

LEAVING BLACK ROCK CITY

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ABSTRACT

This account of a field experience is written in the form of a reverie, to match the conditions that gave rise to it. It emerges from my long-term study of the Burning Man festival, a massive countercultural communal celebration of aesthetic immediacy held annually in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada. Marked by the suspension of ordinary commerce in favor of a gift economy, the spectacle culminates in the torching of an enormous effigy. This experimental ethnography follows in the symbolic interactionist tradition of an earlier tale told by Andrea Fontana.¹

"Urethral awakening dream."

That's how a folklorist mentor once interpreted a tale for me. The phrase reverberated like a mantra in my head, crowding out whatever image had been playing as I swam to the surface of consciousness. I had tanked up on water just a few short hours ago, and foresworn earplugs before crawling into a dusty sleeping bag, hoping that, once lulled by the pulsing techno beat throbbing off the playa, my bladder would awaken me in time to break camp, hit the road, and catch the last plane home. Once settled in, I launched a sleepy review of the week I had just spent at Burning Man, an account that seemed to end as soon as it began. The pressure of water in this arid land synched with the techno, and then I was awake.

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I had followed this festival from the late 1990s, vicariously at first over the net, then through full field immersion as an enthusiastic participant observer. Burning Man has morphed from its simple 1980s origin as a local bonfire communion of intimates to an encampment of 50,000 nomads from around the globe. Arising in the middle of a desert in Nevada (and, as quickly as a mirage, vanishing), this evanescent enclave, christened "Black Rock City," is home to a week-long celebration of aesthetic creativity, authentic presence and radical self-expression that culminates in the fiery sacrifice of a 50-foot human effigy. Pilgrims engage in a gift economy, circulating all manner of presents intended to nourish body and soul, all the while trusting in self-reliance and the kindness of strangers to ensure a stylish survival in this harsh climate.

I have come to think of the festival as a pomo cargo cult, where the destruction and redistribution of goods induces the gods to return to earth. No matter how inexorably the spectacle has escalated, my cynical disappointment always evaporates, because I have come to expect an inevitable epiphany. Wandering the desert floor, sweltering during the day and freezing at night, unsure at times whether I am strolling on another planet or floating like an avatar on the web, I await the in-to-body experience that tells me I have returned. I find a week of sensory overload and living rough in close quarters is a balm to the imagination.

As quietly as darkness and groggy clumsiness allowed, I packed my remaining gear, pulled stakes and levered rebar from ground as pliant as settled concrete, collapsed poles, folded and stowed my tent, packed the rented van and policed my area for moop – matter out of place – a coinage much beloved of Burners, whether they could tie the acronym to Mary Douglas or not. Silently begging for forgiveness and bidding farewell to my camp mates, I started the engine and slowly pulled away, wending cautiously along the hub-and-spoke roadbed. Street signs, long potted for souvenirs or altered in anarchic bursts of performance art, no longer showed the way, nor could the Man, now burned (again) serve as a lodestar for the departing. I crept along a rough diagonal, past the nearly sleeping and the merely celebrating, trying to keep my dust cloud profile small as I joined the growing exodus headed for open ground.

Turning the air conditioner on full-blast, I luxuriated in the cold after the long stretch of almost unbelievable heat. A veteran Burner myself, I had still managed a close brush with heat exhaustion earlier in the week, the fieldworker's zeal once again trumping common sense. I pointed every vent I could reach directly at my body, and anxiously consulted the gas gauge. I had not refueled before off-roading onto the playa last Monday, and

wondered whether I should risk running amenities with little prospect of a timely refill. "Fuck it," I muttered. I would let the burn in my frostbitten ears determine when to shut down the air. I punched on the radio (thank God for SIRIUS) and searched for some outlaw country to ease me out of the New Age and back into the world. I would ride out of one Wild West on the anthem of another. By the time I acquired a signal and could afford to deflect my attention from the hejira to the music, several ballads had been mourned and growled. It was barely 3:00 am.

I had just nudged my van into the long column of decamping pilgrims, careful not to graze the bicycles bungeed carelessly on the back of the RV in front of me, and begun the fitful tromping on the brake pedal whose irregular rhythm I trusted would keep me awake for the few hours it would take to leave the desert floor and rejoin the highway, when the apparition emerged out of the swirling dust of the playa. Initially as indistinct as a dream, and, after seven days of sleep deprivation punctuated by combat naps, just about as real, the figure resolved on the periphery of the headlights. Slowly approaching the empty shotgun seat, pumping one palm to encourage me to dampen my speed and cranking the other wrist to coax me into lowering the window, the haggard sentinel appeared ready to board my vehicle. Had we been back in Chicago, I would have expected him to produce a spray bottle and newspaper, but here in Black Rock City, such wiping would soon leave a clay glaze on the windshield. As I braked to a stop, choking briefly on the dust billowing into the cabin, he poked his head through the open window, glanced quickly around the cabin, and greeted me with a tired smile.

"Mornin'," he drawled.

"Will be in a few more hours, I imagine," I replied, twisting in my seat and leaning against the wheel, to square up to my night visitor.

"I'm DPW," he announced.

Department of Public Works, responsible for creation, maintenance, and leave-no-trace removal of the entire infrastructure that is Black Rock City, my sluggish brain decoded.

"You guys were awesome!" I gushed, before I could regain the solemnity that the ghostly encounter seemed to demand. "You got the new Man up way faster than anyone thought you could. You saved the week!" I reached my arm across the cab to shake his hand.

Accepting my thanks with the same tired smile, he scoped the cabin once again, focused briefly on the dusty console, and then released my hand before beginning his pitch. For a member of a tribe so renowned for its brazen attitude, his tone was surprisingly apologetic. Striving for imperious, settling for sheepish, he sought to extort a present.

"DPW is accepting gifts," he informed me. Any kind of donation is welcomed. Fuel, water, food ... His voice trailed off, the inventory not yet polished to a script. "... Alcohol. Any kind of alcohol would be good ... Medicine, cooking gear ... Sunscreen ..."

I am embarrassed that I had not anticipated such an exit toll (even if couched as a handsel) and feel the small stirrings of shame. I had held my own personal potlatch the evening before, wandering the neighboring encampments, disbursing stores among those who would remain and materiel to those with the storage capacity to haul stuff to their permanent homes.

"I'm sorry, man." The beginnings of a lame excuse competing with a stifled yawn drew out my response. "I gave it all away last night. Anything I couldn't carry on the plane is gone."

Still, he persisted.

"You got nothin', huh?"

"Nope. I gave it all away."

His eyes stray again to the console. I continue my guilty denial.

"All I've got is a half-bottle of water, a couple of granola bars, and some Gummi shit. It's peach, I think. You're welcome to any of that, if you want it." I hold the small bag of fruit bits out to him, a self-conscious gesture that further deepens my embarrassment.

"That's your food for the road?" he asks.

I can't tell if he's touched by my gesture, or offended by its paucity.

"Yep, but you can have it. Really."

This desperate protestation caps my shame.

After a long pause, he sighs, "I can't take that. But I will take your handshake, and your thanks. Safe trip, and see you back next year."

Having found something in the exchange to save face for each of us, he rapped twice on the window frame to announce his departure, and strolled down the caravan in search of a true donor.

I had turned the radio volume way down at the beginning of the encounter, and had gradually grown aware of the silence as my slow progress resumed. I spun the dial to amp the soundtrack of departure once again, and was rewarded with an eerie old Terry Allen ballad suited absolutely to the moment.

Let me digress. Burners often speak of "playadipity," a kind of serendipitous synchronicity that matches the authentic, frequently unarticulated openness to experience and a resonantly personal response from the universe, with an abiding rightness that is at once intellectual and visceral. They speak as well of "playa gifts," and cultivate an optimism in the face of

a relentless and inconstant desert climate the community seeks to tame by repeating an article of faith: "the playa will provide." I had had several such experiences over the course of this field trip. While stockpiling in Chicago, I was hailed by the shrieks of a majestic red hawk, perched unaccountably on a lamppost in the parking lot of Best Buy. While provisioning in Reno, I arrived in the bike aisle of WalMart precisely as a newly assembled model beating my predetermined price point was being wheeled out onto the floor, enabling me to take a seamless handoff directly to the checkout counter. While I watched the spectacular progression of a total lunar eclipse on Monday, another spectacle played out across the playa, as, in an act of vandalism subsequently described as "artson," the Man was unceremoniously and prematurely burned. While interviewing Burners on the perimeter of the pyre later in the week, I was present for the unexpected re-illumination of Man 2.0, the phoenix flying across his visage a tangible expression of the community's devotion to sacrifice. While hunkering down in Media Mecca after days of eating bland trail food, I battened on performance art barbecue that materialized miraculously during a Carne Assaulta. Terry Allen's radio road song was just such playadipity.

The lyrics of his "Gimme a Ride to Heaven Boy" seemed a stunning coda to my encounter with the man from DPW, and a fitting capstone to the field work. The song recounts an episode of late-night wilderness hitchhiking, in which a properly chastened good ol' boy picks up a raucous Jesus Christ, who delivers Gnostic enlightenment and promises salvation to the driver before committing a murderous carjacking. In the driver's words:

Well I pulled up scared but I heard him say
As he left me beneath the stars
"The Lord moves in mysterious ways
And tonight my son ... he's gonna use your car

When I arrived at Black Rock City a week ago, I was met with the ritual intake greeting, "Welcome home." This ballad bulletted my findings in the field in its contrapuntal sounding of my impromptu leave-taking ceremony. The bitchiness of karma, the capriciousness of fate, the quicksilver boundary between scapegrace and scapegoat, the sacrifice at the heart of the gift, and, above all else the nomadic urge to circulate.

Lost in this reverie for miles, I returned to the moment as the caravan picked up speed. In the near distance, I could see vehicles peeling off on either side of the fork, their blinking tail lights diverging symmetrically like the tiny embers flying from a stirred camp fire. Then, climbing quickly from

the dusty trail to macadam, and more quickly still to highway, I pointed the van toward the default world, and followed other pilgrims.

Where are we bound? Can we go home again? Divided by some coefficient of weirdness (as Malinowski willed) intricately derived by each of us each year, this festal fire is banked. It becomes a hearth. Black Rock City has inscribed itself on every pilgrim. The playa dust has flocked our vehicles. It is embedded in our hair and skin. It suffuses our clothing and gear. We each bear gifts from other pilgrims and bring gifts for absent friends that bind us to this place. We will reminisce for months on-line and plan the next migration in the ether, as if we all still dwelled in the same camp. Such musing animates this caravan as it snakes out of the desert, en route to home away from home.

And I will bring more gifts to our next raucous reunion, and sow them more promiscuously, save for one. Absinthe, perhaps. Or mustum. A valedictory gift for the highwayman of DPW.

NOTE

1. Fontana, Andrea (2001), "Salt Fever: An Ethnographic Narrative in Four Sections," *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, 24: 147–163.