



BURNING MAN FESTIVAL IN ALTERNATIVE INTERPRETIVE
ANALYSIS

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Introduction

After a short flight from Salt Lake City, Utah to Reno, Nevada, and a drive some ninety miles or more beyond Reno's casinos, restaurants, and hotels, I saw less and less of the trappings of civilization as the comforts of twenty-first century life gave way to the expanse of the desert. After a while the landscape of dirt, sand, cacti, sage brush, and mountains finally yielded the first signs of human life. A long caravan of cars, trucks, campers, and recreational vehicles were lined up to enter the spot that would serve as home for the next week. As I sat in line with my fellow travelers my eyes scanned the immediate horizon. I could see people working on their vehicles as some had experienced mechanical problems. Several people were riding bicycles and to my initial surprise some of them were naked as they rode in the hot desert sun. When I finally reached the entry point with my fellow travelers I handed over my ticket, allowed the ticket-taker and security person to search the vehicle for possible stowaways, and moved ahead to the formal entry threshold. There I was to receive a formal welcome and greeting; a sort of doing away with my pre-existing "virginal" status in relation to this event. I was welcomed with a traditional greeting of "Welcome home!" and was then asked if I had ever been here before. When I answered in the negative, I was invited to exit the vehicle. I did so, and was instructed to pick up a large piece of metal to strike a bell then shout to the desert, "I'm not a virgin anymore!"

This represented the beginnings of what would be a fascinating experience of and investigation into the 2006 Burning Man Festival located in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada. And I was not alone in my experience. Not only did I travel with a small group, but thousands of people, so-called "Burners," from the United States and abroad came together this year, and in previous years, to participate in an experiment in intentional community with an emphasis on art, self-expression, and creativity, concluding with a burning effigy at week's end.

Scholarly analysis of spirituality and religiosity in the West at times includes studies on Burning Man and is a relatively recent area of academic specialization.¹ It has been the focus of at least one master's thesis² and two doctoral dissertations.³ Academic treatments of Burning Man have found their way into at least one book on the topic.⁴ But even with this relatively recent area of study and specialization, something of an academic "orthodoxy" has already developed in terms of the theoretical lens by which this community and festival can be understood. A comparison of the academic studies on Burning Man demonstrates strong dependence upon the theories of the late anthropologist Victor Turner.⁵ Turner applied the work of French folklorist Arnold van Gennep⁶ to rites of passage among African tribes, and in particular his three-fold structure or phases of this process consisting of separation, margin (or limen), and aggregation (or reaggregation). The experiences of these tribal people during the liminal phase resulted in a sense of social cohesion which Turner called "communitas." Turner's theories have been extremely influential and have provided one of the major frameworks by which Burning Man studies are conducted.

Yet as common as Turner's theories on ritual and communitas may be in the analysis of Burning Man, other perspectives might be considered by the academic community that would shed additional light on our understanding of the Burning Man phenomenon. This article represents an exploration of two such possibilities that provide alternative analytical perspectives.

The main thrust of this article is that the alternative cultural event of Burning Man is a life-affirming secondary institution, a middle way between the subjectivities of the self and mainstream institutions, which provides a religious or spiritual function as a substitute for mainstream religious institutions. This secondary institution functions by means of a Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), or perhaps more accurately, numerous TAZs where art, ritual, alternative spiritualities, and other forms of self-expression facilitate new understandings of self and new expressions of spirituality, resulting in feelings of communitas and temporary community. The social function of Burning Man as a secondary institution indicates that it represents a significant cultural,



social, and spiritual phenomenon in the United States which provides important lessons in the study of alternative spiritualities.

Origin, Historical Summary,
and Community Values

The origin of the Burning Man Festival can be traced to a modest beginning on Baker Beach in San Francisco, California in 1986 with about twenty participants.⁷ The first event came about spontaneously as Larry Harvey and Jerry James burned a wooden man on the beach in honor of the Summer Solstice. Given the positive response of the crowds, the event became an annual phenomenon in San Francisco with the size of the wooden figure slowly growing even as the crowds grew each year. In 1988 the figure became known as "Burning Man," and during this time the event was discovered by members of the San Francisco area Cacophony Society, self-described in its newsletters as "a randomly gathered network of free spirits united in the pursuit of experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society."⁸ The promotion of the burning effigy event in the society's newsletter helped increase the number of the participants which rose to over 300 in 1989, and to 800 by 1990. The growing crowds on a beach in San Francisco, coupled with a large burning effigy, eventually attracted the attention and concern of local law enforcement, and the decision was made to change the location and time of the event resulting in a move to Nevada's Black Rock Desert in conjunction with the Labor Day weekends.

Over time the festival has continued to grow and evolve. In 1992 Burning Man saw the increasing involvement of San Francisco area artists and by 1993 the artistic emphasis became so substantial that the festival began to function both as an outlet for artistic expression as well as an experiment in intentional community. Given this strong artistic connection, in its origins as well as its continued development, Burning Man involves strong influences from California's Bohemian cultures.

In 1995 the collective camps that make up the Burning Man Festival came to be known as "Black Rock City," which included a thriving theme camp culture, the *Black Rock Gazette* newspaper, and radio stations to service its 4,000 participants. By 2005 the wooden Man had grown from a modest eight feet set ablaze by two men on a beach, to reach a height of about forty feet as a rotating wood and neon figure in the Black Rock Desert involving over 35,000 people from across the United States and around the world. Estimates for the 2006 festival were for 38,989 participants, 2007 there were 47,097 participants and in 2008

there were nearly 50,000. The event gives every indication of continued popularity and participant growth.

Beyond consideration of Burning Man's origin and history, it is helpful to understand the core ethical values that are expressed and embodied by the community and required of all participants.⁹ Out of ten key principles for the community, some of the most prominent include participation, radical self-expression, radical self-reliance, gift giving, and leave no trace.

Burning Man is not an event or community in which an individual can merely go and watch in voyeuristic fashion, although given some of the sensationalized practices at the event no doubt many have tried. The organizers of Burning Man emphasize that the festival represents a *participant* process where active involvement is required in building the community and in expressing its ideals. This act of participation takes place through another of the community's ideals, *radical self-expression*. Radical self-expression takes many forms, from nudity, body painting, and costuming, to the creation of various forms of art, including sculpture, painting, and architecture, to art cars licensed by the festival's DMV, the Department of Mutant Vehicles. These acts of self-expression take place in a desert environment which facilitates *radical self-reliance*. Given the harshness of the desert with no vegetation or animal life, its highly alkaline soil, extremes in temperatures, as well as blinding wind and dust storms, participants survive through reliance on themselves and their cooperative efforts with other "Burners."

While interacting with other community members, consumerism is strongly frowned upon. Participants bring whatever they need for their week-long stay in the desert. The main form of economic activity that takes place is in the form of a *gift giving economy*. Participants bring a variety of gifts to the festival and these are freely shared with other participants as expressions of appreciation. The exception to the gifts comes in the form of coffee and ice as the only commodities available for purchase and from only one location at the festival. However, while Burning Man adheres to an anti-consumerist ethical value at the desert event, it is not pursued with total abstinence. In addition to the few exceptions of consumerism I observed during the festival, various merchandise is offered for sale through the Burning Man website with its copyrighted name and logo.

The final foundational community value comes in the form of *leave no trace*. Burning Man takes place on federal land under the control of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and use of the land requires a post-festival cleanup that literally leaves no trace behind and no damage to the desert. In consideration of the week-long activity of nearly 40,000 festive people constructing a temporary city out of nothing, much of which is burned at the conclusion of the festival, Burning Man's



continued success at leaving no trace in compliance with BLM requirements is nothing short of amazing, and a testimony to the intense devotion Burning Man participants have to living their community values.

As a further consideration of Burning Man as a community it should be noted that it is not limited to the annual festival. Burners maintain community through a regional network composed of a number of regional gatherings throughout the United States as well a number of countries around the world.¹⁰ The Internet also serves the community through the ePLAYA discussion board¹¹ as well as through Burner blogs and community-related websites.¹²

In terms of organizational structure, the gathering's founders eventually found it necessary to create a non-profit limited liability corporation, Black Rock City LLC, which holds the copyright for the Burning Man name and image.¹³

Burning Man in Insider Perspective

With a summary of the origin, history, and values of Burning Man in mind, and before moving to academic analysis of its meaning, it is important to consider how those connected with this festival understand themselves. Although Burning Man eschews doctrine and dogma, and sternly resists fixed meanings for its activities, the festival's website provides some clues as to their self-understanding even while acknowledging the desires of participants "to keep the event free from the prison of interpretation, explanation, and the insidious net of Meaning."¹⁴

The "Mission Statement" on the Burning Man website states that the organizing entity exists "to produce the annual event known as Burning Man and to guide, nurture and protect the more permanent community created by its culture."¹⁵ Two items of significance may be noted from this brief description of mission with the first being the production of an annual festival as the main reason for Burning Man's existence. The second item is the conscious awareness that this is not merely an arts festival or temporary event, but that ongoing community and culture come about as a result of the annual gathering. This self-understanding is confirmed by another section of the website in an article answering the question, "What is Burning Man?" This article describes the event as a "classroom" that promises participants can "build your own new world," which results in "an experimental community."¹⁶

At the outset of this analysis it must be recognized that Burning Man participants bring a variety of frames of references, experiences,

and interpretations to the festival, some of them contradictory. It is also important to recognize that the organizational structure which puts on the event sternly resists any fixed meanings and encourages each individual participant to create their own meanings of the festival. It would seem that at a minimum those connected with this event understand it as a festival of expression which results in the creation of community. This self-understanding must be kept in mind as a shift is made from the insider understanding of this culture to the outsider perspective through scholarly analysis. The insider perspective is especially significant as it is contrasted with the analysis and interpretations of those outside the intentional community.

Burning Man in General Academic Analysis

As mentioned above, Burning Man has become the focus of academic analysis in the context of religion in popular culture. Although Burning Man studies as an academic focus are very recent, the theoretical lens applied to this festival and alternative culture tends to focus on ritual studies through the paradigm of cultural anthropologist Victor Turner.

In the 1950s Turner and his wife Edith studied the Ndembu tribe in central Africa with special interest in their rituals and rites of passage. Turner conducted research in these areas and expanded on a set of ideas proposed by folklorist Arnold van Gennep.¹⁷ As Turner studied the experiences of tribe members undergoing a process of transition during the performance of rites of passage, he identified three concepts as parts of this process which involved separation, liminality, and aggregation (or reaggregation). At the conclusion the rites of passage, the experiences of tribal youth going through the process resulted in feelings of strong social cohesion among the participants which Turner labeled *communitas*. As this process unfolded, it began with the *separation* process, where individuals moved from regular participation with the tribe in the mundane world, and then entered a *liminal* or threshold space where they worked together through the performance of rituals. They then experienced *aggregation* or a return to their tribe with a new status resulting from their experiences. The result for those who went through the process was an experience of *communitas*, a strong social bond among individuals who had worked together through common liminal and ritual experience.¹⁸

My research for my M.A. thesis on Burning Man revealed that the majority of academic studies draw upon the Turnerian paradigm of liminality and *communitas*.¹⁹ From this perspective Burning Man participants travel from around the country and experience separation from the world of routine experience. The desert of Nevada then becomes a liminal space of shared ritual expression removed from the



context of theology.²⁰ At the conclusion of the festival, Burners leave the desert playa or lakebed as they return to what Burners call the "default world" and thus achieve aggregation. Through this process Burners frequently express a strong sense of *communitas* or belonging, so much so that for many the experience of community during the week of burning is *the preferred reality* that Burners long for the remaining 51 weeks of the year. Applying the Turnerian paradigm,²¹ scholars have recognized the liminal process at Burning Man and have described it as "reflexive modernity's equivalent to premodern ritual liminality."²² This then becomes "a ritualistic means by which participants can liminally, reflexively, and critically create "distance" from their "normal" sociocultural existence."²³

Yet as important and popular as Turner's concept of liminality is in Burning Man studies, it is not without its difficulties. Turner's work has been challenged and critiqued in other areas of academic study.²⁴ In addition, its application to Burning Man is somewhat problematic in that as developed and applied by Turner it referred to a "non-sensual and homogeneous field of liminal ritual."²⁵ Burning Man involves a major expression of sensuality and a multiplicity of contested meanings. But aside from difficulties with Turner's paradigm, other conceptual perspectives exist that shed additional light on understanding Burning Man. In the interests of putting together a broader set of interpretive tools, I will now consider two heuristic possibilities, first, the "homeless mind" and "secondary institutions" thesis of Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfield Kellner, with the modifications of Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, and second, the Temporary Autonomous Zone as presented by Hakim Bey.

Homeless Minds and Secondary Institutions

Peter Berger is Professor Emeritus of Religion, Sociology and Theology, and Director of the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs at Boston University. Over the course of his professional life he has authored numerous books that touch on society and religion. Berger's work is very influential, especially his early works such as *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) and *The Sacred Canopy* (1967).²⁶ These early works reflect the time in which he became an academic "in a culture where the theory of secularization was widely accepted."²⁷ In the early 1970s Berger co-authored a book with Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner²⁸ which put forward their "homeless mind thesis."

While this volume is wide in scope, the central thrust of the book deals with the impact of modernization upon the modern consciousness.

The authors discuss various aspects of modernization, including technology, bureaucracy, rationalization, the "pluralization of social life-worlds," and the psychological effects these have on the individual. As the authors state,

[T]he secularizing effect of pluralization has gone hand in hand with other secularizing forces in modern society. The final consequence of all this can be put very simply (though the simplicity is deceptive): *modern man has suffered from a deepening condition of "homelessness."* The correlate of the migratory character of his experience of society and of self has been what might be called a metaphysical loss of "home." It goes without saying that this condition is psychologically hard to bear.²⁹

One of the results of the development of homeless minds in response to modernization is a disruption in the social fabric of mainstream institutions. These institutions, whether political, familial, or religious, which were perceived as trustworthy prior to modernization, and which served to ground the individual self and its place in society, came to be viewed by those with homeless minds as having been deprived of plausibility. This is particularly the case with the pluralization of modernity and its impact upon religion. Berger et al. discuss modernization's devastating effects in this area:

The "homelessness" of modern social life has found its most devastating expression in the area of religion. The general uncertainty, both cognitive and normative, brought about by the pluralization of everyday life and of biography in modern society, has brought religion into a serious crisis of plausibility. The age-old function of religion — to provide ultimate certainty and to aid the exigencies of the human condition — has been severely shaken. Because of the religious crisis in modern society, social "homelessness" has become metaphysical — that is, it has become "homelessness" in the cosmos.³⁰

This failure of mainstream institutions, including those focused on religion, means that they no longer function as home for the self, and with the loss of credible external, institutional resources, the homeless mind can only turn inward and seek stability through internal subjectivity and the "creation of the private sphere."³¹ But the authors note that "social life abhors a vacuum" and that "human beings are not capable of tolerating the continuous uncertainty (or, if you will, freedom) of existing without institutional supports."³² This search for new resources for the self led homeless minds to seek out what Berger et al. refer to as "secondary institutions" that included various forms of psychoanalysis,



as well as occultism, magic and mystical religion.³³ In their view, the use of these resources represents efforts to cope with the discontents of modernity.³⁴

Given that Berger's thesis was expounded in 1974 it includes a focus and application to the youth culture and counterculture of the 1960s and early 1970s, but the thesis also has continuing validity and application in the present, especially as it is revisited and updated in light of developments in the intervening decades since the 1960s. This project has been undertaken by religious studies professors Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead.

Heelas and Woodhead³⁵ took up the homeless mind thesis of Berger et al. and reassessed it. In their view its arguments are bold and compelling³⁶ as applied to the 1960s counterculture. In their updated assessment they considered how the thesis holds up in the contemporary situation of the Western world. They stated that while Berger, Berger, and Kellner did not engage in futurist speculation, the thesis seemed to forecast increasing homelessness due to increasing pluralization (through globalization), accelerating bureaucratization and technologization, and the spread of the "gentle revolution" through the population as a whole.³⁷ While the forces of modernization have indeed continued, with the forces producing the homeless minds of the counterculture still at work, rather than continuing and expanding, Heelas and Woodhead noted that "on the contrary, the counterculture has largely faded away."³⁸

In order to account for this anomaly, Heelas and Woodhead put forward a modification and expansion of the homeless minds thesis. They acknowledge that the forces of modernization and the turn to subjectivity are still in place, but that "disillusionment with primary institutions has not resulted in (much) countercultural homelessness because those concerned have found new homes for their lives in all those secondary institutions which have proliferated since the 1960s."³⁹

In addition to this involvement in new secondary institutions as an aid to subjectivity, Heelas and Woodhead also note that in the intervening time period since the homeless mind thesis was first put forward there has also been a change in "the turn to the self and subjectivity" in that it has broadened "into a more general 'turn to life.'⁴⁰ This broadening aspect means that the "primacy of the self has gradually become the starting point for a wider concern with the lives of self and others."⁴¹ They liken this outward moving sense of concern beyond the self to outward moving "ripples in a pool" in which five specific areas are identified. The first is "self-life or psychic life," the

subjectivity of Berger et al.'s homeless mind thesis. Flowing from this is the second element of "relational life" that seeks "life in relationship with others," moving outward further to "humanitarian life" that is concerned with the ethical dimension of global humanitarianism. This then moves to "eco-life" that is concerned with the "unity and interconnectedness of the whole planet," to the fifth element of the "cosmic life," "the monistic idea that there is a cosmic life force which runs through all things and forms the deep ground of reality."⁴² The argument put forward by Heelas and Woodhead is that over the last several decades since the 1960s the turn to subjectivity has moved beyond mere concern with self-life to finding fulfillment in the self as connected with the exterior world and a holistic embrace of the totality of what life has to offer, usually understood in spiritual terms.

As Heelas and Woodhead continued to develop their modification of the homeless mind thesis they pointed out that not only is the turn to subjectivity as articulated by Berger et al. still applicable in our current situation, albeit with important modifications, but also that secondary institutions continue to play a major role as well. This means that with the continuing loss of confidence in primary institutions as meaningful sources in which to guide the self, "people seek out a "middle way," between homelessness of countercultural tendencies and the homelessness experienced in relation to the primary mainstream."⁴³ Heelas and Woodhead see both the broadening "turn to life" and the continuing importance of secondary institutions as a counter to the homelessness of modernization as well as processes which work together and which mutually reinforce each other. They also note that these secondary institutions "are relatively detraditionalized," and tend to be "open ended, nonjudgemental, democratic and intra-personal."⁴⁴

Heelas and Woodhead also discussed the nature of some of these secondary institutions, and some represent spiritual institutions that involve a "plethora of outlets for spiritual seekers who are pursuing their quest outside traditional religious frameworks."⁴⁵ Heelas refers to these as "new spiritual outlets" or "NSOs."⁴⁶ The authors concluded their consideration and modification of the homeless mind thesis by suggesting that "the hard and fast distinction between primary and secondary institutions may be breaking down,"⁴⁷ and that in the contemporary cultural situation of the West "the image of dwelling in many homes may be more appropriate than that of homelessness."⁴⁸

With a summary and consideration of the homeless mind and secondary institutions thesis of Berger, Berger, and Kellner, and its modification by Heelas and Woodhead, I now turn to consideration of another conceptual framework, that of the Temporary Autonomous Zone.



Hakim Bey and the Temporary Autonomous Zone

Hakim Bey⁴⁹ is a theorist who has developed ideas related to anarchist ontology and immediatism.⁵⁰ Scholars such as Graham St. John have described him as an "American libertarian-anarchist philosopher, subversive poet, [and] proponent of "edge Islam"⁵¹ He is best known for his writing on the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) which first appeared on the Internet⁵² and later became available in book form in 1991.⁵³ Not only is Bey an enigmatic figure, but his TAZ is as well. TAZ is difficult to describe because he has deliberately refrained from defining the concept.⁵⁴ When he does write about it his descriptions can be difficult to fully grasp. As an example Bey writes:

Our brand of anti-authoritarianism, however, thrives on baroque paradox; it favors states of consciousness, emotion & aesthetics over all petrified ideologies & dogma; it embraces multitudes & relishes contradictions. Ontological Anarchy is a hobgoblin for BIG minds.⁵⁵

With the difficulties of grasping a definition of the TAZ in mind I now turn to a review of Bey's writings in an attempt to develop a basic understanding of this concept.

As an anarchist, Bey, who studied at Columbia University, is concerned with the ability of the individual to carve out some type of space for radical freedom from authoritarian control. He raises the key question that leads to the TAZ by asking, "Are we who live in the present doomed never to experience autonomy, never to stand for one moment on a bit of land ruled only by freedom?"⁵⁶ His desires for an affirmative answer to this question come in the form of the TAZ that he calls the creation of a "free enclave." Yet even with the suggestion of the solution to autonomous freedom Bey is tentative about the nature of his writings on the topic which he describes as merely "an essay (attempt)" and "almost a poetic fancy."⁵⁷

As the name Temporary Autonomous Zone implies, Bey described a fleeting fixture in space and time⁵⁸ wherein the individual can claim autonomy over the self and complete freedom in opposition to authority structures which provides opportunities for the individual to create new expressions of the self and society. TAZ is fluid in its relation to time and space, but more so in its relation to time:

It can be truly temporary but also perhaps periodic, like the recurring autonomy of the holiday, the vacation, the summer camp. It could even become a "permanent" PAZ [Permanent

Autonomous Zone], like a successful commune or bohemian enclave.⁵⁹

TAZ also places great emphasis upon the face-to-face and the sensual,⁶⁰ and may be understood as essentially an immediate community of ephemeral, unmediated sociality, a kind of experimental laboratory for immediatism.⁶¹

As the TAZ comes into being it provides a context for the nonviolent alteration of existing structures,⁶² but in order for the TAZ to come into existence and serve as a radical tactic of opposition to the mainstream several conditions must be met. For Bey these include actual psychological liberation from dying ideologies as a real place of present autonomy, the use and expansion of the Internet (counter-Net) as a weapon for the full realization of the TAZ-complex, and the continued disappearance of the apparatus of Control or the State.⁶³

One other aspect of the TAZ significant for our consideration is that everyone who participates in the TAZ must do so as a performer, not as a spectator. This is the one basic rule of the TAZ which Bey also calls a festival and a festival culture. Borrowing from another writer, Bey expands on this concept and offers us an image of anarchist society, the *dinner party*, in which all structure of authority dissolves in conviviality and celebration.⁶⁴ Examples of the TAZ include pirate utopias (such as the Republic of Salé), the North American Wilderness, drop-out tri-racial isolate communities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Paris Uprising of 1968, and countercultural and permacultural communities.⁶⁵ The presence of the TAZ has also been noted in Australia's ConFest alternative cultural event,⁶⁶ as well as at rave and post-rave events.⁶⁷

With a consideration of the homeless minds and secondary institutions thesis, and the Temporary Autonomous Zone, I now move to consider an application of these ideas to an understanding of Burning Man Festival.

The Middle Way and TAZ at Burning Man

Burning Man must be understood within its cultural context of late modernity/postmodernity in the West and the continuing distrust of mainstream institutions, particularly traditional religious institutions, and a corresponding turn to the self. Sociologists have noted that for some time America has been undergoing a shift from what one writer has described as a spirituality of dwelling to a spirituality of seeking.⁶⁸ By this is meant that for many people a shift has taken place in expressions of religiosity or spirituality wherein individuals have moved from placing trust in mainstream religious institutions as the primary places for religious engagement to the autonomy of the individual who



looks within herself/himself. This self-orientation in spirituality involves an experiential dimension which draws upon a variety of sources in eclectic fashion in order to create individualized expressions of "Do-It-Yourself" spirituality. Wade Clark Roof has characterized this shift as representing a quest or seeker culture within an increasingly diverse spiritual marketplace,⁶⁹ and it should be noted that this is a marketplace filled with numerous secondary institutions offering spiritual services, commodities, and resources to searching selves.

In Roof's discussion of the quest culture he describes a situation that is in keeping with Berger et al.'s thesis and its updated modification by Heelas and Woodhead. He describes those who were "encouraged" first by the antiestablishment climate of the 1960s and then later by the therapeutic culture of the 1970s and 1980s,⁷⁰ and states that this resulted in a "disenchantment with organized religion" and a corresponding "turning inward in search of meaning and strength."⁷¹ Further, this quest culture is said to be part of a social and cultural context that has arisen as a result of "modernity and its discontents," as well as "the rise of the expansive self."⁷²

Within this social context it is also helpful to consider the demographics and spiritual perspectives of Burning Man participants. Analysis of demographic data from 2001 compiled by the Burning Man organization reveals that while festival participants are diverse in terms of generational representation, and run a spectrum from children to senior citizens, the two major demographic populations are Generation X and Baby Boomers.⁷³

The social location of many Burners provides an important facet in understanding their spiritual perspective, and consideration of survey responses in the area of spiritual identification is helpful as well. As part of her ongoing research into the Burning Man community as discussed in her doctoral dissertation, Lee Gilmore conducted demographic research through surveys by Burning Man respondents. As a result of her research she identified eight basic tendencies in participant responses which she then organized into three general classifications. These include "Alternatives," among whom are those who identified themselves as "spiritual but not religious;" "Mainstream," those affiliated with a Christian or Jewish denomination; and "Secular," those who described themselves as largely atheist, agnostic. The largest segment of Gilmore's research involves the "Alternatives." They represent "the largest single subgroup, totaling 31 percent of all respondents, [and] were those participants who explicitly stated that they thought of themselves as 'spiritual, but not religious.'"⁷⁴ The "Alternatives" category also

incorporates three additional groups which comprise a total of 58 percent of respondents. Gilmore contrasted her survey research results with Wade Roof Clark's analysis among Baby Boomers, particularly his category of "metaphysical seekers and believers,"⁷⁵ and found a "common quality" among the studies which coincides with the "religious frames" voiced in Burning Man responses revealing "a generalized rejection of normative, traditional Western religious orientations."⁷⁶

With the social context, demographics, and spiritual perspectives through self-identification in survey research of Burning Man participants in mind it is evident that many, if not most, have indeed experienced a loss of confidence in primary institutions (per Berger et al.), just as those of the 1960s counterculture did before them, and as a result they have turned within to draw upon the subjectivities of the self. However, this turn to the self is best understood in light of a concept of the self that embraces the broader turn to life (per Heelas and Woodhead) that draws upon life-enhancing secondary institutions. And just as those of the earlier counterculture drew upon various forms of "alternative spiritualities" as resources for the self as Berger et al. described, so contemporary seekers continue to draw upon many of these same spiritualities.

In consideration of the homeless mind thesis in light of Burning Man, for many of the festival's participants it functions as a tool for enhancement and exploration of the self and its connection to spirituality, life, and community, thus serving as a life-enhancing secondary institution. As Jeremy Hockett has described it, Burning Man provides an "opportunity to fill the spiritual void [f]or those who can no longer find solace in institutional forms of religious activity."⁷⁷ Thus, Burning Man "offers an alternative structure" for spirituality. It provides a "middle way" between problematic mainstream institutions and the limited resources of the radical subjectivities of the homeless mind. This might also be understood as part of a process of reframing and retraditionalizing described by Roof. As he describes them, reframing involves religious speech and symbols that are drawn upon as a means of "creating truth or provoking confrontation with it,"⁷⁸ and retraditionalizing involves "creating new cultural formations that provide alternative visions of spiritual and ethical life."⁷⁹ The process of reframing is exemplified in any number of ways at the festival, particularly in the creation of various forms of art that draw upon traditional religious symbols, such as the cross or the image of Jesus, and yet combine these with artistic aspects from other religious traditions so as to challenge interpretations of traditional religious symbolism.

Not only does the homeless mind and secondary institution thesis provide a helpful perspective for understanding Burning Man, but the Temporary Autonomous Zone does as well. It has direct application to



the desires and experiences of Burning Man participants which flows from the practices which take place within it as a secondary institution. First, Burning Man is a temporary place in space and time, where participants meet annually in the desert for one week, and it provides a place where individuals create and claim great freedom. Participants seek out the Burning Man Festival which provides an individualized place in time and space for the individual to experiment with new forms of self and community.

Second, the character of Burning Man fits with Beyø's descriptions of what realized TAZs might look like. Recall that Bey referred to the possibility of periodic TAZs and that such an experiment might take the form of a "bohemian enclave."⁸⁰

Third, the TAZ is festal and anarchist in keeping with the nature of the Burning Man gathering in its festive and anarchic roots and continuing tendencies. Recall as well that Bey referred to the TAZ as a "festival" and "festal culture,"⁸¹ and he provides an illustration of this as taking place in "sixties-style tribal gathering(s)" as well as "anarchist conferences" where "we should realize that all these are already liberated zones" of a sort, or at least potential TAZs.⁸² Burning Man is well known as a space for festivity, so much so that popular media treatments of the gathering tend to describe it as little more than a place for hedonism and partying. The connection of the TAZ to anarchist concerns is relevant in that the earliest gatherings of what would eventually become the Burning Man Festival can be traced to a small group of anarchists meeting in the desert to use it as a firing range and to drive as fast as possible on the desert playa.⁸³ The artistic element of Burning Man also finds relevance as Bey makes a connection between dance, "the arts of life," "a communal network,"⁸⁴ and the TAZ.

The legitimacy of application of the TAZ to Burning Man has been recognized by others,⁸⁵ particularly Graham St. John in his comparison of the TAZ to the ConFest alternative cultural event in Australia.⁸⁶ But in his application St. John noted that there are some discontinuities between ConFest and the TAZ, including "the diversity of participants and the spectrum of discourses, genres and practices [that] make for a clamorous event characterized by a discord and contrariety that deviates from the ideal TAZ." With these differences in mind St. John is "inclined to regard ConFest as a calendrical autonomous zone (or CAZ) accommodating numerous TAZs."⁸⁷ The same discontinuities between the ideal TAZ and ConFest can also be seen in relation to Burning Man, and for these reasons while the TAZ has application to our understanding

of Burning Man it too is perhaps best understood as a ÷calendrical autonomous zone (or CAZ) accommodating numerous TAZs.ö

Conclusion

In this article I have looked at the origins and history of Burning Man, and offered an alternative interpretation as to its meaning. As it has become the focus of academic study in recent years there has been a tendency to analyze the event through the paradigm of liminality and *communitas* developed by Victor Turner. While this approach continues to be helpful in our understanding of Burning Man, I have sought additional theoretical frameworks in which to expand our understanding of this festival and intentional community, including the homeless mind thesis of Berger, Berger, and Kellner, later modified by Heelas and Woodhead. I have also considered Bey and his concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone.

In light of this article's discussion, the significance of Burning Man and other alternative cultural events as social and cultural phenomena in America and the Western world become evident. In the rejection of mainstream institutions, including traditional religious institutions, such phenomena function as new spiritual outlets, and with the breakdown of distinction between primary and secondary institutions, and given the preference of Burning Man participants for the experience of the festival and participation in this intentional community as the preferred reality in contrast to the ÷default world,ö this ÷middle wayö may indeed serve as a primary institution for increasing numbers of people. Functioning in this fashion, Burning Man becomes ÷a liminoidal counterworld of permission, [where] participants *experiment* with desired sources of authenticity as a means of (re)creating their identities.ö⁸⁸

The homeless mind and secondary institution thesis, coupled with the Temporary Autonomous Zone, provide us with additional conceptual tools to understand alternative cultural events like Burning Man that compliment Victor Turner's liminality and *communitas* paradigm prevalent in academic treatments of Burning Man.

¹Robert V. Kovintz and John F. Sherry, Jr., ÷Dancing on Common Ground: Exploring the Sacred at Burning Man,ö in Graham St. John, ed., *Rave Culture and Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Sarah M. Pike, ÷Desert Goddesses and Apocalyptic Art: Making Sacred Space at the Burning Man Festival,ö in Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy, eds., *Gods in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004).



²James G. Gilmore, "Divine Appointments: Patterns of Engagement Between Burning Man and Emerging Churches," M.A. Thesis, Fuller Theological Seminary, 2005.

³Lee Gilmore, "Theater in a Crowded Fire: Spirituality, Ritualization, and Cultural Performativity at the Burning Man Festival," Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 2005; Jeremy Hockett, "Reckoning Ritual and Counterculture in The Burning Man Community: Communication, Ethnography and the Self in Reflexive Modernism," Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico, 2004.

⁴Lee Gilmore and Mark Van Proyen, eds, *AfterBurn: Reflections on Burning Man* (Albuquerque, NM: The University of New Mexico Press, 2005).

⁵Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1967); *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974).

⁶Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, reprint edition (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).

⁷Helpful correctives to the popular mythology and stereotypes about the event may be found in Brian Doherty *This is Burning Man* (New York, Little, Brown & Company, 2004); and the Burning Man website, particularly the "Burning Man Timeline," available from http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/bm_timeline.html; accessed 2 April 2007, and "Media Myths," available from <http://www.burningman.com/press/myths.html>.

⁸Doherty, *This is Burning Man*, 36.

⁹For a brief listing and description of these values and principles see "Principles" at http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/principles.html.

¹⁰See "Regional Network" at <http://regionals.burningman.com/index.html>.

¹¹<http://eplaya.burningman.com>.

¹²http://www.burningman.com/blackrockcity_yearround/.

¹³This aspect of Burning Man has become somewhat controversial. John Law, one of the original founders of Burning Man, filed a lawsuit against two of his fellow Burning Man partners, including Larry Harvey and Michael Mikel (see John Law, "Does Burning Man Belong to Everyone?," <http://johnlawspeaks.wordpress.com/2007/01/09/does->

[burning-man-belong-to-everyone/](#)). The lawsuit questions the legitimacy of whether those who created a festival that began as an anarchist event can appropriately copyright certain aspects related to it. This lawsuit demonstrates the tension in the event's relationship with mainstream culture and its anarchist and countercultural origins.

¹⁴Erik Davis, "Beyond Belief: The Cults of Burning Man," in Gilmore and Van Proyen, eds. *AfterBurn: Reflections on Burning Man*, 15. Burning Man participants will no doubt take at least some exception to attempts at an academic analysis of the meaning of Burning Man. Indeed, one "Burner" became aware of this thesis through my blog posts (located at <http://johnwmorehead.blogspot.com>) and commented via email that the point of Burning Man is that it has no point. While I appreciate this view, it is not without its difficulties. The creators of and participants in Burning Man invest it with meaning, and to say, in essence, that the point of Burning Man is that it has no point, or the meaning of Burning Man is that it has no meaning, is self-contradictory. As this article will discuss, Burning Man involves a lot of meaning for many who participate in the festival and community.

¹⁵"Mission Statement" at http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/mision.html.

¹⁶"What is Burning Man?," http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/experience.html.

¹⁷Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*.

¹⁸Turner described various forms of *communitas*, and that which takes place at Burning Man might be considered a mixture of spontaneous (or existential) and ideological. Turner suggested that hippy communes were examples of spontaneous *communitas* (*The Ritual Process*, 132), and said that ideological *communitas* entails "the formulation of remembered attributes of the *communitas* experience in the form of a utopian blueprint for the reform of society" (*Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives* [New York, NY: Columbia University, 1978], 252).

¹⁹James Gilmore, "Divine Appointments: Patterns of Engagement Between Burning Man and Emerging Churches"; Lee Gilmore, "Theater in a Crowded Fire"; Lee Gilmore, "Fires of the Heart: Ritual, Pilgrimage, and Transformation at Burning Man," in Gilmore and Van Proyen, *AfterBurn: Reflections on Burning Man*; Jeremy Hockett, "Reckoning Ritual and Counterculture in The Burning Man Community"; Jeremy Hockett, "Participant Observation and the Study of Self: Burning Man as Ethnographic Experience," in Gilmore and Van Proyen, *AfterBurn:*



Reflections on Burning Man; Sarah M. Pike, "Desert Goddesses and Apocalyptic Art," in Mazur and McCarthy, eds., *God in the Details*; and Sarah M. Pike, "No Novenas for the Dead: Ritual Action and Communal Memory at the Temple of Tears," in Gilmore and Van Proyen, eds., *AfterBurn: Reflections on Burning Man*.

²⁰Lee Gilmore, "Fires of the Heart: Ritual, Pilgrimage, and Transformation at Burning Man," in Gilmore and Van Proyen, eds., *AfterBurn: Reflections on Burning Man*, 45.

²¹Lee Gilmore attributes the widespread popularity of Turner's ideas in the scholarly world and popular mainstream to Turner's ideas of liminality and ritual providing both the source of Burning Man's rituals and having "emerged out of a Western cultural, and popularly 'counter-cultural' context" ("Theater in a Crowded Fire," 151). While this is a possibility, it seems more likely, at least in the academic realm, that the Turnerian paradigm has quickly become a hermeneutical assumption.

²²Hockett, "Participant Observation and the Study of Self: Burning Man as Ethnographic Experience" in *AfterBurn*, 74.

²³*Ibid.*, 75.

²⁴See for example John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow, eds., *Contesting the Sacred: The Anthropology of Christian Pilgrimage* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), and John Eade and Simon Coleman, eds., *Reframing Pilgrimage: Cultures in Motion* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004).

²⁵Graham St. John, Graham, "Alternative Cultural Heterotopia: ConFest as Australia's Marginal Centre." Ph.D. diss., La Trobe University, 2000, 51.

²⁶One of Berger's more recent works reflects his skeptical analysis and affirmation of Christianity in light of modernity, in *Questions of Faith: A Skeptical Affirmation of Christianity (Religion and the Modern World)* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Limited, 2003).

²⁷Paul J. Fitzgerald, "Faithful Sociology: Peter Berger's Religious Project," *Religious Studies Review* 27, no. 1 (January 2001), 11.

²⁸Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).

²⁹*Ibid.*, 82; emphasis in original.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 184-5.

³¹*Ibid.*, 185.

³²Ibid., 187.

³³Ibid., 205.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, "Homeless minds today?" in Linda Woodhead, ed., *Peter Berger and the Study of Religion*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2002).

³⁶Ibid., 47.

³⁷Ibid., 48.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid., 49.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., 50-52.

⁴³Ibid., 53.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., 62.

⁴⁶Ibid. Interacting in part with Mircea Eliade's study of religious experience, Jeremy Hockett has reflected on Burning Man as a new religious movement. See Hockett, "Reckoning Ritual and Counterculture in The Burning Man Community: Communication, Ethnography and the Self in Reflexive Modernism." Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico. 2004, chapter III, "From Strange, to Weird, to (W)Hol(l)y Other: Conceptualizing Burning Man as a New Religious Movement."

⁴⁷Ibid., 70.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Hakim Bey is the pseudonym of Peter Lamborn Wilson. In the past he has worked for Autonomedia in New York, and at least as of 2000 he was "residing at the Dreamtime permaculture/hypermedia community in Wisconsin (St. John, "Alternative Cultural Heterotopia," 54, n 19).

⁵⁰Likewise, Burning Man founder Larry Harvey has been called "a notable TAZ/Immediatist engineer" as well (St. John, "Alternative Cultural Heterotopia," 239).

⁵¹St. John, "Alternative Cultural Heterotopia," 54.

⁵²<http://www.t0.or.at/hakimbey/taz/taz.htm>.

⁵³Hakim Bey, *TAZ: The Temporary Autonomous Zone – Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. 2nd ed (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2003).

⁵⁴Ibid., 97.



⁵⁵Ibid., 67.

⁵⁶Ibid., 96.

⁵⁷Ibid., 97.

⁵⁸Ibid., 107.

⁵⁹Ibid., xi.

⁶⁰Ibid., 107.

⁶¹St. John, "Alternative Cultural Heterotopia," 56; cf. Bey, *TAZ*, 108.

⁶²Ibid., 55.

⁶³Bey, *TAZ*, 130-1.

⁶⁴Ibid., 102-3; emphasis in original.

⁶⁵St. John, "Alternative Cultural Heterotopia," 56.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Graham St. John, ed., *Rave Culture and Religion*.

⁶⁸Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since the 1950s* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

⁶⁹Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁷⁰Ibid., 58.

⁷¹Ibid., 57.

⁷²Ibid., 59.

⁷³Lee Gilmore, "Theater in a Crowded Fire," 296-309.

⁷⁴Ibid., 44.

⁷⁵Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 203.

⁷⁶Gilmore, "Theater in a Crowded Fire," 48. The demographics of Burning Man might also be connected to another social movement called the Cultural Creatives (Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World* [New York, NY: Harmony Books, 2000]). Ray and Anderson argue that the Cultural Creatives represented "less than 5 percent of the population" in the 1960s, but that since that time they have grown steadily to "26 percent of the adults in the United States," representing some 50 million people who "have made a comprehensive shift in their worldview, values, and way of life — their *culture*, in short" (ibid., 4; emphasis in original). These Cultural Creatives are expressed in two different

segments, with the smaller Green group being “more secular and extroverted,” and the Core segment representing “the creative leading edge of the subculture” that includes “[a] huge proportion of published writers, artists, musicians, psychotherapists, environmentalists, feminists, alternative health care providers, and other professionals” (ibid., 14). This second segment is more active than the first, and is “concerned about both social justice and the development of an inner life” with an emphasis on “self-actualization, and spirituality” (ibid., 15), dovetailing with the discussion provided by Heelas and Woodhead in the development of the self and the outward “turn to life.” Given the clear overlap between the worldview and values of the Cultural Creatives with those of Burning Man, it is clear that Burning Man’s population finds resonance with a significant segment of Americans.

⁷⁷Jeremy Hockett, “Burningman and the Ritual Aspects of Play,” <http://www.msu.edu/~hockettj/Play.htm>, 1999.

⁷⁸Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 169; emphasis in original.

⁷⁹Ibid., 171.

⁸⁰Bey, *TAZ*, xi.

⁸¹The festal nature of Burning Man is significant, and important to understanding this phenomenon as we will see in Chapter Three in consideration of play theology and festival, but this should not be overestimated. As Jeremy Hockett has observed, “Burningman [sic] is certainly a “great party,” providing Bacchanalian spectacle and carnivalesque excess, but focusing so much on this most obvious aspect buries the social functionality and potential resonance of such events and communities; it obscures behind a veil of naïve idealism, sex, drugs, and raves, the need and desire for cultural space, for sacred space, for the product/performative rituals of enactment, attunement and Durheim’s “collective effervescence,” (“Burningman as Ethnographic Experience: Participant Observation and the Study of Self,” n.d., <http://www.msu.edu/~hockettj/Burningman%20as%20Ethnographic%20Experience.htm>).

⁸²Bey, *TAZ*, 104.

⁸³Doherty, *This is Burning Man*.

⁸⁴Bey, *TAZ*, 104.

⁸⁵James G. Gilmore, “Divine Appointments;” Lee Gilmore, “Theater in a Crowded Fire.”

⁸⁶St. John, “Alternative Cultural Heterotopia.” In my opinion, of the academic materials included in my bibliographical research, St. John’s work involves the most significant academic interaction with the significance of the *TAZ* to Burning Man. But while other scholars



interact with the concept, Turner's paradigm still provides the dominant theoretical lens. For example, Lee Gilmore includes a brief discussion of TAZ in her dissertation, but then quickly returns to Turner without ever reflecting critically on Turner from the insights of the TAZ, or how it might shed new interpretive light on an understanding of Burning Man ("Theater in a Crowded Fire," 198). This is unfortunate in that for alternative cultural events the TAZ holds immense explanatory power (St. John, "Alternative Cultural Heterotopia," 57). While it is true that performativity is immensely important in postmodernity, and the interpretation of this in light of Turner's paradigm remains helpful, nevertheless, a sole or major focus on this element as interpreted by Turner as an explanatory framework for Burning Man ignores other significant interpretive possibilities.

⁸⁷St. John, "Alternative Cultural Heterotopia," 58-59.

⁸⁸Ibid., 177; emphasis in original.