

COMEDY OF THE COMMONS: NOMADIC SPIRITUALITY AND THE BURNING MAN FESTIVAL

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ABSTRACT

In this account of our long-term ethnographic investigation of the Burning Man Project, we examine the emergence of nomadic spirituality among the citizens of Black Rock City, Nevada. We describe this emergence as a reaction to consumers' increasing dissatisfaction both with conventional religious denominations and with consumption as an existential ground of meaning. We provide an emic view of the pilgrimage experience at Black Rock City, from the perspective of participants in and organizers of the event. We propose a theory of the comedy of the commons to interpret the surface structure of the moment, and embed our deep structural interpretation of the nomadic spirituality of the phenomenon within the context of new religious movements (NRMs). In so doing, we shed new light on the topic of the sacred and profane in consumer experience.

INTRODUCTION

Religious affiliation in contemporary North America has been aptly described as a spiritual marketplace, fueled in part by a loss of faith both in

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conventional denominational orthodoxy and in secular alternatives, sustained by a questing mood and resulting in the proliferation of religions of the self (Roof, 1999; Taylor, 2001; Csordas, 1997). With the spread of the "culture of authenticity," the rise of "expressive individualism," and the flourishing of the therapeutic ethos – each coinciding with, if not originating in, the consumption ethic of late capitalism – a "reflexive spirituality" of "lived religion" has attracted legions of converts in the past few decades (Taylor, 2001, pp. 83, 88; Roof, 1999, pp. 41, 75). Religious semiosis has migrated from temples to other "architectonic" spaces of "mutual display" such as festivals (Pike, 2001a; Fernandez, 1982; Taylor, 2001), and this movement has generated spiritual genres that are characterized as dynamic, decentralized fluid networks (Roof, 1999; Pike, 2004).

Such evolution from denominational doctrinal orthodoxy to personalized, experiential religious forms unfolds within a long American tradition of alternative worship reaching back to 19th century evangelical camp meetings (Pike, 2001b). The emergence of new spiritual forms, deliberately constructed by bricoleurs of the sacred who have sifted traditions in cross-cultural and cross-temporal perspective to create genres of relevance to contemporary seekers – generating as much criticism as acclaim in the bargain (Wallis, 2003) – affords researchers a compelling opportunity for re-examining the sacred and profane in consumer experience (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Belk, 2004; Sherry, 2004).

Among these new or disestablishment religious forms are genres broadly labeled "New Age" or "Neopagan" (or "Neoshamanic"), an eclectic mélange of syncretic expressions that converge upon the goals of personal experience and insight, and for whom ritual is the touchstone of identity and community (Pike, 2004, p. 22). In his meditation on James' (1982) opus, Taylor accepts experience over cognition as the real locus of religion, but disputes the diagnosticity of individual experience, maintaining that certain emotions arise only in solidarity, and that experience mutates when shared (2001, p. 28). Via such sharing, these groups seek to harmonize humans with nature, sacralize the carnal, cauterize intolerance, and socialize within communities. To do so, they may travel to transformative spiritual frontiers, seeking to experience immanence. The festivals at which they convene often culminate in a sacrificial fire (Pike, 2001a). We articulate the nature of lived religion in just such a communal context, in the present ethnographic study of nomadic spirituality at Burning Man.

As anthropologists sympathetic to Graebner's (2004, p. 105) call to "make common cause" with the anarchists, and as consumer researchers aware of the need to position our work within a relevant theoretical niche, we have adopted a compromise strategy in our interpretation of the

phenomenon. Burning Man is perhaps most cogently described by borrowing Naipaul's (1990) metaphor: "a million mutinies now." It is a subculturally diverse congeries of campers, anarchists, ravers, digerati, artists, spiritual seekers, tourists, urban planners, visionaries, and, increasingly, researchers and media reporters. The event has evolved rapidly and distinctively over the past two decades, in dynamic response to intraorganizational politics, popular appropriation, and the clash of personalities across stakeholder camps (Doherty, 2004). In order to capture different aspects of the phenomenon's complexity, we have parsed our interpretation over many outlets and theories. Our present effort is devoted to a particular dimension of the event's appeal - its spiritual cast - that articulates with an important consumer research issue: the interplay of sacred and profane in contemporary life. Recently, Belk (2004) has offered a retrospective account of this issue, noting especially some areas in need of illumination and extension: landscapes and cyberscapes, violence and the gift, the "cool," festivals, and transgressive desires. In this article, we explore the ways in which many of Belk's frontier concerns are implicated in a remarkable consumption ritual.

THE FESTIVAL

Captured in the character of its own aesthetic charter, Black Rock City might be described as a pastiche of paintings. Begin with a shifting landscape of scenes from Dali's "Archeological Reminiscence of Millet's Angelus," "The First Days of Spring," and "Enchanted Beach with Three Fluid Graces." Imagine the surreal setting crawling with figures from Brueghel's "The Feast of Fools," "The Battle Between Carnival and Lent," and "The Flemish Fair." Finally, anchor the vision on the center panel of Hieronymous Bosch's "The Garden of Earthly Delights" (allowing the water to evaporate in the mind's eye), and permit the gaze to dart from the left wing of "Paradise" to the right wing of "Hell," as the shutters close to enfold the painting in a depiction of "The Creation of the World." Give this vision a kaleidoscopic spin, dub in a soundtrack that runs the aural gamut from simple percussion to synthesized techno, let the thermostat range from 110 to 40 degrees Fahrenheit over the course of your viewing, and, just when you think you're too tired to concentrate any longer, set the whole thing on fire. If you can step outside of yourself while embodying the flame, and cheer as it both consumes you and fuses you with surrounding viewers, you have visited Black Rock City. You have entered the realm of Burning Man. It is a "psychedelic vision made visceral," its art meant to be "touched, then torched" (Pinchbeck, 2002, pp. 81, 91).

Chronicled in many places (Doherty, 2004; Kozinets, 2002, 2003; Gilmore & van Proyen, 2005; <http://www.burningman.com/>), the evolution of the Burning Man Project can be summarily charted. Launched on a whim in 1986 by Larry Harvey and a few friends who gathered on Baker Beach in San Francisco to burn an 8 ft effigy of a man, apochryphally to mark the break up of a relationship, the gathering drew increasing numbers of interested passersby on each successive annual outing. As the event became publicized among Bay area culture jammers, its numbers overwhelmed the venue, prompting a move to the Black Rock Desert in Nevada, a terrestrial *Mare Imbrium* that permitted the kind of countercultural sprawl the moment was demanding. The event unfolds the week prior to Labor Day. Over time, the Man grew larger, and was augmented with other art installations, many destined for the same fiery destruction. Performance art grew to surround the installations, and throngs of participants from around the globe swelled a week-long festival, directed by an arts organization coordinating the voluntary labor of thousands. (It is not uncommon to hear informants wonder aloud about the similarity to the building of the Egyptian pyramids.) Harvey has remained the *genus locus* of the festival, his Man an intentionally underspecified polysemic projective vessel his concelebrants adore as the beacon guiding their pilgrimage to the place they call Black Rock City. Imagistic depictions of the site are being published with increasing frequency (Brill & Bee, 2003; Kreuter, 2002; Pinchbeck, 2003; Sherry, 2003; Sherry & Kozinets, 2003; Traub, Plunkett, Brown, & Wieners, 1997; <http://www.burningman.com/>).

Our account is based on an intensive multi-year ethnographic and netnographic inquiry into the Burning Man Project, conducted with participants drawn from all quarters of the event. Hundreds of hours of physical and virtual immersion in the sites were complemented with interviews of hundreds of informants. Data were recorded manually in fieldnotes, and electronically in photographs and both audio- and videotape. Informants assisted in member checks, and provided insightful feedback on our interpretations. As befits a long-term investigation, our findings are reported in a variety of outlets in addition to the present article (e.g., Kozinets & Sherry, 2003, 2005). In the balance of the text, emic language is placed in quotation marks, and informants identified mostly by "playa names."

THE GREETING

After the long and frequently arduous journey to reach the Black Rock Desert, one of the first salutations a pilgrim receives from a "Greeter" at the

gates of this emerging city of art, and one that she will hear repeated often in the coming week during her wanderings through the city's theme camps, is a heartfelt "Welcome home." This greeting is extended especially to first-time "newbies" as well as returning "burners" (a label loathed by the festival's organizers but beloved by the citizenry of Black Rock City); neither is the benediction denied to the despised "yahoos" who enter the festival late and leave early, behaving rudely like voyeuristic revelers. This hailing is not merely a cordial offer of hospitality. Rather, it is an invocation, an invitation, and an induction.

The nomad is incorporated into the fold, his apparent status as visitor soon transformed to host. Prodigal pursuits in the commercial world of formal institutions are checked at the gate, as the pilgrim is (re-)initiated into the antistructural world of the postmodern paraprimitive technoshamanic vision quest. Dropping out of time and space for a manic burst of creative destruction that will celebrate an evanescent retroscape and mark the passing of a noetic oasis, each nomad receives the greeting as a blessing and a challenge.

The greeting is a gift, the promise of religion in its ancient etymological sense: a binding back to the source. Pilgrims have flocked to Black Rock City to recover a primal experience of immanence and transcendence, and some to take that spark back with them to the "world," in hopes of infusing their everyday lived experience with grace and the possibility of renewal.

BEFORE THE BURN

Over the course of the week, upon a geomantic infrastructure designed by Project directors and laid down by a first wave of nomad volunteers, pilgrims, who will eventually number over 30,000 strong, labor to create Black Rock City. From a barren Pleistocene lake bed ringed by mountains erupts a luminous city of art, with a Wild West ethos, a retrofuturistic architecture, a dense cacophonous soundscape, and a New Age vibe. As quickly as it achieves fluorescence, it evaporates in a swirl of dust, only to re-appear a year hence. It is a tangible mirage.

The city, comprised of theme camps and villages dedicated to aesthetic production, is arrayed in medieval hub and spoke fashion around the axis mundi of the Man, a 50 ft effigy on a multistory pedestal set out on the playa amid a host of mega-installations of art. The Esplanade divides the playa proper from the encampment, which radiates from the center camp

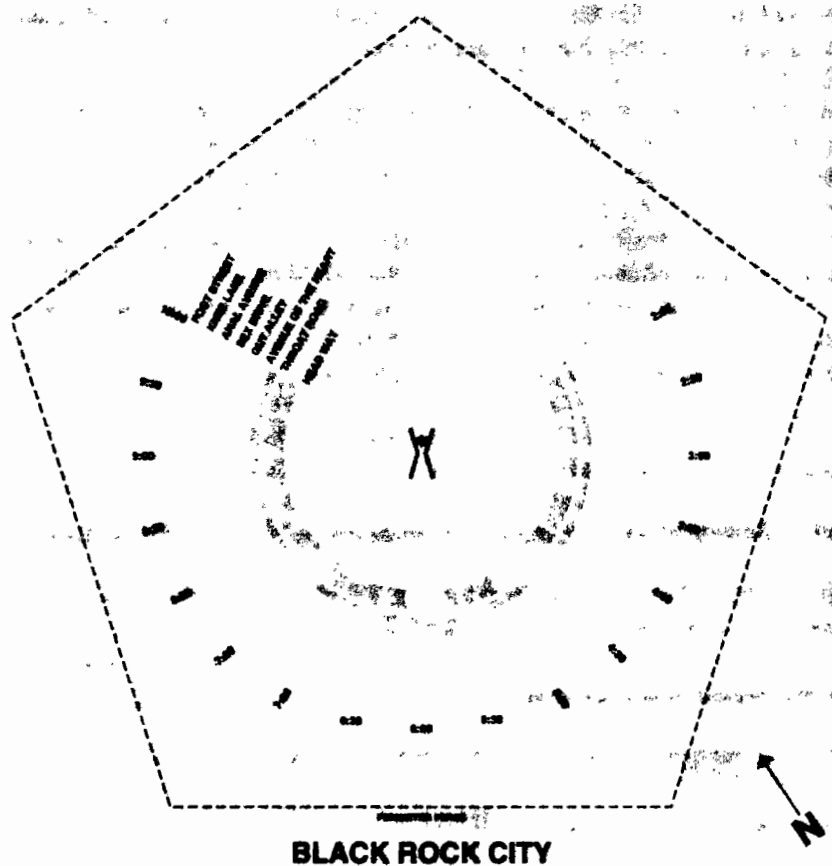


Fig. 1. City Plan

communal café nearly to encircle the playa. Fig. 1 is an artist's depiction of a common plan for Black Rock City. At any given moment, the arteries are choked with pedestrian, bicycle and art car traffic whose predictability in terms of speed, direction, and interaction moves lower as it flows onto the playa; desert darkness drops predictability close to zero.

Interaction ritual among citizens is governed by the festival's twin ideological pillars: radical self-expression and no spectators. Pilgrims are expected to participate actively in the construction of community that, like a chrysalis, will facilitate the emergence of a transformed and renewed self. "This is who I really am" is a commonly asserted affirmation of the playa self that a

pilgrim comes to discover in a week of aesthetically mediated leveling and bonding rituals that draw her into intimate association with her fellow travelers. Through a communally enforced gift economy (commerce is banned, save for the sale, by volunteers, of coffee, tea, chai, and ice in Center Camp, the proceeds of which serve only to help defray festival costs and support the nearest local high school), presentations of food and drink, goods, and services, circulate alongside the endless exchange of the aestheticized self. Pilgrims are present for one another most hours of the day, sharing cordial facework, labor, performances, epiphanies, and, most often, simple immediacy. The anomie of the "world" is banished in the building of this organic community, or exorcised in public forums should it arise during the week.

Playgrounds of diminutive and gigantic scale are scattered throughout Black Rock City. Nomads are constantly encouraged to play, to regress to childhood. Trampolines, swing sets, life-sized interactive board games, toy boxes, and sports equipments are offered by nomads to one another. One theme camp makes components of dolls available to visitors, who are invited to combine the parts in novel and creative ways. The costumes worn by nomads as gifts to one another are effective masks, allowing multiple personae to emerge from the multiphrenic self, harnessing play in the service of self-discovery and self-disclosure.

Sexuality and gender are publicly problematized and communally celebrated. Many participants are on permanent naked walkabout. Ambulatory and automotive genitalia are on constant parade in costumed amplification. Transvestism teems. Public displays of hetero- and homosexual affection abound. Transsexual pilgrims in various stages of gender reassignment have a physical presence, while confounding costumery causes other pilgrims to contemplate the conundrum of hermaphroditism. "Sacred sexuality" is preached and practiced in some of the theme camps. Weddings (and the renewal of vows) are a common event in Black Rock City, performed by a variety of intermediaries and witnessed by close friends and spontaneous gatherings of strangers.

Sacred clowns pervade the festival, and shamans (in the guise of witch doctors, magicians, soothsayers, ecstatic drummers, clerics, and the like) meander the midways. Devils, angels, and interesting hybrids populate the plays. Both Pan and the Green Man are popular festival costumes. Jesters may seek to provoke response from the complacent and the jaded. For example, a performance artist misanthrope may harangue pilgrims with a steady stream of expletives. "Fuck you! Fuck you and your 'no spectating.' Fuck your 'experience.' And fuck you!" may dupe an unwitting nomad into a public debate of festival premises. Another pilgrim, naked save for satanic

and nazi symbolism painted on his body, may preach love and tolerance, enjoining his interlocutors to "Have a nice day!" This same pilgrim, repainted the next day with flowers and smiley faces, will hurl an aggressive "Fuck you!" at admirers of his gentle images. A Dust Devil, dressed as a visual pun of the natural phenomenon, may run a vacuum over the playa surface, complaining of the ceaseless futility of his task. Reversals, parodies, and lampoons of many of the institutions of the "world" are enacted in Black Rock City. Trickster (Hyde, 1998) must surely be among the genius loci of this desert encampment.

Therapeutic practice and ritual relief of all manner are available to pilgrims. Mother Bear conducts healing ceremonies and informational seminars at the Women's Temple. Practitioners of "revirgination" and "rehymentation" offer to renew pilgrims' sexual energy. Massage is widely offered throughout the encampment. Yoga and meditation sessions abound. A variety of exorcisms and baptisms are on offer. Extropians discuss the eventual and inevitable liberation of consciousness from the body, while extollers of entheogens help pilgrims to out-of-body experiences through chemical means. Fortunetellers are abundant. A cursory check of the theme camp manifest suggests no metaphysical ailment or curiosity need go untreated during the pilgrim's sojourn.

Black Rock City can be imagined as a New Age/Neopagan mirror image of the spiritual supermarket its residents have encountered in the "world." The city is a bazaar of beliefs, a hive of heterodoxy, a convocation of callings. The event is as sacral as the Run for the Wall (Dubisch, 2004), and as festal a mountain man rendezvous (Belk & Costa, 1998). The aesthetic medium in which these theologies thrive over the week serves also as a lingua franca for the nomads.

While the theme camps that are the city's residential unit busy themselves with the aesthetic production – substantive and processual – that becomes their gift to the gathering, individual artists and their helpmates erect distinctive installations on the playa. Playa artwork is often colossal in scope, to suit the seemingly trackless expanse of the outdoor gallery and to match the monumental majesty of the Man in apprehension. Strolling nomads might pass by an enormous shattered chandelier, apparently fallen to earth from the hall of Norse gods, or see a gigantic rubber duckie housing a nightclub, or watch a Janus-faced bronze sculpture weep fiery tears, or encounter a prodigious lingam and yoni vibrating to the touch of passersby, or marvel as megaton slabs of granite dangle from chains, swaying as pilgrims dance upon them overhead, or laugh at a larger-than-life scatological rendition of the Merrill Lynch logo.

Often this artwork incorporates ingenious technology, such that stationary sculptures of swimmers stroke to life under the influence of stroboscopes, or musical tones emanate from invisible lyre strings as pilgrims move their hands through empty space, or laser beams trace out the shape of the Man overhead, for the amusement of any watchers from the sky. Humble works are present as well, from elegant postings of poetry, through terra cotta warrior-type battalions of statuettes, to the occasional nonfunctional phone booth or drinking fountain.

Most strikingly, the *playa* is rife with artwork that is sacred, if not overtly religious (and quite frequently blasphemous), in character, whether allusive or allegorical, literal or ironic, approving or critical. Religious referents across time and space are incorporated into much of the art, whether built or found. Allusions to fire worship, and attendant sacrifice by immolation, are endemic. Constant exposure to the sky draws reference to its divinity as well. Altars abound. Ancient mythological deities are evoked in sculpture, song, and dance. Replicas of the Buddha, both monumental and diminutive, are pervasive, as are Hindu icons and imagery. A pilgrim playing a didgeridoo as he methodically wends his way around the Man – whose base is frequently constructed by design to resemble an altar, and is so designated by burners – may respond to the ethnographer's inquiry into his activity with textbook Eliade (1954) precision, "I'm creating sacred space." In 2003, the altar (in fact, a pyramid) was built to accommodate 16 alcoves or grottoes, in which performance artists assumed the roles of demigods, forming tableaux vivants of spiritual devotion in their embedded niches; that they also bore a parodic resemblance to department store window dressings was not lost on informants. A row of crucifixes may invite DIY simulated crucifixion. Chapel installations with simulated stained glass may beckon pilgrims to leaf by candle light through a book that chronicles the exploits of abusive clergy. Sacred iconography from Marian tradition may appear in panel murals in the café in Center Camp, or in extravagant abundance (and in combination with profane images harnessed in the service of goddess worship) on the mobile Church of the Chocolate Martini. Ecstatic trances induced by repetitive drumming, dancing, and/or chemical ingestion can be observed. Theme camp services may deliver a therapeutic cleansing effect to patrons, via channels such as yoga, bodywork, healing rituals, and even self help groups.

Whether aestheticized spiritual seekers, cultural transvestites, eclectic syncretists, or hardy partiers, the focus of the pilgrims' attention throughout their physical and metaphysical journeys of the week, is the burning of the Man that occurs on Saturday night. As the effigy is assembled early in the week, trimmed with neon lighting and installed as a devotional shrine for

the pilgrims who will traverse its structure often in the balance of the week, the talk turns inevitably to the coming burn, to the transience of the creative process, and to the renewal of the world.

THE BURN

In the gathering darkness, pilgrims stream down the dusty avenues, across the Esplanade and fan out over the playa, staking out their places around the neon-lighted Man. Dressed in full regalia, armed with glow sticks and el-wire, bearing musical instruments and cameras, pilgrims banter with each other and the rehearsing performers. The surrounding throng is boisterous and rowdy as the momentum of the previous week achieves its peak. Rangers urge the crowd to sit, to ensure maximum visibility for the greatest number. Fire dancers on foot, on stilts, and in wheelchairs parade around the Man, inciting the crowd with the promise of imminent conflagration. As the ceremonial dancing concludes, Rangers instruct the closest ring of pilgrims in the etiquette of "rushing" the burn, seeking to minimize the danger to life as pilgrims invariably mob the fire raging around the collapsed man.

As pyrotechnics begin to explode, and early flames begin to lick the pedestal, the Man raises his arms (or arm, or not, in the event of a commonly occurring engineering snafu), as if to signal "Touchdown!" or to exhort the crowd to its feet. Pilgrims leap at this command, cheering lustily as the flames devour the Man. Nomads are enraptured by the blaze, some laughing hysterically, others weeping, still others marveling aloud about all the effort going up in smoke. The awe expressed in the face of the burn feels most like adrenalized joy and wonderment, a profoundly playful combustion of the id, releasing pilgrims from any pretext of restraint.

As the Man collapses upon itself, the crowd rushes the enormous bonfire, sometimes under a hail of burning debris raining from the sky. Pilgrims often hurl artifacts into the flames, taking literally the most-asked question of the previous week: "What did you bring to burn?" Sometimes the sacrifice is a carefully planned or hastily prepared document of deep personal significance to the pilgrim; it may be a photograph or other memento. It may be a piece of art. One year, we witnessed the immolation of a Christmas tree, passed hand over hand above the heads of the crowd, as one of the revelers barked out, "Merry Christmas! Merry fuckin' Christmas!" The rush gradually assumes the shape of an enormous conga line, as pilgrims, braving the incredibly intense heat, dance for hours around the massive perimeter of the bonfire. The physical feel of the fire accompanies a symbolic stripping of

the self, as the dancers enact their purification ritual (Pike, 2001a, p. 165). Musicians in the crowd add their efforts to this free-form dancing, helping to keep the circle turning until the fire begins to subside.

Eventually, pilgrims desert the dance, disoriented not merely from the bacchanal, but more profoundly from the loss of the Man as their axis mundi. All week the Man has been the lodestar by which they have navigated the emerging city, and its absence robs many of their sense of direction. Before eyes adjust to the darkness, pilgrims may stumble inadvertently upon passionate lovers on the desert floor, as if they had wandered onto the set of *The Wicker Man* (a burner favorite). Small islands of nomads congregate in the dark, some reliving the rapture or slowly coming down, and some regrouping with friends to continue a night of unbridled partying. Drum circles reconvene around fire barrels closer to the Esplanade, beckoning returning pilgrims with their smaller home fires. Still other nomads drift to installations farther out on the playa, to commune with art and the solitude of the deeper desert night.

AFTER THE BURN

Backlit by the gibbous moon, the smoldering remains of the Man and his "altar" become the staging ground for ritual activity far into the morning hours. Some pilgrims, hands folded and heads bowed, perform a devotional walk around the perimeter of the area. Others walk barefoot across the glowing embers, some making slow repeated crossings, some dancing out quickly as the heat becomes unbearable and the pain too intense. A pilgrim may rub his face with the ashes of the Man, in ritual recognition of corporeal transience and acknowledgment of metaphysical transcendence. The Man is widely compared to "the phoenix," and some pilgrims are not content to wait an entire year for him to rise from his ashes.

Squatters tend small campfires about the site, conversing in low tones about the personal significance of "the burn," stoking their high with infernal husbandry and conversation. This high is sometimes amplified or modulated with mind-altering substances, often accompanied by the ingestion of the charred remains of the Man himself. Musicians drift to these communal fires, jamming, and riffing at volumes suited to each gathering's mood. Dancers, drawn to the music, match their movements to these rhythms. Drum circles arise, and trance dancing may result.

Some pilgrims may be moved to song. In a moment of what may fairly be described as cosmic, let alone postmodern, irony (and which invites

comparison with Kubrick's singing manchild warriors in *Full Metal Jacket*), we observed a young woman with a trained voice begin a haunting solo a cappella rendition of the Disney anthem, "When You Wish Upon a Star." As she completed the first verse, other pilgrims, pulled into the orbit of her spell, drew close to her and added their voices to the balance of the song. A wandering flautist began his accompaniment midway through the impromptu performance. At song's end, after quietly thanking and reverently complementing the lead singer, and exchanging hugs, the pilgrims dispersed, each to her own destination, with no commentary on this apparently striking juxtaposition of sacred and profane, of TAZ with theme park.

Individual onlookers may use these tableaux, or any of the myriad of scattered embers still glowing, as objects of contemplation. These pilgrims become suspended, in meditative pause, for long minutes on end. Then, they resume their journeys, stepping off into the darkness and steering by the distant lights of Black Rock City's festive precincts, to be replaced by other nomads at ground zero, until dawn dampens ardor.

THE MORNING AFTER

In the early morning light, dozens of pilgrims converge upon the burn site, sifting the scorched surface of the playa and culling the detritus of last night's conflagration. Looking for all the world like a post-apocalyptic version of Millet's *Les Glaneuses*, these gleaners industriously amass the bricolage of the afterburn – carpenter's nails, fused glass, wire, cinders – bundling away the treasure like so many pieces of the true cross. Ashes from the Man are packed tightly into empty coffee cans, Mason jars, plastic bags, and other containers near to hand. (A similar collection of ash occurs after the "Temple burn" a day hence.) These relics are destined for a variety of ends. Some entrepreneurial pilgrims fashion jewelry, keychains, and other artifacts from the gleanings, creating auratic art that both keeps the gift circulating and tangibilizes (and sometimes commodifies) the process of creativity that the Burning Man Project celebrates. These pieces may become trade goods at subsequent burns. Some of the relics end up as objects of contemplation on shelves and in corners of the permanent homes of pilgrims, retired from circulation. Some pilgrims believe the relics to have healing properties for both physical and spiritual ailments, and so bring their bounty back to friends and relatives unable to make the pilgrimage, in the hope of effecting mitigation and cure.

On the morning after the burn of 2003, gleaners were greeted by an apparition arising from the ashes, in the form of an exquisitely curated

replica of the original Burning Man, erected by Project directors. The 8 ft tall figure, quite humble in appearance when compared to its present incarnation, quickly became an altar upon which gleaners and other pilgrims installed a variety of offerings (in the fashion of a spirit house) and inscribed a host of sentiments directly upon the wood. Votaries treated the little man as they did the Temple, its accessibility inviting sacrifice in a way the current Man does not. Offertory activity accelerated as word spread that the figure was to be burned that very night. Adjacent to the figure, a laminated legend presented the history of "Early Man," from its origin in 1986, and included photographs of the "First Man" prior to and during the original figure's burning. This playful confounding of anthropological and biblical meanings by the curators resonated with comments such as "He is risen" and "It's the phoenix rising from the ashes" voiced by some of the gleaners.

THE TEMPLE BURN

Gradually, many pilgrims have felt a shift in the "energy" or "soul" of the festival away from the burning of the Man and toward the burning of the Temple. The "Temple" is the cover term used by informants to describe the project of artist David Best that has unfolded over the past four years. As the concept has evolved, its contrast with the festival's traditional culmination has become more marked, and more remarked upon by pilgrims. "Screw the Man, the Temple is where it's at" is the voice one informant gives to an increasingly popular sentiment. Her statement is not as dismissive or hyperbolic as it sounds. Rather, it reflects many pilgrims' nascent dissatisfaction with spectacle in the face of a more sacral alternative. The citizenry at large of Black Rock City seems gratified to have a second cy-nosure whose ethos complements or balances the main event.

David Best, a bricoleur of the first order and a master of lateral cycling, installed his first playa temple (the Temple of the Mind) in 2000, and in subsequent years has erected temples of Tears, Joy, and Honor. Each temple has also been designated a "mausoleum," as each is a house of memory for those who make the pilgrimage. The airy structures have grown increasingly monumental with time, from 20 feet to three stories in height. Early efforts were constructed of the wooden filigree discards that are the byproduct of manufacturing model toy dinosaurs, and have had a Southeast Asian Buddhist gingerbread hybrid pagoda-wat kind of feel. The latest temple was fabricated from piñata components, and sported turrets, minarets, and huge garlic bulb domes that invited comparison with middle eastern Islamic

mosques and the Kremlin. The surfaces of this latest temple were covered in allegorical iconography from the middle ages.

The overtly spiritual architecture of the temples facilitates a correspondingly reverent demeanor among the normally rowdy nomads of Black Rock City. Bicycles are parked a respectful distance away from the site, and pilgrims complete the journey quietly on foot. Art cars that blare music of almost unbearable decibels mute their speakers in passing. Pilgrims speak in hushed tones, and wandering musicians play quietly, if at all, in the Temple precincts. Dwellers feel a palpable sense of quietude at the site. Pilgrims are encouraged to divest themselves of toxic emotions, to express grief, to commemorate or venerate significant others, and otherwise express themselves in a way that leads to enhanced self-acceptance, by inscribing their thoughts on the monument itself, by leaving an artifactual representation of their intention (e.g., a photograph or document), by listening to the artist periodically meditate aloud about his purpose (and engaging him in dialogue), and by participating in rituals (e.g., mourning) that are convened at the site. Behavior at the Temple contrasts strikingly with the festive comportment that characterizes the festival at large.

The Temple burn is a correspondingly solemn occasion. A smaller gathering than saw off the Man, a host of partied-out pilgrims, anticipating postpartum blues, converges upon the site. The raucous revelry of the previous night's burn is replaced by a contemplative calm. The pyre is ignited, cheers are baffled by decorum, and the blaze is witnessed rather than encouraged. Unlike the Dionysian dancing around the consumed Man, an Apollonian procession attends the remains of the Temple. A disorientation similar to the one produced by the extinction of the lodestar Man afflicts the departing pilgrims, who are deprived of the last beacon on the playa, and must dead reckon their dark return home.

Several factors account for the Temple burn's ascendant exaltation. The Temple is a personal labor of love, designed and largely executed by a "people's" artist. It is widely viewed as the single most heartfelt gift given to the entire community. The artist has designed the Temple to be a projective vehicle, an intimately interactive work that pilgrims believe demands their participation (if not outright appropriation) to be fully realized. The structure invites deep inscription and evokes empathic, cathartic, therapeutic response in its dwellers. It convenes community in the heart of community, and harnesses *communitas* in the service of mindfulness or soulfulness. The site is regarded as holy, and as a respite or sanctuary from the sensory overload of Black Rock City proper. It is the wake that counterbalances the party (Pinchbeck, 2002, p. 104). The progress of its erection, on a lonely

stretch of playa, is closely monitored throughout the week, and attended by a growing sense of reverential awe. Finally, much like an ancient scapegoat or sin eater, the Temple holocaust becomes a communal sacrifice that purifies its attendants, as pilgrims' personal baggage heads skyward in a blaze of stunning intensity.

STAYING-WHILE-LEAVING

The caravan departing Black Rock City begins early the morning after the burn, and pulses again the morning after the Temple burn. Each nomad who has pulled up stakes wears a mantle of playa dust, and will continue finding traces of the desert in his belongings months after his decamping. Many bear contraband containers of the dust, making just this one exception to the ethics of eco-proprity, to have a sensual remembrance of this dwelling when the comfort of the permanent residence palls. (This despite a common fear that their precious cargo will be mistaken for anthrax by airport security.) Soot from the Man and from the Temple clings to their skin as well.

This dusty hejira is a nonconscious, paradoxical inversion of the pilgrims' leave-no-trace adoption of Mary Douglas' deep structural understanding of dirt as "matter out of place" (or "MOOP" in playa-speak): place into matter is the rule of the road, this second skin the desert's handsel to the dwellers it releases to the world. It is as well the re-enactment of the mythic theft of fire, as the nomads carry the antistructural spark of the liminoid back with them to their distant homes, there to be fanned at regional gatherings, through the ether, and in their everyday lives, in the coming year. Staying connected and spreading the word are important maintenance rituals for burners making the countdown to the next "Happy New Day."

The expatriates of Black Rock City dwell in the state of *staying-while-leaving*, if an analogy with Weiner's (1992) keeping-while-giving is entertained. In this state, an erewon of the mind, the sedentary burner retains a stake in the liminoid oasis from which she has emigrated physically, but where she still resides in reverie. Inasmuch as the kingdom of the Man is within you, the nomad bears the TAZ on every journey undertaken from the source.

The Internet, which Neopagans pioneered (Pike, 2004) and which burners have always used to grow and orchestrate their event (Pinchbeck, 2002), provides a heterotopic limbo in which the pilgrims will dwell in the year between visits to the desert. Web rings, bulletin boards, and chat rooms will

thrum with the activity of image posting and reminiscence, anticipation and planning, and, most of all, community building born of constant chatter. The telenomadic technopresence of the pilgrims in each other's lives betwixt and between their sojourns in the desert, is sprinkled, like so much pixel dust, in the eyes of every fellow traveler. Each is reminded of her reclamation and reconversion of the postmodern spectacle – the material reconstruction of religious illusion that replaces participating with spectating, *pace* Debord (1967/1975) – in the service of re-enchanting the world, at once exalting individual and tribal identity, and decommodifying spirituality.

FOUNDER'S PERSPECTIVE

In a depth interview conducted *in situ* with Larry Harvey, the founding father and general steward of the Burning Man Project, we elicited a number of insights into the festival's origins and intended orientation, as they bear upon our core interest in spiritual consumption. As a key informant, Harvey (Larry, hereafter, in keeping with his iconic status in Black Rock City) is uniquely qualified to comment on all things physical and metaphysical pertaining to the festival.

The psychodynamic origins of Burning Man are especially intriguing, and the break up that catalyzed the Baker Beach burn seems simply the surface structure of emergence. Larry recalls a lifelong fascination, beginning in childhood, with "sacred architecture," and found MesoAmerican structures particularly compelling. His father (a carpenter) instilled a passionate love of nature in Larry, and reinforced this love on camping trips taken with Larry and Larry's brother. Larry came to believe that "nature was charged with the numinous." He also envied the "holistic" or organic solidarity of the so-called "first civilizations," to which he attributed a seamless inter-facing of sacred and secular realms.

His father was an autodidact (a pattern Larry subsequently emulated) and belonged to a Masonic lodge, whose rituals and fraternity Larry found laudable, although he himself did not prove to be "Mason material." An adopted child, Larry felt his family to be isolated from the local community. Over time, in his consultation with theologians, and in his wide reading of the humanities and social sciences (William James and Heinz Kohut being important influences), he laid the intellectual foundation for the "conversion experience" that resulted from his "dark night of the soul."

Claiming to be "messianic" rather than "charismatic," and resonating with Kohut's (2000) theory of the good parent, Larry couches his own

interpretation of the Man in a kind of apotheosis of parenthood. The Man (and, by extension or incorporation, Larry himself), is symbolic of the good parent, delivering the two-fold gift that children most desire: "Pick me up!" and "Watch me!" He speculates that Burning Man is an attempt in part to change his own past, to revise his childhood in more self-enhancing ways. The Man might best be understood at core as the symbolic cosmic continuity of fatherhood.

While Larry steadfastly refuses to reduce the Man to a single interpretation, he is alternately amused and touched by the readings of his fellow pilgrims. He's been told countless times that the Man is "Larry," or "Larry's father," or "Larry's son." He's heard the figure christened "Old Man Gloom." When asked for his interpretation, Larry prefers to remain "cagey," for fear of dictating meaning that would ultimately subvert the goal of the festival. Larry refuses to give the pilgrims a "pill" that will absolve them of their own semiotic obligation, as such pill dispensing characterizes the passive dependency of the "world" from which the pilgrims are currently fleeing.

He staunchly maintains that the Man is not "God," but that it is "God-like." He sees the figure as the "transcendent" focal point of the gaze, and speaks of its "sacred" nature (even likening the annual city-building process to Genesis). He tells pilgrims that the Man is "yours" and reminds them constantly that "you built the thing." He sees the Man as a projective vehicle of "merged selves," producing a "conversion experience" that can lead pilgrims to a "connection with the oversoul." It is a theologically "immediate" emblem of "being" that radiates among the pilgrims, "shedding light" as it "touches everything."

The scale of the Man is designed to "dwarf you," to "humble you," and to provide a conduit for the "great power" that emerges from and passes through the thronging pilgrims. Perhaps most perceptively, he understands the Man as not merely a "gift," but rather as a kind of gift "chimney," an engine of sacrifice that draws in vast amounts of economic and extra-economic "resources" and transmutes them to immanence. Veteran burners have sometimes castigated him for raising the Man on a pedestal, instead of leaving it directly on the ground in the immediate physical presence of the pilgrims: "We can't touch it! You took it away from us! You can't touch it! Your transcendence is fascist!" Putting the Man on a pedestal so that everyone might have a better, safer view was charged with unintended and unanticipated consequences.

Larry often emphasizes the importance of sacred festivity, and is discouraged when he hears some people think of the event as simply "the

world's biggest party." If it were only a party, Larry feels his hard work would neither be justified nor rewarding. The ludic, festal impulse pervades the event and integrates it, but the party is a means to an end. Burning Man is a "spiritual movement far from the church," promoting a "sacred vision of unity" (in diversity). The event is a "vision quest," realized through mimesis, sacrifice, and the "holy medium" of fire.

Here is his own account of the vision or origin myth that raised Black Rock City from the desert floor:

. . . We started out on the beach before the broad Pacific, and though the figure was only eight feet tall, it was enough to feel transcendence . . . Had it been backed by an eight storey building, I don't suppose it would seem so transcendent. . . . When we came out here, we had this great flat expanse, and by that time, the Man was four stories. And that was enough to induce awe, and enormous mystical resonance for me. I may be the only one that thought that, to tell you the truth. And that's what chiefly struck me. That's why I thought they'd come. I stood there, and I looked up, and I looked around, and I could imagine . . . I saw great cyclones of dust generated by armies marching from the four quarters of the playa, and it looked to me like columns of dust generated by armies marching toward the center of the world. And this thing that looks cosmic in scale is part of it. It made sense to me.

Striving to create a "visionary void" where his "stagecraft" can facilitate visions for pilgrims, he encourages the development of rituals which will have "seizing" and "conversion" effects upon pilgrims, and result in a "change of life" experience for burners willing to accept that the "ultimate source of value" is not rationality, but, rather, faith.

Such faith is grounded in what Larry refers to as a "living philosophy of being." Convinced that religion has co-opted the sacred, and that consumer culture has trivialized it, he is eager to restore the sacred to everyday life. This is the restoration of "untraditional reality," achieved in part theatrically (as it was in the "mystery religions" for which he feels an affinity), and in part by his frequently stated "refusal to commodify belief." Burning Man has fewer "overt dogmas" than conventional religion, but the spiritual trappings of religion are ripe for syncretic borrowing. Larry's dogma resides in the immediacy of personal experience that opens the way for an oceanic merger of selves and nature. He espouses a holistic experience of "sacred unity," predicated on a "spiritual arc" that runs from "I am" through "You are" to "It is." Traversing this arc opens pilgrims to the possibility of being "pervaded by a god" and "reversing" the effects of living in the "world." He describes the alienation arising from consumer culture in several striking metaphors. Society is viewed as a "vending machine," dispensing materiel and predigested ideologies to passive recipients. The ethos of this world is

characterized as “consumerism simony,” the “unhallowed trafficking in sacred things.”

Larry promotes a return to the “old world” or nomadic view of “reality,” a re-embracing of “It is.” Personal experience is sacred, and begets connection to others (a kind of Baker Beach spin on the Baker’s Square mantra: Come for the party, stay for the tribe). “Ideology” grows out of “immediate experience,” and canalizes “transcendence” in the service of community. Through mysticism, stagecraft, and encampment in a harsh environment (wherein Larry has “seen the hand of God”), the event creates the conditions that will allow animal alertness (Berman, 2000a) to (re-)appear.

“New ideas,” emerging from the desert, have the power to “transform the world.” Personal, social, and cultural transformation demands an “opening of the heart.” Larry acknowledges that his “utopianism” has required the directors of the event to become “more worldly,” both to protect the sanctity and viability of the annual event, and to export the reformation to the “world” at large. Some of this worldliness is pithily detailed in recent work by Doherty (2004).

Featuring himself a social planner, Larry desires to carry the lesson of his desert temporary autonomous zone (Bey, 1994) to the level of a cultural revitalization movement. His entrepreneurial outreach has broadened and intensified in recent years, as he has worked the lecture circuit at home and abroad, and stepped up the pace of his writing. Organizers of regional “burns” turn to him for advice and publicity. Consumer activists – such as the Rev. Billy and the Church of Stop Shopping – have formed alliances of convenience with the Burning Man Project. Larry extols the “social capital” in the “world” that helps facilitate the aims of his organization, burner “moles” who are able to use their professional offices of lawyer, lobbyist, architect, physician, and so forth, to provide the “gift” of free service that helps Burning Man flourish.

Larry recognizes and laments that the individual festival may not be “sustainable” because currently there is “not enough of a backbone to it,” as the population grows exponentially while the number of infrastructure-providing volunteers remains constant or grows slowly. Even activist pilgrims who carry the “gift thing” home with them re-acclimate themselves to the “world” rather quickly, leaving much of the “beautiful good” created in the desert in the dust of their repatriation. Acquisition of a permanent site for the event looks to be a short-term solution to sustainability, but its impact on the liminoid character of the festival may prove harmful in the long run. Fission, fusion, and franchising of a sort may disseminate the vision and distribute it about the planet physically at the same time the

Internet fuels its virtual spread around the globe, such that a host of heterotopias – a nomadic diaspora of global proportion and influence – acts upon the world to transform it.

GNOSTALGIA, MONASTICISM AND THE BURNING MAN NETWORK

We interpret the Burning Man Project in the context of new religious movements (NRMs) that seek to counterbalance people's dissatisfactions with consumer culture and conventional religious institutions with an awakening, or, more properly, a re-awakening, that promises polysemy and heterodoxy (York, 1995). Burners enact a "deregulated" reality in a retro key, splitting "imaginal space" from the marketplace where it has come principally to be lodged, and reattaching it to the infrastructure of tribal travel (Davis, 1998, pp. 177, 225; Brown, 2001; Brown, Kozinets, & Sherry, 2003). They reclaim the liminoid from the liminate (Sherry, 2004), and follow the song lines (Chatwin, 1987) in the ether between sojourns in the desert.

As we have described it, Burning Man is not an overtly religious form of NRM. Henotheistic in matters of devotion and tolerance, it is a confederacy of spiritual orientations, a docking station for the heterodox. It partakes of a "popular Western cultural criticism expressed in terms of a secularized esotericism" (Hanegraaff, 1998, p. 521), where gnostic experience is privileged above reason and faith, the twin pillars of American cultural ideology. Gnosis is perhaps the most precise way to describe the experience to which burners aspire, as the Burning Man Project struggles to develop a "vocabulary" of "spirituality" stripped of religious connotation. This experience is gnostalgic in the sense that its technologies of the sacred are both archaic and futuristic. Pilgrims employ the cutting edge to return to the carved in stone.

In this article, we have continued to push the theorizing of sacred travel in the direction of kinetic ritual (Turner & Turner, 1978), emphasizing the interplay between the central shrine (Coleman & Eade, 2004), the prayerful/playful dynamic of serious tourism (Schramm, 2004) or post-tourism (Urry, 2002), and the telenomadic role of cyberspace in the prolongation of the TAZ. Pilgrimage is currently being "reframed" as a constellation of inter-related activities, featuring movement as performative action, as embodied action, as semantic field, and as metaphor (Coleman & Eade, 2004, pp. 16–17). Burning Man encapsulates each of these types of movement.

Among the options available for activists seeking to combat the “spiritual death” of the culture, for whom the “anodynes” of consumption provide no balm and the “vital kitsch” of co-opted social movements no consolation, Berman’s (2000b, pp. 2, 129, 136) “guerrilla” monasticism – the spiritual nomadism that we detailed earlier and theorize more fully below – best captures the ethos of the Burning Man Project. This ethos is more precisely understood in terms of NRMs rather than New Social Movements (NSMs) because of this spiritual cast. While the nomad may be aware of the “historical irony” that works to convert corrective movements to oppressive orthodoxies (Berman, 2000b, p. 138; Doherty, 2004), the movement nature of the gnostic moment portends an interesting interaction of NSM and NRM dynamics, as the routinization of charisma and *communitas* proceeds apace.

The Burning Man Network, an emerging linkage of quasi-franchised regional affiliates, organized (despite the fears of corporate cultural imperialism of some participants) not only to keep the event from being “commodified” as a consequence of its “national cachet,” but also to “co-opt” the forces of “consumerism” itself, is a “movement” designed to coordinate the effect the Burning Man “ethos” is projected to have upon “mainstream American life.” Intended to be loosely coupled, with benign oversight and assistance from the Burning Man Project (which will provide affiliates with such outreach and development services as “Burning Man Film Festival in a Box”), the Burning Man Network appears to be the next phase of the organization’s effort to revitalize the “world.” This phase also includes the professionalization of formerly voluntary positions (Harvey, 2004). Regional affiliates must affirm and disseminate the principles of radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leaving no trace, participation, and immediacy – the dogmas that ritual underwrites – as a condition of incorporation (<http://www.regionals.burningman.com/networkprinciples.html>). The Burning Man Network is likely to produce memetic duplication and factional fission, with the faithful replicating the ethos. The disaffected, already a presence at the annual burn, (in the form of such groups as the Pirates of the Gonorrhoea – again, Disney being the ineluctable nexus of subversive semiosis – who perpetuate politico-aesthetic vandalism at the central shrine, posting, for instance, stickers that proclaim “Free the Man”), who feel the event has grown too “large,” too “organized,” or too “touristy” will form less impious splinter groups charged with rekindling the “authentic” “original” flame.

COMEDY OF THE COMMONS

While a theory of comedy has been usefully applied to the understanding of advertising (Stern, 1995), much more of consumer behavior falls under its purview. In his magisterial survey of the genre, Segal (2001) dissects the dynamics of comedy in a way that illuminates the goings on in Black Rock City. Beginning with etymology, he traces the essence of *komos* to a cluster of meanings centering around a "wild, wine-soaked, no-holds barred revel" or, more preciously, a "revel without a cause," that typically occurred at night. He links *komos* to the dreamworks and the carnivalesque, and judges it to be a superego solvent; it is a state of mind, not merely a performance (2001, pp. 4, 7). He mines such spurious relatives as *kome*, to make a suggestive bridge to the roisterers banned from the ancient city, who pursued their revels in the country, which provided them greater freedom (2001, p. 3). Most helpfully, he detects an "erotic sense of letting go" to underlie the root, and pronounces the essence of *komos* to be its very "irresistibility" (2001, pp. 2, 7). He speculates that the common Indo-European root of words such as *komos* and *kome* connotes communal activity, a sense of "home" as a focus of the "community spirit" (2001, p. 8). Thus, the Black Rock benediction, "Welcome Home," proves an especially apt incantation for the liminoid license to ensue. It is the "happy end" that is the "essential joy" of comedy (2001, p. 10).

Segal proclaims the primal appeal of comedy to be the "unconscious desire to break society's rules" (2001, p. 8), to indulge fantasy in the flesh, to experience a mental orgy. He locates the genre's origin in a "mimetic, cosmogonic ceremony" offering spectators and participants a "fresh, new beginning" (2001, p. 150). This ritual is a stimulative re-enactment of the birth of the world from Chaos and Eros, originally involving orgiastic sex but gradually institutionalized in the form of a festive *gamos*, or wedding; comic transvestism, involving loss of social and sexual identity, abetted this ritual (2001, pp. 14–16). The genre evolved from the "phallic procession" that celebrated the "metasexual embodiment" of continuity and fertility. Even the licentious verbal abuse encouraged in such ritual produces "invigoration by invective" (2001, p. 21). Each of these elements – world renunciation and world renewing, orgiastic sex and weddings, the fungibility of social and gender status, the fescinine humor of the sacred clowns, and the constant interplay between fantasy and embodiment – is celebrated at Burning Man.

One critic's dismissal of the "Disneyfication" of religion is another's postmodern vindication of the efficacy of syncretism in preserving the relevance of "essential truths" (Eade, 2000, p. xxiii). Indeed, the subversive

co-optation or reappropriation of Disneyfication – the contratheming and rememing of Holt's (2002) vampiric capitalism – is part of the culture jamming agenda of such revitalization movements as the Burning Man Project. Think of it as a "Take Back the Night" operation waged on a cultural scale. The sacred center resides in the movement to the limits of the need for intermediaries (Eade & Sallnow, 2000, p. 7), whether from clergy or clerisy, in a way that renders everyman (and woman) his (and her) own (sacred) clown. The coordinates of the center can be described as person, place, and text (Eade & Sallnow, 2000, p. 9), that is burners, installation (mega or micro), and performance (in cyberspace or IRL).

In his chronology, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* marks the death of comedy for Segal, and Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* witnesses its transmogrification, as nuclear annihilation becomes the subject for laughter (2001, pp. 450, 454). This recalls Benjamin's (1968) quip about people being able to experience their own destruction as aesthetic pleasure of the first order. The Burning Man festival suggests that comedy may be revived and rehabilitated toward its original end. In an era when the power of ritual is co-opted and appropriated by the commercial, where the liminoid is siphoned away to become the liminate (Sherry, 2004) as corporate spectacle provides more individuals with their principal source of transcendence, and as art struggles to touch the masses, the promise of revitalization held out by countercultural activists is tantalizingly cogent. Festivals that are able to harness the comedy of the commons, uniting individuals in a lived experience of community devoted to the revisioning of the social order, may be able to restore that primal license that may rehumanize the "world."

NOMADIC ESSENCE OF THE BURN

While the surface structure of Burning Man is well described by a theory of comedy, its deep structure requires a more comprehensive interpretation of the type supported by Berman's (2000a) culturally grounded, panoramic, and provocative theory of nomadic spirituality. At the cost of doing great violence to his eloquent argument, Berman's insights can be reduced to set of observations. In evolutionary perspective, the sedentism giving rise to agricultural civilization, and the corresponding alienation of humans from the natural environment, led to the development of three different types of consciousness to deal with the rift. "Paradox," the nomadic mode of consciousness, is a diffuse or peripheral awareness, an "animal alertness" absent a "quest for meaning" that accepts the world as it is. The sacred and the

secular are coterminous. The "sacred authority complex" (SAC), the mode of consciousness of sedentism, projects sacrality out of the world (upward to the gods), tapping spirituality through "ascent" or "oceanic" experience via trance ecstasy, and creates a "psychological cocoon" that assure humans that reality is of a very particular fabric. Finally, "dullardism," the mode of consciousness of industrial society, while maintaining trace activity of ecstatic practice (among the heretical marginal fringe), encourages humans to go unconscious by adopting drugs, television, sport, organized religion, and other compulsive behaviors (consumption being an obvious candidate), and to believe that the sacred lies elsewhere (Berman, 2000a, pp. 3-6). This is the diminished perceptual capacity people have sacrificed to other mental capabilities (Lévi-Strauss, 1979). We imagine Burning Man to represent a flight from dullardism, through a re-engagement with SAC, to a reconnection with paradoxical consciousness. While paradox may be a burner ideal intermittently or cumulatively achieved, it is at the heart of the burn(s).

Imagine the sacred, or, more specifically, the pilgrimage, as the site of a religious "void," an "arena" for complementary or competing interpretations of spirituality where meaning is contested earnestly or playfully (Eade, 2000, p. xiii), and the wisdom of preserving the polysemy of the Man is confirmed. This theater of contending discourses (Eade & Sallnow, 2000, p. 5) comprises both the event and the moment. The "rituals without dogma" positioning (Kozinets, 2002) is disingenuous to the extent that it masks the Burning Man ideology (or dogma): radical self-expression in the service of temporary community, to the purpose of self-transformation, in the absence of marketplace behavior, in the hope of cultural (r)evolution. There can be no ritual without some mythic charter. That ideology, phrased most succinctly as a series of Thou Shalt Nots -- no spectating, no vending, no trace -- enfranchises innovation. Minimalist prohibition invites a thousand snowflakes to melt.

As pilgrims desert the structural realm of dullardism for the antistructural realms of SAC and paradox, in keeping with Turner's (1974) formulation of the liminoid, they become existential nomads as well, eager to assimilate radically new ideas and experiences. Principally familiar with the fixed perceptions of "certainty" created by sedentism, their journey predisposes them to experiment with the ecstatic modes of SAC that industrial society has suppressed, and to seek the experience of transcendence. Nomadism encourages paradoxical perception, a consciousness that is simultaneously focused and unfocused, such that an intensely personal unique moment feels as if it is also profoundly universally shared in connection with others. This is the experience of immanence produced by nomadism, the sense that movement across landscapes renders religious ritual "superfluous"

(Berman, 2000a, pp. 6, 16, 166). The *communitas* of the festival, conditioned by the sojourn in the desert and catalyzed by the burn(s), is the immanence the pilgrims feel.

If movement is the “physiological substrate” of paradox, and if movement encourages the grasp of life without mythic or ritual filters (Berman, 2000a, p. 81), then the “rituals without dogma” ideology of the festival (Kozinets, 2002) can be understood as a kind of withering away of the SAC, and the techniques of the ascent experience a collective transitional object, all in the service of recovering, eventually, paradoxical consciousness. If spectacular unmediated aesthetic experience is the manifest impulse to the pilgrimage, the latent satisfactions of the soul at Black Rock City appear to reside in the recovery of sacred secular unity, and the realization that the “aliveness of the world is all that needs to be worshipped” (Berman, 2000a, p. 188). To the extent that the burner regards the festival not as a “mental theme park,” but as a rejection of the “suffocating ideological certainty” and emotionally crippling consequences of sedentism (Berman, 2000a, pp. 151, 157), even temporarily, the desert may afford him the most congenial staging ground for the experience of immanence.

Contemporary nomadism may represent the return of the repressed, the recovery of our mobile genetic heritage, and the recognition that a need for unpredictability and surprise supercedes our need for certainty. It marks as well the recovery of spiritual intelligence (Berman, 2000a, pp. 16, 157, 181, 188; Sherry, 1990). The definition of nomadism offered by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the “attempt to reterritorialize on deterritorialization,” is an accurate description of Black Rock City. To the extent that nomads are able to preserve their experience of paradox upon their return to industrial society, and nurture it until their return migration (or until the organizers acquire enough private land to institutionalize the festival permanently, which will prompt ever more interesting evolution), their pilgrimage promises to remake the world over yet again. In their flight from the dominant tradition, through the countertraditions of primacy of spirit or process and primacy of matter as the vehicle of spirit, burners use art in the service of transcendence. By the end of the week, or by the end of years of weeks, lived somatically in the immediate presence of fellows in a natural environment that demands constant contemplation, burners achieve a mundane apotheosis in a third countertradition, finding truth will emerge only when it is not pursued (Berman, 2000a, pp. 208–209).

Insofar as the postmodern pilgrimage may be construed as a journey of the “suffering soul” rather than the traditional “suffering body” (Eade, 2000, p. xvii), the technological and luxurious ingenuity of the nomads’

desert structures, and the sophistication of the cyber-oases they habitually traverse in the off season, seem all the more poignant. While it can be an enormously expensive undertaking to flee to the Black Rock Desert, the event is more than simply an opportunity for elite consumers to use their money to achieve the illusion that money is unnecessary or incidental to life. Money is used pragmatically, as a means to an end. In some fundamental sense, it takes money to un-make money. If the potlatch is to be efficacious, the sacrifice should be considerable. Having money to burn is essential.

Intensive secular commerce frequently attends the sacred commerce of pilgrimage (Eade & Salnow, 2000, p. 25). Merchant's Row is a common fixture of Neopagan gatherings (Pike, 2001a, p. 75), and vendors are present in such other utopian convocations as the mountain man rendezvous (Belk & Costa, 1998). Indeed, the stalls have traditionally proven felicitous points of entry for ethnographers. Secular commerce (with those few noted exceptions) is banned by fiat from Black Rock City, the little we detected driven underground, and often decried and reported to the Rangers, by affronted observers. Impersonal modes of exchange may be anathema to the world-building agenda of emergent spiritual movements, whereas gift giving appears to abet it.

Recent work in consumer research supports Berman's belief (2000a, p. 18) that contemporary culture is bound for the next incarnation of SAC, and a large uptick in the transcendent outlook. The corporate appropriation of the liminoid and its transmutation to the liminate (Sherry, 2004), encouraging individuals to construe themselves primarily as consumers and to seek transcendence in goods and services is a hallmark of the postmodern era. Like Berman, we believe that paradox should remain a gadfly, not become a tyrannous paradigm itself, to remind people of the abounding alternatives of being. He notes that "oddball spiritual nomads keep rediscovering paradoxical heritage on a mental level" (Berman, 2000a, p. 12). The pilgrims of Black Rock City have converted this mindscape to landscape once again. They have created a postmodern hybrid of the potlatch and the cargo cult. By amassing goods in the wilderness, and by destroying or redistributing them, the pilgrims coax the gods back into lived experience.

In the course of writing our accounts of the festival, the years have witnessed the phenomenal box office profitability of two films of unlikely popular appeal. One (*The Passion of the Christ*) celebrated deicide, the other (*Fahrenheit 9/11*) the conflict between contemporary crusaders and jihadis. This hyperpoliticization of the spiritual has stirred considerable cultural commentary, even though it has been sparked by that quintessential genre of spectacle, the cinema. Concurrently, the Temple (the Temple of the Stars)

has evolved to a mega structure covering a quarter-mile surface of the playa. Such synchronicity conspires to remind critics that the spectacular exists in a relation of complementarity to the sacred, and contrariety to the profane (Sherry, 2004), and that our culture can travel from pathos to bathos in less than 60 seconds. We hope our exploration of nomadic spirituality keeps the flame that is the polylogue of utopian discourse in consumer research turned all the way up.

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