

## Desert Goddesses and Apocalyptic Art

### Making Sacred Space at the Burning Man Festival

Sarah M. Pike

A sculpture composed of mud and chicken wire and dedicated to the Vedic god Rudra burned spectacularly in the Nevada night sky on Labor Day weekend 1998. The fire sacrifice to Rudra consisted of a two-hour-long "opera," during which professional opera singers and classically trained musicians, as well as dozens of costumed dancers and drummers, paid homage to the god, while thousands of participants at the Burning Man festival sat watching in a circle on the prehistoric lake bed of Black Rock Desert. And this was only a warm-up for the festival's main event the following night, when a forty-foot-tall wooden effigy—"the Man"—also went up in flames to the drumming and cheers of 10,000 festival-goers. As I left behind the burning remains of the man and walked toward the lights of our temporary city of 10,000, I saw artists torching sculptures that I had wandered by many times over the past several days. Then suddenly, along the distant horizon, a galloping horse (a bicycle cleverly covered with electroluminescent strips) appeared, followed by a huge dragonfly with flashing wings.<sup>1</sup> A feast for the senses, Burning Man merges the enchantment and playfulness of children's worlds with adult content, and it is this mix of elements that draws participants of all ages from across the country, from New York to nearby Reno.

As many commentators note, Burning Man started in 1986 as a small gathering of friends on a San Francisco beach. When it became too large and wild to escape the attention of city police, it moved to the desert (see Gilmore and Van Proyen 2005). Larry Harvey burnt a wooden effigy at the end of a relationship, and the "Burning Man" soon became an important rallying point for a small community of artists, musicians, and interested onlookers. Burning Man first came to the Black Rock Desert in 1990. Every year the festival attracted more participants, and as this happened, the organizers began to describe their vision for this event and established a few rules, such as "leave no trace." By 1997, the first year I attended Burning Man, it had become a week-long festival involving weeks of advance preparation and cleanup afterward, mostly done by volunteer crews. A "Public Works" crew creates "streets" that mark out the half-moon-shaped

city—"Black Rock City"—that comes to life as festival-goers arrive with camping gear, pavilions, art installations, and a range of temporary desert homes. The city borders the "playa" as a real city might develop along a lakefront. Out on the playa are large sculptures, including the Man himself, and installations, but no campers. Concerts, performance art, and other events are scheduled every day and night of the festival, but most festival-goers spend their hours wandering around the temporary city looking at art and visiting "theme camps," which are a blend of campsite and interactive art installation. The first year I attended, the festival attracted around 10,000 men and women, but in 2008 attendance had grown to 48,000. Many, but by no means all, participants were white, middle-class, "twentysomething ravers, fiftysomething hippies and thirtysomething computer whizzes" (Lelyveld 1998).

Seeking their dispersed community on the Burning Man internet bulletin board several days after the festival was over and they had returned home, participants mourned the end of Burning Man and discussed its impact on their lives: "It was life-changing and the most spiritual experience I've ever had," wrote Shannon (b.b., September 2, 1997).<sup>2</sup> And another message promised, "In the dust I found my family, In the dust I found my clan, In the dust I found hope for us all. Until we burn again I will hold my screams inside, I will keep the ashes burning until again I join my tribe" (Kaosangel, b.b., September 2, 1997). Peri agrees that Burning Man is a place of belonging: "In the Black Rock Desert, I've found a new hometown, where my imagination can sail without limits and bounds ... where the aliens and the child-adults find common ground" (b.b., September 28, 1998). Another bulletin board participant called Burning Man "the enactment of the city of the heart" (September 2, 1997). In the *Black Rock Gazette*, Burning Man's official newspaper, artist Charlie Gadeken said: "Sometimes I feel like my real life exists for 10 days a year and the rest is a bad dream."<sup>3</sup> In his poetic tribute to the festival, I Shambat declares: "When life returns to the desert Humanity is rejuvenated/with dew on our lips and paint on our bodies we enter the kingdom of god" (b.b., September 11, 1998).

This charged language contrasts sharply with journalists' accounts of the festival. While participants focused on the sacred or life-changing experiences that they brought home, *U.S. News and World Report* called it "the anarchist's holiday of choice" (Marks 1997); *Life* reported it as "the largest weinie roast ever" (Dowling 1997); *Wired* editor Kevin Kelly, writing in *Time*, designated Burning Man a "meaningless but mesmerizing ritual" (Kelly 1997); *Print* called it a "preapocalypse party" (Kabat and Ivinski 1997); and the *San Francisco Chronicle* described it as an "eccentric six-day art festival in the Nevada desert" (Whiting 1997). News stories tended to focus on the art and elements of debauchery: "measured in terms of artistic and sexual freedom, there is no place else like Black Rock City," Sam Whiting wrote in his *San Francisco Chronicle* article. However, what most

intrigued me about the festival was that, for many participants, Burning Man was an event of *religious* significance, characterized by powerful ritual, myth, and symbol; experiences of transcendence or ritual ecstasy; experiences of personal transformation; a sense of shared community; relationship to deity/divine power; and, perhaps most important, sacred space.

Burning Man is open to anyone who will pay the gate price (from \$160 for those with a low income to \$300 in 2009) and follow a few rules, such as "Do Not Drive Your Car in Camp" and "All Participants Are Required to Remove Their Own Trash and Garbage." It provides a locus where cultural problems, and especially problems of ultimate meaning, are expressed, analyzed, and played with. This festival is an important cultural and religious site that exemplifies the migration of religious meaning-making activities out of American temples and churches into other spaces. Scholars of American religion have judged the decline in church attendance to signal a disestablishment (Hammond 1992), or the increasing personalization of religion (Bellah *et al.* 1985; Roof 1993), while others have noted the shift from mainline churches to conservative, experiential forms of Protestantism such as Pentecostalism and independent evangelical churches (Cox 1995). I want to first situate the festival in its historical context on the American religious scene, and then explore the ways in which festival participants create the sacred space that makes transformative and intense experiences possible. Finally, I will explore the ways in which Burning Man reveals crucial tensions in contemporary American life that emerge because of the unique space that the festival creates. In so doing, I want to suggest that popular religious sites like the Burning Man festival are essential to an understanding of contemporary issues and future trends in American cultural and religious life.

### The Festival as a Place Apart

Burning Man is hailed as the "new American holiday," "a circus of chaotic behavior," "a Disneyland in reverse," and "an arena of visionary reality."<sup>4</sup> It belongs to a growing trend (since the late '60s) of large-scale cultural and religious events that offer alternatives or place themselves in critical opposition to ordinary life—neo-pagan festivals, raves, women's music festivals such as "Lilith Fair," and Rainbow gatherings, all of which offer participants sacred space and ritual.<sup>5</sup> Burning Man and these other events fit David Chidester's characterization of American sacred space: "sacred meaning and significance, holy awe and desire, can coalesce in any place that becomes, even if only temporarily, a site for intensive interpretation" (Chidester 1995, 14). It also belongs to a tradition of collective occasions which (to borrow historian Jon Butler's phrase) first flourished in the "spiritual hothouse" of the nineteenth century. Chautauquas, outdoor revivals, camp meetings, lyceum programs, and Spiritualist conventions were all intended to

transform the minds and spirits of nineteenth-century men and women (Moore 1994).<sup>6</sup> I want to turn briefly to look at these earlier American religious events in order to place the Burning Man festival in a tradition of American worship that has provided alternatives to mainline churches and other established religious institutions. An understanding of how Burning Man becomes religiously meaningful to participants may also shed light on this stream of American religiosity.

Like contemporary festivals, these events of earlier eras were consciously experienced apart from the rhythms of daily life, and drew boundaries between their gatherings and the rest of society. They were occasions on which a multitude of meanings and desires converged on the beaches and wooded areas where these gatherings were held. They served as vacation retreats and as opportunities for conversion experiences, and exposed their participants to new and radical ideas. Historian of American religions R. Laurence Moore notes that nineteenth-century evangelical camp meetings and revivals were "theatrical" and "carnavalesque." "Critics complained," Moore writes, "but the setting of the revival, for the space of the few hours or days, often protected practices that were elsewhere forbidden." Camp meetings were occasions for indulging the senses as well as seeking conversion (*ibid.*, 45–46; see also Schmidt 1995).<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Burning Man participants come looking for spiritual enlightenment, artistic pleasure, sensual indulgence, and "radical self-expression," to borrow one of founder Larry Harvey's favorite phrases. Evangelical camp meetings and festivals like Burning Man have very little in common in form and appearance with religious gatherings in mainline Protestant or Catholic churches. Historian Nathan O. Hatch says critics of camp meetings "perceived a manifest subversiveness in the form and structure of the camp meeting itself, which openly defied ecclesiastical standards of time, space, authority and liturgical form" (Hatch 1989, 50). Because their wild surroundings heightened the contrast to everyday life, controversial behavior like ecstatic dancing was exaggerated in these settings. Burning Man's site in a barren desert, like 'camp meetings in the hills of Kentucky, makes it strange and wild to city dwellers because it provides a sensual and aesthetic contrast to the everyday world. These nineteenth-century attractions for religious seekers prefigured celebrations like Burning Man, where embattled Silicon Valley employees escape from "the world of engineers and clocks" to spend a week in Black Rock City (Ed, b.b., September 10, 1998).

As in descriptions of their nineteenth-century forebears, accounts of Burning Man have in common the impression that festivals are *not* like the everyday world in which most of us live and work. Black Rock City comes to be a place of powerful and transformative experiences that cannot be had elsewhere. What is it about this festival that produces such powerful impressions in participants? How does Burning Man come to be imagined and experienced as such a different place from the world outside? Or, in the

words of geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977, 6), how does a "space" which is "open and undefined" become a "secure and familiar ... place" for festival-goers?<sup>8</sup> The festival is transformed into a sacred space that contrasts to the outside world in a number of ways. Festival participants create what cultural theorist Rob Shields calls "placemyths," composites of rumors, images, and experiences that make particular places fascinating. Burning Man participants tell stories designed to locate the festival in what Shields describes as "an imaginary geography vis-à-vis the placemyths of other towns and regions which form the contrast which established its reputation as a liminal destination" (Shields 1991, 112).<sup>9</sup> Participants work before, during, and after festivals at making an experience set apart from their lives "back home."<sup>10</sup>

Much of the advance planning and networking, as well as post-festival discussions, take place on the internet, where contact information, festival journals, photographs, and short videos are shared. Cyberfiction writer Bruce Sterling notes in his report from Burning Man that the festival has evolved into "a physical version of the internet" (Sterling 1996, 198). An extended festival narrative of words and pictures exists through links from website to website, allowing festival participants to keep their community alive across the country. The World Wide Web, notes Janet Murray in her study *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, "is becoming a global autobiography project ... pushing digital narrative closer to the mainstream" (Murray 1997, 252; see also Turkle 1995). Burning Man is just one of many real-world events that are extending their life through the internet and creating new forums for narrative. At the ninth Annual Be-In in January 1997, Larry Harvey discussed the similarities and differences between Burning Man and cyberspace: "on the one hand, says Harvey, Burning Man is a compelling physical analog for cyberspace" because "it is possible to reinvent oneself and one's world aided only by a few modest props and an active imagination," but on the other, Burning Man, unlike cyberspace, is an experience that heightens awareness of the body (Burning Man website, www.burningman.com).

Its life on the internet contributes to the sense that Burning Man is not like the churches and homes of ordinary life; it is a marginal site, or "heterotopia," to borrow Michel Foucault's term. There are places in every culture, says Foucault, "which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which ... all the other real sites ... are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1986, 24).<sup>11</sup> At Burning Man, Mark writes to the bulletin board, "I felt as if I BELONGED somewhere, a sensation that is curiously difficult to maintain in the Midwest" (September 12, 1998). Like many others, Pan-o'-Playa regrets his return to ordinary life: "I'm trying not to let the tar, nicotine and sludge of this, the Outer World, drag me down" (b.b., September 15, 1998). Festival-goers reject and vilify the outside world in order to heighten their sense of the festival as a more important reality. I noticed this when I returned from

Burning Man '98 and began reading messages on the Burning Man bulletin board, many of which expressed a longing to return to Burning Man and contempt for normal life: "Buddy, this is our church, this is our respite from suffering through 358 days of Christian-inspired, bore-me-to-death society with all its mind-numbing institutions, corporations, and television. This is where we pray, this is our sacred place," wrote Mark (b.b., September 2, 1997). Like Mark, many festival-goers describe their Burning Man experience in such a way as to protest the ordinary world outside festival bounds. After Burning Man '98, I Shambat described the contrast between being in the outside world and being at the festival in a long poem he wrote to the bulletin board: "Come, disaffected/suburbanites/Souls like oil-splattered rags/Minds torn up in the clock:/Come, take your mind-rags/and heart-rags/And let desert/Cleanse them/With Holy Fire" (b.b., September 11, 1998). In this view, the outside world has corrupted and oppressed the men and women who arrive at Black Rock City to be cleansed, renewed, and initiated into a different reality.

The festival is conducive to powerful experiences because it is imagined as a blank canvas, a frontier of possibilities and unrealized potential—"the vacant heart of the Wild West" as one observer put it.<sup>12</sup> Larry Harvey instructs festival-goers to "imagine the land and the looming lakebed of the playa as a vast blank screen, a limitless ground of being."<sup>13</sup> And *Piss Clear*, one of Black Rock City's two newspapers, reminds festival-goers: "All that lays before us is the wide open playa floor. It is our palette and canvas, to create the world we can't enjoy at home." The land is thought of as something passive that human imaginings can be projected upon and, at the same time, as a living force that must be dealt with. In "Burning Man and the Environment," Harvey explains the relationship between Black Rock Desert and the festival: "We have discovered a new land; it is a place, a home, a living earth we can possess. And just as surely as our sweat will saturate this soil, it will possess us" (Burning Man website). The construction of Burning Man as a place apart is aided by its remote location in a desert about 110 miles north of Reno, near the tiny town of Gerlach. Black Rock country, a small portion of the Great Basin, is surrounded by the Granite, Calico, Black Rock, and Selenite mountain ranges. In the Nevada desert, survival is an issue; scorching sun, sandstorms, and sudden rain make the environment challenging for city dwellers. Storms wreak havoc on campsites and art work at the same time that they bring together festival-goers in the common project of keeping their tents up and sheltering each other from the elements.

One of the most effective ways that Burning Man establishes itself as a "church" of sorts is through anti-religious art and the subversive appropriation of familiar symbols. One example of festival-goers' playful irony is the Temple of Idle Worship at Burning Man '98. A sign at the temple instructed visitors: "You can light candles and prostrate yourself all you want, but your prayers won't be answered: the Deity is napping."<sup>14</sup> In the "What, Where,

When of Burning Man '98," a guide to festival events and exhibits, the Temple of Idle Worship is described as a "spiritual power point on the playa," but visitors to the temple are warned that "it makes no difference in what way you recognize this power as all forms of ritual and observance are meaningless here." In "Festival: A Sociological Approach," Jean Duvignaud writes that "all observers agree that festival involves a powerful denial of the established order" (Duvignaud 1976, 19). Folklorist Beverly Stoeltje explains that "in the festival environment principles of reversal, repetition, juxtaposition, condensation, and excess flourish" (Stoeltje 1992, 268). These principles are everywhere apparent at Burning Man, and help to give participants memorable experiences through contrasts between everyday life and the festival.



Figure 8.1 Interactive ritual art at Burning Man 1998. Photo by Sarah M. Pike.

Although festival-goers contrast their Burning Man experience to life in the outside world, they borrow the idioms of that world in order to criticize organized religion, consumerism, and social mores. During Burning Man '98 I came upon a confessional in the shape of a large wooden nun painted colorfully with flames coming up from the bottom of her robe, and words along her head reading "Sacred Disorder of the Enigmata!?" and "Confess Your Conformities!" In front of the nun confessional a framed sign, "the Enigmatic Psalm of Eural," was written in biblical language, but its meaning was intentionally obscured. When I walked through the confessional's curtains I was faced by a round mirror decorated and painted with the message: "Be Your Own Messiah." The appropriation of religious symbolism—messiah and confession—both reifies and critically comments on Catholic practice.

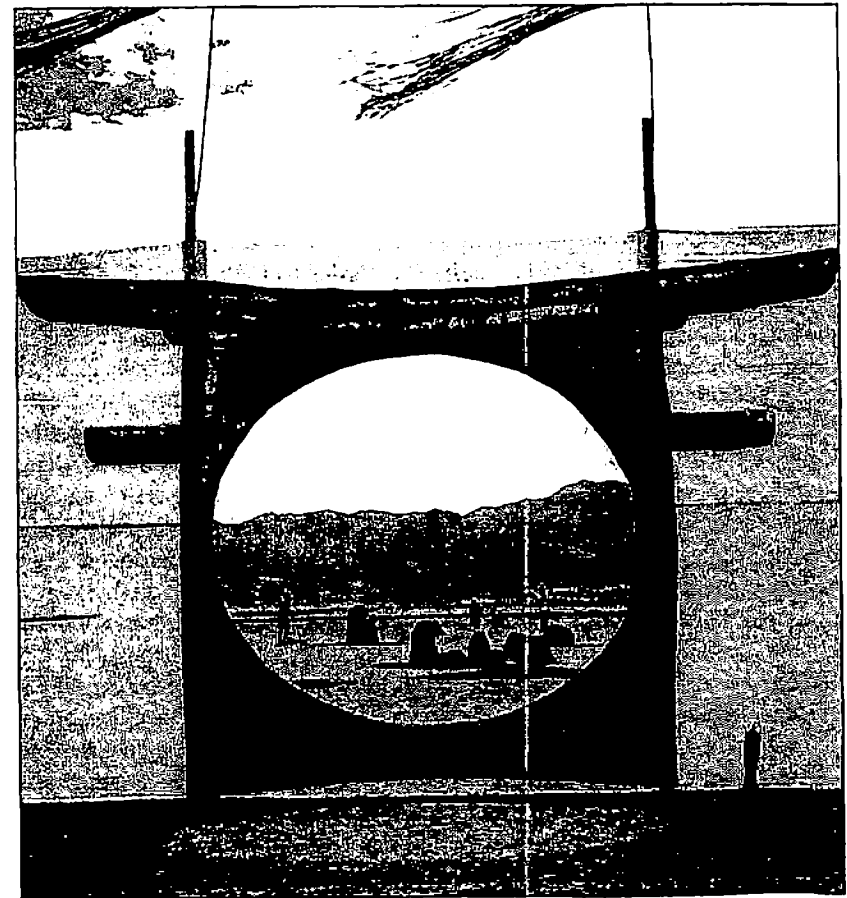


Figure 8.2 Interactive ritual art at Burning Man 1998. Photo by Sarah M. Pike.

It is a playful display, yet serious in its underlying critique, an attitude mimicked in dozens of other festival appropriations of religious symbolism. On my first day at Burning Man '97 I noticed a two-foot statue of the Virgin Mary squirting out a stream of water for thirsty festival-goers. In the Burning Man world, all religions and traditions are up for grabs, and authenticity, authority, and purity are not at issue. In the eclectic world of Burning Man, artists and performers also borrow from non-Christian religions and cultures that are foreign to most Americans. An advance notice of "performances," published on the Burning Man site two weeks before the 1997 festival, described the "daughters of Ishtar," a lavish production of opera, music, dance, and ritual: "This ritual of death and resurrection is a revival of an ancient Sumerian cult, after 3,000 years of latency." Another announcement, this one for "Blue Girl," promises: "The intergalactic Fertility Goddess from the 16th Dimension will arrive to seduce you with eerie multilingual arias; her ship is fueled by drummers and such cult leaders as the Buddha, Krishna, L. Ron Hubbard and the Easter Bunny." Here futuristic thinking—"intergalactic"—is grounded in the ancient notion of a fertility goddess and juxtaposed with cultural figures as serious as the Buddha and as marketable as the Easter Bunny. Many theme camps included signs with religious references like "Buddha's Seaside Den of Iniquity," "Confess Your Sins!" and "Repent!" If sin is not exactly celebrated at the festival, its meaning is called into question by festival-goers' playful irony and an atmosphere of revelry.

Religious idioms are decontextualized in order to make fun of and protest religious institutions of the outside world, but they can also be appropriated for constructive purposes and made to serve the festival community. On my first afternoon exploring the playa by bike, I spotted a series of signs with sketches of churches on them that directed people to an orange tent called "The Cathedral of the Wholly Sacred." In front of the tent opening was a hand-painted sign that read, "Offer something, leave anything, anything sacred to you, your dog, our time here on the playa, the desert, Jewel, Leo Trotsky, whatever. (Sanctity is Contingent.)" I stepped inside the carpeted tent, glad for some relief from the desert heat. An altar, covered with Indian-print cloth and candles as well as a variety of objects left by visitors, served as the cathedral's centerpiece. Offerings left in front of the altar included good luck candles, incense, a basket with chilli peppers, Chapstick, tobacco, a conch shell, silver sandals, a mother goddess statuette, clay figures fashioned of clay left out for visitors to use, sunglasses, and necklaces. Visitors had written messages in a small notebook left out for that purpose: "free to be you and me," "Death, abandonment, pain, sorrow—Burning Man show me happiness again," "the desert exposes us—shows our true nature and forces us to learn lessons. I pray that I am strong enough to endure even when there is despair. Love, freedom, life"; "I give thanks to the ancestors"; and other notes. Like a traditional church or shrine, the "cathedral" offered a space of contemplation in which festival-goers could share with each other

their thoughts about the festival, and the altar within the shrine created a focal point for visitors' reflections.

Altar art is one of the most ubiquitous forms of expression throughout the festival, and the smallest of sacred spaces. Public altars invite participation by the whole community and are specifically designed to contribute to the festival experience. One of the altars I saw in 1997 was covered with photos, a plastic skull, bottles of beer, candles for saints, and other odd objects; a sign instructed people to "alter the altar." This community altar made possible a conversation between participants who might never meet each other face to face. It also gave them an opportunity to help create the meaning of Burning Man with their shared prayers and confessions. Participation is a key festival theme: "No Spectators" is one of Burning Man's slogans, and festival-goers are constantly reminded that they are responsible for the production of festival space. Altars and other sacred places are self-consciously designed to bring together individual and community. They serve diverse purposes and accumulate meanings over a short period by providing points of focus in the midst of the visual complexity of festivals.

Sculptures, shrines, altars, and installations become the focal points of ritual performances, usually scheduled at night. Burning Man '97 and '98 featured lavish Saturday-night performances that converged on temple/sculptures which festival-goers had photographed, admired, and worked and climbed on over the past few days. These sculptures were created by Bay Area artist Pepe Ozan out of playa mud and chicken wire, and filled with dry wood. Professionally trained opera singers, dancers, and musicians combined with festival volunteers to create the late-night spectacles. The 1998 Sacrifice to Rudra, the Vedic god of fire, began at around 3 a.m. and opened with an invocation to Rudra in Sanskrit. The dark expanse of desert was illuminated by a full moon and flaming batons spun through the air by fire dancers. A hundred costumed dancers split into groups representing earth, water, air, and fire. Watching from the temple sculpture, a priest and priestess stood in long gowns that flowed over stilts. Other characters circled the Rudra sculpture with the dancers: drummers marched with their drums strapped over their backs, and a man with a lizard mask rode in a chariot. At the end of the performance, the temple was torched by performers, and thousands of spectators danced around the fire. Ritual organizers evoke powerful emotional responses from festival participants by borrowing elements of ancient cultures, but providing their own interpretations rather than trying to duplicate other cultures' ritual practices.

Since 2001, the focus of collective ritualizing at Burning Man has been the huge memorial temples that are burnt at the end of the festival. These occasions are more solemn than the festive burning of "the Man." After artist David Best created the Temple of the Mind in 2000, the temples, which Best and other artists have shaped differently each year, have been visited

every year by tens of thousands of festival participants, who leave memorials and write on all of the temple's surfaces. Altars, shrines, messages, and mementos have become more numerous and more elaborate, and the temple increasingly has become a focus of contention over the meaning of mourning and the proper ritual experience at Burning Man (Pike 2005).

### Sacrifice and Transformation

If Burning Man art and ritual feel apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic, as many observers and participants have remarked, this is because fire and sacrifice are their central idioms.<sup>15</sup> One news story recounted, "Nevada's sixth-largest city was torched Sunday night as the Burning Man spit sparks and fell over backward onto the desert floor" (Whiting 1997). Crosses dot the Burning Man landscape, and are played with and redefined by festival-goers. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reported that before the actual burning of the man, "a man named Highway Hal stood naked on a motorized cross" (Whiting 1997). A festival-goer named Fred describes his experience this way: "The man burnt and so did my outer skin giving me space and movement to grow into another year" (b.b., September 2, 1997). Fire symbolically strips off the self at the same time that it is physically felt, furthering the purification the festival is expected to bring about. Shady Backflash explains the symbolism of the Burning Man: "It felt like the collective fears, rage and frustrations of everyone there were going up in smoke" (b.b., September 11, 1998). The Man, writes Bruce Sterling, "becomes a striking neon symbol of pretty much everything that matters." It is ironic that the sacrificed Man stands at the center of the festival, a community that celebrates its opposition to organized Christianity. The sacrificial meaning of Burning Man varies from person to person. It may aid the cause of personal renewal, cleanse self and community, or provide a means of creating a new self and world out of the ashes of the old.

Festival-goers embark on a kind of pilgrimage as they leave behind the ordinary world and travel to the desert to be transformed—"pilgrims to a new land," the 1997 web guidelines called them. Festival-goers travel toward Black Rock City with expectations built up in earlier conversations about the festival, and then maintained by festival rituals and works of art that affirm that their lives will be changed by the festival experience. "As pilgrims to a new land, each of us becomes a founder," notes Larry Harvey.<sup>16</sup> These festival-goers' accounts of their preparations and trips to festivals are similar to the stories of other religious people described in studies of pilgrimage.<sup>17</sup> Burning Man, George points out on the bulletin board, is "what today's faithful experience in Mecca or Rome, only without all that burdensome dogma" (b.b., September 2, 1997). In his introduction to a collection of essays on pilgrimage, Alan Morinis explains that what is essential to pilgrimage is a quest for what is sacred, especially the valued ideas and

images of communal and personal perfection (Morinis 1992, 18–21). Burning Man participants set off from home hoping to experience ideal communities and to discover new selves at the festival, which then becomes for them a sacred space of unlimited possibilities.

The journey is often described by festival-goers as one of personal transformation and healing. Because identity is malleable in festival space, self-transformation comes more easily. Hanuman tells other bulletin board readers: "My old self has been torched! I am reborn!" (b.b., September 2, 1997). Participants create the festival with art, dance, and ritual, but Burning Man also acts on them in ways that open up the possibility for natural and supernatural experiences otherwise unavailable: "I can't believe the power that all of you have helped me see within myself," writes Pamela (b.b., September 2, 1997). Many reports from Burning Man mention the ways in which it is a life-changing and initiatory experience. During the festival, participants mark these changes on their bodies. Sam writes to the bulletin board: "I got my head shaved while I was there ... and emerged a new person" (b.b., 6 September 1997). Some festival-goers wish for friends and community to be renewed as well as for self-transformation. In the journal where visitors to the "Temple of the Wholly Sacred" put down their thoughts about the festival, one person wrote: "May men find their gentleness as they rise phoenix-like from this fire here. The new face of power." Self-transformation is mirrored in the hybrid art forms that abound at Burning Man, such as art cars and bicycles masquerading as giant insects or horses, or the lifelike figures that seemed to be emerging out of the playa dust (or sinking into it). "Cars morph into bugs and software programmers into painted pagans," reported Jennifer Kabat in *Print* (Kabat and Ivinski 1997). The boundaries between human and nature, as well as between human and machine, are open to question and experimentation during the festival.

Festivals promote creative self-expression and sensual enjoyment, and in so doing, enable festival-goers to go beyond their usual ways of carrying themselves and acting toward others. In order to create a "superreal" festival world of meanings absent from the workplace and urban landscape, festival-goers highlight what is lacking for them outside, such as sexual freedom. Moving more slowly helps festival-goers to forget the fast pace of their everyday lives. They speak of the festival as a place of enhanced sensory perceptions or altered awareness.<sup>18</sup> Even time is lived differently at the festival, as Pan-o'-Playa points out in a diary-like message to the bulletin board: "I am very quickly slowing down to a Playa clock and mindset" (b.b., September 23, 1998). This slowing down, the sense that festival space and time are different from ordinary life, is experienced through the body, and it is the body as much as the mind that is changed by Burning Man. One participant, in her third year of law school, remarks on the contrast: "After spending the year in the oppressive confines of a rigorous brainwashing,



soul-crushing enterprise like law school, Burning Man brings me back to myself. I remember what it feels to laugh until I cry! ... to dance until I fall down ... to make friends with people I have no immediate reason to distrust ... to walk around naked and love it, never feeling ashamed of my body, but rather being fully present in it" (Julie, b.b., September 5, 1997). Layney, a first-time festival-goer, gives thanks for "the chance to be part of something that really makes sense ... i have it in my bones." She describes the heightened awareness of being in her body and moving differently from her usual ways of moving that resulted from dancing around a fire late at night: "i danced myself into a new existence ... i ground myself into the sweet desert earth and set free to a blazing fire" (b.b., September 2, 1997). The body is simultaneously liberated and constrained. The hot and dry festival environment constantly reminds festival-goers of their embodied existence. But nudity, dancing, body paint, and costuming can liberate the body as well as insist on its presence.

### Burning Man as Home and Family

Festivals are not only places of "anarchy" and unlimited self-expression; transformative experiences are possible because Burning Man is at the same time "home," "tribe," and "family." It is a place where men and women say they experience an ideal community and where they create anew familiar concepts like neighborhood and church. Annual journeys to festivals are simultaneously adventures to exotic "uncharted shores" and to familiar, homelike, memory-laden places. The world that festival-goers represent as being on the fringes of "mainstream" culture becomes the center of their most meaningful activities. Soon after leaving the festival, Kaosangel calls Burning Man "the place we all call home, in the place we are alone, together under a firelit sky" (b.b., September 2, 1997). Some participants describe a sense of oneness with other festival-goers and the feeling of belonging to an extended family, while others speak of it as a tribe: "I walked alone for twenty years, I have screamed since I was born, this world had almost killed me, before I found my home. We are all one tribe" (Anonymous, b.b., September 2, 1997). For many participants, festivals are an ideal way of being with others, and for this reason they relate more intimately to each other at festivals than in other social environments. Mistress Cinnamon reminisces a month and a half after Burning Man '98: "i've felt misplaced ever since i got back, brc [Black Rock City] is my home and the citizens are my people" (b.b., October 18, 1998). Festivals become home-like places where participants can be the kind of children they want to be, can share intimate secrets and play in the ways schools, parents, and religions in the outside world deny them. "Got 'Home' Tuesday morning. How fucked up is that? BRC is my HOME dammit! ... I believe I'll relocate to my home on the playa ... I'm dreading the commute to LA daily but it beats suburbia."

Over email, festival-goers share with each other their reluctance to return to normal life after the heightened experience and welcome sense of community at Burning Man. References to village, home, family, church, and tribe attest to festival-goers' desire for an experience of community that is lacking in daily life.

Even more than a spiritual home or substitute for church and family, Burning Man symbolizes utopian hopes: "That's what Burning Man brings back to my heart: Hope," says Migwitch, who continues: "We are the ones who create the world that we all long for, the imaginary community to which we constantly compare the one in which we live" (b.b., September 11, 1998). "Remember," writes another festival-goer to the bulletin board, "THERE IS ANOTHER WAY" (Ranger Thumper, b.b., September 9, 1998). "Dark Angel of Black Rock" puts it this way: "The beauty of Black Rock City is powerful. It is stronger than the world we have escaped from ... Burning Man is no longer merely a festival. It has metamorphosed into a way of life for the new millennium" (b.b., September 15, 1998). Festival-goers believe they are the vanguard, visionaries who will usher in new ways of making art and living life.

### Conclusions

In the many ways I have suggested, Burning Man participants establish—through narrative, ritual, and fantasy—a contrast between the festival world and everyday society, in which the former takes on a heightened reality and represents for participants a world made over by festival-goers' views of economics (barter system), law enforcement (tolerance and self-policing), gender, ecology, and the nature of the divine. Mike explains that for him Burning Man was "idol worship in the purest sense," rather than "a media-created god or goddess" (b.b., September 2, 1997). Anthropologist Margaret Thompson Drewel, building on the work of Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz, writes that in Yoruba culture, "rituals operate not merely as models of and for society that somehow stand timelessly alongside 'real' life. Rather they construct what reality is and how it is experienced and understood" (Drewel 1992, 174). Burning Man works hard to represent itself as a new reality. Festival organizers' website statement, "Building Burning Man: The Official Journal of the Burning Man Project," begins by explaining that the festival is a critical response to corporate America and an antidote to consumerism, then asks rhetorically, "Where else, but in America, would people be invited to pack their belongings, journey into a desert wilderness, and there create the portrait of a visionary world?"<sup>19</sup> There is an expectation and excitement in the festival atmosphere that makes participants feel that they are contributing to a powerful social force. Festival literature and art installations underscore this aspect of the festival with their apocalyptic language of sacrifice and redemption.

The themes of sacrifice and redemption, death and rebirth, disintegration and creation suggest that for many participants the festival's impact is profound. But the symbolic significance of the Man's demise is still up for grabs: "Meaning' is dog meat in the face of experiment and experience" is how *Village Voice* writer Erik Davis sums up festival-goers' attitudes toward interpretations of Burning Man (Davis 1995). In fact, festival-goers debate the festival's meaning before, during, and after Burning Man. The most striking characteristic of bulletin board discussions about Burning Man and Burning Man literature are the conflicts that emerge as participants and organizers create festival space, experience the festival, deconstruct their experiences after the fact, and plan for next year's festival. In a multipart message to the bulletin board called "A Newbie's Perspective-or-THIS is community?" Gomez Addams described nasty neighbors who stole tools and water, harrassed people, played over the sound level restrictions, and sabotaged other camps (b.b., September 11, 1998). Criticism as well as praise of the festival appeared on the bulletin board and fueled debates over intrusive photographers, "gawkers," neighborliness, and environmental issues. Concerns about the festival's environmental impact have threatened its future at this site.<sup>20</sup> In the many years that I have attended Burning Man, the theme "leave no trace" has appeared on all email messages from the organizers and on all other festival literature. Trash continued to be an issue in the messages of horrified festival-goers who saw debris dumped along the roads leading away from the festival site when they traveled home.<sup>21</sup> Other bulletin board readers responded by urging everyone to focus on the positive, life-affirming aspects of Burning Man, rather than its failures. By emphasizing first their separation from the outside world, and second their unity as tribe and family, the Burning Man community tries to downplay inner differences and contradictions.

Participants expect Burning Man to embody their ideals, but the festival does not always live up to such expectations. In fact, it may perpetuate the social problems festival-goers say they want most to change, such as wastefulness and rigid organizational structures. "Like it or not, Burning Man is not about survival. At its most *extreme*, it's about projecting our God-fearing red-blooded American values of waste, greed and debauchery on an empty canvas of dust and air. And at its most innocent, it's an *escape* valve from the societal rules that bear down on us daily."<sup>22</sup> Thus the opposition between festival and outer worlds is often complicated by the many differences *among* festival-goers, and the realization that instead of leaving the outer world behind, they have brought its problems with them. Tripper, for instance, understands Burning Man somewhat differently than the "many airheads" who "gush on about what a utopian experience Black Rock City is, when all it really is is an amalgam of twisted reflections, magnifications, and rejections of the culture we purport to leave behind" (b.b., September 23, 1998). Controversies at Burning Man follow a pattern described in an

extensive literature by folklorists and anthropologists on festivals as places where conflicts are worked on and resolved. In "Shouting Match at the Border: The Folklore of Display Events," Roger D. Abrahams argues that public events provide opportunities for "perilous play": confrontation, negotiation, and creative responses to social tensions. Festivals and fairs, explains Abrahams, "in part dramatize and reinforce the existing social structure," but they also, as in the case of Burning Man, "insist ... that such structure be ignored or inverted, or flatly denied" (Abrahams 1982, 304).

An uneasy dynamic develops at Burning Man, which reveals the tensions between individual and community that the festival is intended to harmonize. Festival-goers gather to share a common experience, but in so doing they may discover the many differences that separate them and threaten their efforts at community building. Of all the tensions and contradictions that characterize Burning Man, none is as charged as the relationship between self and community. In "The Year of Community—You Are a Founder," Larry Harvey describes his understanding of Burning Man: "Ours is a society of activists and your experience of our community will be defined by two essential elements: radical self-expression and a shared struggle to survive."<sup>23</sup> Burning Man participants engage in self-exploration and commune with nature at festivals, but they also establish important friendships and intimate relationships with other festival-goers. Observers of the relationship between self and community in the contemporary United States have argued that Americans tend to emphasize the needs of the self over those of the community. Robert Bellah and his colleagues point out in *Habits of the Heart* that when Americans describe their spirituality, they talk most about personal empowerment and self-expression, rather than the requirements of community (Bellah *et al.* 1985; see also Anderson 1990; Roof 1993). In contrast, Burning Man emphasizes both the needs of the self and the creation of community. Self-expression is encouraged but must be constantly tempered by consideration for one's neighbors.

If the festival is a site for life-changing experiences of self and community, for the creation of new religious and cultural visions, then, for these reasons, it is a contested site. The festival works its transformative magic on participants because of a set of contradictions that exist within it: festival-goers escape their home life when they journey to the festival, and at the same time expect festivals to be the location of "home" and "family"; they imagine the desert as a "blank canvas" as well as a "living land"; the language of "tribes" and "villages" coexists with advanced electronic technologies; festival-goers constantly negotiate between self-expression and the needs of community; in festival art and ritual they express desire for both sacrifice and salvation; and Burning Man's apocalyptic overtones are meant to both describe the disenchantment and decay of American life today, and envision a future that is rejuvenative as well as destructive. It is the creative work that characterizes Burning Man—playing with symbolic meanings and creating



new rituals from old—in response to these contradictions that transforms the festival into places of meaning.

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## Notes

- 1 Photographs of some of these were on the Fruit of the Lumen website ([www.scumbby.com/~wesBman98/](http://www.scumbby.com/~wesBman98/)), which is no longer active.
- 2 The hundreds of messages on the bulletin board were one of main sources for this essay. All bulletin board messages (designated as "b.b." and a date) were originally read at <http://bbs.burningman.com/index?14@^8013@/> and were available through the archives at this address. The URL is no longer active. I first heard about the festival in 1996 when one of my students told me about his experience there. I then attended the festival in 1997 as a participant-observer, and returned almost every year for the next ten years. Over these years the festival experienced tremendous growth and increased publicity, but the issues I address here have remained remarkably consistent from year to year. Other sources I used were two newsletters published during the festival: *The Black Rock Gazette*, and *Piss Clear*; informal conversations with other festival-goers during the festivals and with several of my students back in ordinary life; and the Burning Man website and other websites of participants. I also read through a variety of media accounts of the festival, both in print and online.
- 3 Interview by Lee Gilmore, September 5, 1998.
- 4 Sterling 1996, 1; Scotty, Burning Man b.b., September 11, 1998; Kelly 1997, 62 (quoting Larry Harvey); Harvey, "Radical Self-Expression," Burning Man website, 1998 ([www.burningman.com](http://www.burningman.com)).
- 5 During two years of reading through the Burning Man bulletin board, I saw mention of raves, Lilith Fair, Lollapalooza, pagan festivals, Grateful Dead shows, Rainbow gatherings, and the original Woodstock. Pike (2001) is a study of ritual and sacred space at contemporary pagan festivals across the United States. For an in-depth description of national Rainbow Family gatherings, see Niman 1997. Information about raves is easily available on the internet; for example, a rave network with many links is at <http://hyperreal.org/raves>.
- 6 R. Laurence Moore discusses Chautauqua Sunday School Institutes (Moore 1994, 151). The essays in *The Celebration of Society* cover a wide variety of festivals, sporting events, masquerades, and other celebrations in the United States and elsewhere (Manning 1983).
- 7 Schmidt discusses "the peddling of festivity" at church festivals and hawkers waiting on the outskirts of camp meetings to sell "food, liquor, patent medicines, books, ballads, shoe polish, and daguerreotypes" (Schmidt 1995, 21).
- 8 Also see Bachelard [1958] 1964; Lefebvre [1974] 1992; Soja 1989.
- 9 G. Rinschede and S. M. Bhardwaj describe "place mythologies" as narratives of the virtues and sanctities of specific sites (Rinschede and Bhardwaj 1990, 11). But the sites they identify, like Burning Man, probably have negative associations as well. Other studies of place mythologies that have helped me understand festivals as "places apart" include Agnew and Duncan (1989); Buttner (1993); Duncan and Ley (1993); Hiss (1990); Sears (1979). For some good examples of place myths see Griffith (1992); Scott and Simpson-Housley (1991).
- 10 Anthropologist Victor Turner contrasts flexible, egalitarian liminal events to the stratified, normal world (Turner 1974, 200–01).
- 11 Much of Foucault's work is taken up with issues of power and space. My understanding of festivals as "places apart" has also been helped by Duvignaud (1976); Falassi (1987); Gregory (1994); MacAloon (1984); Stoeltje (1992).
- 12 Darryl Van Rhey, "The New American Holiday" in "Building Burning Man: The Official Journal of the Burning Man Project" (Winter 1998).
- 13 Larry Harvey, "Radical Self-Expression," Burning Man website, August 1997.
- 14 *Black Rock Gazette* 1997.
- 15 Scholars disagree on the meaning and appropriate usage of the terms *apocalypticism* and *apocalyptic*. I follow folklorist Daniel Wojcik's suggestion that *apocalypse* "refers to the catastrophic destruction of world or current society, whether attributed to supernatural forces, natural forces, or human actions" (Wojcik 1997).
- 16 "The Year of Community—You Are a Founder" (August 7, 1997).
- 17 For instance, see Crumrine and Morinis 1991; Haberman 1994; Morinis 1992; Myerhoff 1974; Orsi 1991; Rinschede and Bhardwaj 1990; Turner and Turner 1978.
- 18 There is much discussion about drug use and abuse at Burning Man. From festival-goers' own descriptions of their festival experiences, it would seem that drugs play a part as often as not. However, perhaps as a result of a visible law enforcement presence, drugs are not as common as alcohol.
- 19 Winter 1998.
- 20 In February 1999 I received an issue of "Jack Rabbit Speaks," urging festival-goers to write letters to the Bureau of Land Management, which oversees Black Rock Desert. This was the most recent request for help from festival organizers in several years of negotiating with local authorities and other groups concerned about the festival's effects on the land. The Burning Man website has links to more information about these issues.
- 21 A heated and contentious discussion of trash on the bulletin board lasted for months after Burning Man '98.
- 22 Stewart McKenzie, "Bitch Bitch Bitch about Burning Man," *Piss Clear* 1997 (the "other" Burning Man newspaper).
- 23 Burning Man website, 1997.

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# God in the Details

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