

2011

Performing selfhoods in U.S. rituals of private and public spheres

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PERFORMING SELFHOODS IN U.S. RITUALS OF
PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPHERES

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

In

The Department of Communication Studies

By

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May, 2011

I dedicate this work to my grandfather Fran Lekë Shkreli.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Do not be fooled, this is not my story. Countless top shelf spirits have influenced this work. A wise man once told me, there are no good or bad decisions, just decisions. Hopefully the same is true for thank yous. I am indebted to my graduate committee. Perhaps it goes without saying that I could not have accomplished this without you, but it truly must be said. I would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to my friend, mentor, advisor, and editor par excellence Ruth Laurion Bowman: you have the astonishing poetic mind of a delicate ninja; to Miles Richardson for ceaselessly being the southern scholar and gentleman to which we should all aspire; to Michael Bowman, whose razor sharp humor and intellect has kept me sane and awed on more than one occasion; to Trish Suchy, who never seems to run out of brilliant ideas or the energy to make them happen; and to Nick Erickson whose effortless perspective pointed me in many good aesthetic directions. Thank you for supporting my work, making yourselves accessible, for being such hard-working good-hearted people, and for making this work so damn appealing. I would also like to thank my mentor at Eastern Michigan University, Annette Martin, for encouraging me to continue graduate studies, and especially for sharing her intuition that LSU was the right fit. I would never have gotten to experience the beauty of Louisiana without you.

I would also like to thank all my friends from LSU and Baton Rouge. From the graduate school to the neighborhoods, it was a very special time to say the least. We've all parted ways and I hope y'all are enjoying wherever you've landed. Thank you also to all the friends I have made along the way in New Orleans, New Mexico, and California.

And to the students I've gotten to know at LSU and CSUN for endless inspiring resuscitations from the void. I'm a lucky girl who likes her work.

And to my family in Michigan and New York who must claim me on the blood tree. I believe I'm doing right by the kids. Thank you Tony, Lisa, Zef, Jozef, Zander, Michael, Nikolas, Anthony, Giavanna, and Ava for love, support, and understanding while I do my own thing. To the ancestors who keep this ball rolling, and the great spirits that animate this mystery. And finally, an enormous debt of gratitude to my parents for bearing through jobs they hated and constant denial of personal pleasure so their children could wander, barefoot in their curiosity to find their own answers. Noshi Fran Lekës and Filje Lekë Marku, the refined rebel seminarian and the mystical shepherdess joker: nuk keni shokë askund. Your characters are mythical in my book. Mom and Dad I love you very much. Thank you for always in the end making the conscious decision to let me go.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
ABSTRACT.....	vi
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
2 CAPTURING MAGIC: TARYN SIMON’S WORLD OF THE FORMAL AND UNFAMILIAR.....	14
3 CREATING A BURNER: THE BURNING MAN FESTIVAL AND THE LIMITS OF CARNIVAL AND COMMODIFICATION.....	38
4 THE PARROT AND ITS ECHO: THE MICHIGAN WOMYN’S MUSIC FESTIVAL.....	77
5 OLD LIGHT: INTENTIONAL ART SPACE AT RODEN CRATER.....	109
6 CONCLUSIONS.....	125
WORKS CITED.....	140
VITA.....	147

ABSTRACT

In this study, I explore four events to learn the embedded instructions of selfhood performatives in each case and how these performatives code public and private space and experience. The selected events offer a different and explicit example of private and public modes of authority and access – e.g., in the public museum experience of an exhibit by photographer Taryn Simon, in the gift of a ticket to Burning Man, womyn only at MichFest, and insider exclusivity at Roden Crater. While each event offered a different understanding of selfhood as it applied to the participant, each confirmed a selfhood performative in play through its structure, methodology, and dependence on participation.

Calling on Louis Althusser's theories of subjectivity and ideology to approach a definition for selfhood performative, ultimately I argue for a Bakhtinian use of the term. Bakhtin relies on an expansive definition where "selfhood is not a particular voice within, but a particular way of combining many voices within" (Morson and Emerson 221). This "particular way" can be understood as a conscious compositional approach to selfhood served by the performance research practice of mystory developed by Gregory Ulmer. The mystory attempts to record and articulate the relationships of the composer and her interdependent institutional and personal subjectivities through the application of the relay. Throughout the study, I make use of a literal and figurative relay between the events, composing, collecting, and documenting associations while conducting my research and drawing out the patterns and poetics therein.

The purpose of the study is to show connections between selfhood performatives and commodification, and to find regularities, ironies, and pleasures between the revealed

performatives and codes. I also examine how these events enhance, challenge, or stray from post-structural theories that support the interdependence between selfhood and prevailing concepts of public and private. The study also supports the application of mystory theory, with its resistance to the reproductive elements of a model, as performance research that offers an update to Brecht's notion of theater "for an audience of the scientific age" (Brecht 185). I attempt to locate today's audience as one situated in the tension of constructing selves between binary notions of private and public caused by the ramifications of scientific objectification and conceptual representation and reproduction. I argue the mystory is an approach to understanding the self constituted from within the interdependence of private and public relationships, and holds the unrepeatable self central to that approach.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this study, I explore four events to learn the embedded instructions of selfhood performatives in each case and how these performatives code public and private space and experience. The events I explore are an exhibit by photographic artist Taryn Simon, the artisan carnival of Burning Man, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, and the naked eye observatory of Roden Crater. The purpose of the study is to show connections between selfhood performatives and commodification, to find regularities between the events, and to seek out the contradictions, ironies, and pleasures of the revealed performatives and codes. I also examine how these events enhance, challenge, or stray from post-structural theories that support the interdependence between selfhood and prevailing concepts of public and private. The study also makes use of the application of mystory theory as performance research. In this introduction, I define key terms and events and provide key theory perspectives and methods to approach and support my study and its significance.

To approach a definition for selfhood performative, I call on Louis Althusser and his theories on subjectivity with ideology. In his discussion of the formation of subjects and ideology, Althusser suggests that ideology functions to recruit individuals as subjects through the process of interpellation or hailing. The process of interpellation occurs when one recognizes without hesitation that s/he is being addressed. "[T]he one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed" (Althusser). This recognition interpellates or transforms the individual into a subject in an ideological moment that thus endows them with ideological authority. For Althusser, subjectivity and ideology not only function together, "[t]he existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of

individuals as subjects are one and the same thing” (Althusser). It is this hailing moment when subjectivity interpenetrates ideology that I use as the constitution of selfhood. The hailing moment composes the subject as ideological; the ideology offers the embedded instructions for selfhood performatives. Ultimately I argue for a sense of selfhood that is expansive, and call upon a Bakhtinian use of the term:

[F]or Bakhtin, the true style of novels is in fact the combination of styles; by analogy, selfhood is not a particular voice within, but a particular way of combining many voices within. Consciousness takes shape, and never stops taking shape, as a process of interaction among authoritative and innerly persuasive discourses.” (Morson and Emerson 221)

The authoritative discourses in Bakhtinian theory are in line with Barthes’s concept of the *studium*, while the innerly persuasive discourses with the *punctum*. It is with these two concepts from Barthes that I begin to map out definitions for public and private.

For Barthes, the *studium* acts as the realm of “sovereign consciousness” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 26). The *studium* is the territory of shared cultural memory, narratives, and signs. I use this realm to describe a public realm of received cultural comprehension, a familiar field perceptible as a consequence of cultural knowledge (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 25). Barthes’s *punctum* is the realm of personal memory and signs, the accidental sign in the photograph that pricks or bruises (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 27). The *punctum* works to disturb, interrupt, break or punctuate the *studium* (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 26). Barthes’s interdependent use of the terms creates a link between his concepts and those of Althusser specifically in terms of ideology and hailing. Barthes writes, “This time it is not I who seek it out (as I invest the field of the *studium* with my sovereign consciousness), it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an

arrow, and pierces me” (*Camera Lucida* 26). The relationship between these terms is the relationship I use to define private and public.

Briefly here and more explicitly in my discussion of pertinent methods I clarify my understanding and use of the mystory, a foundational practice in this study. Resisting the reproductive elements of a model, the mystory attempts to record and articulate the relationships of the composer and her interdependent institutional and personal subjectivities. Fundamental to the practice of mystory is Gregory Ulmer’s conception of the relay, the process by which the composer moves between, collects, and documents associations while conducting research, drawing out the patterns and poetics therein. In the process of a mystory, the composer learns to “chorograph,” a style of writing that is influenced more by the patterns of music than by those of concepts (Ulmer, *Heuretics* 91). Throughout the study, I use the compositional and theoretic features of the mystory to expand definitions for selfhood performatives and the public and private realms with which they exchange institutional and personal signs. Specifically, I link Ulmer’s concepts of the general and particular to public and private, respectively. Lastly, while I make great use of Ulmer’s sense of “relay” research, I also borrow “models” that are helpful in articulating specific performance practices.

The noted events might best be understood as case studies I gather/ed while on a mystory relay through the US in search of selfhood performatives. In the actuality of my travels, I planned to visit some of the events and I was invited to others. I selected the events because each offers a different and explicit example of private and public modes of authority and access – e.g., in the public museum experience of the Taryn Simon exhibit, in the gift of a ticket to Burning Man, womyn only at MichFest, and insider

exclusivity at Roden Crater. The four events are similar in that they all aim to inform and contribute to selfhood through the experience they offer. Participating in the events helped me to identify how certain selfhood performatives are influenced by a tension between private and public modes of cultural and self perception. While each event offered a different understanding of selfhood as it applied to the participant, each confirmed a selfhood performative in play through its structure, methodology, and dependence on participation.

In my study of Taryn Simon, I build what is called a ground-zero narrative as a means of articulating ideological-subject formation through an expressive document of seduction. The ground-zero text records the interpellative process through an expository anecdote that also functions as metaphor. By claiming Althusser's hailing moment of ideology as the moment of seduction, the ground-zero text writes generatively from that point. The process of writing from the ground-zero perspective allows for the language necessary to discuss the subjective nuances of interpellation and subject formation, which I use as definitions for selfhood performatives. Thus, Simon's exhibit hailed or interpellated me, and I ground this moment as the "beginning of the middle" of my relay.

At Burning Man, I experienced selfhood as marketed through a carnivalesque spiritual-artisan approach. Participants, or "burners," are offered a space of pure potential on which to unleash repressed productive, sensual, and expressive tendencies. Boasting of opportunities for "radical self-reliance" and self-expression (Black Rock City, llc, "Ten Principles"), Burning Man describes itself as an effort to transform consumers into producers. But Burning Man is not free and cost influences participation. As a consumable event, Burning Man understands its consumable survival, marketing to

its patrons what they apparently lack, a selfhood, as noted in the participatory term “burner.” Identifying this selfhood and its appeal, feminist Blogger Samhita writes, “The search for making a culture of their own, the majority white constituency of Burning Man has created a culture of dramatic appropriation, elitism, consumption and lack of inclusion all within the guise of freedom. It is another American holiday like any other and honestly, it is fun” (Samhita). It is the marketing of carnival and unfettered artistic expression that continues to make Burning Man successful. What in 1986 amounted to a free event for twenty people on Baker Beach in San Francisco has become a temporary city of 40,000 participants each paying up to \$300 a ticket for entrance. For an art experiment founded on decommodification (Black Rock City, llc, “Ten Principles”), the growth is astronomical, and it warrants an examination of the performative aspects supporting its survival.

At MichFest, selfhood is linked to gender performatives. Namely, the festival is open only to “womyn born womyn,” where sexual assignment at birth takes precedence over gender performatives and reassignments. The festival supports a selfhood performative that unifies female selfhood based on sexual assignment. I discuss the workings of the festival through the performance work of Split Britches, who performed at the festival, and the fiction of Miranda July, with whom I became familiar on my way to the festival. The creative spaces created by July and Split Britches were significant during my time at the festival because while the festival markets a unification of female selfhood, I experienced a fracture of selfhood. I became aware of a performance paradox of selfhood performatives as they relate to unification at the festival.

At Roden Crater, I experienced and understood selfhood as influenced by modes

of sensory perception. The observatory functions to call attention to perception and how the perceiver is co-creator of the perceived. In this way, selfhood is something that can be enhanced in the individual and shared through collective experience. The perceptual experience at Roden Crater is manifested by a relationship between the perceiver, the space, and cosmic phenomena. The project of Roden Crater is conceived by its creator James Turrell as a naked eye observatory and interactive light exhibit achieved via the natural world in which it is embedded, a volcano in the desert. Just as the natural world influences the art space and the perception achieved, so too does the observer. Turrell suggests:

I look at my art as being somewhere between the limits of perception of the creature that we are, that is – what we can actually perceive and not perceive, like the limits of hearing or seeing – and that of learned perception, or we could call prejudice perception...it's not just the fact that you are bringing the cosmos down into the space where you live, but that your perception helps create that as well. (Turrell, "Roden Crater")

In this sense, the crater acts as a model for learned cultural perception between perceiver, cultural space, and cultural phenomena. As a performative model rooted in collective space and individual perception, the crater allows me to examine selfhood methodologies in a similarly constructed way. It additionally acts as a mystory model, recalling the relationship between global and particular phenomena by focusing our "attention on infinite reaches that are both geologic and astronomical, both personal and psychological" (Adcock).

The primary sources that constitute all four events in my study include direct participation, journaling, and travel memoirs. For Burning Man, I also rely on the Burning Man website, critical essays, and news articles. For MichFest, I call on festival literature, performances, and participation both in and outside of the formal and informal

events and gatherings. My analysis of Roden Crater includes online interviews with the artist, critiques, and reviews.

The methods I use to conduct the study begin with Ulmer's mystory theory, which allows for diverse methods, texts, and perspectives. Through this approach, I make links between theories of performativity, phenomenology, and Marxism. The theories of Bertolt Brecht and David Abram connect Western scientific and philosophical traditions of objectification back to perceptible gaps between the private and public spheres, and consider the self constituted within the gaps as an aesthetic means to approach the dilemma. Abram argues that the influences of modern Western traditions force us to loose our connection to the experienced "life-world," a term he defines as:

...the world of our immediately lived experience, *as* we live it...the world that we count on without necessarily paying it much attention, the world of the clouds overhead and the ground underfoot, of getting out of bed and preparing food and turning on the tap water. Easily overlooked, this primordial world is always already there when we begin to reflect or philosophize. It is not a private, but a collective, dimension – the common field of our lives and the other lives with which ours are intertwined – and yet it is profoundly ambiguous and indeterminate, since our experience of this field is always relative to our situation within it. (Abram 40; emphasis in original)

Western traditions, Abram continues, create a gap between objectification and experience through an analytic premium on interpretation and representation. In his work, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Abram argues that the need for the scientific community to recognize its place in the phenomenal world from which it draws its study is crucial to repairing the social disjuncture that results from separating a subjective world of experience from an objective world of measurable material forms, a direct polarization of personal and general realms.

The life-world is thus peripherally present in any thought or activity we undertake. Yet whenever we attempt to explain this world conceptually, we seem

to forget our active participation within it. Striving to represent the world, we inevitably forfeit its direct presence. (Abram 40)

This idea of conceptual representation not only affects the interests of the scientific community, it deeply affects our understanding of aesthetics and language. As Terry Eagleton's treatment of Barthes suggests:

The realist or representational sign is for Barthes essentially unhealthy. It effaces its own status as a sign, in order to foster the illusion that we are perceiving reality without its intervention. The sign as "reflection," "expression" or "representation" denies the *productive* character of language: it suppresses the fact that we only have a "world" at all because we have language to signify it, and that what we count as "real" is bound up with what alterable structures of signification we live within. (Eagleton 136; emphasis in original)

We interpret and represent by foregoing crucially influential experiential phenomenon. A living world endures despite the disruptions of representations and interpretations of it. These conceptual representations have an equally important role in terms of defining intellectual and aesthetic expression. If we extend the life-world, from which we draw aesthetically and academically, to include an even broader realm of easily overlooked but common experience, we enlarge our perceptive abilities so that, as Lou Andreas-Salome (the so-called muse of Nietzsche, Rilke, and Freud) offers, "Everything that is truly seen *must* become a poem" (qtd. in Prose 166; emphasis in original).

Abram turns to phenomenology as "the Western philosophical tradition that has most forcefully called into question the modern assumption of a single, wholly determinable, objective reality" (Abram 31). I seek out how this perspective has influenced selfhood performatives that assume a single, wholly determinable, objective self as they are practiced or challenged in the events that concern me.

Brechtian theory and practice acknowledge the effects of scientific objectification through phenomenological descriptions of "strangeness and incomprehensibility" in

performance (Brecht 185). The very concept of alienation and its effect resulted from Brecht's disposition that his theater was intended "for an audience of the scientific age" (Brecht 185). In "Dialogue about Acting," Brecht offers that performers for such an audience should demonstrate their knowledge "of human relations, of human behavior, of human capacities" in the particular circumstances of their time (Brecht 185). For me, this statement implies the Brechtian self has phenomenological potential, meaning it can address the life-world gap that Abram describes.

For Brecht, actor-self becomes a phenomenon that discloses otherwise unascertainable insights into our social relations:

Oughtn't the actor then try to make the man he is representing understandable?

Not so much the man as what takes place. What I mean is: if I choose to see Richard III I don't want to feel myself to be Richard III, but to glimpse this phenomenon in all its strangeness and incomprehensibility. (Brecht 185)

Brecht's comprehension of identity is distanced from convergence of self-histories in social context; the convergence works as a point of dis/orientation. What remains relevant are the particularities of the phenomena of selves situated in social conditions, not an attachment to and disclosure of a self-contained identity. Deleuze and Guattari offer a similar approach to that of Brecht in *Anti-Oedipus*, a text Michel Foucault called an "'Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life'" (qtd. in Deleuze and Guattari xiii), and a contemporary mystery *par excellence* invented as it was by ciphering itself through Freudian theory. In their promotion of schizoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari write:

The task...is that of tirelessly taking apart egos and their presuppositions; liberating the prepersonal singularities they enclose and repress; mobilizing the flows they would be capable of transmitting, receiving, or intercepting; establishing always further and more sharply the schizzes and the breaks well below conditions of identity. (Deleuze and Guattari 362)

The self experienced through Brecht's phenomena becomes a valuable field of experience and knowledge as the interface of interior and exterior, of public and private.

Ulmer offers the mystory as an alternative to the reproductive power of interpretative, representational texts and methodologies. The mystory approach does not attempt to unify private and public selves, but rather, I would argue, it acknowledges and depicts the life-world that Abram describes in relation to the generalized, objective realm.

Ulmer writes:

This alternative – the relay organized by speed, rather than the gravity of the monument – will be one of the most difficult and important issues for teletheory: *how to bring the particular or singular into relation with the general or global in the manner of the relay rather than the model*. Is there a contradiction, then, in trying to invent a genre for teletheory (mystory)? Perhaps not, if we keep in mind that unlike the treatise, or the conventional genres of academic scholarship, the mystory does not repeat, is not reproduced, in that no two are alike. (Ulmer *Teletheory* 170; emphasis added)

It is in this description of mystory that I believe Ulmer hits on a key relationship his teletheory genre hopes to address, namely, between the particular or singular and the general. Thus the mystory is an approach to understanding the self constituted in private and public relationships, and it holds the unrepeatable self central to that approach.

Using Barthes's *Fragments*, and specifically Barthes's concept of "amorous feeling" as an equivalent emotional position from which to instantiate a teletheory genre, Ulmer asks:

What is the feeling that goes with the sentences of insight, polemic, refutation, research? The exclamation — "that's so true!" — is the twin of the emotional sentence that identifies ideology (that-which-goes-without-saying), the stereotypes of a discursive formation being the vehicles of ideology in a specific practice: the effect of truth carries a certain feeling that may be used to sort out and name the figures of a given discourse. (Ulmer, *Teletheory* 117)

Ulmer makes use of an internal instance to connect back to, in fact conceive of,

discourse, in this case a private and public discourse. Ulmer continues:

An unusual aspect of this composition then is that it enters a practice at the oral level [*oralysis*—the oral register of literacy]. The headings being something said when the pose is encountered (the position struck) suggests that a literate practice carries with it an oral accompaniment. A tension arises between the ordinary language of the speaking academic situated contingently and the specialized discourse of the written argument as legitimized knowledge, a point of exchange between oral and literate styles to the point that the mystorian tells anecdotes about concepts. Barthes is showing us how to articulate the private, public, and learned spheres of culture. (Ulmer, *Teletheory* 118)

It is from between Barthes and Ulmer that I take my definition of the terms private and public; namely, through Ulmer's extension of Barthes use of the terms particular and global as private and public.

In these terms, from Abram's phenomenological perspective as well as from a post-structural slant, we become aware of screens that separate the authoritative knowledge of verifiability and representation from the influential phenomena from which it springs. Life-world phenomena have the potential to break through representational forms, because although cyclical, they are inherently unrepeatable; resembling a spiral more than a circle. In response to authoritative verification, Ulmer describes his genre of mystory as "designed to simulate the experience of invention, the crossing of discourses that has been shown to occur in the invention process. Realizing that learning is much closer to invention than to verification, I intended mystoriography primarily as a pedagogy" (Ulmer, *Heuretics* xii). I argue that Ulmer positions mystory as a learned method of reconnecting to the life-world Abram defines:

Mystory learns from [Barthes's instructions] to approach a discourse formation, a knowledge practice, from the angle of a personal experience in which a general science exists as a collection of stereotypes and as an idiom; at the level of practice these two dimensions cross and exchange properties, such that the life story may become the vehicle for theoretical research, and the disciplinary

concepts operate in terms of the prejudices of common sense. (Ulmer, *Teletheory* 118)

The mystory then is an approach to understanding the self constituted in private and public relationships, and it holds the unrepeatable self central to that approach. Thus, the mystory becomes an appropriate vehicle through which to experience and analyze the relayed events I have chosen: it will directly address the relationship between selfhood performatives and private and public spheres without requiring that self find completion (and hence model itself into a medium of selfhood identification) to perform effectively. This approach in turn will help me question the coherence and commodification of selfhood as it operates in the events that concern me.

The implication from Abram, Brecht, and Ulmer is that we contribute to and operate from a discrepancy between experience and explanation. How might we reconcile such a discrepancy? We can update Brecht's analysis by describing the sort of age in which we are living and performing. Perhaps we can locate ourselves in what has been called the "Information Age," overwhelmed and sustained by print media and hypertexts seen as generative ground for Ulmer's electronic literacy, or within the "Digital Age," an adaptation to an ethereal space that responds to code. We could locate ourselves within an even more impenetrable epoch. As Salman Rushdie offers in the forward to Taryn Simon's book, "'Ours is an age of secrets'" (qtd. in Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* 5). Perhaps we can locate today's audience as one situated in the tension of constructing selves between private and public caused by the ramifications of scientific objectification and conceptual representation and reproduction. A question for my research then becomes "what sort of knowledge about this age and its human relations is it possible to demonstrate (are we demonstrating) when

we perform?” The performance of a mystory collage can be an example of such a Brechtian update. Using Ulmer’s parameters of mystory as an alternative to representation and reproduction, keeping in mind how a hermeneutic tradition influences this tension as well, I look to the sites I have chosen for this research experience as a means of applying this question. Through a process of a performative writing relay between the events I have described, I attempt to both perform a mystory collage and thus update Brecht’s analysis.

CHAPTER 2
CAPTURING MAGIC:
TARYN SIMON'S WORLD OF THE FORMAL AND UNFAMILIAR

This story starts, as much as a story's beginning can be measured, at the Whitney Museum in New York City in the first weekend of June in 2007. I was in New York for the wedding of my dear cousin Monika who, with thirteen years behind me, I watched grow up from underneath diapers, countless improvised renditions of "Do Your Ears Hang Low," and her outdated but no less adorable Dorothy Hamill bob. I had not seen her in a few years, but they were those few crucial years of late adolescence when a person transforms completely; she became a beautiful, vibrant woman. I was nursing my own transformation.

That summer, I began my doctoral dissertation, or in French *la memoire*, my personal connections to global phenomena as considered through performance theory; but as I soon realized, I was already in the middle of it. The dense holographic streets of New York were a fitting encounter for my feelings on the project. I had a large task in front of me, a monolith. So large in fact at times that it seemed impossible to visualize or digest. Although I had not yet developed what theorist Gregory Ulmer in his theory of mystory composition calls the wide image, "an aesthetic embodiment of [one's] attunement with the world" (Ulmer qtd. in Weishaus) that would help me access my object/s of study, I did have basic drives to which I was responding. I intuited this large body of work to be a performance of personal composition, associative collage and surrealist photography, and vice-versa, of "picto-ideo-phonographic writing" (Ulmer, *Heuretics* 17) that "bring[s] the particular or singular into relation with the general or global in the manner of the relay rather than the model" (Ulmer, *Teletheory* 170). The

relay allows the writer to use the patterns of music and poetry to articulate and record the associations she encounters in her research (Ulmer, *Heuretics*, 91). Foregrounding the composition methods of transformation and adaptation, the relay is a mix of magic and manipulation.

Reuniting with Monika that summer would prove to slowly rekindle a degree of wonder that even to this moment continues to baffle, enchant, and excite us. It reassured me with mindful certainty of the existence of uncanny timing, graceful coincidence, and the complex voices of chance; of the strange awe that comes with the openness of stepping back to watch patterns, intersections, and poetry emerge without force. The timing called forth a reassurance to trust, follow, and record what would become a network of interdependent reflections, associations, and responses waiting to be acknowledged.

Thus, it was a doubly advantageous weekend to be in New York. Just a month earlier I found out the Whitney Museum was hosting an exhibit that summer by Taryn Simon, a photographer with whom I had become familiar through a TV interview with Charlie Rose months earlier. In the interview, Simon talked about her new project, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, a catalogue of photographs and captions she had made of events, places, people, practices, and artifacts that, through publication, address the complex relationship between the politics of access, exclusion, recognition and aesthetic investigation. Simon's work aims to record lesser known events that influence, reveal, and question prevailing cultural ideologies by working with the tensions between formality and incongruity, popular knowledge and coded knowledge, convention and invention.

With my own magic of that summer in mind, I too had to contend with my composition work as a researcher: my aesthetic decisions, my editing and authorizations, my manipulation of conventions that influence my research processes and products. Attending Simon's exhibit influenced my study in two important ways. First, it became what Louis Althusser refers to as the "hailing" moment of subjectivity, the moment at which I was called as a subject to recognize myself in a specific ideology by responding to its call (Althusser). Second, I would transform this moment of conversion into a ground-zero narrative, producing a written document essential to the composition of a mystory.

The ground-zero text confronts ideological-subject formation, asking the composer to reconsider the relationship between researcher and object of study by writing from within the interpellation process. Specifically, it challenges the assumption that we choose our objects of study rather than being chosen by them. Critical theorist and mystoryographer Michael Jarrett warns about this assumption:

Conceptualizing our affections in this manner is, perhaps, responsible behavior. We make (or break) our own lives. We have free wills. But what's the cost of volition? Namely this: The more we emphasize our freedom – particular, unconstrained choices – the more we de-emphasize the role ideology plays in our lives – that is, the degree to which identity is defined and shaped by culture. (Jarrett)

Acting as an inventive blend of exposition and metaphor, the ground-zero narrative intends to show how the composer first became acquainted with her subject, the specifics of the attraction, and the circumstances surrounding the interpellation. "Ground-zero anecdotes demystify the desire that motivates research but are, at the same time, mysterious" (Jarrett). Thus, the ground-zero narrative is a deliberate record and dramatization of seduction. "[I]nstead of explaining Althusser's concept of

interpellation, whereby individuals are constructed as subjects when they answer the call of ideology” the ground-zero narrative allows the composer to show rather than tell about subject formation (Jarrett). By locating and writing my own ground-zero text, I learn to talk about the nature of interpellation and subject formation as a definition for selfhood performative. In this chapter, I intend to show how Simon’s exhibit became the hailing moment that began my mystory relay, and dramatize its seduction over my attention through a ground-zero text that thereby highlights the connections to mystory practice.

For a *mise-en-scene* of seduction, a good place to start is in the bedroom. I was turning down the bed when Charlie Rose played low on one of the only television channels I could get in Spanish Town with used rabbit ears, Louisiana Public Broadcasting. The unmistakable black background that frames all of Rose’s guests in an abyss of serene gravitas, the blank canvas of negative space, drew my eye. The woman Rose was interviewing wore black that accentuated the vanishing point. She was intense, articulate, and composed. The focus she had on her subject and the language she used to describe it afforded an ease to her delivery, the fluency that comes with intimate knowledge. Yet something in her seemed unsatisfied, searching. As I fluffed the pillows, she spoke of her desire to photograph secret sites within the United States, hidden spaces inaccessible to the public that nevertheless influence shared cultural narratives. I was bewitched.

When Rose asked Simon how she conceives of her compositions, she responded, “I look for something that is going to be seductive” (Simon, “A Discussion with Taryn Simon”). Simon proceeds to explain her composition methods more explicitly:

My photography is large format. It’s extremely formal and calculated. I don’t take multiple looks at a site, I pick one particular frame and I go for it, I try and

light it. And I want to seduce a viewer, and then have them look further into the facts behind the image, but first and foremost it has to be seductive. So I'm looking for something that formally succeeds. (Simon, "A Discussion with Taryn Simon")

I considered what seductions of Simon's I had fallen under, whether they were intended by her, whether intent was important in such matters, and whether I would be successful in articulating them.

Simon spoke of her interest in photographing sites that are not typically photographed, finding significance in contributing something new to her field:

I try to [make photographs] in a very respectful way. My intention is to give a stage to things that don't receive that sort of stage. I'm much more about portraiture, or sites, but where there is an agreement. I don't capture moments. I've never taken a camera around with me just randomly snapping. It's always deeply calculated, and deeply thought through....I never take pictures. (Simon, "A Discussion with Taryn Simon")

It struck me that Simon was making a distinction between taking and making photographs, although at the time I was not sure I understood her exact distinction. Did she mean to articulate a difference in quantity, quality, or intent? As I continued to listen, Simon explained that for her most images feel "over photographed" and disposable. "I'm always looking for unseen sites, which is part of photography's role ... to access things that aren't typically accessed" (Simon, "A Discussion with Taryn Simon"). I felt a kindredness with Simon as a researcher in search of significance. In performance vernacular, I understood that her position on the social role of photography was that it was to be a means of excavating cultural performance, bringing into view a corpus of documentation that would otherwise remain unknown to a wider public audience.

Roland Barthes suggests another role for photography: "Photography...began, historically, as an art of the Person: of identity, of civil status, of what we might call, in

all senses of the term, the body's *formality*" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 79; emphasis in original). While Barthes intends here to describe the object of portraiture, I argue that the "art of the Person" and somatic formality should likewise extend to the photographer and her practice of composition. A connection appears between Simon's insistence on formality and the art of the persons involved in the making of photographs as subject formations.

It would be remiss of me then not to attend to the role of the photographer and her activity of photography, since the action and modes of making the photograph inform its documentation. Discussing her camera, Simon offers, "It's the old kind, where you put the blanket over your head, and the negative is this big," indicating a large awkward square with her hands. "It's a 4 x 5 camera, and it's not meant for travel like this, and certainly not travel to distant areas" (Simon, "A Discussion with Taryn Simon"). At least at the technical end, Simon's method insists on her acknowledged presence. "Everything I do is collaborative. Every single location I work with, person I work with, there is a collaboration, and that's part of using that big camera, you can't sneak an image" (Simon, "A Discussion with Taryn Simon"). So it would seem that the mode makes her transparent, or at least transparency is an aim. But transparency and objectivity are different beasts, and Simon is overt about her personal investment.

In the interview, Simon discusses her understanding of the historical moment in which she made the photos displayed in the exhibit. For Simon, the beginning of the twenty-first century in the US was:

a critical time in American history when America was seeking secret sites outside of its borders, whether it be weapons of mass destruction or to understand different cultures. I wanted to look inward during this important time in my

history as an American and find these secret sites within our own borders.
(Simon, “A Discussion with Taryn Simon”)

Looking inward carried a double meaning and resulted in Simon compiling a personal wish list of imagined secret sites in the US (Simon, “A Discussion with Taryn Simon”). Her list eventually culminated in a published catalogue of unknown cultural performances. More to the point, Simon’s project offers an example of how personal secreted sites are housed *within* larger cultural borders, *always as part of* what composes the space inside; they make up the same space.

In one such photograph, Simon shows a set of steel nuclear waste capsules submerged in water to protect against radioactivity that looks like a map of the US (Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* 19). The site contains over 120 million curies of radioactivity, its luminescent photo (also) looking like a weapon of mass destruction.

Simon calls the facility, and presumably the resulting photograph, “a bit of a find” (Simon, “A Discussion with Taryn Simon”), which for me articulates the tension between the formality of her photographic method and the pre-existing phenomena and ideologies she encounters. One takes an exacting amount of control and her direct interference, a search, while the other exists free of her intervention; it is already there. Her work calls attention to the fact that her compositions are not wholly created by her. By virtue of her compositions, she adapts to subjects already existing. She answers their call through exposure.

As I listened to the interview, two things became obvious to me. First, Simon was not able and did not desire to remove herself personally from her cultural work, as the borders on which she reflected implicated not only herself but her nation. Here, social

roles of photographer, citizen, artist, archivist merge and are shown to be inseparable from a more personal sense of self. Second, Simon's aesthetic fascination rested in the complex intersection of practicing her medium and its modes of access and exclusion and in how this relationship plays into the creation of cultural and epistemic production.

I am fascinated too. The photographs in Simon's project suggest a host of texts and performances of whose secret or inconspicuous existence we are unaware and yet bear upon the epistemic questions behind any study and constitution of cultural production. We are individually and collectively composed by the histories that we do not know as much as by those we do. It was this petition to recovery that Simon's work directly appealed to the underlying questions in my own project. Namely, my interest over the years has focused on the interdependent tension between private and public realms of knowledge as they contribute to the performance of selfhood, realms Ulmer defines as particular and general, personal and global. I am drawn to how rituals of access and exclusion, as affected by public and private domains, offer instructions for performing selfhood.

The two points I mention above, Simon's personal position and her methodology, I take as the selfhood instructions embedded in her interpellation. Simon is frank about her personal position as an unavoidable situation influencing the outcome of her composition. She explicitly describes using and wanting to achieve seduction in her compositions. Further, Simon applies formal aesthetics as a means to this seductive success. In her method, one realizes seduction through a deliberate use of technique. Transparent collaboration as a means of exposure is yet another instruction.

However, Simon is even more specific about her self-definition as an artist when Rose asks her how she is different as a photographer today than she was five years ago.

Simon responds:

I think that I am probably more fearful and paranoid as a person and I think I've always been that way. And I probably, as I see all these things that I've been experiencing through my photography, become even more fearful and paranoid and mistrustful of systems and power structures, and that is what motivates my photography ultimately. I think that it's probably something that could keep me in bed and make me a deep introvert but instead I've somehow managed to turn it into this need to go out into the world and keep confronting my supposed limitations and photographing and digging deeper and trying to get farther in. (Simon, "A Discussion with Taryn Simon")

The formality is guided by a mistrust and fear of larger institutional structures that I would argue Simon perceives as invested in anonymity. What she is choosing to expose and make familiar are cultural signs whose implied institutional force threaten to limit her own sense of selfhood. Yet she returns ultimately to institutional domains in order to expose them and in effect code her own work. Both she and her subjects have become part of our cultural and economic currency; what happens to them now? Seduced by Simon's seductions as a point of departure for my relay, I intend to go "farther in," or in my case, recognize that I am already in the middle. I do this by confronting our mutual interpellation at the Whitney Museum that day in June.

Climbing the stairs of the Whitney, I am greeted by the cheery incongruence of a sign that blocks passage to a hall under construction next to the exhibit. My inclination toward coincidence and irony suggest this must be it. Upon opening the large glass doors to a room made pale yellow by the wood floors reverberating off the lighting, I am faced with about thirty images hanging evenly at eye level. The images constitute roughly half of the collection of fifty-seven photographs.

I walk to the center and scan the room as if I am looking for someone. I am drawn to a photograph of a person lying in an operating room awash in the colors of hospital blue and green with a back wall made of square tiled privacy glass. The caption tells me it is of a Palestinian-American woman prepped for hymenoplasty (Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* 23). The woman's face is covered with a blue hospital blanket, as faces are on television shows when a doctor loses a patient. She is lying back with a hand on her stomach and her legs and feet are in stirrups. Her left foot is covered with a blue blanket also, and I wonder if the coverage is to provide anonymity too, concealing a tell-tale sign of identification. Or perhaps the woman's foot was just cold. A white blanket covers her torso and drapes between her elevated legs. "The purpose of hymenoplasty is to reconstruct a ruptured hymen" the caption reads. "[T]here is a correlation between an intact hymen and a women's virginity; many cultures view the tearing of the hymen as a critical symbol of that loss" (Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* 23). In the photograph, two giant round spotlights hang from the ceiling reminding me of a scene in a bootleg alien autopsy video. As with all operating rooms, the contents and colors at once look modern and outdated. Two trays are prepped with various instruments, towels and cloths, and a single syringe lies on an adjacent counter, possibly a general anesthetic already used. At this point, I wonder to what extent the photo was staged. Did Simon enter just as the surgery was to take place, or did she direct the placement of the woman and items in the picture explicitly for the collection? The caption does not tell me.

Later, I turn to the Rose interview and Simon's book about the exhibit for answers to the noted questions. Despite the facts, my particular questions regarding composition

remained unanswered. Simon's seductions were succeeding formally for now, so I moved on.

Another image is a Braille edition of *Playboy* from August 1989. The parched yellowish-brown cover of the Braille book is emblazoned with the familiar bunny, bow-tie and ears cocked accordingly. The surface of the book cover is raised with Braille text. Simon framed the book on a black marbleized surface, spot-lit from the left side. The smoky effect of the marble combined with the lighting creates a classic *film-noir* mood. Further, the cover – with its title in bold font, gritty earth tones, and stark graphics – remind me of an old West “Wanted” poster. There also is something strikingly comical about the rabbit icon and its allegorical connection to frenzied reproduction that came across clearly for me, with the cover stripped of its usual content. In this version, the large uniform circularity of the pupil-less eye pops out with an expression of self-conscious alarm. The rabbit stands alone.

The photo prompted for me an internal speculation on the tactile erotic play at work in a Braille *Playboy*. I wondered about the narrative under one's finger tips, the decoding that takes place on a multi-sensory level achieved exclusive of visual stimulation: the sensual thrill of reading. I wondered whether the magazine's usual array of sexually charged images were described in equally sexually charged prose, and how such a translation would take place? Is this version truly only for the articles, and if so, are the articles better? The caption informs us that the National Library Service produces the Braille *Playboy*, along with other magazines that are selected based on reader interest (Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* 27). The caption also provides a short list of well-known literary contributors to the magazine, and a brief history on the

battle between Congress and the National Library Service over funding translated materials for the blind and physically handicapped (Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* 27). Simon's caption stops short of interrupting my flow of wonder with conclusive answers about magazine content though. It is as if she knows exactly what not to say, or give away, as part of the seduction in her crafted captions.

Another photograph that drew me near was the interior of a bear den in a West Virginia National Forest. The image is layered with the browns and blacks of tree moss, logs, leaves, branches, and bear fur that make up the nest. The still gestures of the sleeping bears almost seem to pulsate. The mother lies on her side with a claw peeking out from under her resting head, and I am taken with the posture she assumes to give herself comfort. Her tiny cubs nuzzle on top of her. The caption tells us that the dens are the place for birthing and nursing cubs over four months of winter (Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* 67). Given the immense difference in size between the mother and the cubs, it would seem the cubs were but a few weeks old. The caption also explains the phenomena of hibernation with fascination, contrasting the harsh external conditions to which the bears must adapt with the internal processes and preparations that arise as part of that adaptation (Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* 67). Simon's lighting design captures the light-colored snouts of the bears and shows the mother's eye partially open, as human eyes often are in the deepest of sleep. Yet the incongruence of the open eye illuminates both the vulnerability of a black bear hibernating with her cubs and the vulnerability of the photographer in close proximity to the bears.

The image had me wondering about Simon's aim of collaboration, not to undermine her intentions but to ponder its meaning in terms of my own compositions. While the majority of photographs in her collection are collaborative, collaboration is simply not always possible where secret sites are concerned. Perhaps strengthened by the scientific certainty of the bears' unconsciousness, Simon underplays the danger involved in this and some of the other photographs she makes. "I'm not invested in risking my life. And I'm also not interested in stolen images," Simon claims (Simon, "A Discussion with Taryn Simon"). But in fact some images must be stolen – for instance, the vulnerable scene of deep slumber in an un/interrupted hibernation – the boundary between public and private space constituted by the transgression.

As I moved on through the exhibit, I was stopped by the expression of Sharon Grambo, a professional actor hired by medical schools as a Standardized Patient. Trained to simulate a real patient for the purpose of testing medical students on their diagnostic and interpersonal skills, Ms. Grambo is "in" character in Simon's photograph, playing the role of Rita Baron (Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* 33). Baron-Grambo sits on the edge of an examining table in a cloth gown. Her right arm is in a sling around her neck and shoulder, her right eye is badly bruised, and her posture is slumped yet composed. "The goal is for SP simulations to be so accurate that they cannot be detected by a skilled clinician" (Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* 33). Hence, Baron-Grambo's expression: jarring and deeply psychologically distraught. "The medical student should eventually determine that the physical injuries Rita Baron describes are inconsistent with a car accident. She is actually a victim of domestic violence" (Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* 33). The

compositional choices of this image add to the degree of alienation the storyline creates. The photograph is not taken in the same room as the patient. It is taken through the window of an adjoining room with the blinds pulled opened. A rectangular x-ray illuminator hangs on the wall. The dull colored wall is barren besides these features and a few outlets. Baron-Grambo looks through the window and directly into the camera.

In the Contraband Room at John F. Kennedy International Airport, Simon puts into the frame of the photograph a table overflowing with goods “seized from the baggage of passengers arriving in the US...over a 48-hour period” (Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* 75). Reading through the robust list of the confused pile of items is a metonymic gold mine: African cane rats infested with maggots, bush meat, dried orange peels, fresh eggs, giant African snail, South American pig head, uncooked meats, unidentified sub tropical plant in soil (Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* 75). Against the institutional yellow-tiled wall, steel table, and cardboard boxes, the contraband is vibrant. Boxes pour out from underneath the table with more unwelcomed items. There is a violence between the hard lines of the institutional interior and the haphazard placement of goods that have now been tamed. It is a contained mess that looks like an industrial kitchen catastrophe.

We are taken into a hallway in the next photograph. The walls, ceilings, and floors are identical in color; another institutional scene with fluorescent lights washing the already drab interior in a glow of pale neon. It is art hanging on the walls of the Central Intelligence Agency. The space and the art seem perfect for each other, as Simon’s composition attends to the angles of the space, which accentuate the geometric shapes in the hanging art. The image is a meditation on the influence that abstract

expressionism had on CIA cultural initiatives during the Cold War, the style proving “to popularize what is considered pro-American thought and aesthetic sensibilities” (Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* 43).

Further along is a bird’s eye view of an “Infectious Waste Treatment Center” that looks like abstract expressionism. In a sea of spattered reds, blues, light browns, and whites, the photograph takes on the free-form visual patterns of a Jackson Pollock painting. The contents in the photo are shredded and indecipherable, save for the top of a baby bottle, creating the sense of a three-dimensional texture. The caption notes that the content is medical waste, of which the US produces up to one million tons a year, and the treatment center is run by Sanitec Industries, which specializes in alternative technologies for medical waste treatment (Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* 81). There is a spectacular contrast between what constitutes the content, in this case infectious waste, and the image it evokes. The image looks like art.

The program for the exhibit offers some official navigation through the disorienting emotions raised by the jarring photos and annotations:

For this project, artist Taryn Simon assumes the role of shrewd informant while invoking the spirit of [a] collector of curiosities, compiling an inventory of what lies deep within the borders of the United States and documenting diverse constituencies across the realms of science, government, medicine, entertainment, nature, security, and religion. One commonality persists in her chosen subjects: each remains relatively unknown or out-of-view to a wider public audience. (“An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar”)

That’s me; I’m the wider public audience. But I am also the shrewd informant (such is my response to ideology). And now here I am confronted by direct documentation of notions of private and public access as they bear on personal associations with cultural identity. I am invited to experience a moment of national identity crisis on a personal level. I am confronted with questioning how much of a performance of national

character and resonance lies within what has been removed from our knowledge. The collection suggests that cultural production rests with a closure of access and privilege. Paradoxically and archetypically born from this closure, our popular culture swells with photographers like Simon, or academics like myself; a hybrid mix of journalists, artists, renegades, civil rights workers, outlaws, talk show hosts, and all those with a spirit of curiosity, inquiry, blood thirst, social justice, or just plain nosiness who work sometimes tirelessly, sometimes futilely, to pry open the Al Capone-sized vaults. A cultural message conveyed here reveals we are living in the paradox of simultaneously closing off through the privilege of privacy fences *and* uncovering through the privilege of having a right to know, a yin yang dance that effortlessly beguiles our attention and describes a cultural inheritance.

On that day in June, vast associations in hand, I recognized myself in the middle of my research, seduced by the ideologies of personal memory, embodiment, seduction, formal composition, and their interdependent bearing on shared cultural knowledge. I go about conducting research the only way I seem to know how to make it stick, fully embodied and from the inside out. Yet I struggle to define the terms private and public. As I seek out their definitions, I likewise seek out sites of investigation that involve my direct participation in them, testing their authority and my own by becoming informed and inscribed by the encounters. This somatic theoretic approach seems appropriate since, as Michael Warner offers in *Publics and Counterpublics*, “the terms [private and public] are complex enough and shifting enough to allow for profound change; yet in practice they often do not seem theoretical at all. They seem to be preconceptual, almost instinctual, rooted in the orientations of the body and common speech” (23). The “seem”

in all contexts is vital, since private and public become increasingly complex concepts to navigate when asking where they are rooted and defined. The body and language become familiar and necessary points of orientation when critiquing participation in and perpetuation of such lofty, willfully ambiguous, socially-coded terms.

Bound up with the structures and expectations of social institutions, private and public exist as sites for protection from and the rousing of institutional mediation with the “self.” Building from Althusser’s theories of subject formation and ideology, Judith Butler’s linguistic theory in *Excitable Speech* serves as an extended parallel for the cautious need to approach power paradoxes where the self is concerned:

It is...impossible to regulate fully the potentially injurious effect of language without destroying something fundamental about language and, more specifically, about the subject’s constitution in language. On the other hand, a critical perspective on the kinds of language that govern the regulation and constitution of subjects becomes all the more imperative once we realize how inevitable is our dependency on the ways we are addressed in order to exercise any agency at all. (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 27)

Butler warns us of the ramifications of both institutional intervention on private affairs and the counter lack of critical subjective response. In the above-implied case, the potential and compromising regulation of hate speech thus requires significant critical reflection on language and power. Butler also points out the inevitable interdependence of address and agency. The theories forwarded by Althusser, Butler, and Warner support interdependence between language and the body that ultimately extends to notions of private and public. Inevitable interdependence is a key element in the definitions of private and public that I use in this study. Our somatic relationship to address and to language, its unavoidable influence over us and our actions, mirrors the power functions imbedded in concepts of selfhood, interpellation, access, exclusion, the personal, and the global, and similar experiences associated with private and public.

As Eudora Welty offers in her autobiography, *One Writer's Beginnings*, "In my sensory education I include my physical awareness of the *word*" (Welty 11; emphasis in original). Thus language is connected intimately to our sense of somatic knowledge, similarly rooted in bodily orientation. As Welty continues on her sensual connection to language:

There comes the moment, and I saw it then, when the moon goes from flat to round. For the first time it met my eyes as a globe. The word "moon" came into my mouth as though fed to me out of a silver spoon. Held in my mouth the moon became a word. It had the roundness of a Concord grape Grandpa took off his vine and gave to me to suck out of its skin and swallow whole. (Welty 11)

Language, despite its instability, has the power to extend our sensual experience. And, as I struggle to articulate in my work, it is this instability that makes selfhood performatives equally unstable while at the same time allowing for intimate, sensual, somatic knowledge.

The functions of somatic language that Welty notes work on me as I conceive of my research and how I can meet goals of expressive self-invention and rigorous theoretic scholarship – borrowing here the distinction between heuristics and hermeneutics as developed by Gregory Ulmer.¹ Surely, the institutional force of private and public must exist because I become aware of a fear of compromise on personal, artistic, intellectual, or experiential levels. But I also want to challenge my understanding of supposed competing social roles, situated as it seems we all are in the histories, complexities, and influences of private and public. As with the Hindu myth of Ganesh continually throwing obstacles in the seeker's path, I intend to use my fears as obstacles in order to invent myself out of them. As Miles Richardson offers, "The ethnographic trick is not to

¹ Ulmer writes, "Without relinquishing the presently established applications of theory in our disciplines (critique and hermeneutics), heuristics adds to these critical and interpretive practices a generative productivity of the sort practiced in the avant-garde" (Ulmer, *Heuristics* xii).

factor out the biases, for that would factor out the ethnographer; rather the best strategy is not only to be aware of the biases but to utilize them in the research” (Richardson 222). My first strategy then is to continue to cultivate an awareness of my partiality; to make use of my fears, or biases, and maintain my impulse toward somatic research as a sort of schizoanalytic approach, “[s]toned thinking based on intensely lived experience” that seeks “a combination of three modes of knowledge—the *intuitive*, the *practical*, and the *reflective*” as a basis for interrogating the power dynamic between personal and global knowledge (Seem qtd. in Deleuze and Guattari xix, xxi; emphasis in original).

I return to a basic component of Simon’s work to help compose my definition of public and private, which have a direct bearing on selfhood performatives. Namely, I return to photography and to Roland Barthes’s theory for reading photographs, his development of the *studium* and *punctum*. The *studium* refers to conventional cultural meanings that produce the sympathetic interest of a “docile cultural subject” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 43). Our ability to read these meanings rests with our cultural training and participation; it is a common field of perception. The *punctum*, on the other hand, belongs to a personal field of perception, and it disturbs, interrupts, breaks or punctuates the *studium* (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 26). Often painful, the *punctum* is the accident in a photo that bruises us with an unexpected personal response. The two concepts carry a tension between the dullness and the bluntness of meaning. They also carry a tension between implicit and personal signification: “The *studium* is ultimately always coded, the *punctum* is not” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 51). Key to Barthes’s theory is that the basic relationship between the *studium* and the *punctum* is a matter of co-presence (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 42). For Barthes, the *studium* and the *punctum* do not operate separately.

I use these distinctions and the interdependence of these distinctions as my definitions for public and private.

Gregory Ulmer understands the *punctum*, which foundationally guides his theories regarding literacy in digital media, as the “power of a photograph to stimulate involuntary personal memory” (Ulmer, *Internet Invention* 44). Ulmer takes Barthes’s notions of cultural and personal meanings a step further and explicitly links the concepts to those of public and private. Ulmer connects the *punctum* to “personal memory based not on the public archive but a private repertoire,” (Ulmer, *Internet Invention* 44). Ulmer reads Barthes’s claims as an opportunity to consider public and private meanings as “two databases to call upon” (Ulmer, *Internet Invention* 44), allowing for an expansive approach to research.

Working within modes of public and private language that I gather from my understanding of Barthes and Ulmer, I hand-carve my obsessions into common speech in an effort to speak plain and extend beyond the “hardened language” of “self-contained” systems that make up the closed systems of writing that Barthes describes in *Writing Ground Zero* (Barthes, *Writing Ground Zero* 19). Or, if I cannot escape the systems, I attempt to confront by some means the paradox of the “occult side of language” toward which written language is turned (Barthes, *Writing Ground Zero* 19). Perhaps here is where the Ganesh myth puzzles itself in: to use the closed, hardened nature of language and sign systems productively, in a concrete way, to put that nature to work *for* itself. Welty directs us toward an opportunity to see “words in continuation and modification, and the beautiful sober, accretion of a sentence” (Welty 31). She also unfolds for us the sensual effects possible from our labors with the mysterious poetic architecture of

language. She writes, “I could see the achieved sentence finally standing there, as real, intact, and built to stay as the Mississippi State Capitol at the top of my street, where I could walk through it on my way to school and hear underfoot the echo of its marble floor, and over me the bell of its rotunda” (Welty 31).

My relay work also is influenced by a chaos akin to that described by Welty as a grade school student in a weekly PE ritual:

Dread rose in my throat. My head swam. Here was my turn, nearly upon me. (Wait, have I been touched—was that slap the touch? Go on! Do I go on without our passing a word? What word? Now am I racing too fast to turn around? Now I’m nearly home, but where is the hand waiting for mine to touch? Am I too late? Have I lost the whole race for our side?) I lost the relay race for our side before I started, through living ahead of myself, dreading to make my start, feeling too late prematurely, and standing transfixed by emergency, trying to think of a password. (Welty 29)

Welty’s words affect me. I recognized their relevance while caught in the midst of a powerful relay of my own. In writing this study, as I relayed between libraries, writing spaces, museums, coffee shops, research events, and all the various places I called home, by way of trains, plains, bikes, buses and feet, between neighboring cities or across an entire country, Welty’s literary advice became my password. She offered her clarity to my project just as I needed it: trust the associations and run. The result will be a document of inter-textual research, a poly-vocal collage. Each intersection, a mirrored conjunction reflecting back out infinitely, will confirm a conversation with cultural and historical forces much larger than my personal realm.

As the Whitney program states, Simon functions something like a collector of curiosities. Her exhibit recalls and produces the effect of the *Wunderkammern* described in Lawrence Weschler’s *Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonders* where “the palpable reality of such artifacts so vastly expanded the territory of the now readily conceivable” (Weschler

80). The “*estude, studiolo, theatrum mundi* or *Wunderkammern*—which blossomed in the 16th and 17th centuries as a successor to mediaeval relic collections and royal treasure chambers” have the effects and functions of a personalized “microcosm of the world – all knowledge, the cosmos arranged on shelves, in cupboards, or hanging from the ceiling, ‘infinite riches in a little room’ at a time when individuals could still aspire to know everything” (Sieveking).

While by no means exhaustive, my research process is informed by the curiosity cabinet phenomena, which is supported by Ulmer, Barthes, and post-structural understandings of language, text, and textuality. I use Taryn Simon’s photographic work as a model for my own cabinet of curiosity and wonder, my written document a place to store and arrange what I have collected during my relay. Quoting Albert Magnus, Weschler describes wonder as “a systole in the heart” (qtd. in Weschler 78). Weschler continues, “Someone witnesses something amazing but what matters most is not ‘out there’...but deep within, at the vital emotional center of witness” (Weschler 79). And while the deeply moved momentum of the witness certainly begins the relay, so to speak, perhaps the “out there” does matter as well. The interdependent relationship between the external phenomena and the internal space of communion can provide the “that’s so true!” relatable moment that Ulmer describes (Ulmer, *Teletheory* 117).

This relay of moments through mystory performative writing thus turns Barthes’s “hard language” of writing, and of sign systems in general, into communicative aesthetics (Barthes, *Writing Ground Zero* 19). It is my aim to borrow the metaphoric aspect of the cabinets as used by Simon as a frame for my mystory approach. By pointing her attention, indeed her camera, to the publication of widely unknown cultural phenomena,

Simon hopes to share that which has come to view only recently.

In its inter-textual, poly-vocal approach, my project practices the ideas and methods of mystory as an opening of selfhood, “produced not for its own sake but as the trace of convergence of living and artificial memories” (Ulmer, *Teletheory* 170). The mystory research approach incorporates and draws links between professional, personal, and popular discourses so as to “uncover and trace the story of the ‘self’ that is buried or enciphered in a variety of ‘other’ historical discourses” (Bowman and Bowman 164). These links create a collage of researched cultural knowledge and phenomena. Indeed, Ulmer’s convergence of memories functions *as* collage. He articulates the “more descriptive than wounding” power of Derrida’s “parasitical economy,” the citational force of which Ulmer suggests mystory carries to its limit *through* collage (Ulmer, *Teletheory* 144). Ulmer offers that the “charge” of parasitism leveled on deconstructionist readings should be understood for “how it functions as theoretical property” (Ulmer, *Teletheory* 144). He emphasizes the potential for plurality in collage by quoting J. Hillis Miller in defense of deconstruction:

“What happens when a critical essay extracts a ‘passage’ and ‘cites’ it? Is this different from a citation, echo, or allusion within a poem? Is a citation an alien parasite within the body of its host, the main text, or is it the other way around, the interpretive text the parasite which surrounds and strangles the citation which is the host?” (Miller qtd. in Ulmer, *Teletheory* 144)

“Miller’s rebuttal,” Ulmer continues, “is meant to undermine the very notion of ‘univocal’ reading by showing the equivocal, paradoxical plurality of the meaning of ‘host’ and ‘guest,’ which turn out to share the same etymological root and are interchangeable in their sense” (Ulmer, *Teletheory* 145). Here I am reminded of the resonance in Welty’s capitol rotunda mentioned earlier. The possibility of a work of

associative collage resembles her acoustics as an intact achievement that, like prose, allows for the echoes of the movement and transportation I experienced to create my document.

CHAPTER 3
CREATING A BURNER:
THE BURNING MAN FESTIVAL AND
THE LIMITS OF CARNIVAL AND COMMODIFICATION

We rolled onto the playa creeping through a line of hundreds of other RVs and vehicles early at dusk on Monday, August 27, 2007. Brandon, Craig, Dehlia, and myself: a couple, a roommate, and a friend from college nestled together in a rented RV and towing stocked cabinets of fruit, dry foods, home-made breads, Emergen-c, all kinds of ready-to-prepare ingredients for a week of camping in the desert, lots of water, propane, DVDs, board games, digital cameras, mixed-matched costume pieces, four bikes for the cracked desert landscape, and a lot of expectation. The line took hours even this early in the week, caravans of cars, trucks, SUVs, and RVs starting and stopping with bellies full of cargo to pitch tent for the week long festival that ended prodigiously on Labor Day.

With its ability to convene a spectrum of grotesque and frivolous amusements, this annual performance and art installation event held in the desert of northwestern Nevada the week before Labor Day, has cultivated itself into a city. Specifically, some 40,000 participants turn the desert where the event is held into Black Rock City, Nevada. Paying between \$200 and \$300 for an entrance ticket,² participants gather for a week of RV and tent camping in the harsh desert climate aiming to build a community based on the relationship between carnival and art. Costs for the event exceed the ticket price. As Berton observes, “a festival ticket offers few amenities beyond portable toilets and

² 2500 tickets are available at a price of \$160 for those who qualify for low-income status (Burning Man, llc, “Burning Man Tickets”). The ticket application asks seven subjective questions about monthly income and intended contributions to the event, such as, “What do you do to pay the bills and keep the landlord off your back? (i.e. - how do you make a living?)” (Burning Man, llc, “Burning Man Tickets”). The Scholarship Ticket Program is another low priced ticket incentive for a limited number of patrons. Information on the program was restricted to a predetermined date. Simply, the directors offer, “You do not need to be a student or be planning an art project in order to qualify” (Burning Man, llc, “Burning Man Tickets”).

emergency medical attention. To survive the desert conditions, festivalgoers must bring food, water and shelter, ranging from high-end RVs to simple tents” (Berton).

The desert plot from which Black Rock City rises is dubbed “the playa” by the “burners,” the participants who attend and make the festival. The term burner also is a way for participants to locate and acknowledge each other outside the festival proper, in the “more permanent community” of their daily lives (Black Rock City, llc, “Mission Statement”).

Having turned off the main road, our little community proceeds down a dry dirt road lead by a series of roped flags that eventual turn into a large maze of pylons that demarcates entry to the festival. This is the way in for ticket holders, the majority of us whose access was shaped by security, top-down organization, and ritual staff greetings. Meeting us up the line was a row of Burma Shave styled signs, whose meanings we tried to decode. “Burning Man ... was better ... last year. Hey Burning Directors ... please turn back ... the clock. I need to get the rush ... of my first time ... at Black Rock.” Taking on the disillusioned tone of underwhelmed burners of years past, the signs welcomed and warned the novice and the champ. “There are too many people, and too much to see. Please keep it all the same just for me!” The signs set up the tension between those who feel the festival will never return to its humble and, as they see it, more powerful origins and those charged by its evolution and expansion.

Did the roadside signs act as disclaimers, predictions, and apologies for the discriminating palettes the directors were sure to fail to astonish this year? Or were they a call-out on the jaded old-timer’s sensibility, made obtuse and pointless by his indulging nostalgia and exclusivity? “The problem ... is with Frat Boys ... who only come to see.

All I know for sure is the problem isn't me." Was it irony or double-irony covering its own tracks? It sounded like the directors of the event wanted to acknowledge their loyal followers *and* use their disillusionment to cater to newer members. Like many things at Burning Man, you would never know for sure what the collective "Oz" was up to, despite a desperate desire to pin the whole damn thing down behind a curtain, partially because it was difficult to locate those in charge once inside the gates. The landscape was awash with thousands and thousands of participants and their two- and four-wheeled vehicles, campsites, and the various art projects and parties that seemed to be in a constant state of assembly and disassembly. In any case, the signs seemed to suggest that there was no turning back for Burning Man, now facing unparalleled growth. But it certainly did seem that the directors of the event wanted to publicly acknowledge their awareness of the attendant dichotomy of old guard and new blood, and play off it.

Even without knowing the complexities, there was no escaping the invitation to consider the event in light of its history and emergent transformation; we were greeted with their friction at the entrance. The publicized desire to regain the rush from one's first time at Black Rock City prompted me to think about the hymenoplasty photograph at the Simon exhibit: a restoration of the virginal state in order to adhere to cultural expectations. Was it possible to reseal the rupture so as to re-experience it, and in any case, who were they trying to convince?

For me, a first-timer who was supposed to be savoring her own raucous virginity, who or what "Oz" was, where, and how it operated became more than an obsession. I was critical of the Kool-Aid, so to speak. But Burning Man was no environment for a discourse of suspicion. It's not in the spirit of things. A critical perspective was *itself* an

object for suspicion, an admission of a certain lack of participatory skill, of surrender, of letting go. The invitation is for experience and play. And as the signs suggest, if you're not playing, then you're just looking, enacting a browsing shopper uncommitted to a firm purchase. This invitation and expectation disallow our ability to participate and observe simultaneously or at varying intervals of degree and dedication. It would seem then that observation threatens the collective concentration required to prompt consumption of the event, one ogled participant at a time. But I also am aware of the Buddhist notion that the dogs of doubt must be turned on doubt itself. Similar to the in/visible Oz-like directors of the festival, I would have to confront whether my signs were productive revelations of irony or merely covering their own tracks.

By this point, all four of us were cozied up by the RV cock pit excitedly awaiting arrival on the other side of the entrance. We presented our tickets to the gate manager. (My ticket was a gift from Craig and Brandon, and it was with free air miles that I flew to San Francisco to meet them. Without these two conveniences, I would have missed this leg of the relay entirely.) We passed a fairly tame security sweep through the RV (Craig knew some folks), and then were asked our status: were there any virgins in our vehicle? As three of us were new to the festival, we were channeled to a second entrance area where we were separated formally: Brandon, Dehlia, and I were escorted to the Playa Virgin Bell to be deflowered, and Craig drove the RV just beyond to wait for us. The Playa Virgin Bell initiation was explained to us by a young man holding a stick. His voice carried the mustered up erotic glee of a St. Crispin's Day speech diluted by repetition and exhaustion. This already confused tone clashed against that of the distracted flamboyance of a Best Buy salesman who has forced too many accessories in

too many carts too many times. As Playa Virgins, we were asked to climb on top of a very large domed bell and straddle it while a Burning Man worker (or volunteer, certainly not a virgin, but anyway someone whose status was unclear because this was not time for “let me talk to your manager” type questions) banged on the bell sending a euphoric wave of unbridled rapture up your hooah. We looked at each other meekly, caught in between our nearing middle-age sobriety, the keen wisdom of post-adolescence, and the desire to act upon our irreverence for such social codes. We were tangled in the fact that we were not cultural suckers who were going to do something we’d regret and our childlike desire to play and do something we’d possibly regret. Here’s where the ticket paid off. This was the first ride. We were supposed to be getting something out of it. But authorizing our complicity drew the conflict for us. It was the way they were moving us through, pressured with people watching, waiting for their notarized orgasm, waiting to pass.

Up went Dehlia, dynamically and skillfully as mounting a horse, apprehensive but smiling the whole time as the chimes rang through. Then up went Brandon, who reminded me of our last time together on the roller coasters at Cedar Point amusement park, uncomfortable elation at an unpredictable moment. When my turn came, the salesman lost his interest in persuasive bravado, apparently under the influence of my apprehension. He did not ask to crack my bell. We never said a word to each other. He conveniently miscounted me, and I conveniently walked away. It was like reliving the awkwardness of a junior high dance. And like two middle-schoolers, we wordlessly and self-consciously moved away from each other with nothing more needing to be said. My initiation ritual ended with an anticlimactic, unverifiable loss of virginity.

The twenty-four hour ride from San Francisco through the north Nevada desert was long, and the first night ended in exhaustion even though the day had just begun. With the morning light emerging, we parked the RV and oriented ourselves as to where we were on the map of the playa. We were on the outskirts; this would be home for the next week. We could see a good deal of the “city” design from our vantage point.



Fig. 1 Domestic desert scene upon first arrival; Black Rock City, Nevada
August 27, 2007
(photo by the author)

Next to us was a large open space where an airport for small single-engine planes was being established. Around to the other sides were RV and tent sites already up or in the works. That morning alone, we met people from California, New York, and Michigan and a group of friends from Louisiana who had caravanned up. Later in the week, I learned just how big the festival was by virtue of its international appeal, meeting people

from Germany, Japan, and Brazil. Burning Man has quite a substantial following both in and outside of the US.



Fig. 2 Early in the week, airport in background; Black Rock City, Nevada
August 28, 2007
(photo by the author)

That first morning, fighting exhaustion with coffee and deep curiosity, I perused the 2007 program, which publicized the events, theme camps, and art installations that participants could attend. There were body and healing activities like yoga, Thai Chi, and massage, new-age pastimes like fire dancing, drum and chant circles, somatic playgrounds with trampolines, hula hoop camps, and a roller skating rink, dance parties with scheduled DJs, and a roster of camps and their themes. Burning Man was an adult playground, and I wanted to become more familiar with the toys. After showers and a meal, we piled on our bikes to explore the surrounds.

Much of the playa was organized around theme camps, collaborations between participants that resulted in themed sites and villages. With 40,000 participants, camps were numerous and far-reaching, and it was impossible to experience more than a handful or remember all the various aspects of those I strolled through. The 2007 program organized them from A-Z as well as by virtue of a map. Theme camp names ranged in style from “Raggedy Annex” to “Kamp Kaos” to “Deviant Playground” and typically offered shelter to socialize and relax out of the heat and dust. Many publicized DJs and low tech bars, usually consisting of a few informal chairs and a stocked beverage cart. Many camps also had art exhibits featuring the collaborations of the campers.



Fig. 3 A surrealist scene with orange ball; Black Rock City, Nevada
August 28, 2007
(photo by the author)

Riding through the Nevada desert in late summer, one must buffer against high temperatures. Water bottles and canteens are necessities urged through the Burning Man

slogan to “piss clean,” a constant reminder shared amongst participants. Clear urine assures you are drinking enough water to keep from becoming dehydrated in the harsh climate. Sunscreen, sunglasses, and head protection are equally important, but so is a bandana, surgical mask, or scarf so as to guard against the dust getting into your lungs. During my visit, most everyone wore goggles and a dust mask, the variations conjuring images of old West bandits, renegade surgeons, and humanoid aliens.



Fig.4 Art cars and flaming tuba; Black Rock City, Nevada
August 28, 2007
(photo by the author)

In the initial stages, the playa took on a wild mystique. Art cars, buses, and trucks, floats and sculptures were found in vast supply parading both during the day and at night. It was easy to find captivation in the sheer productive energy of the many art projects being installed. Each year the event organizes around a major theme. In 2007, the theme was “The Green Man,” its premise based loosely on environmental issues.

Cradled inside a fence laid out in the shape of a pentagon, Black Rock City consists of seventeen streets radiating out from center camp, creating a semi-circular shape. Thirteen additional streets dissect the others. While highly organized, the town is nonetheless bewildering; a carnival maze due to the disorienting yet repetitive contents of the camp sites: a panoply of neon fur, brightly colored animal prints, rave costuming, and lots and lots of skin. As a result of the street design, one could find oneself at “3:00” and “Fresh Water,” “six and jungle,” or closer to our camp, at “8:30” and “Landfill.” Bikes were in ample supply and were an easy way to navigate through the streets. In fact, one exciting pastime is riding in the dust storms that crop up unpredictably throughout the week. At some point the air becomes filled with brown dust to the point where riding is impossible, the wind bearing down to an immobilizing degree.

Over the course of the week the playa was everywhere coming to life. Camps and larger installations slowly animated into the full scale productions they boasted by the week’s end. Apparently, many burners do not arrive onto the playa until Wednesday or Thursday, after the set up of camps and art installations is nearly complete and the party is in full swing, anticipating the formal events of the weekend.

Central to Black Rock City and the Burning Man festival is “the Man,” a forty foot tall wood and neon figure (Burghart). “The Man” is housed and displayed in the center of Black Rock City until the end of the week, when he is burned on Saturday night in a ritualized immolation (Burning Man, llc, “Frequently Asked Questions”). The town is set up around this center piece and all activity happens on its periphery.

Formal events aside, the festival is organized to endorse spontaneity and improvisation generally and especially in the camps that offer events fairly

autonomously. For that reason, many events are not planned or publicized; they just happen by word of mouth. Most of the dance and other parties my RV mates and I attended happened this way, by meeting people, or riding around and stopping when we found something that looked fun. The great draw of the event is that your time is your own, and the discourse of the planners and participants is one of finding inspiration through idle wandering and socializing.



Fig. 5 Black Rock Roller Disco; Black Rock City, Nevada
August 29, 2007
(photo by the author)

Enjoying seven days of sovereignty and an autonomous lack of disruption from its neighboring commonwealths, Burning Man has issued missions and principles sounding the values inherent to its project:

Our mission is to produce the annual event known as “Burning Man” and to guide, nurture and protect the more permanent community created by its culture. Our intention is to generate society that connects each individual to his or her creative powers, to participation in community, to the larger realm of civic life, and to the even greater world of nature that exists beyond society. We believe that the experience of Burning Man can produce positive spiritual change in the world. To this end, it is equally important that we communicate with one another, with the citizens of Black Rock City and with the community of Burning Man wherever it may arise. Burning Man is radically inclusive, and its meaning is potentially accessible to anyone. The touchstone of value in our culture will always be immediacy: experience before theory, moral relationships before politics, survival before services, roles before jobs, embodied ritual before symbolism, work before vested interest, participant support before sponsorship. Finally, in order to accomplish these ends, Burning Man must endure as a self-supporting enterprise that is capable of sustaining the lives of those who dedicate themselves to its work. From this devotion spring those duties that we owe to one another. We will always burn the Man. (Black Rock City, llc, “Mission Statement”)

As the entrance signs warned, participation is set fiercely against observation, that is, the weak ogling voyeurism of a “frat boy.” The “radically participatory ethic” is stated officially in the “Ten Principles” of Burning Man. The ten principles are radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leaving no trace, participation, and immediacy. Radical inclusion refers to the open invitation to anyone to attend the festival: “We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community” (Black Rock City, llc, “Ten Principles”). Of course, the invitation is predicated on one’s ability to afford the ticket price. “Gifting” refers to the ethic of gift giving as it relates to the social and economic relationships endorsed by the directors. Discouraging the practices of swapping, bartering, or purchasing, the directors suggest that “[g]ifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value” (Black Rock City llc, “Ten Principles”). Many participants I met came to the

festival prepared with CD compilations, soaps, jewelry, and other items to give away as they desired.

Linked to “gifting” is the principle of “decommodification,” the ethic that attempts to “create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising” (Black Rock City llc, “Ten Principles”). This principle came under serious fire in 2007, the first year that the directors allowed corporate participants to promote their products (Chris Taylor). The loophole was that the companies were “green-friendly” and hence attended to the ethics of that year’s environmental theme (Chris Taylor). Still, the decision marked a turning point in the event’s history.

“Radical self-reliance” refers to the discovery and use of one’s “inner resources” while “radical self-expression” is even more vague in definition. The website tells us, “Radical self-expression arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content. It is offered as a gift to others. In this spirit, the giver should respect the rights and liberties of the recipient” (Black Rock City, llc, “Ten Principles”).

“Communal effort,” forwards ideas of cooperation and collaboration that “produce, promote and protect social networks, public spaces, works of art, and methods of communication that support such interaction” (Black Rock City, llc, “Ten Principles”). “Civic responsibility” speaks to the directors’ responsibilities to the festival participants and the public domain they build and to the larger local, state, and federal institutions with which they must cooperate. “Leaving no trace” is an environmental statement that defines the policy on waste: “We are committed to leaving no physical trace of our activities wherever we gather. We clean up after ourselves and endeavor, whenever

possible, to leave such places in a better state than when we found them (Black Rock City llc, “Ten Principles”).

The final two principles, “participation” and “immediacy” are closely linked. “Participation” connects a “radically participatory ethic” with “transformative change” (Black Rock City llc, “Ten Principles”). This change “can occur only through the medium of deeply personal participation,” where being is achieved by doing, both of which are cornerstones to one’s sense of reality (Black Rock City llc, “Ten Principles”). “Immediacy” refers to immediate experiences that relates to “barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with a natural world exceeding human powers” (Black Rock City llc, “Ten Principles”). Resisting the ideologies inherent in this statement, the directors proceed to state, “No idea can substitute for this experience” (Black Rock City llc, “Ten Principles”).

Another discourse at work is that of unbridled artistic production influenced by an anything-goes sensibility. One can experience a diverse range of art and performance at Burning Man – from large scale iron work sculptures, to low budget CD mixes, to enormous animatronic displays, to jewelry, improv music troupes, paintings, and varying degrees of costuming. Due to the vast open-air scale of the landscape, the event seems to draw artisans working in large scale projects that require training in technologically complex mediums, such as, welding and carpentry. Structures like an iron-work tree house, a carousel of moving monkeys, and eighteen-wheelers rigged as dance clubs were plentiful. Dwarfed by the very landscape that brought them into existence, some installations seemed miniature despite being incredibly impressive. Some displays were

interactive to varying degrees, allowing you to climb them, sit in them, or in one case power the display by means of pedaling a bike. But since many displays were not interactive, the landscape became an enormous museum of large-scale techno-art. The museum quality of the work coupled with the massive use of personal still and video cameras convinced me that for an event dominated by an anti-observer discourse, much of the activity of Burning Man was very much about just looking.

Locating the embedded instructions for selfhood performatives is not difficult at Burning Man; they are spelled out explicitly in the “Ten Principles.” They define in no uncertain terms what constitutes a burner’s code of being. The principles of immediacy and participation are taken to heart by festival participants who, through panoptic monitoring, “hail” each other to participate, to enact a selfhood of participation. The loss of virginity spectacularly publicized at the entrance to the festival is not the only initiation ritual. One must also be baptized with a playa name. I was dubbed “Cold Cut” by my RV mates and neighboring festival goers both for my unwitting ability to ask a group of vegans where they kept the lunch meat, and as an indictment of my at times aloof and solitary nature.

For instance, one morning a man garbed in black bikini briefs and playa dust stopped in front of our open RV window where I was journaling quietly and spit out his contempt for my lack of social involvement and seeming observation of others. “I’m just a whore, and I’m just looking,” the man mocked audibly without looking at me. He hung at the window for a moment, huffed, and then walked away. Burning Man had a dark side. For all of its amusements and distastes, I found myself engaging in the tension between the jaded critic and the wide-eyed follower. I suppose influenced by the

initiating rhetoric of the entrance signs, I found myself conflicted between seeing through the hokum and believing in the magic.

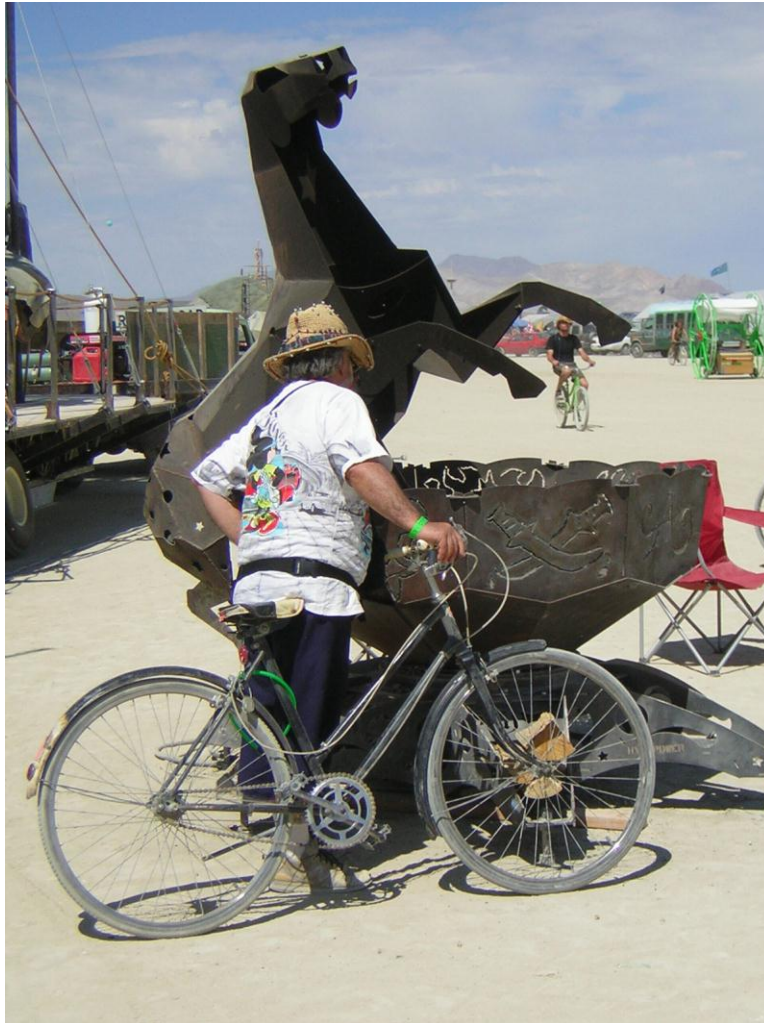


Fig. 6 A burner stops to look inside an iron horse fire pit; Black Rock City, Nevada
August 28, 2007
(photo by the author)

One memorable event stands out in terms of believing in the magic of grotesque possibilities at Burning Man. Loitering through several camps and performance spaces, Delhia and I found a make-shift lounge of sorts with a fully stocked bar, stools, and a leather-vested, top-hatted bartender that poured us a few. At the moment, Delhia and I were in flow: fully in the spirit of gleeful wandering we brought out in each other in the improvisational environment. Whenever domestic tensions in the RV set to boiling,

Dehlia and I would escape for a bike ride, applaud each other on dueling trampolines, or scamper hand in hand in flirtatious and wanton strolls in the labyrinth of camps. After much delighted inebriated laughter, we were interrupted by the bartender who asked us in an incredibly gentle voice if we'd seen the kitties. Naturally, all that could make the moment grander were fluffy kittens crawling on the bar while we dipped our straws in each other's drinks.

The bartender motioned us over to a "box" at the entrance of the tent to which we practically skipped and giggled. Stunned, there we found in a glass rotisserie the decomposing bodies of several road-kill cats. The host's attitude was not one of delighted self-pleasure at our naïveté, at least not overtly. The display stood as a grotesque narrative protest, insisting on itself through our equally insistent buzz. The bartender told us where the cats were found and how many pets were killed by vehicles annually in the tone of a casual storyteller. He tenderly watched with us as the carcasses rotated. This was not what one expects from a self-pleasuring head-fuck. He was courteous as he attempted to tell a narrative whose soft exposition was incongruent to the revolving image before us. As Burning Man loyalist Pinchbeck offers, "The purpose of the art is to delight as well as to inspire improbable interactions" (Pinchbeck). A+.

What fascinates me about Burning Man is how it functions as cultural performance – given that it composes itself as an alternative art community space; a space crafted deliberately for the performance of selfhood realized loosely through "radical self-expression" that "arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content" (Black Rock City, llc, "Ten Principles"). The implication is that the instructions for selfhood that

Burning Man offers stand outside cultural and economic forces. The contents of the self are unquestionably self-determined, a kind of autonomy outside of the sway of social relationships, not unlike the post-apocalyptic scene of its performance event.

Burning Man also seems to suggest that they offer a space for members of the public to go to seek refuge from the larger social order, a space in contrast to that order, a private space that provides comfort and permission for the anti-social fact that “[y]ou’ve covered yourself in silver, you’re wearing a straw hat and a string of pearls, or maybe a skirt for the first time” (Steenson). After all, Burning Man’s meaning, if not door fee, “is potentially accessible to anyone.”

I sought participation in the festival as a student of performance compelled by selfhood performatives that demonstrate a private and public tension. The private world of Burning Man is accessed by virtue of a nearly \$300 ticket, “not to mention the thousands of dollars spent on gas money and equipment to survive in a climate that is not inhabitable” (Sahmita). What kind of performance event do you get with that kind of money? To what type of private counterpublic do you gain access? Writer and cultural critic Daniel Pinchbeck suggests we consider Burning Man within the heritage of last century’s performance art. He writes:

With its utopian spirit and creative aims, Burning Man can be compared to a range of twentieth-century art movements, from Dada to the radical community of the Viennese Actionists....The festival's expressive mode could be called post-Pop surrealist. (Pinchbeck)

Pinchbeck’s view seems fairly accurate in light of the style and scale of “last summer’s artworks [which] included a giant urinal (a nod to Duchamp) and a chandelier so large it seemed to have fallen from a god’s banquet hall” (Pinchbeck). Without a trace of nostalgia, Pinchbeck suggests the art work is “pushed to the point where irony

cannibalizes itself and disappears, leaving a sincere and seamless merging of the profound and the profane” (Pinchbeck). Where Pinchbeck felt Burning Man annihilated its own sense of irony, the festival often felt like it was simply devoid of irony. On the other hand, recalling the entrance signs, there is a conflict between these critics about if and how, Burning Man has evolved; these days, Burning Man is a polarizing force.



Fig. 7 Playa scene; Black Rock City, Nevada
August 28, 2007
(photo by the author)

Likening the event to twentieth century avant-garde movements may seem appropriate when considering the experimental effects in play. Diana Taylor asks us to consider the influence of the avant-garde movements in performance studies:

The presumption, of course, is that performance—now understood as drawing heavily from the visual arts and nonconventional theatrical representations, happenings, installations, body art, and performance art—is an aesthetic practice with its roots in either surrealism, dadaism, or earlier performance traditions such as cabaret, the living newspaper, and rituals of healing and possession. The

avant-garde's emphasis on originality, ephemerality, and newness hides multiple rich and long traditions of performance practice. (Diana Taylor 10)

For Taylor, the binary between forgetting and discovering shapes tenuous relationships between cultural and aesthetic traditions, and “epitomize(s) the period’s self-conscious obsession with the new, as it forgot or ignored what was already there” (Diana Taylor 10). Taylor’s comments are relevant from a performance research and critical perspective on Burning Man since much of the rhetoric of self-expression and immediacy revolves around innovation, progress, and new relationships between art and technology. Understanding how the rhetorical functions of selfhood performatives translate into aesthetic compositions makes the festival’s use of performance movements and their histories significant. I had to consider in what ways preoccupations with immediacy and presence resist or “forgot” *any* kind of artistic tradition.

Finding information about the participants that make up the festival was difficult.

The official website offers:

We typically have participants from all 50 states and just about every corner of the planet. The majority of participants hail from California and Nevada, but we’re seeing growing international participation from Canada, Europe and Asia. We haven’t systematically recorded demographics, but the trend toward international participation has been growing each year. (Black Rock City, llc, “Burning Man Press FAQ”)

Systemic demographics do not seem to have been a priority for the directors in the festivals nearly two and a half decades of operation. That trend may be changing though as the festival becomes open to its identity as a business. According to Marian Goodell, who is referred to as the festival’s CEO in Business 2.0 Magazine, “This community is a dream for anyone looking at demographics,” Goodell says. “We have kids who work in coffee shops and we have billionaires. To ignore the value of our brand, the buying

power it has, is silly” (Taylor, “Burning Man Grows Up”). Brand identity and demographic calculation do have some bearing on each other.

One rare piece of demographic data, created by information designer Flint Hahn, is an impressive infographic, which is a timeline and map of Burning Man demographics over the years. In Hahn’s data, 54% of participants are male, 40% female, 67% are between the ages of 21 and 40, 69% have graduated college, 28% have an income of between \$50,000 and \$100,000, and 15% between \$100,00 and \$500,000 or more (Hahn). Race is not calculated as part of the demographics. From my experience at the festival, the majority burners are white.³

Feminist blogger Samhita argues festival organizers, “don’ do much to make it appealing to people of color. It is not the kind of space where we are made to feel welcome, it is not our space and it was not meant to be,” arguing that little is done in the way of outreach and funding (Sahmita). Sahmita continues:

[The] total lack of inclusion to world music and the music of working class people and people of color felt strategic, even if it was simply an oversight. As much as [Burning Man] wants to exist in a bubble, let’s be real, nothing that happens in the US is in a bubble. If you are having a party and everyone is white, something is not right. Right? (Sahmita)

SFGate.com reporter Vanessa Marlin acknowledges the racial discrepancy stating, “The absence of people of color at an event touted by founder Larry Harvey as ‘radically inclusive’ is a popular topic of discussion among burners” (Marlin). According to Marlin, Harvey theorizes that the appeal of Burning Man for a white demographic stems from a specific racial need for cultural community. “‘Whites are radically isolated from their families and each other,’ he said. ‘It’s easy to get lost in a life where no one is

³ An article in “SFGate.com” reports that “Burning Man’s official census purposely does not collect information on race or ethnicity. The form simply asks whether the person filling it out considers himself white or not, and ‘Does this question offend you?’” (Marlin).

connected”” (Harvey qtd. in Marlin). But perhaps participants are not encouraged to recognize the relationship between an anti-consumerism social movement in the US in 2010 and tensions between race, class, and gender; or at least these relationships are irrelevant to the project. Self-expression and radical self-reliance, indeed selfhood, are far less complicated on the playa:

You're here to experience. Ride your bike in the expanse of nothingness with your eyes closed. Meet the theme camp — enjoy Irrational Geographic, relax at Bianca's Smut Shack and eat a grilled cheese sandwich. Find your love and understand each other as you walk slowly under a parasol. Wander under the veils of dust at night on the playa. (Stenson)

Again, constant tension is at play for the participant caught in understanding Burning Man as a social bubble, and enjoying it for exactly that fact.

The contingency at Burning Man, a largely middle and upper-middle class white population, is instructed by the directors to delve deeply into embodiment, or at least to rouse their desires toward an ideal of “embodied ritual before symbolism” (Black Rock City, llc, “Mission”). The terms for embodiment were hard for me to discern. The most material definition that I experienced amounted to a retail-like reflex and accessibility to pastiche costuming: the borrowed, thrift shop costuming that takes little risk and is easily assembled and removed. Arguable, playing dress up can be relatively harmless. Yet, for Sahmita, the bubble-like private domain of the playa lends to a low risk carnivalesque practice of borrowing cultural costume, protecting participants from outside surveillance as well as from the need for cultural consciousness and sensitivity:

White people on the playa felt very comfortable donning “ethnic” cultural artifacts, styles of dress, architectural and artistic styles. The influences were profound. I saw at least 5 white men wearing full Native American headresses and tribal face paint. This is made worse because Nevada is home to some of the poorest reservations in the country, so not only was this insensitive but it is blatantly offensive (even if it is done in the guise of their version of the

“American Dream”). (Sahmita)

I did notice the use of tribal pastiche in costumes and camps alike, as evidenced in the photo of hides, face-painted masks, skulls, and furs shown below.



Fig. 8 Cruise America; Black Rock City, Nevada
August 29, 2007
(photo by the author)

Burning Man as a protected domain of cultural practices becomes hard for me to overlook as mere carnival performance. Sometimes the symbolic artifacts that the event generated were hard to ignore in terms of the private world created under its direction. Passing by the “Kostume Kult” costume shop on a bike ride through the playa certainly had me wondering about the limits of carnival, subversion, irony, racial politics, and bad taste.



Fig. 9 Kostume Kult; Black Rock City, Nevada
August 29, 2007
(photo by the author)

With the middle digit raised high, the strange hooded figure, and the repetitive “K,” the shop made it clear to me that for all the grotesque play at the festival, there were moments when participants of Burning Man were clearly unaware of themselves. Am I supposed to deny these moments in order to make room for embodied ritual? In light of the buffet of embodiment the festival encourages and protects, it is hard not to see the at-times problematic carnivalesque practices as protected, especially since the cost of attendance guarantees a level of privacy. Samhita’s perspective supports this view too:

I saw many folks wearing traditional Arab dress and wrapping kafiya’s around

their heads. In one instance a young man actually took his off when sitting next to us. I will never know if he did it because it was hot or because he couldn't figure out if we were of Arab descent or not, but it occurred to me that he wouldn't have even thought he might run into some folks that might be offended. We caught him in his free space. (Sahmita)

The implication of “free space” suggests that the private/public binary exists explicitly at the festival in terms of rhetorical goals of individual freedom. It further implies that these spaces – which cut across race, class, and gender – are not democratized but maintain the tensions between these cultural positions through exclusion. A selfhood performative of radical individuality at Burning Man has little to do with challenging these cultural boundaries as points of personalized oppression; the performative tends to be more about simplifying the issues into a means of safety for the major demographic benefitting from firmly established embodiments of private and public.

Demographics continue to play into Burning Man's future, whether it embraces corporate participation or a post-Pop surreal aesthetic and ethic. Burning Man critics and allies remain polarized on the issue. Not everyone shares Pinchbeck's loyalty to the event, especially the disillusioned old guard who were around during the initial phases of Burning Man, and newcomers like Sahmita. In the former respect, the directors had it right: festival attitudes are divided along the lines of nostalgia for earlier days and a sense of salvation for what the festival provides that no other event can. What in fact were the initial goals towards which the nostalgia is pointed?

Ally and author of *This is Burning Man* and the 2006 article titled “Burning Man Grows Up,” Brian Doherty provides some idea of the Burning Man past:

My story was about Burning Man growing from its origins as a mostly anarchistic intentional community of artist/boho buddies gathering in the distant, eerie, and empty Black Rock Desert in Nevada (where the celebration had occurred every Labor Day since 1990, after it outgrew its 1986 birthplace on a San Francisco

beach). I chronicled how Burning Man was growing into a more complicated set of entanglements with and responsibilities to government entities, and making tentative steps toward imposing order and rules on fiery chaos. The [other] story in the July issue of *Business 2.0* is instead about Burning Man shifting into collaboration with corporate forces in the service of modern progressive ecopolitics, while trying to maintain its identity—one could even say its “brand identification”—as an “anti-commodification” social movement. (Doherty)⁴

Doherty tracks the festival from its beginnings through its twenty-four year run, “leveling” with the audience in terms of the inevitable economic expansion the festival faces due to its size.

In his work *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, Marshall Berman draws a connection between “modernist culture and the bourgeois economy and society—the world of ‘modernization’—from which it sprung,” suggesting that a dualism historically divides modernist culture and modernization (Berman 90). Berman’s argument compels an image of Marx inseparable from the bourgeois principles that he attacks. Marxist communism, Berman suggests, “is unmistakably modern, first of all in its individualism, but even more in its ideal of development as the form of the good life” (Berman 98). In its “Mission” statement and “Ten Principles,” Burning Man’s rhetorical performances seek to undo or rework the tenants of capitalism destructive to selfhood and community. It is possible to consider Burning Man’s situation within a capitalist bourgeois system.

Carnival practice at Burning Man mimics the exhilarating confusion of consumer capitalist spectacle and places Burning Man as an extension of capitalist exuberance. Berman describes the “solid institutional core of modernity” in Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*, which for me echoes the nature of the festival: “Vast numbers of the uprooted poor pour into cities, which grow almost magically—and cataclysmically—overnight”

⁴ Chris Taylor of *Business 2.0 Magazine* wrote the other article titled “Burning Man Grows Up” to which Doherty refers.

(Berman 91). We are left then to consider in what ways Burning Man's constituency, rich at least in disposable income, is poor; what "aura of holiness is suddenly missing" from their lives? (Berman 89). It is this sense of symbolic poverty that is echoed in Burning Man's "Mission Statement," where:

[t]he touchstone of value in our culture will always be immediacy: experience before theory, moral relationships before politics, survival before services, roles before jobs, embodied ritual before symbolism, work before vested interest, participant support before sponsorship. (Black Rock City, llc, "Mission")

To break down this statement rhetorically, placing a mode of assumed oppression (for instance, "symbolism") before its ideal ("embodied ritual") is a privileged class move that sustains the Burning Man economy, including the economy of lack of selfhood individuality.

It would seem that the work of Burning Man's volunteer artisans would undermine on some small scale the global capitalist growth that consumes and disintegrates local and regional industries and markets; at least, its mission, if not the principles of gifting, decommodification, and communal effort, reads like a call to counter-action. But in many ways, the pieces are as monumental as the economic system they attempt to counter. Yet, despite the fact that true to the capitalist dictum that "everything that bourgeois society builds is built to be torn down" (Berman 91), Burning Man maintains that the culture it creates off the playa, dispersed into the global marketplace fifty-one weeks of the year, is permanent. Does this mean that burners can "awaken to some sort of class consciousness and activate themselves against the acute misery and chronic oppression in which they live" (Berman 91)? This is a fascinating aspect of Burning Man's rhetorical function of decommodification; it is possible that Burning Man's mission could be a call to arms or a further deferment of the "sober

senses”” necessary to understand ““the real conditions of [our] lives and [our] relations with [our] fellow men”” (Marx qtd. in Berman 89).

Community permanence seems to work in an effort to meet its own survival, again, one year later, in order to reinstate specific performatives of selfhood. The function of deferment aligns the event with its own publicity. In order to safeguard its “permanence,” the event must function in a state of continual future publicity. Burning Man is in this respect an advertisement for itself, and as John Berger writes, “Publicity, situated in a future continually deferred, excludes the present and so eliminates all becoming, all development. Experience is impossible within it. All that happens, happens outside it” (Berger 153). The experience Burning Man offers, the embodied ritual of publicity, precludes experience itself. Burning Man is busy, but to what end? Berman suggests that the praise that Marx offers the bourgeois class is due to “bourgeois activism” or a:

genius for activity [that] expresses itself first in the great projects of physical construction—mills and factories, bridges and canals, railroads, all the public works that constitute Faust’s final achievement—these are the pyramids and cathedrals of the modern age. (Berman 92)

This activism, accompanied with “the immense movements of people...which the bourgeoisie has sometimes inspired, sometimes brutally enforced, sometimes subsidized, and always exploited for profit” (Berman 92) are the powers of human development that capitalist forces sustain.

[W]hat stirs [Marx] is the active and generative process through which one thing leads to another, dreams metamorphose into blueprints and fantasies into balance sheets, the wildest and most extravagant ideas get acted on and acted out (“whole populations conjured out of the ground”) and ignite and nourish new forms of life and action. (Berman 93)

As Berman suggests, Marx hailed the bourgeois class for its unprecedented ability to create. But there is for Marx an unfortunate hang-up fueling the activity.

If we can see the massive activity that goes on at Burning Man galvanized as the bourgeois activism that Marx described in the *Manifesto*, incredibly impressive and not hastily overlooked, we also can gather where all this activity might lead. Berman highlights a key paradox within all of this activity. “The irony of bourgeois activism, as Marx sees it, is that the bourgeoisie is forced to close itself off from its richest possibilities, possibilities that can be realized only by those who break its power” (Berman 93). In these terms, it would appear burners are resistant to break the power that protects their domain of private radically self-expressive practices. In a description befitting and relevant to the Burning Man demographic, Berman continues: “[T]he bourgeoisie have established themselves as the first ruling class whose authority is based not on who their ancestors were but on what they themselves actually do. They have produced vivid new images and paradigms of the good life as a life of action” (Berman 94). At Burning Man, this alienated “good life” is evidenced by the distance the community tries to place between the possibilities offered within its borders and those of the host economy of the US. Burning Man is an alternative space of decommodification.

The profits that benefit burners are linked to the purchase of selfhood that allows them to protect and continue to enjoy a degree of economic privilege. And, as Doherty has observed, the oncoming capitalist influence on the event is inevitable.

What’s so infuriating about market capitalism to those who want to hate it? We inevitably swim in it, and any attack on it threatens to involve us in a performative contradiction. We create, we trade, we buy, we sell—it is essential in the nature of any culture that wants to survive beyond the grimmest self-sufficiency. (Doherty)



Fig. 10 The wildest and most extravagant ideas; Black Rock City, Nevada,
August 29, 2007
(photo by the author)

Doherty may be sensing an inevitability that is direct in Burning Man's principles, despite its ideal toward decommodification. The principle of "Civic Responsibility," for instance, finds its own inevitability between the directors who organize the event and their observance and compliance with local, state and federal laws (Black Rock City, llc, "Ten Principles"). Naturally, it seems unnecessary to point out the need to maintain the safety and order for a population of 40,000 by upholding local and federal laws. Yet given this level of transparency, it is important to point out that no where in the official rhetoric does Burning Man endorse any form of capitalist democracy as essential or inevitable. Nor does it discuss the performative contradiction of its marketability and its principle of decommodification. "Civic Responsibility" reads close to a Marxist account of bourgeois organization described by Berman, "In order for these great changes to go

on with relative smoothness, some legal, fiscal, and administrative centralization must take place; and it does take place wherever capitalism goes” (Berman 91). Burning Man’s centralization given its expansion is a capitalist inevitability. Thus, its principles serve its capitalist ends.

My understanding of the directors’ lack of official capitalist endorsement is because, just like they play both sides at the entrance gate, Burning Man directors play both sides here too. It plays to some generic sense of radical capitalist reform and essential yet progressive capitalist development. Perhaps this is where Burning Man has left out some fundamental information in its guiding principles. As with its mission statement, Burning Man’s declaration of principles does not make clear what existing principles it sets itself against. This vagueness of direction may be due to its civic responsibility or its emerging brand identity. What prompts 40,000 people to leave their “normal” lives for a week of experimentation might be gleaned from the given language and, in the absence of said language, we are invited to fill in the blanks. While never stated plainly, Burning Man’s goals suggest that a deficiency exists in its “host” society that validates Burning Man’s creation and persistence. If they are impossibly vague through their tenants to say what exactly Burning Man is, it is equally hard to pin down what it is not. Against what dominant forces is Burning Man rebelling? What civic ailments have called Burning Man to action? Who are Burning Man’s enemies? Who is the man they want to burn? The predicament in which Burning Man finds itself is complex beyond its desert bubble.

As experimental performance, Burning Man seeks to unveil a suppressed real and primordial self manifested through paradigms of embodied ritual, radical self-reliance,

and authentic self-expression. The irony of Burning Man is that the flamboyant carnivalesque play of selfhood that is encouraged is not understood as constructed, it is understood as innate. Burning Man's lack of performative self-consciousness largely turns self invention into selfhood reproduction. It offers a conflated version of the readerly and writerly; that is, as seen through the playground of texts created on the land, its instructions lead to more self reproduction than self invention.



Fig. 11 Sometimes the monkeys didn't work; Black Rock City, Nevada
August 28, 2007
(photo by the author)⁵

Yet Burning Man contends that its immediate goals aim at turning the consumer into the producer as evidenced by its principle of participation:

⁵ Interestingly, this piece, titled "Homourobos" by burner sculptor Peter Hudson, was one of the green installations at the festival. The movement of the piece was generated by solar power as well as human energy collected through bike pedaling. Its animatronic mechanism was fascinating to watch but you had to catch it at the right time. The interactive art piece was reported as not always working (Burghart).

Our community is committed to a radically participatory ethic. We believe that transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur only through the medium of deeply personal participation. We achieve being through doing. (Black Rock City, llc, “Ten Principles”)

I question whether Burning Man succeeds in its aims for participation. Do the events and activities of Burning Man prompt participants to produce or do they plunge one further into the idleness of a customer? Do I give over to the referendum and merely vote by my allegiance as a burner or a naysayer?

My exposure to Burning Man made me aware of the emergent nature of my mystory. In their discussion of the textshop in the classroom, Bowman and Bowman remind us that the mystory asks the student to “draw on the resources of their own heritage or culture, their own developing sense of professional discourse, their own memories and experiences” (Bowman and Bowman 168). Burning Man tried to confirm a collective heritage and culture and made me acutely aware that it needed to at once be invented and destroyed, built and burned. The project then is to articulate the nature of this heritage, its boundaries and attributes, consider how and through whom it survives. As Diane Taylor writes, “Cultural identity is highly performative. Recognition is predicated on embodied behaviors and speech acts: the languages we speak, the way we ‘do’ our gender and sexuality, the ways in which class and race are understood and made visible, the degree of agency displayed by social actors” (Diana Taylor 121).

Deciding what Burning Man contends to be also is located in my own expectations of it, in what I need it to be in order to prove its efficacy as a performance.

As Michael Bowman writes:

By way of analogy or conceit, I would like to say that doing performance research and writing are akin to the activities of a legendary outlaw, since, in both, the idiomatic (one’s personal or private discourse) joins with the institutional (the

recognized “grammar” of one’s discipline) in order to rewrite (or, in Brecht’s terms, refunction) an object of study. For the famous outlaw, this means projecting one’s inimitable style or signature onto the grammar of law-breaking (e.g., robbing a bank) in order to recompose or refunction our standard attitudes toward “law and order.” (Bowman 362)

I am reminded thus of my own motives, not just as a dissertating doctoral student, but as an academic at all. Locating the tension of opposites in Bowman’s work, between law and the outlaw for the purpose of refunctioning, I have to come to terms with my choice of grammar, discipline, and institutional practice. Bank robbers exist to rob banks because they deeply desire what is inside, and lots of it. I wanted Burning Man to allow for outlaw performance; not congenial outlaw performance, but the real coyote (Bowman 363). It is the kind of performance that Barthes promises from the *punctum*. He writes, “This particular *punctum* arouses great sympathy in me, almost a kind of tenderness. Yet the *punctum* shows no preference for morality or good taste: the *punctum* can be ill-bred” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 43). One Burning Man performance in particular was ill-bred.

On August 28, 2007, at approximately 2:58 AM, an arsonist set fire to the Burning Man figure in Black Rock City, Nevada, during the height of full lunar eclipse. The figure was extinguished, but not before it sustained significant damage, and it was deemed unsafe to keep it in place for the remainder of the event. The Burning Man event continued, and the figure was rebuilt in 3 days, to be burned again – at the appointed hour – on Saturday night, surrounded by Black Rock City’s more than 47,000 participants who had come to witness its immolation. (Black Rock City, llc, “‘07 Bman Arsonist to Be Arraigned in Pershing County”)

The dry reportage betrays the indignation of the Burning Man institution. The first line reads like an homage. Mythology permeated the arson as did the laughter that rocked our RV. One story told of a group of burners dressed as Roman soldiers in a mock-gladiator celebration. From the midst of the performers, one emerged with arrow lit and let it fly directly on to the icon of capitalist establishment, which blazed on contact as it was

meant to do. Another story was less dramatic: against the dark eclipsed night, a man with lighter fluid and rags was seen climbing up the Man like a kid in a tree going too high because he never looks down. I've been able to confirm the latter story.

One man was arrested in conjunction with the unscheduled burning, Paul Addis, 35, of San Francisco, California. Addis was booked into the Pershing County, Nevada jail on suspicion of arson, illegal possession of fireworks, destruction of property and resisting a public officer, according to the sheriff's department. He posted a \$25,632 bond and was released. (Black Rock City, llc, "'07 Bman Arsonist to Be Arraigned In Pershing County")

The tenor around the playa regarding the unexpected burn was of outrage largely. It reconsolidated the identities of the burners. After all:

You're here to celebrate. On Saturday night, we'll burn the Man. As the procession starts, the circle forms, and the man ignites, you experience something personal, something new to yourself, something you've never felt before. It's an epiphany, it's primal, it's newborn. And it's completely individual. (Stenson)

An unplanned burn flies in the face of the embodied ritual procession of instantaneous individuality for which participants pay dearly. It was not that Burning Man's sense of irony cannabilized itself into disappearance, rather Burning Man was devoid of irony.

"Addis' arraignment on these charges was scheduled for September 25, 2007, at the Pershing County courthouse. Burning Man has and will continue to cooperate fully with the authorities in this investigation in pursuit of justice for the perpetrator(s) of this act" (Black Rock City, llc, "'07 Bman Arsonist to Be Arraigned In Pershing County"). Burning Man will be robbed of none of its thunder. It deemed the act not one of community creation in the name of its principles, but a destructive act against the line of its intentions.

In the meantime, we are grateful to the entire community, including the hardworking Burning Man staff and volunteers, for their support and participation during the unscheduled fire and destruction, its aftermath, and later, the eventual rebuilding of our event's namesake figure. Having weathered this unexpected

experience together, the final sentence of our mission statement rings truer than ever in the afterglow of Burning Man 2007: “We will always burn the Man.”
(Black Rock City, llc, “‘07 Bman Arsonist to Be Arraigned In Pershing County”)

The “man” has been safely protected as a “namesake figure,” a logo of brand identity, the Burning Man community redoubled in its efforts by virtue of a common enemy.

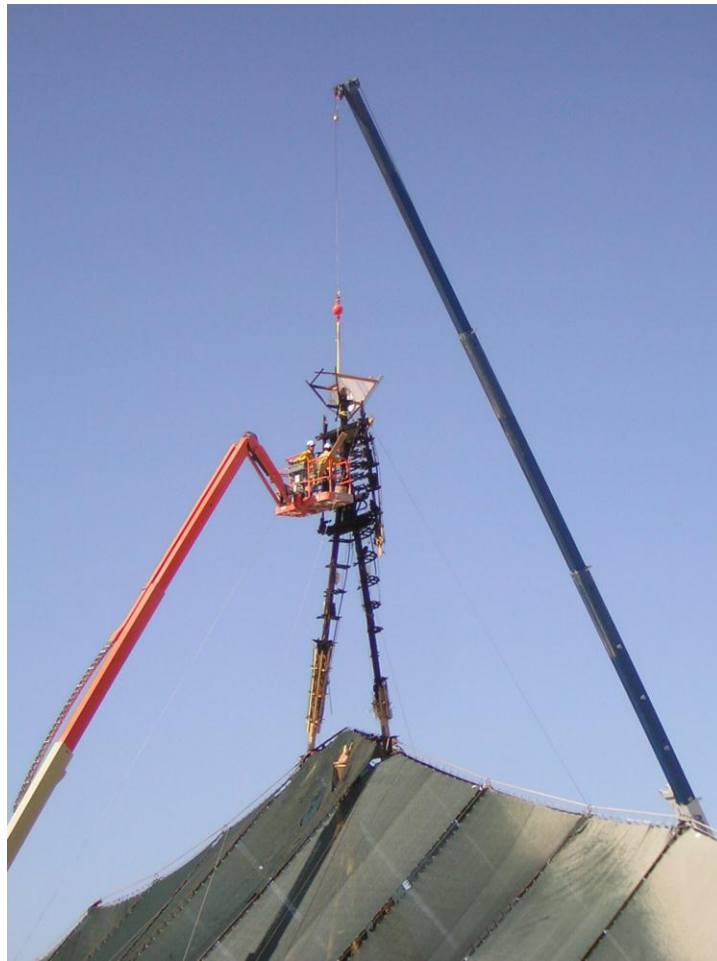


Fig. 12 It has to be blank; Black Rock City, Nevada
August 29, 2007
(photo by the author)

As Michael Bowman reminds us though, “In any discourse on method, one can usually find a corpse” (Bowman 361). The singed corpse of the Man would be resurrected, in the sense of being cleaned up for viewing and re-murdered, but dead all the same. Maybe Burning Man would have its cultural hymenoplasty after all. As a

sacrifice, albeit one that was reclaimed and re-ritualized, the act of spontaneous arson counters the boundaries of Burning Man's radical sensibilities.

In an interview with *Valleywag* online magazine on August 30, 2007, Addis describes his motivations:

"I started to believe that because of the way the event itself was transforming, I started to see that Burning Man's social impact and efficacy in having a substantial role in domestic policy and personal growth was nil. Burning Man had degenerated into a postindustrial disco." (qtd. in Thomas)

But more plainly, Addis suggests the reason he returned to the event in 2007, after a long hiatus since 1998, was due to a personal affront of his own selfhood: "[A] friend of mine from Los Angeles... goaded me into going. He asked me why I wasn't going, in front of a group of friends. And I said the only reason I would go was... 'blank.' The only reason I went was to keep my word to a friend of mine." The *Valleywag* reporter asks, "'Blank?' By 'blank,' do you mean 'to burn down The Man?'" to which Addis responds, "It has to be 'blank,' I'm on charges. You can't print that" (Thomas).

But why did I feel so entitled to a coyote? And why do I feel such an urge to distance myself from Addis? It is as if making social theory your career implies the presence of institutional oppressions, pressures against which an armed intellect must do battle. You do not have to be a card-carrying anarchist to understand the drive to influence and counter the production of social knowledge. We sense the same threats even if we react differently, with divergent styles. Our jobs in Performance Studies must do more than merely sniff out oppression; it is not enough to pull pranks or punches. Relevance is found in the ability to influence cognitive practices in inventive ways, to not fall too dreamily into the avant-garde trap, to remind ourselves of cognitive paths that may not be getting enough or the right attention.



Fig. 13 Rituals of healing and possession; Black Rock City, Nevada
August 29, 2007
(photo by the author)

In light of the Burning Man tragedy, things continued on during the week with renewed solidarity. As I watched a crowd in a healing tent reach rhythmic crescendos as directed by their conductor, I wondered what imperative drove them to their collective embodied expression; from what model were they drawing in their search for an authentic embodied moment? In her search for a more appropriate term to negotiate the tensions of performance, Diana Taylor suggests the Arawack word “areito,” the term for song-dance:

The term is attractive because it blurs all Aristotelian notions of discretely developed genres, publics, and ends. It clearly reflects the assumption that cultural manifestations exceed compartmentalization either by genre (song-dance), by participant/actors, or by intended effect (religious, sociopolitical, aesthetic) that ground Western cultural thought. (Diana Taylor 15)

This point clarifies the duality of a cultural group, myself included, who at once hope to defeat compartmentalization from within an embodied practice, but who come from traditions that persist otherwise.

CHAPTER 4
THE PARROT AND ITS ECHO:
THE MICHIGAN WOMYN'S MUSIC FESTIVAL

I woke up this morning thinking about Peggy Shaw. I thought about sitting on the lawn in front of the “Acoustic Stage” where Split Britches performed and watching Shaw unfurl her monologue like a pro, like a pro who knows the importance of a crisp white shirt collar. Out came her voice, commanding, mythological, not to be messed with and tenderly smooth because of it, while she remained unseen. She threw her voice, in front of her, at our feet. As she moved toward us, snaking off the stage and around the pop-a-squat seats of her audience, I thought about who it was she seemed to be imitating. “She does Christopher Walken *better* than Christopher Walken,” I thought with no disrespect toward the original. Waking up thinking about Peggy Shaw after her performance was not uncommon for me. It was one of those shows that made you want to perform, somewhere, quickly; you just want to find a mirror or cobble together an audience and do what Shaw and her partner Lois Weaver were doing. I thought about the show often after the festival was over. I thought about what the pair did to me, what they made me admit, how they made me feel. The dynamic they created for their audience forced me to take sides, and Weaver’s frantic demanding borderline hysterics were annoying, unpleasant, and just too much for me. I fell hard for the shirt collar.

Choosing came first though, no doubt about it. It was only after I picked that I understood I had been forced to recognize sides, recognize them as familiar in my cultural vernacular: girlie, manly. I was not confused by the gender performatives as I had seen and experienced them created all my life. What was confusing was how well Shaw and Weaver were able to manipulate the emotional response of an audience

member who knows full well the nature of gender performance and performance in general. The actors polarized desire through their play of binary seductions, and in so doing they left me wondering what lies behind desire.

She tried to hook me up with the other womyn, Lois Weaver did, by prompting, “You have a sexy voice...are you single?” during an audience interaction scene. “Go ahead, talk, say some more,” she insisted with the drunk manic power of a rich and pampered 1950s housewife. Since I was unprepared, and frankly annoyed that Lois was not Peggy, I shrugged too insolently toward her mask, “I don’t know what to say.” “Well then read your backpack,” she insisted. “Don’t you want to hear her ladies?” She was manic and undeterred; she demanded her way. So, out came the words, “North Face...Reconn,” in the smoothest, butteriest voice I have ever spread on a piece of toast. I felt like Berry White in a transparent, rose, crushed velvet dress. But it was not enough. Peggy never came around to me, to slip her fingertip under my chin during her version of “To All the Girls I’ve Loved Before,” Lois buzzing around like a coked-up femmed-out Martha Stewart in the background. While one kept me yearning, the other prepped and coaxed me into a slinky version fit to meet that yearning; Peggy played the target, Lois couched me towards a bull’s eye. Besides leaving me wanting more, they left me in a space of confusion in terms of understanding concepts of desire and seduction, with half-cooked notions of originals, imitations, and repetitions. After all, imitation is not just a form of flattery. When asked “What’s cool mean?” my four year old nephew Anthony once answered, “You know, like, ‘Hey, where’d you get that?’” Me wanting Peggy Shaw had a lot to do with me wanting what Peggy Shaw’s got.

My seduction in the Split Britches performance of *Retro Perspective* that I described above occurred during the 34th Annual Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, also known as MichFest. I attended in August of 2009, when the festival ran between Tuesday, August 4th and Sunday, August 9th. Located in Walhalla, Michigan, on the Lower Peninsula near Lake Michigan in the Manistee National Forest, the festival has organized a unique women-only village for three and a half decades. Each summer, the entire infrastructure of the village is built from the ground up by volunteers and participants and then taken apart and stored for the next summer (Kendall 3). The village is designed to provide a women-only space that features women's music concerts and entertainment, recreational spaces and educational workshops and spaces, a craft market, camping facilities, health care, day care, and food service to sustain the three to four thousand women that take part each year (Kendall 3).

Affectionately termed "the Land" by organizers and participants, the 650 acre festival site has successfully maintained its presence for thirty-five years largely due to the support of festival volunteers and paying participants known as "festies." What brings many participants back are the feelings of safety and community the festival space inspires, which has led to the land taking on an aura of sacredness for its participants (Kendall 4). Indeed, the program directors are grounded in maintaining the festivals legacy as a communal village. As the festival program offers, "Womyn of all ages and all of our children experience a unique feeling of safety and freedom on the Land" (Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, "2009 Program" 1). Part of the seduction in this case is that the women-only environment proposes a rare social experience. Having heard about the festival ten years prior as a student in Michigan, I never had the

opportunity to attend. This time, I had two major obstacles to contend with; the ticket price and travel expenses. I was living in northern New Mexico and had to get across country to Walhalla on a waitress's salary.

My road to the festival started with a reality check: I could not afford to go. To approach this problem, I listened to the advice of fellow participant and colleague Cora Leighton who suggested a yard sale to raise money. Having nothing to sell, as I was in New Mexico with little more than a suitcase and a few boxes of books, I instead held a raffle. Titled "Send Linda to MichFest," the raffle was held in my then-current residence of Taos, New Mexico, as well as on Face Book where I was able to connect with other women from the festival. I was waiting tables at a popular restaurant called "The Dragonfly," which at the time happened to be an all-female environment as well. My co-workers helped me out by donating items for the raffle. I was gifted hand-made postcards, organic granola, a large mug with the restaurant's logo, music CDs from women's musicians Emma's Revolution and Holly Near, a hand-made kitchen apron, a vintage photo from a 1930's dance hall performance, and other odds, ends, and accessories. To this I added other items I had designed: a hand-made beaded bracelet and a reusable grocery sac I had crocheted out of recycled plastic bags. Several festival women I had never met before donated from \$5 to \$25 dollars. After three weeks of advertising the raffle, friends and supporters had donated \$200 to my fund, which helped me pay for the \$395 five-day ticket. My ticket purchase was another testimony to the spirit of MichFest community since the woman from whom I purchased it online allowed me to pay her in installments. I still owed her money after she sent me the ticket; that took a level of trust most online shoppers never experience.

Notable in the purchase of a ticket are the diverse methods of payment. For instance, the sliding scale for ticket purchase and the reduced rate subsidies are intended to benefit lower income women. The sliding scale also supports the festival financially as an honor system for those women who have the means to pay a higher price. The organizers also offer a ticket payment plan for those participants needing to pay in installments. It is clear that the organizers are sensitive to the diverse economic needs of their participants and have created these accommodations as part of their festival ethic. This being said, and while the point may remain arguable by devoted attendants, the ticket prices are considerable. A six-day all-inclusive ticket for the 2010 festival ranged from \$435 to \$525. The cost for a one-day ticket ranged from \$65 to \$100 (Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, "Tickets and Travel").

As noted on the official website, purchasing an all-inclusive ticket gives one access to forty performances, three vegetarian meals per day, a campsite, a film festival, intensive and general workshops, a craft fair, a barter market, DJ'd dances, group sports like basketball and volleyball, as well as childcare. Also included in the ticket price are community services (Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, "Tickets and Travel"). These range from first aid and basic healthcare, resources for disabled women, shuttle transportation throughout the site, peer counseling and recovery support, a women of color gathering and resource center, and sign language interpretation at concert stages (Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, "Tickets and Travel"). Deciding if the ticket was economical considering the entertainment and services was left to be determined. For now, I still had to come up with the rest of the ticket, not to mention the \$230 roundtrip

airfare between Albuquerque to Chicago. And then of course there was the trip to Walhalla.

One way I was able to cut these costs further was through the help of a forum on the MichFest website that allowed participants to coordinate rides between cities. There I met a woman from Chicago who was willing to split the cost of gas for a roundtrip ride from Chicago to Walhalla. Riding with a woman met online might well result in a dicey situation, but given the support I had experienced up to that moment, I surrendered to the comradery the festival seemed to inspire in its participants. My road to the festival was turning out to be incredibly playful, and I became excited by its prospects. From monetary donations from friends and perfect strangers, to donated gifts for my raffle, to the ease of hitching a ride to the site, to my luck with a ticket, it felt like I was being easily welcomed from a great distance.

Once I got to Chicago, I met up with my old friend Melissa Powers with whom I had attended Michigan State University as an undergraduate. Melissa and I caught up over dinner and talked about life past and present, music, and literature. She recommended a book that I took with me on my travels to Walhalla. It was Miranda July's *No One Belongs Here More Than You*, a book of short stories that garnered the author much praise. I started reading the book immediately, and I was instantly spellbound by July's weird humor, language, and writing style and her sensitivity toward nuanced characters and relationships. A dialogue emerged between my experiences at the festival, my own musings, and July's stories. Early the next morning I met the woman with whom I would be driving to Walhalla. Luckily, she was good natured and did not raise any immediate red flags. She had been going to the festival for a few years

and was a perfect sounding board for questions and told some good stories. We got our morning coffee and off we went.

When we arrived about four and a half hours later, there was not much of a wait to get into the parking area. I had read on the online forums about the long line of cars early in the week that take hours to process and the car-to-car socializing that takes place during that time. On a Wednesday afternoon, ours was an easy entrance. At the box office, we furnished our tickets and proceeded onward. Just beyond the entrance was a sea of cars in neat rows that aligned the open space of the parking area. After being escorted to appropriate parking, we began to unpack the car. Since this was my first trip to the event, I was again (and remarkably) a virgin, a “festie virgin” in this case.

However, unlike the Burning Man bell ride, there was no grand ritual to broadcast the passage. I was allowed to enjoy my fleeting purity without too much aggressive publication. “We’ve got a festie virgin here,” and a few whoops and hollers were the harmless responses I received, prompted by my driving-mate who made my “virginity” known to the staff at the entrance. We were instructed to leave our bags and tents at the shuttle base while we went to the orientation tent. The tent offered festival programs and posted information about the camp grounds, community services, and work shifts.

To control costs and to encourage the spirit of community that drives the festival, each participant is asked to sign up for a work shift. For those participants staying four to seven days, two work shifts are required. Each work shift is four hours and participants choose from over twenty-five community work areas. The organizers encourage at least one shift in the food service tent, known as “the Kitchen,” to help feed roughly thirty-five hundred womyn three times a day. As the “2009 Program” states, “The festival is

structured so that all of us provide the village services for each other by doing work shifts, creating what is truly at the heart of our festival – a community built by womyn working together” (Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, “2009 Program” 4). Since I stayed at the festival for five days I took two work shifts, one in “the Kitchen” and one in the “Womb,” the tent designated for first aid and alternative medicines.

At the shuttle base, more participants were waiting with their gear to be taken into the camp grounds. A lot of gear began to accumulate, everything from alcohol to industrial-strength rain tarps. The shuttle was a large canvas-topped trailer with open sides that allowed for two rows of people, one along the outside rim of its carriage and one row on the inside. The shuttle operates constantly throughout the festival to bring people to and from their cars as well as between different sites on the grounds. While we rode in the shuttle, we slowly passed a woman on the road. She was topless, and she said to those of us in the caravan, “Welcome home ladies.” Many women replied with clapping, laughter, sighs, and hollers. The scene quickly became one of silent film slap stick, as the shuttle’s slow movement matched the pace of the woman so that the one lingered alongside the other. The woman lightheartedly played into the absurdity by exaggerating her movements. As with Burning Man, MichFest has a reputation for nudity, and once again, I was forced to consider my position regarding it. The nudist confronts me with my in/ability to look as much as challenging herself to be naked under a stranger’s gaze, if in fact it is a challenge.

The design of the site is shaped something like a lower case “h,” with streets and walkways intersecting the main roads, Lois Lane and East Road, at various points. Other passageways like “Easy Street,” “Old Workshop Walk,” “Womb Way,” “Mistake Trail,”

and “Trail Mix” connect the main roads for easier access throughout the site. On the official festival map, you can find the major points of interest such as designated camping sites, communal service tents like “the Kitchen” and the healthcare tents (“Oasis” and “Womb”), the crafts tent, and performance stages. The performance stages are far enough away from each other to not create competing sound interference during shows. “One World,” “Day Stage,” “Night Stage,” and “Acoustic Stage” feature the forty-some acts that run all week long (Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, “2009 Program” 50).

The designated campgrounds are organized to accommodate the diverse needs of the participants. For instance, “Amazon Acres” features quiet camping, “Bread and Roses” is “a chem-free area for womyn who are clean and sober,” and the “Solo Collective” is for womyn who are attending alone (Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, “2009 Program” 2). General camping can be found at “Jupiter Jumpoff,” “Bush Gardens,” “Solanas Ferns,” and “Crone Heights.” And the “Twilight Zone” features “loud and rowdy camping” as a “late night party zone” (Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, “2009 Program” 50). It lived up to its name. One night I showed up while pudding wrestling was in full swing.

Family camping is also an advertised priority of the festival. Boys up to four years of age stay in the “Sprouts Family Camp,” which provides daytime child care. To maintain the women-only policy, boys ages five through ten stay in a self-contained camp called “Brother Sun” where activities and outings are organized. In both cases, mothers must stay over night with their children. In the case of “Brother Sun,” no male children in this age group are allowed on festival grounds, and the campground is located a distance off the land requiring a shuttle. A day camp for girls five and older, called

“Gaia,” runs throughout the week. Both “Gaia” and “Sprout” camps are located off “Lois Lane” in the center of most of the activity (Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, “2009 Program” 6).

Since I attended the festival alone, it was recommended on website forums and in the program to camp at the “Solo Collective.” Intended to give an opportunity to participants traveling on their own to meet, the campground also was a place for regular solo attendants to reconnect. I pitched my tent in a fairly secluded area; it was still possible with roughly thirty-five hundred attendants to find quiet space. I went about making my home for the week, setting up my tent and making the inside space cozy. I usually find with camping that the tent can be a place of sanctuary as well as induce cabin fever. I laid around a while, read through the program, journaled, got comfortable. Having packed lightly, I cleverly layered my clothing as it began to get dark and took a walk around the grounds before sunset. I had some time before the official “Opening Celebration” started to see where I had landed.

That early evening I meandered through various campgrounds to see what sorts of things people were up to. I walked through “Jupiter Jumpoff” to find a relaxed mix of camp sites and maintenance, lazy camp circles with conversations and alcohol, impromptu drum and guitar sessions, and other post-dinner idleness. A walk down Lois Lane revealed the more energetic family camping of the “Sprouts” campground, after which I decided to find the kitchen and the healthcare tents. Located near each other, they were a good distance from my camp, about half a mile. Looking at the map more carefully later, I realized that it was about a mile from my camp to the entrance. This was a fairly big place, and I began to understand the necessity of the shuttle. The shows were

taking place at the “Night Stage,” and I did not want to get too far away from it, so I loitered at the “Kitchen” and the “Womb” for a while.

Approaching the “Night Stage,” I saw that many women had already congregated on lawn chairs and blankets facing the stage in wait. This was not a rowdy audience, it was calm and rehearsed. It seemed that many of the women had been coming to MichFest for years, and their level of foreknowledge resulted in serene excitement. The “Night Stage” gallery was packed but well organized. Seating areas and aisles were demarcated with tarps. One section to the side of the stage was marked off for dancing. August in Michigan meant that the evening sun was still out. As 8 pm approached, the “Opening Celebration” began. Understood as “the fuse that fires up the festival’s high time” (Pruett), the celebration featured singers that gather from throughout the week, high-energy dancers, and comedic and dramatic monologues. After the official opening ceremony, two more musical acts closed out the evening.

My mornings at the festival were spent either in pursuit of workshops, reading and journaling, drying out my tent and the contents of my tent from the few rain showers we experienced, remembering to catch meal times, or in conversation with participants I had met on the lawns or during meals. Music concerts were on consistent rotation between noon and 10 pm daily. And, later in the night, groups hosted parties or small gatherings around their campgrounds.

Many activities were posted and discussed via the online forums offered through the official website. As a newcomer, I found them incredibly helpful. I was able to post questions and get details about parties and events hosted by groups from all over the festival site. Meet and greets, “Eat and Shmooze,” speed dating, costume parties with

1950's and uniform themes, and the celebrated Femme Parade, Butch Strut, and Plush Promenade, not to mention pudding wrestling, all are advertised with dates, times and locations by their organizers on the MichFest forums. The parade, strut, and promenade are collective pride marches that draw hundreds of participants. The marches are also noted in the general workshops in the festival program.

The festival also hosts intensive workshops that take place from Tuesday morning until Wednesday afternoon and general workshops that take place all week. The intensive workshops run longer than the general, sometimes over a series of days. Both recreational and educational, the workshops were not organized by category but by time and date in the program. A sample of the workshops include singing and dance instruction, craft and writing workshops, archery, purification sweat lodges, sexual health and erotica, yoga, and alternative health and healing workshops. Other workshops feature legal and professional advice, lesbian history and culture, the politics of oppression and privilege, and science and sexuality. In sum, they feature women's issues and ideologies angled toward pro-female, lesbian, and feminist perspectives.

My shift in "the Kitchen" was bright and early at 6:30 am on the Friday of the festival. I showed up to a groggy crew in white aprons positioned at several chopping tables under a large roofed area. Surrounding this space were the cook tents, an outdoor dishwashing facility, and grassy areas for sitting and eating. We were put into table groups by the volunteers managing our shifts and assigned knives and vegetables for chopping. We were given a brief demonstration of how to properly use knives, where to place our vegetables once we were finished, and where to discard any waste. With about six to eight women to a table, the mood of the shift was easy-spirited and encouraged

conversation and light-hearted banter. Working in kitchens and restaurants was a role with which I was familiar, but in the end the work did feel like work. I was tired, it was wet and muddy, and I really didn't want to be chopping vegetables. Yet having come to the festival alone, it was a good way to socialize for four hours.

"The Kitchen" served three meals a day. The breakfast menu, served from 8 am to 10 am, consisted of peanut butter, tahini, rice cakes, fruit, scrambled eggs or tofu, granola, and yogurt. Lunch was served between 11 am and 1 pm and included vegetarian sandwiches and salads of fresh vegetables, beans, and pastas. Dinner was served everyday from 4:30 pm to 6:30 pm and ranged each evening from curry, burritos, and stew to salads and steamed vegetables. All meals were prepared by participants and volunteers. When attending meals, we would line up with our own utensils for self service. Those participants on work shifts restocked all food items during meal service.

My second shift, at "Womb," was on the final Sunday at 7:45 am, and I was asked to help assist walk-ins in the self-help area, which supplied tampons, bandages, ibuprofen and other simple remedies. Later, I was asked to assist in the herbal tent to help create tinctures and teas dependent on specific ailments. I was fascinated by the amount of herbal remedies in stock, the resource books on how to use them, and the expert volunteers who were on hand to maintain the tents.

The festival also hosted a barter market on Saturday where participants set up booths or blankets of merchandise they were seeking to exchange with other participants. The space was set up as an open-air market with walkways that allowed easy browsing. Many items were handmade, from jewelry to knitted pieces to soaps. Other participants brought personal possessions they were looking to swap, such as clothes and accessories

and other odds and ends you might find at a yard sale. Still others were more formal in their stock, with artists offering photographs and paintings, and herbalists displaying organic body care items. I brought a few hand-crocheted pieces and a prized flask with a New Orleans *fleur-de-lis*. This was not my first time at a barter rodeo. I was in the market for some good swapping. Trading one *fleur-de-lis* for another, I made out with a piece of New Orleans-inspired graphic art and organic bath products.

One thing that stands out for me as a unique part of the festival experience was the music. The music was incredible. The range of female artists and styles of music were impressive and far ranging. As a festival gift, Cora had given me a copy of her annual mixed CD in preparation for my time at the festival. Unfortunately, it was all I had left to swap for gas money to get me back to Chicago.

Throughout the week of work shifts, workshops, wandering, concerts, shows, meals, socializing, and otherwise loafing around, I began to consider the selfhood performatives at work at the festival. The most clearly promoted instruction for selfhood was the festival's principle of unification. Supported by the "womyn-born-womyn" policy, which offers access to the festival's unique experience and counterpublic space, the policy suggests a degree of unification based on at-birth sexual assignment. This unification is reinforced through, for instance, the ethics of communal living, the work shift policy, and the notion of returning to "the Land" as a homeland (Kendall 1), which I experienced on the shuttle into the campground. Notably, both at the festival and in the forums, the festies of MichFest refer to themselves as a tribe. The festival directors suggest as much in the "Welcome 2009" greeting, offered as subjective invitation in the

program, “Our powerful and beautiful Michigan tribe walks the Land again” (Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, “2009 Program” 1).

The ticket purchasing policies and the alternative economies of the barter market promoted selfhood directives that accommodated diversity of economic background. Despite its firm policy on sexual definition, the festival directors did try to make the festival accessible to a broad range of participants within the women-only domain, supporting racial, economic, and physical differences. The nature and content of the intensive and general workshops functioned to offer instructions that support dialogue and the proliferation of non-normative cultural knowledge. The workshops prepare individuals to support a safe environment for the facilitation of a diversity of psychological and physical healing. The safety that results offered instructions to perform an ethic of carefree living within the festival space. The music of the festival offered a diversity of performatives: a rich variety of song styles, musical traditions, and narrative histories.

To discuss the instructions for selfhood performatives that the festival supports, I use the critical theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, particularly his theory regarding the first and second stylistic lines in the genre of the novel. As Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson write in regards to the first stylistic line:

[T]he first line strives for a finished, elegant style, which is studiously polished and never interrupted by heteroglot expressions from real life. Or if heteroglossia does interrupt the style, the intrusions are isolated and never lie on the same plane as the elevated language that establishes the tone of the whole. (Morson and Emerson 346)

The implied agreement of consensus of unification at the festival functioned in this way. That is, the first stylistic line of selfhood at the festival was unification based on the

“womyn-born-womyn” policy. This first line acts as a set of social codes sustained by the unity of their delivery. The “studiously polished” nature of the first line speaks to a clean narrative line that focuses on cohesion above other minor tracts. Morson and Emerson continue:

The contrast between elegance and heteroglossia, if it is present at all, only serves to set off the elegance of the dominant language more palpably. By definition, then, works of the first line know “only a single language and single style (which is more or less rigorously consistent); heteroglossia remains *outside* the novel, although it does nevertheless have its effect on the novel as a dialogizing background in which the language and world of the novel is polemically and forensically implicated.” (Bakhtin qtd. in Morson and Emerson 346; emphasis in original)

The first line has a dominant authoritative language that drives the work. In this stylistic line, there is a clear division between the inside world of the novel and the world outside of it, whose influences are contained in the “dialogizing background” (Morson and Emerson 347).

With the concept of heteroglossia, Bakhtin refers to the diversity of speech styles in a language resulting in a complex interaction of dialogue (Morson and Emerson 232). “[L]anguages of heteroglossia are best understood not as a specified set of propositions, but as a ‘living impulse’ that responds to experience and changes, and thus grows in potential” (Morson and Emerson 309). The flexibility of the “living impulse” is key to Bakhtinian heteroglossia and to the second stylistic line.

In Bakhtinian terms, the second stylistic line “‘incorporates heteroglossia *into* a novel’s composition, exploiting it to orchestrate its own meaning and frequently resisting altogether any unmediated and pure authorial discourse” (Bakhtin qtd. in Morson and Emerson, 346; emphasis in the original). Bakhtin’s notion of “novelness,” the genres ability to make use of and invent its own unique and diverse aesthetic methods, he

understands as being more fully developed in the second stylistic line where heteroglossia is cultivated. The first line “approximates true novelness” whereas “the second line has been more successful in exploiting the genre’s potential” (Morson and Emerson 345, 347).

With its exposure to dialogic complexity, the first line has the potential to be productive. “Both stylistic lines of the novel rely on and exploit heteroglossia in a dialogizing fashion. The second line does so by incorporating heteroglossia into the text, the first relies on heteroglossia’s presence and activity in the ‘dialogizing background’” (Morson and Emerson 347). The “elevated language” of tribal unification at the festival seemed to restrict the content of other experiences; unification was taken as a given. We were asked to uphold the parameters of the village, keeping the outside world out, and suspend our disbelief of such clear distinctions. Thus, any diversity of experience with this ethic in mind would appear to “set off the elegance of the dominant language more palpably” (Morson and Emerson 346).

I had a difficult time understanding the instructions for unification at the festival, primarily because I was not sure what it meant or implied. I considered its relationship to participation. At different times, I both was drawn and withdrawn from participation in the event. While I felt a desire to identify with nothing, neither gender nor orientation nor history nor community, it was probably more accurate that I enacted “Bottom” from *A Mid-summer Night’s Dream*, swimming in what Diana Taylor calls an “entangled surplus subjectivity, full of tugs, pressures, and pleasures. I continue to embody these tugs through a series of conflicting practices and tensions” (Diane Taylor xv). This conflict seemed to be at odds with the performative instructions for unification the

festival supported. Indeed, I felt myself conflicted about my participation at the event: what did it mean to go to a “womyn’s” festival? While I was attracted by the creation of a safe space in which women can relax from the burden of sexual difference that prevails in our mass culture, I experienced a fracture of selfhood without the space to confront it.

However, there were ruptures below the festival’s first stylistic line. Within the larger performative of unification were a diverse collection of “heteroglot expressions,” including the ticket policies, accommodations, artists, and musicians. The interesting feature of the festival is that its first stylistic line, its performative of unification, fosters those second lines whose heteroglossia challenge the monadic “unmediated and pure authorial discourse” of unification (Bakhtin qtd. in Morson and Emerson, 346; emphasis in the original). The result is a performative paradox: sustained by exclusive sexual-assignment, the festival produces the generative and complex selfhood performatives of its more diverse second line. That interdependence cannot be overlooked.

In the strict sense of sexual difference, male and female, the enigmas of gender and sexuality are suppressed by female selfhood unification. Enigma is restored through the less unifying and more confounding selfhood performatives offered by Split Britches, who I argue belong to the festival’s second stylistic line. I encountered a similar disposition toward enigmatic selfhood performative in the fiction of Miranda July with which I became acquainted during my envoy to the festival. July’s work offers a good literal example of the heteroglossic style of Bakhtin’s second stylistic line in the novel, which is “more successful in exploiting the genre’s potential” (Morson and Emerson 347).

The selfhood performatives that Split Britches offered in their performance of *Retro Perspective* functioned as imitative repetitions that challenged notions of a source. For insight into the cultural work of imitations and repetitions, I turn to Hal Foster's study of Andy Warhol, arguably the most prolific artist in the medium of pop cultural repetition in the twentieth century. As Foster writes:

[R]epetition in Warhol is not reproduction in the sense of representation (of a referent) or simulation (of a pure image, a detached signifier). Rather, repetition serves to *screen* the real understood as traumatic. But this need also *points* to the real, and at this point the real *ruptures* the screen of repetition. It is a rupture less in the world than in the subject—between the perception and the consciousness of a subject *touched* by an image. In an allusion to Aristotle on accidental causality, Lacan calls this traumatic point the *tuché*; in *Camera Lucida* (1980) Barthes calls it the *punctum*. (Foster 132; emphasis in original)

Barthes understanding and use of *punctum* rests with its co-presence with *studium* (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 42). The *studium* facilitates the painful prick of the personal; they work in cooperation. The *studium* is the field from which desire is launched “beyond what it permits us to see” (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 59). The *studium* and *punctum* interpenetrate to facilitate the perceived experience of each.

Also working with the point of rupture Foster describes, Judith Butler's use of performativity functions as the rupture experience of public codes. Conscious of the perceived gap and tension between private and public codes, Butler clarifies performativity as a difference between gender as it is experienced and gender as it is told. Butler emphasizes Althusser's use of always-already subjectivity, qualifying normative influence of subject constitution. “What are being performed are the cultural norms that condition and limit the actor in the situation” (Butler, “Changing the Subject”). For Butler, imitation and repetition of gender performativity is restrictive.

For Robert Wilson, the interplay of imitation and repetition is not necessarily restrictive. Based in surrealism and dominated by visual images, Wilson's theater allowed for an informal concept of inner and outer screens that was interactive.

Regarding Wilson, Colin Counsell writes:

Human beings, [Wilson] maintains, always register the world in two ways, on two separate "screens." The "exterior screen" is the place of conscious, public meanings, where we ascribe to objects and events the same significance as our fellows. But at the same time we each register those same images on our "interior screen," where they are perceived subjectively, our imaginations granting them meanings personal to ourselves. (Counsell 180)

The interactive play of creating image and sign from coded public meanings and internalized personal responses is for Wilson a generative practice. Weaver and Shaw's use of repetition as screen can also be understood in terms of Wilson's concept of inner and outer screens as they relate to the processing and production of personal and public imagery. In *Retro Perspective*, Weaver and Shaw demonstrated the relationship between sexual desire, cultural production, and functions of power therein. And they showed us this relationship through coaxing a very keen somatic reaction, a tension between public codes and personal response.

As with the noted concepts and practices of Bahktin, Warhol, Barthes, Butler, and Wilson, Shaw and Weaver attempt to activate a rupture in the exterior screen of the real (the public *studium* or first stylistic line of stylized imitation and repetition) by stimulating the interior screen – the personal *punctum* – to respond to its (public) self; to imitate and repeat without reproduction. Split Britches seduction of a fragile event within the codes of public and private generates resonant confusion. As Foster continues on Warhol:

This confusion about the location of the rupture, *tuché*, or *punctum*, is a confusion of subject and world, inside and outside. It is an aspect of trauma; indeed, it may be this confusion that *is* traumatic. (“Where is Your Rupture?” Warhol asks in a 1960 painting based on a newspaper advertisement, with several arrows aimed at the crotch of a female torso). (Foster 134; emphasis in original)

The performance duo work through trauma as a productive point of mystification and seduction.

For me, the work of Split Britches functioned to help me deal with a state of uncertainty I underwent at the festival, in effect by producing more uncertainty that manifests as a type of counter-seduction. Jean Baudrillard finds play at work in the “enigmatic duel” of mutual seduction. Working from Kierkegaard’s *Diary of a Seducer*, Baudrillard offers that one must seduce an enigma *with* an enigma, the tension of play arising out of the complicity of mutual secreting rather than from hidden information:

There is nothing in the place where meaning should be, where sex should occur, in the place where words designate, and where others think it to be. And this nothing of the secret, this unsignified of seduction circulates, flows beneath words and meaning, faster than meaning: it is what affects you before utterances reach you, in the time it takes for them to vanish. Seduction beneath discourse is invisible; from sign to sign, it remains a secret circulation. (Baudrillard, “On Seduction” 162)

At the heart of this seduction is not simple reproduction or imitation; instead, an inventive counter seduction must take place. One cannot seduce with the same seduction, mere imitation will not work. Positioning seduction as a mark rather than a sign, Baudrillard suggests that these marks do not signify, but rather challenge signification: “Seduction is that which extracts meaning from discourse and detracts it from its truth” (Baudrillard, “On Seduction” 152). Playing with the expectations of culturally received coded knowledge, Baudrillard continues, “Seduction is not that which is opposed to production. It is that which seduces production—just as absence is not that which is

opposed to presence, but that which seduces presence” (Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* 58). Baudrillard’s attention is focused on *means* rather than meaning, on process rather than product, on play rather than toys, insisting that the supposed fraudulence of appearance is actualized by the finality of meaning and production. Split Britches’ performance techniques work in a similar way. They restore enigma and through their thorough seduction invite enigma; they create a desire for enigmatic response. They had me wanting to try on their style. I wanted to play too.

I was thoroughly seduced. I could have watched these women for hours. I did not want the rupture to end. I welcomed the confusion that at once felt so clear and tangible yet so vague and empty. As Baudrillard continues, “What makes...[discourse] seductive, is its very appearance: the aleatory, meaningless, or ritualistic and meticulous, circulation of signs on the surface; its inflections and its nuances” (Baudrillard, “On Seduction” 153). Shaw and Weaver understand a ritualistic meticulous drive at work on the surface of signs. For me, they draw connections between *studium*, *punctum*, trauma, and echo.

Derrida offers the following:

Echo, cursed by the jealous gods, was never allowed to speak for herself, and was only allowed to repeat the ends of other’s phrases. But Echo, in her loving and infinite cleverness, arranges it so that in repeating the last syllables of the words of Narcissus, she speaks in such a way that the words become her own. In a certain way, she appropriates his language. In repeating the language of another, she signs her own love. In repeating she responds to him. In repeating, she communicates with him. She speaks her own name by just repeating his words. And as always with speech, one is blind. To speak is to not see. (Derrida)

On the heels of Echo, I attempt to move beyond simple appropriation and reproduction and into nuances of Derrida’s “parasitical economy,” the plurality of which was an effect of the Split Britches performance, and guest and host, utterance and echo became

interdependent in meaning. As with the work of Miranda July, *Split Britches* play with the coded expectations between private and public screens; they play the binaries.

Before gaining access to Miranda July's website, the user is asked boldly with large font to enter a secret password. "You know the password, just clear your mind and look within. It will probably be the first word that you think of," the ghost in the page encourages you. "If this doesn't work, try looking at a candle for a few seconds." And, no matter what you put, yes, no, password, nonsense, as long as they are unpunctuated letters, you will receive the same response, "You obviously know what I'm talking about" (July, "Miranda July").

Once inside, you have access to July's personal archive of work. Her biography describes her as a filmmaker, artist, and writer who also works with web-based design as an artistic medium. She is best known for her 2005 film *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (winner of the Cannes Camera D'Or, which goes to best first film) and for a book of short stories, *No One Belongs Here More Than You*, published in 2007. Reviews of her work have called her a polarizing force, inducing both annoyance and devotion, where a fetishism of quirkiness prompts the first, and an "uncanny ability to mine universal truths from surreal details" sparks the latter (Cutter).

July hopes her work functions both to enable and propel. She seeks to build an archive of seemingly unimportant things that become lively testaments to "half-beautiful, half-nauseous" human truths (July, "Pretty Cool People Interviews"). She creates from a space that she calls a painful and bizarre chasm between one's inner world and that which makes up the shared outer world of "doing and saying" through speech, gesture, and interaction, which is highlighted for her through labor, a common motif in her writing

("Miranda July Interview"). She describes this chasm as a "science fiction reality that is totally normal, and yet it is absolutely demanded that we all function and do our tasks, and do not flip over into some kind of alternate reality" ("Miranda July Interview"). The tension in this space between the inner and outer worlds is where July describes her stories are being told ("Miranda July Interview").

Perhaps one of my favorite Miranda July short stories is "The Moves." In it, July describes a scene between the narrator, female and ambiguous in sexual orientation, and her father, in which he bestows on her the legacy of his hard-won personal knowledge. "Before he died, my father taught me his finger moves. They were movements for getting a woman off. He said he didn't know if they'd be of use to me, seeing as how I was a woman myself, but it was all he had in the way of a dowry. I knew what he meant" (July, *Nobody Belongs Here More Than You* 145). The story reflects for me July's innate ability to impose a dose of relief on binary gender performativity through a startling use of humorous gloom:

There were twelve moves in all. He did them on my hand like sign language. They were mostly about speed and pressure in different combinations. There were some flourishes that I never would have thought of. I imagined he'd learned them when he was overseas. A sudden reversal in both speed and direction. Still fingers held like silence for a beat, and then long quick strokes that he called "skinning." I kept wanting to write things down, and he would scoff, asking me if I would take out my notes when the time came. You'll remember, he said, and he repeated skinning on my palm with his dry fingers. It felt like a hand massage. He was incredibly confident. I could not imagine using these movements alone, with such confidence. You're going to make some woman very, very happy, he said. But I knew I had never made anyone very, very, happy, and I could only imagine bringing in my dad when the time came to do this. But he would be dead, and I suppose she would be a lesbian and wouldn't want him to touch her. I would have to do the finger moves myself. I would have to decide when she was ready for six and for seven. Could she handle the intensity of the still beat and give in to the rapid pleasures of skinning? I would have to listen to find out. Not just to her breath, my dad said, but to the moisture on the skin in the small of her back. That sweat is your secret emissary. One moment she'll be dry as a cat, and

in the next moment—Cape Town is flooding! Don't wait to be sure or you'll miss the boat, hop on and move, move, move.

Each morning when I try to motivate toward something positive, I think of him saying this, and it is a great comfort. I know that one day I'll meet someone special and I'll have a daughter and I'll teach her what he taught me. Don't wait to be sure. Move, move, move. (July, *Nobody Belongs Here More Than You*, 145-146)

July's ability to undermine the habituated attachment the reader may have to political expectations and social codes succeeds because of the comic lack of commitment and implied uncertainty the narrator has toward her own political, social, and sexual orientations. In the end, it does not matter if the woman's "someone special" is a man that will help her produce the daughter of which she dreams, not because she is a particularly effective diplomat for queer politics but simply because it does not matter to the story. The expression of profound loneliness, disillusionment, humor, and sadness take precedence. And, as in many of July's stories, the feeling of alienation is tied to the mundane fuel of capitalist modernity, which simply has never gone away. In "The Moves," it would be queer *to* identify one's orientations in light of the traumatic profundities.

Not unlike Eudora Welty's PE relay advice, at the heart of July's "The Moves" is the password of trusting the guidance of passage in one's own relay. Gregory Ulmer notes turning off the filter for indecision as a performative for electracy. Drawing on Basho, he urges, "'let there not be a hair's breadth separating your mind from what you write. Quickly say what is in your mind; never hesitate at that moment'" (Basho qtd. in Ulmer, *Internet Invention* 50). July's narrator borrows this method of delivery. We are given details, so many manic details that feel awkward and overly personal, yet the narrator maintains an unhesitating tone. At some point we do not get caught up in the

privately coded nature of the details; we regard them as boring, a form of details we all possess and find on some level to be baggage, creating space for the *punctum* at work in the *studium* of the boring though no less satisfying details. The baggage is funny (certainly we are laughing at the narrator and her father), which because it is so refreshing and inventive invites us to invent ways to laugh at our baggage too. More to the point, if we pay too much attention to each other's baggage as anything less than potential shocking rupture, we will miss the boat.

In Barthes's terms, a principle of unification poses a compositional problem. The monadic nature of the *studium* indirectly emphasizes a lack of vacillation, a lack of disturbance; it has a tendency toward the banal. "The unary photograph has every reason to be banal, 'unity' of composition being the first rule of vulgar (and notably, of academic) rhetoric" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 41). It is what July does with this banality, how it serves the texture of her compositional style, that addresses my uncertainty at the festival. The way July generatively exploits boredom as a part of the *studium*, "that very wide field of unconcerned desire" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 27), functions as heteroglossic.

As noted, Hal Foster suggests that we view Warhol's work similarly, as "traumatic realism" to be precise, thereby revealing his images to be "referential and simulacral, connected and disconnected, affective and affectless, critical and complacent" simultaneously (Foster 130). Specifically, Foster understands Warhol's infamous quote "I want to be a machine" as a declaration of a shocked subjectivity. In this way, July appears to echo Warhol:

These notions of shocked subjectivity and compulsive repetition reposition the role of repetition in the Warholian persona and images. "I like boring things" is

another famous motto of this quasi-autistic persona. “I like things to be exactly the same over and over again.” In *POPism* (1980) Warhol glosses this embrace of boredom, repetition, domination: “I don’t want it to be essentially the same – I want it to be exactly the same. Because the more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel.” (Warhol qtd. in Foster 131)

While Warhol presumes a narcissistic emptiness of meaning, July and Split Britches use emptiness as an ecstatic application of seduction that detracts from monadic “truth.”

Foster continues:

Usually [Warhol’s] statement [on emptiness] is taken to confirm the blankness of artist and art alike, but it may point less to a blank subject than to a shocked one, who takes on the nature of what shocks him as a mimetic defense against this shock: I am a machine too, I make (or consume) serial product-images too, I give as good (or as bad) as I get. “Someone said my life has dominated me,” Warhol told the critic Gene Swenson in a celebrated interview of 1963. “I liked that idea.” In context, then, the two statements read as a preemptive embrace of the compulsion to repeat put into play by a society of serial production and consumption. If you can’t beat it, Warhol suggests, join it. More, if you enter it totally, you might expose it; that is, you might reveal its automatism, even its autism, through your own excessive example. (Foster 131)

Accessing alienation through serial repetition in the work of both Miranda July and Split Britches functions to reveal a complex understanding of gender performatives that do not seek to unify female selfhoods; rather they counter unification through embodied rupture. They function as echoes that reveal as they self-express.

During my travels, I heard an interview on National Public Radio’s “Fresh Air” with Dr. Irene Pepperberg, a professor of psychology who studies gray parrots. Dr. Pepperberg studies the birds for their cognitive and communicative abilities. Her description of her relationship with a parrot named Alex functions allegorically to highlight the complex yet playful relationships between seduction, boredom, imitation, and echo. After testing Alex many times on the same material, which he successfully passed each time, Dr. Pepperberg remarks:

[I]t's a bit anthropomorphic—but he would get bored, and he would—what he would start doing would be to throw everything on the tray on the floor with his beak, just knock it off or give me colors that weren't on the tray or turn his back to me and say, want to go back, and be very clear that he didn't want to work. (Pepperberg)

Realizing this bird was paying attention, Dr. Pepperberg had to boost her techniques of seduction. “And so you start getting inventive, and you start using things like Jelly Bellies instead of wooden blocks, and he'd get one of those for his reward” (Pepperberg). This system worked for a while until boredom set in again.

And then one day, I come in...and I said, Alex, what color three? And he looks at me...and he says five. And I'm thinking, huh, there's no five things on the tray. And so I say, Alex, come on, what color three? Let's go. And he looks at me again, and he says five. And this goes back and forth several times. And I'm thinking, what is going on here? He's not throwing everything on the floor. He's not giving me wrong colors. He's saying a different number. And there isn't any of the stuff on the tray. (Pepperberg)

Having been stumped by a parrot, Pepperberg concedes and changes her technique again.

So I finally said, OK, smarty, you know, what color five, not knowing what to expect. And he looks at me and he says, none. So not only did he transfer this information from that other task to this task, but he was responding to an absence of number, a kind of zero-like concept. Plus, he had figured out how to manipulate me into asking him the question that he wanted to answer, which I think was pretty...sophisticated on his part. (Pepperberg)

Alex became for me a symbol of mischievous seduction, of the desire to dialogue and play, of how to keep the communication going through the threat of boredom.

Unlike Burning Man where the pressure to participate was inscribed in the master plan, at MichFest there was never any insistence or monitoring of my participation. It was much easier to get lost. What I did find myself doing during the festival was getting lost in imitation, both of Split Britches and Miranda July. Pages and pages of stories and monologues that came easily as I adopted the personas I had digested recently. In my writing I was trying to find the next move that would keep the seduction afloat for me

and my audience. Imitations came easy to me since watching the TV screen explode during an episode of Carol Burnett when I was a pre-school four year old. The big kids were at school, the adults in the kitchen, and I was on my own watching one of those old TVs with the loud clicking knobs that looked like a piece of furniture. I think of the moment often, as a bolt of divine lightening that taught me to chameleon my voice and identity through Burnett's slippery characters. Carol channeled her clown, and I was handed divine license to jest as a silent fool. I believe it is accurate to say my voice was taken from me that day, and I have not seen it since. Although the loss might be called laryngitis, I prefer to think of it as ventriloquism. Throwing my voice, animating as both parrot and echo, in an effort to speak my own name and sign my own love. And since that day, whenever I hear a powerful performer's voice I try it on in hopes of realizing the message of human follies and frailty it has to offer through my imitation. Well, that is what I say upon a moment of reflection that obscures the simple pleasure I take in imitating what I love.

These women drink deep in their *communitas*. I am tripped up by wondering if I could pass as one of them. Could I really have the password with the simple virtue of my sexual difference? I felt that somebody was going to ask me to leave because I was not doing "womyn" right, that perhaps I was a faux queen, a female-bodied drag queen. I wondered if I was only a robot that mimicked, but surely parrots are not robots and must feel *communitas*, even when they are being sophisticated. Yes, I think I have it down. Echoes of July, parroting Split Britches, Christopher Walken in drag.

The last day of the event hosted the "Transformational Healing Ritual" at "Acoustic Stage," gathering the drummers, singers, and healers who met throughout the

week with an open invitation for participants to join in a mass healing ceremony (Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, "2009 Program" 22). Standing outside the healing circle contemplating the bodies lying down inside the circle, I had no tears. Slowly, I realized that I also could not breathe. Tearless and breathless, my emotions were everywhere. Getting it right, getting it wrong, hesitating in the relay, trusting the associations, holding on, letting go, belonging, trespassing, everything swirled in a cloud of grief and release as the participants around me searched for their own sources of pain and reprieve. I put my hands on my chest to encourage movement there with warmth and a circular motion, hoping something would give like the top of a jar, or a cramp. I watched two musicians across from me to see if any of this was working, to monitor the progress of the healing. They were beautiful. We paid good money to watch them on stage; it made sense to watch them now.

A topless woman with a strong maternal presence wearing a sarong skirt and lei walked over to me. She noticed my un-self-conscious hand, and I was both proud and resentful that it was a symbol that deserved attention. The woman put her hand over mine, she knelt her head on my shoulder and her breast knelt its head under my arm, looking for a little refuge. She sang along with the group in a higher tone, an undeterred angel imploring us to let her love in to heal us. I wanted things to be that magical, that easy, just let them in. They knock, I say come in, and the healing begins, descends like six versions of mom attending to your puke. But when the topless angel saw how unsuccessful I was at healing, she told me it was ok to let it go. I neither knew what "it" was nor how to let it go, and I told her as much. I could feel her hand become disinterested, disappointed. I thanked her and she moved on.

The concept of letting go in that directed moment was difficult to comprehend, perhaps because, try as I might, my most profound healings and therapeutic purgings have resisted a schedule. Still, something persistent yet awkward emerged in that moment of exposure for me, and who can say what healing should look like. Besides whatever dire demons, aging traumas, and timeless sadness ailed me, what I also held onto in that moment was my life. And my life was not finished with them, they were inseparable. Just as poet Maria Rainer Rilke found himself at odds with psychoanalysis – as “too basic a help for me, it helps once and for all, it clears out, and to find myself cleared out one day would perhaps be even more hopeless than this disorder” (qtd. in *Prose* 171) – I fear purging my poetic disorder. I fear closing a wound too soon. I fear not experiencing its messages. Whatever wounds need healing have my heart in their hands and will not let go without it.

The paradox of MichFest is that despite unification performatives that potentially threaten heteroglossic methodologies, I find a revelation for my collection and convergence for my mystory. I begin to see my cabinet as a series of passage rites, collected through experiences, rituals of age and gender, and hailed subjectivities. Through my travels of discovering and uncovering the many layers of acquired and contestable selfhoods, I find an anxiety and self-consciousness toward achieved adulthood in a consumerist culture that retains an investment in maintaining a class of intellectual and spiritual adolescents. My passage, my collection, my story becomes a way to disarm the economic attack.

As I collect and confront passage rites, I gather the momentum of an unhesitating passage through my relay. My relay becomes the “private affair which is best done

collectively” (Henry Miller qtd. in Seem, xxi), leading to a process of transformation within the public domain to which I am fundamentally joined. I find within my self-imposed rituals of elusive womanhood and adulthood a space to articulate my personal yet communal blueprints of passage. My research for this project, my search for a wide image, becomes a series of blueprints that articulate my always-already subjectivities, my perceived institutional codes and the personal responses they elicit. As Gregory Ulmer writes, “To make a mystory is to record obtuse meanings of information in each of the institutions of the maker’s experience” (Ulmer, *Internet Invention* 44). By unearthing my map of rites, I hope that others might recognize themselves in the blueprints of passage and appropriate them as they see fit.

CHAPTER 5

OLD LIGHT: INTENTIONAL ART SPACE AT RODEN CRATER

In March 2009, my relay falls upon the Painted Desert in Prescott, Arizona, where I visit the raw power of Roden Crater, which is located on the western edge of the desert. Nearly 600 feet tall and at an elevation of almost 5400 feet, Roden Crater is a roughly 400,000 year old extinct volcanic cinder cone that is being transformed into a naked-eye observatory and art project by light visual artist James Turrell (“About Roden Crater,” The Skystone Foundation). The design of the observatory as “an interconnected complex of spaces constructed on and within [the] volcanic cinder cone” captures the remarkable power of planetary light and space through the medium of the extinct volcano (“Friends of Roden Crater,” The Skystone Foundation).

According to former assistant William Cook, the space creates a personalized and tangible experience with the cosmos for Turrell’s viewers (Cook). Combining mathematical, geological, and astronomical science with art, the observatory will allow visitors to experience rare celestial events and alter their perception of viewing the common property of light. Driven by a desire “to feel [light] physically almost as we taste things” (Turrell, “Spirituality”), Turrell designed the interior of the crater to draw connections between the senses and prompt the effects of synesthesia.

Turrell purchased the crater through individual and organizational donor support, and art grants from the Lannan Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Dia Art Foundation among others (“Friends of Roden Crater,” The Skystone Foundation). To acquire the land initially, a portion of it had to be converted into a cattle ranch since Turrell could not receive a line of credit on vacant land. To keep the crater, his

investment has left him with a million dollar mortgage (Turrell, “Spirituality”). The ranch runs mostly separate from the art project, selling cows once a year in the fall for profit (Turrell, “Spirituality”).

Because the crater is still under construction and not open to the public, I adopt the role of shrewd informant of the inaccessible, becoming closely linked to the processes of Taryn Simon. “This [inaccessibility] makes the crater, in the logic of the art world, one of the hottest tickets around” (Finkel). Public despite the closed exhibition, I gain my access through the hospitality of the newlyweds whose wedding I attended back on the weekend I saw Simon’s exhibit in New York. My cousin married into the Turrell family. The fact that the crater remains unfinished, under construction since 1975, and “visitation is not encouraged” (“Roden Crater,” Center for Land Use Interpretation), influences the culture of the crater and my experience of it.

Turrell’s project is conceived as a naked-eye observatory and an interactive light art project, achieved by the natural world in which it is embedded, a volcano in the desert. He explains one motivation for the project and for himself as an artist: “Generally we use light...we don’t really pay much attention to light itself. That’s my interest, this fascination with light, and how we come to light” (Turrell, “Spirituality”). Another way Turrell achieves the tremendous brilliance of the natural world is by gathering light outside our planetary system, light that is older than our solar system by some three and a half billion years (Turrell, “Roden Crater”). As Turrell offers, “You can gather that light and physically have that in place so that it’s physically present to feel this old light... that’s something that you can do here in a place like this, where you have good, dark skies” (Turrell, “Roden Crater”). The natural environment is always influencing the

complexity of perception achieved through the art space. Turrell continues, “It is a piece that does not end. It is changed by the action of the sun, the moon, the cloud cover, by the day and the season that you’re there, it has visions, qualities and a universe of possibilities” (“About Roden Crater,” The Skystone Foundation). But just as the natural world influences the art space and the perception achieved, so does the perceiver. Turrell theorizes:

[I]t’s not just the fact that you are bringing the cosmos down into the space where you live, but that your perception helps create that as well. So that you really are this co-creator of what you’re seeing. (Turrell, “Roden Crater”)

The co-creative capacity of the crater as art space, as a space that directs perception and yet is interactive, appealed to my somatic research.

I was in Taos, New Mexico, in March of 2009, and my cousin Monika had settled into Prescott, Arizona, about a six hour train ride from me. Given the proximity, and the fact that we had not seen each other since her wedding, I decided to visit her. We only had a few days to reunite, meander through the old West town of downtown Prescott and its “Whiskey Row,” a block that once hosted over forty saloons (“Whiskey Row US”). In those few short days, we also made a trip to visit Roden Crater.

Friends and family of Turrell led us northeast from Flagstaff through the unbroken desert landscape in search of the right turn-off. In the continuity of a landscape without signs, it was hard to be sure what would put us on the more-or-less road-less hike to the crater. The driver’s went on memory, nuanced landmark, and trial and error. Eventually, the bumpy dirt road to the crater took us there by spiraling around its outside. We parked near the east side of the crater, the area recently developed, and waited for the few car loads that made up our caravan to settle. The landscape was vast and quiet. The

burnt colors of the desert had a layered richness to them that gave depth to the folds in the earth. Someone presented a key, and we walked in through the east door.

Since Roden Crater is still under construction, certain areas were closed off or otherwise incomplete when I visited. I was able to experience the “Crater’s Eye,” the “Sun and Moon Space,” the “East Tunnel,” the “East Portal,” and the “Chamber Bowl” during my visit. As we walked down a dark hallway, the passage was brightened a bit by intermittent lights. The first observation space we entered was the “Crater’s Eye.” As you might expect, the “Crater’s Eye” is a large round room at the center of the crater with a hole in the ceiling and a circular benched seating area aligning the wall. The hole is an equally large round shape that is symmetrically aligned to the ceiling and the floor. I was told by a fellow visitor that the hole was called a “Skyspace.”

The “Skyspace” is a window on the ceiling, cut without height or width dimension; in other words, the cut is flush with the ceiling. Turrell refers to the unique design as a convertible ceiling (Turrell, “Spirituality”). Without the presence of the extra height or width dimension (commonly realized with windowsills, doorways, and skylights), the “Skyspace” is able to achieve the effect of bringing the sky flush with the ceiling. The effect of the “Skyspace” for Turrell is to “[b]ring the cosmos closer, down to a space where we occupy” (Turrell, “Spirituality”). Instead of appearing thousands of miles away as an orbital layer of the planet, the sky atmosphere is brought down to the level of the room. That is to say, we are made to realize we are surrounded by the atmosphere already. The “Skyspace” then operates like a projection of moving sky images that we watched as if it were a film. Except there is no screen, or at least only

boundless space acting as a screen and prompting us to realize that we are not separate from but rather bound up in the atmosphere.

Further along another hallway, we came to the “Sun and Moon Space” at one end of the “East Tunnel.” Another large round room, this space had recessed lights on the inside rim of the ceiling, granite floors, and earth tone walls. In the middle of the room was a huge black stone rectangular wall that left plenty of space for movement. On one side of the wall was a large white circle that faced the entryway of the “East Tunnel.” It was a projection screen intended to display sky phenomena as it travels down the tunnel. The “Sun and Moon Space” is designed as a gallery for watching the noted phenomena.

We then walked away from the projection screen towards the entryway of the tunnel. The “East Tunnel” is an 854 foot tunnel that connects the center of the bowl to the “East Portal” (“Roden Crater,” The Skystone Foundation). Shaped like an enormous keyhole, the tunnel has several aims. It projects celestial phenomena as they occur via an exposed ceiling in the “East Portal” on to the white circle in the “Sun and Moon Space.” Working something like a telescopic *camera obscura*, the design of the ceiling, tunnel and projection circle operate to capture solar and lunar phenomena and rare celestial events. The tunnel is interactive as well. Visitors travel from the center of the bowl to another event space in the “East Portal” through the tunnel. The tunnel begins as an arched hallway that slowly changes shape as you walk through it. The tunnel is long and dark and is lined with a repetitious frame pattern that starts as a circle and slowly changes into a large key-hole pattern. Resembling a surreal ribcage, the tunnel made me feel as if I were walking through the interior of a strange animal or giant insect machine.

Approaching the “East Portal” from the tunnel, I was faced with a circular window space that looked out into the vast blue distance. As I came closer, the circular shape changed and eventually widened out into an ellipse. Finally, I realized that it was another “Skyspace” not facing me at all but located on the ceiling. The “East Portal” is a circular room lined with a circular stone bench for seating. The ceiling is tiered with a layer of interior lights, a circular beveled edge just above that, and finally an elliptical “Skyspace.” Both “Skyspaces” I have described also serve to project the movement of daily sunlight into their respective rooms, not unlike windows in one’s home, allowing a cat to move from sunspot to sunspot over the course of a sunny day. However, the mediations of the “Skyspaces” allow for more linear shapes, denser light, and clearer movement than do the windows of a house.

At the center of the portal is an open bronze staircase that relies on no support save the strength of its accordion-like stairs joined by floor and ceiling. It connects to the rim of the elliptical “Skyspace.” The image of the staircase is an oddity; there is a precision to it that enhances its surreal nature. The staircase allows a visitor to climb up to and through the “Skyspace” whereupon she can enter the open-air exterior of the crater and the boundless landscape that surrounds it.

Now outside the crater, the visitor can walk over to the exterior of the “Skyspace” of the “Crater’s Eye.” The outside of the eye is bounded by a low circular wall and flanked by four stone structures that visitors can recline on. From this horizontal position, I was able to perceive the shape of the “Crater Bowl,” a circular edge raised above the plane that extended all the way around the crater and gave the appearance of sitting under a dome. The raised edge of the bowl was created by hauling and shaping

1.3 million cubic yards of dirt so as to accentuate the walls of the crater's cone ("Roden Crater," The Skystone Foundation). While inside the chamber of the "East Portal," the sky appeared dark, once outside the late afternoon sun was still out. The "Skyspace" of the portal mediated the intensity of light perceived and thus its color. Working with the properties of synesthesia, Turrell claims, "We actually create...color. Color is this response to what we are perceiving. So there isn't something out there that we perceive, we are actually creating this vision, and that we are responsible for it is something we're rather unaware of" (Turrell, "Roden Crater"). Lying back on the stone plank in the middle of the crater's huge eye, I allowed the spherical shape of the crater's bowl to meet my own. The sky it turns out is not flat. I was living in a dome.

The visit lasted about two hours with everyone wandering off, intersecting again, and taking advantage of the solitude the crater allows. We spent a little time in the visitor's center, which was still under construction. The space is influenced by Japanese Zen simplicity. Monika and I talked for a minute and decompressed from being deeply impressed. Walking back outside I thought about the volcano when it was active, how long it took to become dormant enough to meet its new destiny. I thought about activity and dormancy, the differences between being dynamic and being asleep. The image of Taryn Simon's hibernating bear came to mind: a powerful wild beast composed in a vulnerable gesture of repose, resting just deeply enough to allow the curious and searching humans a better view.

Roden crater is expansive, an enormous construction intended by Turrell for public use. The public use of the crater draws on and implies a general or shared ability to enjoy what it facilitates, specifically, Turrell's use of light as a common property, as a

common field of perception. The conception of light as common perception connects to Barthes's sense of the *studium* as a familiar field, perceptible as a consequence of cultural knowledge (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 25). Our ability to read and receive the meanings of the *studium* rests with our cultural training and participation; it is a "classical body of information" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 26). In terms of the crater, the common field of light is meant to facilitate personal response to our expanded ability to perceive it. The public display of public light creates private reaction. The interdependence of these two fields is an explicit aim of the crater project. "Turrell's crater brings the heavens down to earth, linking the actions of people with the movements of planets and distant galaxies" ("James Turrell Biography"). My experience at the crater had me wondering on the one hand whether a *punctum* must be painful, whether it can produce awe; and on the other hand, whether the crater had the metonymic power of Barthes's sense of *punctum*.

Considering the crater as a public space, I also wonder how it might function as a public archive. Quoting the etymological definition of the archive, Diana Taylor reminds us that the term refers to "a public building...a place where records are kept" (Diana Taylor 19). Making use of common fields of perceptions, a public domain for an exhibit of internal perceptions, I consider what records it might hold as part of a classical body of information. As the crater's official website suggests:

Roden Crater has knowledge in it and it does something with that knowledge. Environmental events occur; a space lights up. Something happens in there, for a moment, or for a time. It is an eye, something that is itself perceiving. It is a piece that does not end. It is changed by the action of the sun, the moon, the cloud cover, by the day and the season that you're there, it has visions, qualities and a universe of possibilities. ("About Roden Crater," The Skystone Foundation)

Vital and somatic, the crater is described as a being alive amongst the elements. The rhetorical function draws on ancient histories to which it connects itself back. "Working

with cosmological phenomena that have interested man since the dawn of civilization and have prompted responses such as Stonehenge and the Mayan calendar,” Turrell’s obsession is clarified as a “fascination with the phenomena of light...ultimately connected to a very personal, inward search for mankind’s place in the universe” (Cohen). A tension rests between personal experience and attempts to connect to larger questions about human existence. “Much like other civilizations throughout history that have built large structures that embody knowledge, scientific, cultural and spiritual, so will the Roden Crater project” (Cohen). Outside of its force as an observatory, the crater is a monument to the age-old search for universal communication, archiving that search.

It also functions as an archive of illusion, as I experienced in the “East Portal” when a skylight further down the passage appeared as if it were on an opposing wall. No wonder the design of the project is influenced by Turrell’s studies in perceptual psychology and optical illusions (“James Turrell Biography”). The length and angle of the tunnel and the elliptical shape of the skylight affects perception as the visitor moves through and in relation to them. The “Skyspaces” function similarly. Working something like a reverse *trompe l’oeil*, the “Skyspaces” bring the far off images closer and into greater dimension. The methods of illusion weigh in deliberately for Turrell’s work where “space, objects, the materials of the earth, distance, and even time are not only revealed by light, they are illusions created by light” (Halbreich, Porter and Craig).

The crater is motivated by this play of perception and also by undoing false impressions in terms of which we constantly operate. Turrell offers:

I look at my art as being somewhere between the limits of perception of the creature that we are, that is – what we can actually perceive and not perceive, like the limits of hearing or seeing – and that of learned perception, or we could call prejudice perception. That’s a situation where we have learned to perceive a

certain way, but we're unaware of the fact that we learned it. So this can actually work against you sometimes. Working between those limits and kind of pointing them out is something I enjoy doing. (Turrell, "Roden Crater")

Regarding one specific limit, Turrell notes how "we have made real an actual illusion," namely, the understanding of the sun "rising" in the east (Turrell, "Spirituality"). The more precise description is that the earth turns in the opposite direction than the sun, a movement we do not detect. The soon-to-be developed "North Space" challenges this illusion by "[removing] all reference to horizon, so that your field of reference is the stars...so you feel yourself to be moving, almost tipping" (Turrell, "Spirituality").

Turrell theorizes that the "North Space" will allow you to feel the rotation of the earth by how it directs and limits your perception (Turrell, "Spirituality"). Although the "North Space" was not complete during my visit, the "Skyspaces" I experienced also removed horizon reference. Without the stars however it was difficult to understand the concept of rotational sensitivity.

Notably, Turrell's reference to the illusion of sunrise connects him to the phenomenological theory of David Abram, who comments on the same event:

After the investigations of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo, the sun came to be conceived as the center of the phenomenal world. Yet this conception simply did not agree with our spontaneous sensory perception, which remained the experience of a radiant orb traversing the sky of a stable earth. A profound schism was thus brought about between our intellectual convictions and the most basic conviction of our senses, between our mental concepts and our bodily percepts. (Descartes's philosophical disjunction of the mind from the body was surely prompted by this already existing state of affairs—it was necessary, for the maintenance of the new, Copernican worldview, that the rational intellect hold itself apart from the experiencing body.) Nevertheless, our very words continued to betray the intellect and to prevent the clean ascendancy of the Copernican system: we still say "the sun rises" and "the sun sets" whether we are farmers or physicists. It is in this sense, writing from the perspective of the experiencing body, that Husserl is able to claim that earth, "the original ark," does not move. (Abram 43)

Here Abram warns of the binary at work between an experiencing body and a rational intellect, reinforcing its unresolved gap and leaving the world inadequately explained from either end of the binary. Yet despite this lack of satisfaction, the binaries do not necessarily collapse. The experience the crater affords hopes to reconcile this gap. Like Abram's life-world on an extra-planetary level, the crater is designed for personal meditation on our shared planetary perceptual fields: light, stars, the atmosphere, and our position on the earth. They are not purely phenomena that we look at, but rather our relationship to them is surfaced. The caveat of course is that these relationships are brought to us by illusion; the crater asks us to consider perception with respect to this perpetuated gap.

The way the crater shapes common public codes, internal private reactions, and its use and revelation of illusion, I understand as instructions for selfhood performatives. Further, Turrell cites what he sees as one of the problems of contemporary art, the distance between the viewer, the art work, and the artist (Turrell, "Spirituality"). So his project becomes one of addressing the distance created by contemporary and conceptual aesthetics, of requiring the viewer to enter and interact with the realm of the artist. "[T]he situation of the journey *to* the place...the fact that you have to do something...to have this come over you" is part of the performative of the visitor (Turrell, "Spirituality"; emphasis added). As Turrell's biography suggests, "Turrell's art prompts greater self-awareness through a similar discipline of silent contemplation, patience, and meditation" ("James Turrell Biography"). Along with these prompts, Turrell offers another instruction to visitors who desire to experience the archived knowledge of the crater: "You have to quiet" (Turrell, "Spirituality").

Given the drive toward meditation, Turrell seems conscious and deliberate about the possible interpretations of his work. In a 1983 interview, his response to an interviewer interpreting his work as transcendent was, “What do you mean by transcendent?” (Halbreich, Porter and Craig). The interviewer replies, “One almost leaves one’s body through one’s body because one is made so sensitive to how one is sensing” (Halbreich, Porter and Craig). Turrell side-steps the spiritual rhetoric to clarify what he believes the space offers: “I do like that you are sensing and that it’s non-vicarious; it’s about your seeing and you know it’s about your seeing. You can decide you don’t want to deal with it but if you do engage it, there is something to engage” (Halbreich, Porter and Craig).

The implication is that the non-vicarious experience of the crater brings a spectator into perception in a profound and unprecedented way, in a transformative way. The crater offers this opportunity, should one choose to engage it. Such engagement, Yi-Fu Tuan reminds us, moves the act into another space, “Ritual is different. Officiants at a ritual transform rather than perform” (Tuan 242). The ritual that Roden Crater proposes is a ritual of perception, of a transformation of perception intended to extend beyond the experience of the crater itself.

Barbara Myerhoff defines transcendence as a state when “one is aware simultaneously of being in flow as well as aware of his/her actions” (Myerhoff 247). This state destroys a dualistic perception of flow and reflexivity, merging action and awareness in the participant and performer. Myerhoff is suggesting that flow of action need not run counter or be interrupted by self-awareness. A “[h]eighted concentration and focus on a delimited aspect of reality has the effect of excluding all but the central

experience” (247). In terms of the crater, the delimited aspect rests with the act of perception mediated through astral events. Inducing one to see one’s seeing offers a possibility for transformation of that perception. Like Levi-Strauss and Turner before her, Myerhoff defines transformation as:

a major and lasting change: in structure, appearance, character or function. One becomes something else, and since we are emphasizing consciousness, we must add, one has an altered state of consciousness, a new perception of oneself or one’s socio/physical world, a conversion in awareness, belief, sentiment, knowledge, understanding; a revised and enduring emergent state of mind and emotion. (Myerhoff 245)

Myerhoff continues that the type of transformation enacted in ritual performances are turned toward the subjective state of the individual based on the experience of consciousness, which poses larger issues of examination when approached through objective methodologies.

Noting transformational subjective states as an area of traditional anthropological limitation, Myerhoff argues they are deemed inexpressible typically because they offer:

non-normative and often unconscious information where maximum sensitivity, subtlety, inference and courage are required of an ethnographer, not to mention psychological sophistication and depth of experience in and knowledge of the language and culture in which observations are made. (Myerhoff 245)

It will be interesting to see how visitors react to the crater and how their responses are translated. Within a spectrum of possibilities – between “an inexpressible realm of knowledge” and as “common as the property of light” – where will their reactions fall?

Myerhoff argues that ineffability is linked to right-brain activity, producing states that “like dreams, are fundamentally non-linear, non-discursive, non-linguistic and are distorted beyond recognition when rendered in collective, verbal, conscious” (Myerhoff 246). Ruling out explanations that essentialize these states because they are difficult to

translate, Myerhoff concludes, “The ‘oh wow’ descriptions of these states are not simply self-indulgence or cultural protection” (Myerhoff 246). Thus, Myerhoff creates a space of possible definition for Roden Crater: a space for tension between private and public ritual. The observatory requires individual participation and induces the “oh wow” moment, yet it provides the “continuity and predictability” of collective ritual experience (Myerhoff 246). Myerhoff’s implication is that non-discursive subjective information is generative to the collective if we know how to approach it. Myerhoff continues:

[R]ituals have the effect of fusing the dreamed-of and lived-in order. Thus transformation is a multidimensional alteration of the ordinary state of mind, overcoming barriers between thought, action, knowledge, and emotion. The invisible world referred to in ritual is made manifest and the subject placed within it. (Myerhoff 246)

The world of the crater is at once visible yet tangible only at the level of perception. The self defined in that space is one that, as co-creator of the perceived, collapses the received gap between the ethereal world and the material world. In other words, as I discovered sitting in the “Crater’s Eye,” we were made to realize we are surrounded by the atmosphere already.

Myerhoff states, “Ritual is a performative genre; one performs a statement of belief through a gesture. That is all that is socially required and all that is of interest to the society. Personal feelings are irrelevant; genuflection is all” (Myerhoff 247). The selfhood performatives enacted at the crater offer a paradox to the visitor: to establish a belief in perception that is at least partially grounded in illusion. Perception becomes a ritual gesture of that illusion. Myerhoff continues:

All ritual is a kind of lie, the lie of “as if” which Goffman and Bateson refer to as “the frame,” which Langer calls with more kindness a sort of virtual magic, which in theatre is simply the willing suspension of disbelief, which as experimental, ludic creatures by evolution, we all know as “Let’s pretend.” (Myerhoff 247)

Roden Crater is a cultural performance based in ritual perception where “an associative or even causal relationship is posited where the individual is a microcosmic expression of the macrocosm, and conduct in one alters the other” (Myerhoff 247). Turrell’s sense of being “co-creator” of the perceived speaks to this mutual cause and effect. With the crater’s revealed performative in mind, its ritual of illusion, I too find “more kindness” for my experience and critique of the crater than with my experience and subsequent critique of Burning Man. My kindness stems from an appreciation for illusion, for the crater’s ability to allow one to be in flow and reflexive at the same time. Myerhoff wonders:

Do we forget ourselves, forget we are pretending? There are those who would say the forgetting is the very hallmark of rapture, the height of human imagination, and those who warn us of the madness, the dangers of forgetting that we are always in a play of our own construction. (Myerhoff 248)

The perceptual field that the crater expanded for me was not scientific only nor one of rapturous transcendence. My perceptual field was expanded and transformed by the interdependent perception of the lucid lie, the known and the unknown; standing simultaneously within the dreamed-of and the lived-in realms without compromise of either. Thus, it was not just my sensory perception that benefitted from the observatory, but my performative cultural perception as well.

I consider an earlier musing the crater induced, specifically whether the *punctum* must be painful, or whether it can simply create awe. Must pain constitute the sign of the *punctum*’s presence? I consider whether a relationship exists between the *studium*, the *punctum*, and the ludic state. Myerhoff continues:

The ludic is neither true nor false, nor does it suggest a specific emotional state – pleasure or pain. It simply points us to the power, the inevitability of our

imaginative activities in which we have the opportunity to inscribe our fates, our desires, our stories in the air, and partly believe (to some degree) in their reality. (Myerhoff 249)

At the crater, the ludic state operates something like the *studium*, the perceiving self mediating the interdependence between communal properties and personal disturbance. The crater does inscribe the vast skies with the ability to generate stories built from perception. I consider the potential sign that confirms my experience of a ludic state at the crater: the flow of seeing myself seeing, a merging of perceptions enacted without need for forgetting.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSIONS

In this study, I have attempted to locate instructions for selfhood performatives and connect their processes to the concepts of private and public codes by studying four events. Each event represented different codes of private and public access and exclusion and offered divergent experiences of participation and enactment of selfhood performatives. My purpose was to find commonalities, variations, paradoxes, and pleasures between instructions and events. I also was concerned with how commodification played a part in the construction and maintenance of selfhoods. Further, by using applications of mystory research practice, I was further interested in how binary codes of public and private were maintained or challenged in each case, seeking out an interdependent view of these codes supported by the post-structural theories on which I call.

In my study of Taryn Simon, I aimed to define selfhood performatives and connect their processes to the concepts of private and public codes as they are addressed in her work. To do this, I connected Althusser's theory of subject formation within ideology to Barthes's theory of the *studium* and *punctum*, both of which are practiced by Ulmer in his development of mystory. I crafted the chapter as a ground-zero narrative, featuring Simon's project as a site of seduction and documenting the circumstances of the hailing moment so as to articulate my subject formation in ideology and in the application of mystory practices.

Taryn Simon uses the performative of the "shrewd informant" to code her subjects as incongruent with prevailing cultural knowledge. Her subjects are framed as hidden and unfamiliar to received cultural vernacular yet positioned as influential to

epistemic production. By introducing her subjects to a broader public audience, Simon achieves an incongruity between what constitutes cultural knowledge and what is received as such. Simon aims towards revealing public secrets, the latent signs of cultural knowledge that result in defamiliarization. Yet, Simon's images did not necessarily stimulate a *punctum* for me. Barthes is clear that the "Operator's" intent does not function this way. It is the element of the *punctum* from within the field of the *studium* that seeks the viewer, who receives it in a moment of personal memory. In that moment, they bring each other into being. Barthes continues, "[An] incongruous gesture is bound to arrest my gaze, to constitute a *punctum*. And yet it is not one, for I immediately code the posture, whether I want to or not, as 'aberrant'" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 51). Simon's project brings to bear the aberrations of received cultural knowledge. Through her project, she gives language to irregularities, and as Barthes reminds us, "What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance" (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 51). The images work more as *studium*. While Simon may not create disturbance on a personal level, she nevertheless expands the *studium*, offering complex images and information to the story of shared cultural signs. Simon does service to the *studium*.

It is interesting to consider this point of disturbance in light of other performatives that Simon calls on as an artist, those of calculated formality and collaboration. I draw on a quote that stumped me when I first encountered it. It reminds me that in some sense Simon hopes her work to be revelatory without necessary disturbance, almost as if conscious of the lack of disturbance it takes to document the *studium*. This point is substantiated for me by Simon in the following commentary:

I try to [make photographs] in a very respectful way. My intention is to give a stage to things that don't receive that sort of stage. I'm much more about portraiture, or sites, but where there is an agreement, I don't capture moments. I've never taken a camera around with me just randomly snapping. It's always deeply calculated, and deeply thought through....I never take pictures. (Simon, "A Discussion with Taryn Simon")

Making the distinction between pictures and her own compositions on the one hand seems appropriate: she is a photographer protecting her aesthetic. Yet her perspective also speaks to a selfhood performative that codes a preference for her social role as shrewd informant, the point of her most profound interpellation as a photographer.

Barthes continues:

To recognize the *studium* is inevitably to encounter the photographer's intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to approve or disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue them within myself, for culture (from which the *studium* derives) is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers. The *studium* is a kind of education (knowledge and civility, "politeness") which allows me to discover the *Operator*, to experience the intentions which establish and animate his practices, but to experience them 'in reverse,' according to my will as a *Spectator*. (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 28; emphasis in original)

Within the context of the project, I discover Simon as an operator creating friction. Lost in her work, she is just doing her job: making pictures. While by virtue of her camera and her method Simon strives for transparency of presence, sometimes she seems to disappear. She gets lost in the catalogue of her photos, which at times seem to demand objectivity as articles belonging to the public domain. At times, her mastery of composition reminds me of her personal investment; at other times, her voice in the captions. Simon's work creates friction between personal and social roles. Barthes continues:

It is rather as if I had to read the Photographer's myths in the Photograph, fraternizing with them but not quite believing in them. These myths obviously aim (this is what myth is for) at reconciling the Photograph with society (is this necessary? – Yes, indeed: the photograph is *dangerous*) by endowing it with

functions, which are, for the Photographer, so many alibis. These functions are: to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause to signify, to provoke desire. And I, the *Spectator*, I recognize with more or less pleasure: I invest them with my *studium* (which is never my delight or my pain). (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 28; emphasis in original)

Yet Simon's work did induce both delight and seduction on my part, not necessarily in the content of the photograph, but in my response to her methods and their possibilities of extending cultural knowledge. Simon is able to develop the *studium* in effectively defamiliarizing ways, which in turn summoned a moment of interpellation for me.

Simon's work realizes the complex tension in the boundaries between public and private, strengthening their interdependence just as it hopes to lessen the strain through exposure.

In my analysis of Burning Man, I offered thick description to articulate my private experience of a public event, crafting my description to show the complexities and ironies of the festival's selfhood performatives. With clear domains of public and private established by the protected world of carnival on the playa, I showed how the domains were treated by participants as binaries so as to support and perpetuate the benefits of the same. The ethic that supports radical participation undermined the interdependent nature of observation and participation resulting in an environment of surveillance. Yet, the 2007 Burning Man festival seemed fraught with more ironies than just this.

Most notable was the theme of the festival, "The Green Man," aimed at environmentalism and ecologically conscious practices. Given the incredible amounts of fuel, energy, supplies, water, and waste that the festival generates, environmentalism is an appropriate theme. The output of the festival also renders the participatory term "burner" a sobering accuracy, burning through the various forms of sustenance the festival requires to run. Chris Taylor writes:

Burning Man, an extravaganza characterized by the consumption of huge quantities of fossil fuel, has discovered environmentalism. It is attempting to offset the 28,000 tons of carbon it estimates the event generates (counting all those flights and long drives for its far-flung attendees), and the organization is belatedly switching to biodiesel generators to provide most of the event's electricity. (Chris Taylor)

Yet attempts to reduce carbon emissions by 4.5 tons through use of biodiesel were weakened by faulty and low-capacity generators (Burghart). Likewise, in terms of effective marketing towards burners on "green" sensibilities and practices, the numbers did not always add up. "Some two dozen camps like 'Silicon Village,' through their demonstration of green principles, got listed on the Black Rock City map as green. By contrast, there were some 650 total camps" (Burghart). With this type of information, I wonder how relevant or influential *any* of the overarching yearly themes are to the functions of carnival practice at the festival.

It is difficult to weigh the "green" campaign's effectiveness. Some supporters may evaluate effectiveness in terms of visibility. And visibility became a newly tapped potential in 2007. Namely, marketing became something the festival explicitly began to develop. Thus, the 2007 festival offered another contradiction directly related to its "green" theme. That year, Burning Man opened its doors for the first time to the official advertising of select eco-friendly companies. Whether directly launched at this conflict of interests, it also was the first year "the Man" was burnt before he was officially scheduled to be burnt.

Upon exiting the event, I am left to ask what transformations if any occurred at the festival. As a performance event predicated on embodiment and participation, in continuity now for nearly two and a half decades, Burning Man would seem to exist as a type of performative rehearsal, but what is the rehearsal for? What kind of momentum is

being generated on the playa? If Burning Man's "Green Man" is a rehearsal, a sort of slow momentum, it is important to consider why the "Green Man" theme was not more successful on the land itself. I am left to question what Burning Man can bring back to a larger society. Further, do attempts at conservation on the playa contradict or otherwise interrupt the radical forms of self-expression the festival endorses?

To engage further the question of momentum, I look to other instructions of selfhood the festival prompts. Given the circularity of the performances of surveillance, surveillance is the selfhood performed despite the featured rhetoric of participation. Participants internalize the gaze of participants, self-monitoring their participation as well as policing the participation of others.

Bearing in mind the principle of de commodification that influences meanings of the *studium* at the festival, I consider whether Burning Man may be a rehearsal for an anti-consumerist movement on the playa. Many allies of the festival believe that given time, the burners can alter social conditions. But is the momentum that is building at Burning Man the right kind of momentum for such tasks? Given the privatized and classist demographics of the event, burners may not be living up to the Burning Man creeds because of the other instructions at work in the festival.

At MichFest, I looked to the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin to discover a method of explanation for a conflict of selfhood performatives I experienced at the festival. The unification ethic that is supported by the womyn-only policy had me considering its limitations in terms of generative selfhood performatives. Through Bakhtin's first and second stylistic lines, I was able to show how the festival offers generative practices despite its primary line of unification. For instance, despite its firm sexual division,

MichFest was more inclusive than Burning Man, proving to do more to make itself accessible to a wider range of participants.

One aspect of its second stylistic lines was the performance work of Split Britches. In my discussion of the performance duo, I considered how their use of repetition and imitation functions to undermine notions of a source, the Derridian parasitical economy of guest and host. I discuss the important feature of heteroglossia in imitative and repetitious play. As Bowman and Bowman write in regards to the mystery:

The point in both the science and humanities labs is to produce a person capable not only of reciting the history of invention or analyzing the inventions of others but of inventing something. The lesson should be that imagination and imitation are both integral parts of invention. (Bowman and Bowman 164)

The inventions of both Split Britches and Miranda July function as seductive mischief, and Baudrillard's theories of seduction helped me to analyze them. Baudrillard offers a clue to his application of the term. "Seduction is what seduces, and that's that" ("On Seduction," 57). While brief, Baudrillard's definition pinpoints seduction as a function, insisting on some sort of perpetual motion or open field. The seduction at work in the performances of Split Britches and July function as a motivating surprise, a stirring of unnamable emergence.

The goals of MichFest, Split Britches, and July's work agree in some ways. They contest and invent selfhood via private and public codes, through the acknowledged loss and attempted reclaiming of feminine and human rites of passage that allow for one's story to unfold and speak for itself. Here I recall Warner's study of the word "public," which "derives from the Latin *poplicus*, for people, but evolved to *publicus* in connection with pubes, in the sense of adult men, linking public membership to pubic maturity" (Warner 23). The source of my anxiety within the context of the festival is a privilege to

access the public that is withheld from me, based on my *lack* of appropriate sexual assignment.

Whether it is Diogenes masturbating in the marketplace or Catharine Beecher's disgust for Frances Wright's public mannishness, Warner reminds us, "being in public is a privilege that requires filtering or repressing something that is seen as private. In both cases, too, the transgression is experienced not as merely theoretical, but as a violation of deep instincts about sex and gender" (Warner 23). Thus, my access should involve a gender-influenced declaration in the performative sense or a story in the mythological sense. My story should be an expression of socially-repressed female "pubic" maturity whose imposed privacy silences a story inherent to constructions of selfhood performatives, yet through its publicity is in danger of being commodified.

Likewise, in my desire to show the histories of MichFest as part of the shared cultural histories that may not know of its influence, I risk its commodification. Laurie Kendall writes, "Perhaps the reason there are so few textual sources on the Festival is that it is only 30 years old, or because women are reluctant to write about it for fear that doing so might violate the sanctity of the 'women only' space" (Kendall 5). This fear of commodification conflicts with my drive toward research practices that acknowledge the relationships between personal experiences with larger institutional spheres. As Ulmer writes, "To make a mystory is to record obtuse meanings of information in each of the institutions of the maker's experience" (Ulmer, *Internet Invention* 44). Mystory practice recognizes the inevitable integration of institutional and personal meanings.

I consider that this conflict of exposure weighed in on the selfhood performative of "coming home" to the festival, and my own sense of fractured selfhood at the festival. Ironically, the notion of "alienation" in the vocabulary of mystory practice refers to

“homesickness.” Ulmer writes, “Our point of departure assumes the default state of mind of ‘alienation.’ The mood guiding us toward the wide image...is first intuited through the ordinary feeling of homesickness” (Ulmer, *Internet Invention* 75). A generative relay practice, homesickness allows the narrative search for the wide-image to continue. Mystory theory and practice allows me to turn toward rather than away from this fractured feeling, reminding me of the advice of Welty, July, and Basho to not hesitate with my response. Ulmer asks, “How many inventions have been delayed by the inability to recognize a disturbance as an insight?” (Ulmer, *Internet Invention* 76). Without knowing if my invention has been successful, at least I am assured of its possibility (with my attempt) and its suspension (with my neglect).

At Roden Crater, I offer a description of my experience as a visitor of a naked eye observatory in a dormant volcano currently closed to the public. Using the common field of light perception as a type of *studium*, Turrell manages to find a language that maintains the speechless ethic of the crater. Traveling to the crater at a time in its public life when it is still under construction, I find a quiet landscape in a remote location that commands the power of its natural surroundings. The experience of the crater afforded a play of optical illusion against this stark desert landscape, fostering an appreciation for the ludic possibilities of the crater.

Selfhood performatives I found in play at the crater concerned the performative masks of illusion, pilgrimage to the site, and the state one achieves to enter a place for its sublime calm. The space intensifies notions of a quest in which the visitor participates as part of her experience. Turrell offers the quest as a response to contemporary art that focuses our attention on observation rather than interaction. Interestingly, the quest for

experience influences the events of Burning Man and MichFest as well, the journey to a particular city or land, one of returning home. In all three cases, the quest speaks to issues of access. If, due to economic means, a prospective participant cannot make the journey or purchase a ticket, how are these events interactive, as they claim to be; how do they activate participation over observation; and how do they address the problems of contemporary art?

The quest established at Roden Crater moves ahead of the art project and into a search for communication and knowledge beyond our known realm of perception, using the boundless sky as the blank screen for the quest. Yet while the crater may share some similarities with Burning Man in terms of the bourgeoisie activism described by Marx and highlighted by Berman, I find that the crater exceeds the activity of rote consumption and moves into a more enduring experience.

I also found that my experience at the crater expanded my understanding of it as ritual performance of perception. Reading my experience at the crater through Barbara Myerhoff's concepts of ritual and ritual transcendence, I find the crater's use of illusion is a productive element for selfhood performatives. In the following commentary, I find that the crater also offers an analogy for mystory as ritual performance.

[R]itual performances are testaments to our capacity to endlessly bring new possibilities into being without entirely relinquishing the old, prior understandings that have given rise to them; we make magic, believe in it or do not, at once, we make ourselves anew, yet remain familiar to ourselves, are capable of being carried away, changed, yet know fully and freely exactly what we are doing and why. (Myerhoff 249)

Here I am reminded of the space Ulmer creates between hermeneutic and heuristic performances. Ulmer writes, "Without relinquishing the presently established applications of theory in our disciplines (critique and hermeneutics), heuristics adds to

these critical and interpretive practices a generative productivity of the sort practiced in the avant-garde” (Ulmer, *Heuretics* xii). The similarities between Ulmer and Myerhoff focus on the intersection between accepted conventions and new possibilities and inventions. Just as the self mediates the interdependence between the mind-body gap at the crater, so too does the self mediate the interdependence of the general and particular in the mystory.

I found commonalities amongst my events in terms of a persistent selfhood performative they offered. Drawn to the selfhood performative of the shrewd informant that Simon makes visible, I allow the role to influence me as I study the events that constitute this project. With Simon’s shrewd informant in mind, I find a link to Bakhtin’s use of the rogue in the novel:

The rogue continually dons and discards masks so as to expose the falsity of those who presume their roles and institutions are natural. Bakhtin goes on to state that the stance of the rogue is precisely the stance of the novelist. Thus, although roguish “masks” occupy a place in Bakhtin’s new theory analogous to that of “alibi” and “pretender” in his early texts, they are represented as agents of truthfulness and authenticity rather than as futile tools for an escape. Irresponsibility, now recast as mockery of the “official,” has assumed a positive value. (Morson and Emerson 353)

Here I am drawn to the contradiction that truthfulness and authenticity are tied to mockery of the natural and official. Truthfulness is that which refuses the concretization of truth. As Althusser offers, “‘*So be it!* ...’ This phrase which registers the effect to be obtained proves that it is not ‘naturally’ so (‘naturally’: outside the prayer, i.e. outside the ideological intervention). This phrase proves that it *has* to be so if things are to be what they must be” (Althusser; emphasis in original). The rogue figure reveals the rhetorical function of ideology. In Baudrillard’s terms, it is seduction “which extracts meaning from discourse and detracts it from its truth” (Baudrillard, “On Seduction” 152). The role

of rogue acting as a seducer of monadic authority represents the possibility for limitless invention.

As rogue, Simon has a penchant for incongruity; it is part of the composition of her photographs. The strange tension between what exists as cultural sign and its publication as unfamiliar make for incongruent images. The rogue also functions in Burning Man as the arsonist, turning on its head the notion of a planned immolation of capitalist subversion. Likewise, at MichFest the rogue functions in the likes of Split Britches and Miranda July in their use of imitation and repetition as detractors of definitive sources for selfhood performatives.

As noted in the Introduction to this study, Simon's work functions as a model for my own collection of curiosities. Borrowing from the ethos of "the 'ready-mades' of Marcel Duchamp and the *objets trouvés* central to surrealist aesthetics," I assembled and associated relics from our collective life-world, knowing full well the paradox that "[t]orn from their mundane associations, these objects [become] imbued with the mysterious and the irrational" (Sieveking). Starting with Simon's exhibit, I filled the shelves of my curiosity cabinet by a literal and figurative nomadic relay between Burning Man in Black Rock City, Nevada; to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival in Walhalla, Michigan; and finally to Roden Crater in Flagstaff, AZ.

In her review of Lawrence Weschler's *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, Wendy Lesser captures the affects such collections provoke:

Lawrence Weschler's latest book is a bit like one of those deceptive plays – by Pirandello, say, or David Mamet – in which you have to keep adjusting your sense of where you stand. At first you feel you are simply the recipient of straightforward information. Gradually it dawns on you that some of the characters within the drama are being fooled by other characters, but as a member of the audience, in cahoots with the author, you still feel privy to the master plan.

Eventually, however, there comes a moment of revelation in which you discover that you too are one of the dupes. And yet, despite all the trickery and illusion, your final impression is that you have been exposed to deep and lasting truths. (Lesser)

Thus, the shrewd informant converges with collector of curiosities and the illusionist.

Does the rogue finally offer the possibility for the interruption of “lasting truths”? While the power of illusion became a generative point at different times across events, illusion also had the potential to merge with the grotesque with both defamiliarizing and troubling effects. As Weschler reminds us of the “bedazzled” New World haze that allowed Europeans to ignore the atrocities committed in the Americas under their discoveries, trickery and illusion do not necessitate productive results.

My research worked largely in the tradition of post-structural theory, finding significance by furthering performance research in mystory practice and application. In their study of Bakhtinian discourse, Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson remind us that the self acts as a medium for artistic communication, “The self, as an assimilator of discourses, resembles a novel” (Morson and Emerson 220). This Bakhtinian approach falls in line with Ulmer’s notion of “the crossing of discourses that has been shown to occur in the invention process” (Ulmer, *Heuretics* xii). Likewise, Morson and Emerson’s relation of the self to that which is “novel” recalls Ulmer’s notion of the unrepeatable self in a mystory. Both seem to suggest we reassign a phenomenal approach to the personal or private in communion with the shared or public, maintaining “the self’s” novel ability to shed new insight and deepen performative consciousness. As Abram continues:

To acknowledge that “I am this body” is not to reduce the mystery of my yearnings and fluid thoughts to a set of mechanisms, or my “self” to a determinate robot. Rather it is to affirm the uncanniness of this physical form. It is not to lock up awareness within the density of a closed and bounded object...the boundaries of a living body are open and indeterminate; more like membranes than barriers,

they define a surface of metamorphosis and exchange. (Abram 46; emphasis mine)

Connecting Abram, Ulmer, and Bakhtin allows me to draw conclusions on the mystory as a visible sign of the uncovered self that must evade concretization, a condition threatened by pure representational models that evade invention or the generative possibilities of imitation.

This condition speaks directly to the theoretical question I posed at the beginning of the study: what sort of knowledge about this age and its human relations is it possible to demonstrate (are we demonstrating) when we perform? As Bowman and Bowman remind us, "...mystory attempts to uncover and trace the story of the 'self' that is buried or enciphered in a variety of 'other' historical discourses" (Bowman and Bowman 164). Certainly one condition of our age is that of the self and its inability to be removed from historical and institutional epistemology, each influencing the other intertextually *ad infinitum*. The division of public and private realms of knowledge can be understood as the historical denial of personal, social, and institutional realms of knowledge as pervasively interrelated. Diane Taylor writes:

Performances travel, challenging and influencing other performances. Yet, they are, in a sense, always in situ: intelligible in the framework of the immediate environment and issues surrounding them. The *is/as* underlines the understanding of performance as simultaneously "real" and "constructed," as practices that bring together what have historically been kept separate as discrete, supposedly free-standing, ontological and epistemological discourses. (Taylor 3; emphasis in original)

Our human relations thus express an understanding that discrete performances are a matter of forced perception. The "is/as" constitution that Taylor draws on reads as the membranes of metamorphosis and exchange that Abram suggests, refiguring conceptions of boundaries as both real and constructed. Likewise, both Taylor and Abram connect

back to the paradoxical plurality that Ulmer draws from Derrida. The study of performance is rooted in a paradox of indefinable parameters, making accessible the dis/orientation of the stage and allowing the stage to become the gallery. It is the dynamic of indefinable parameters in performance scholarship, after all, that guides my research into rituals and paradoxes of selfhood.

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The wildest and most extravagant ideas. Black Rock City, Nevada. Personal photograph by author. 29 Aug. 2007.

VITA

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Linda has also taught performance in northern New Mexico, San Diego, and Los Angeles, California, where she is currently a lecturer at California State University, Northridge. Outside of performance, Linda works in the mediums of photography, video, textile and costume design, poetry and short fiction, arts and crafts, and she has a special appreciation for dance. New to southern California, Linda is thrilled by the wild parrots of the region that cruise the skies and play in the yard. With a milestone career goal now complete, she hopes to take some time to learn to surf.