

PART III



*Contemporary Pilgrimage
and Communitas*



Chapter Ten

**Of Ordeals and Operas:
Reflexive Ritualizing at
the Burning Man Festival**

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At summer's end in the Black Rock Desert, over 35,000 revelers seeking an alternative to the ordinary will gather in this remote corner of northwestern Nevada for an eclectic annual celebration of art and fire known as Burning Man. For one week, this temporary community—termed Black Rock City—becomes the fifth largest metropolis in the state of Nevada before fading back into the dust, as all physical traces of this momentary habitation are completely eliminated at the festival's conclusion. Participants—collectively known as “Burners”—dwell in tents and imaginatively designed shelters laid out along a carefully surveyed system of streets that form an arch of concentric semicircles surrounding an open central area, where an extraordinary assortment of interactive and often monumentally scaled art installations are constructed. At the center of it all stands the “Burning Man” effigy itself—an imposing, forty-foot high wooden latticework figure atop a fanciful platform, lit with multicolored shafts of neon and filled with explosives designed to detonate in a carefully orchestrated sequence when it meets its fiery demise at the festival's climax. Ostensibly genderless and void of any stated “meaning,” this icon—affectionately known as “the Man”—is ultimately offered up in blazing sacrifice with each annual incarnation of the event. After spending up to a week camping in the desert, and perhaps looking forward to and preparing for this dramatic rite all year long, par-

ticipants greet the Burn with considerable fervor and enthusiasm. Once the flames have transformed the Man into a heaping pyre, the celebration rages throughout the night until daylight returns and the time comes to pack up for the inevitable return to the banal routines of everyday life—or, as some Burners term it, the “default” world.

This festal pilgrimage resonates in some fairly clear ways with Victor Turner’s (and Arnold van Gennep’s) understanding of the basic tripartite structure of passage rites. Participants leave behind their everyday lives and mundane contexts (separation), journey to a distant, unforgiving wilderness, and enter into the carnivalesque setting of Black Rock City (liminality), and often return home with a changed perspective or renewed understanding of themselves in relation to the world (aggregation). While numerous theories could be invoked to help interpret the significance of Burning Man’s rites, Turner’s in particular have a strong resonance with some aspects of this event.¹ Nor am I alone in my inclination to look to Turner in analyzing this event, as a number of other scholars (Hockett 2004, 2005; Kozinets 2002; Pike 2001) have also gravitated toward Turner’s ideas as a theoretical model by which to structure their analysis of this festival. However, this is not to say that Turner’s theories perfectly encapsulate Burning Man, let alone that they are universally applicable to such events. There are numerous ways in which “competing discourses” (Eade and Sallnow 1991: 5) clearly abound, as will be demonstrated below. Something more interesting, complicated, and reflexive is happening here.

I believe the congruity of Turner as a theoretical model for Burning Man is attributable not so much to any inherent or essential accuracy of these theories, although their explanatory power cannot be easily dismissed. Rather, this power stems in part from the fact that both Turner’s theories (at least in part) and Burning Man’s rituals have emerged from within a Western cultural, and popularly “countercultural,” context. Furthermore, having itself inherited a good deal from those counterdiscourses and their antecedents, Burning Man’s ritual structures also in part reflect the extent to which Turner’s ideas about liminality, *communitas*, and ritual process have themselves now filtered into popular culture, such that they have come to shape contemporary ideas about *what ritual is* and *how it should transpire*. With this dynamic in mind, this essay intends not only to demonstrate the applicability of Turner’s work to this festival, but to do so in a way that problematizes those theories, situating these ideas as reflexive discourses in which this festival participates. I base my assessment on nine years of participant observation within this festival community, including numerous formal and informal interviews, and an extensive online survey.

HISTORY AND OVERVIEW

The Burning Man festival began in 1986 as an impromptu gathering on a San Francisco beach when a man named Larry Harvey decided to construct a wooden effigy and burn it on the eve of the summer solstice.² Initially inviting a handful of others to join in, he was delighted to discover that once the hastily constructed eight-foot sculpture was ignited, the spectacle attracted onlookers from all up and down the beach. As Harvey tells the now oft-repeated tale, someone began to strum a guitar, others began to dance and interact with the figure, and a spontaneous feeling of community came upon those gathered. Harvey decided to repeat the event the following year, and with each subsequent iteration both the crowd and the sculpture grew substantially in size. By 1988, approximately 150–200 people joined in, and the figure, now thirty-foot tall, was officially dubbed the “Burning Man.” By 1990, with approximately 800 in attendance, nearby residents called in the local park police to halt the combustion of this now forty-foot effigy. As the crowd grew restless and unruly, it became clear that the event was no longer sustainable as a free-for-all beach party. Undaunted, Harvey teamed up with compatriots from the San Francisco Cacophony Society, a loose-knit confederation of self-proclaimed free spirits and pranksters who orchestrate absurd public performance “happenings” and private underground art parties, several of whom were in attendance at these initial beach Burns.³ Assisted by the organizational efforts of these “Cacophonists,” it was determined to take the Man out to the desert to meet its fiery destiny on the following US Labor Day weekend (that is, the first weekend of September).

Located approximately a hundred miles northeast of Reno, Nevada, the dominant feature of the Black Rock Desert is a 400-square mile prehistoric lakebed—an utterly flat, bone dry, hardpan alkali plain known as “the playa.” The climate here is harsh: temperatures in late summer can range from below forty to well over a hundred degrees Fahrenheit, fierce dust storms occasionally rage with winds as strong as seventy-five miles per hour, and dehydration is a constant threat in this intensely arid environment. Yet as the austere emptiness of the desert invites the imagination to populate its open terrain, participants produce a mind-boggling array of expressive projects, creating a visual contrast between emptiness and abundance. The desert also evokes deeply ingrained narratives of hardship, sacrifice, mystery and limitlessness that help set the stage for transformative experiences.

Fewer than one hundred participants made the trek out to the first desert iteration of Burning Man. As one of these original travelers later described the experience:

In Cacophony, we called these adventures a “Zone Trip.” The Zone was some other dimensional place, it could be the past, the future, something weird, it didn’t matter. We were going there, and we would challenge it and be better for it. . . . We all got out of our cars as one member drew a long line on the desert floor creating what we accepted as a “Zone gateway.” This was one of our Cacophony rituals, for the zone as we defined it took on many forms. . . . Today it was the base of a mountain range in Northern Nevada. We crossed the line and knew we were definitely not in Kansas anymore. (Brill n.d.)

In this initial rite of crossing a threshold into an “other dimensional Zone,” the metaphors of liminality are readily apparent. While Harvey and his team of organizers have consistently denied that Burning Man should be understood as constituting a “religious” movement, the traces of ritualization have long been present in such references.⁴ There are many more such parallels—some quite explicit, as we will see below.

In the decade and a half since this initial adventure, Burning Man has grown into an increasingly elaborate production with tens of thousands in attendance. Black Rock City features basic civic amenities such as professional medical and emergency services, an internal volunteer peacekeeping force called the Rangers, a central café, at least three daily newspapers, dozens of low-frequency radio stations, an array of interactive artworks and “theme camps” (which are creatively constructed and embellished encampments, functioning both as interactive entertainment venues for the festival populace and as hubs for their own extended communities), and hundreds of regularly serviced chemical toilets. This endeavor is organized by a year-round staff of about two dozen individuals assisted by over 3,000 volunteers, and is funded almost exclusively by sales of tickets ranging in price in 2007 from USD 195 to 350 each (depending on time of purchase).⁵

Yet while the ticket price required to support this elaborate production is high, participants and organizers alike embrace an *anticommodification* ethos. Vending is prohibited within the festival itself and all offers of corporate sponsorship are refused, in contrast to many other such events. The café, which sells only coffee and chai, functions as a core community hub and, along with an ice concession, is the only place where money is exchanged within Black Rock City limits. Organizers instead promote the idea of a *gift economy*, in which participants are encouraged to freely share their resources and creativity while also promoting *radical self-reliance*, requiring attendees to bring all of their own supplies including food, shelter, and water. Furthermore, many participants bring not only everything they need to survive for up to one week in a challenging desert setting, but also go to considerable expense and effort to transport the materials needed to create monumental art and imaginative performances. This is in turn tied to another primary mandate

encouraging *radical self-expression*. A related core principle is the injunction to *participate* in some way, with the corollary that there should be *no spectators*. Consideration for the environment necessitates another of the event's primary mandates—*leave no trace*. This entails scrupulously cleansing the playa surface of all physical traces of the event at its conclusion, down to the last pistachio shell and boa feather, which means that Black Rock City must be built from scratch each year. A final key value embraced within this context is *community*, as will be further examined below.

PARALLELS AND DISJUNCTURES

In my own quest to understand and analyze the ritual dimensions of Burning Man, I first looked to Turner's examination of Christian pilgrimages, in which he came to see these phenomena as neatly mapped to the tripartite structure of rites of passage, and as thereby eliciting the qualities of *communitas* and liminality that he saw as inherent within all such rites. Noting that the traditional liturgy and sacraments of his own Roman Catholic faith offered little in the way of the sort of liminal experiences that he identified in his fieldwork in Africa, Turner (in collaboration with his wife, Edith) looked to the phenomenon of pilgrimage in the Christian world, where he perceived the processes of liminality, antistructure, and *communitas* in action. In the ritualized journey and hardships encountered through a pilgrimage, they identified "some of the attributes of liminality," including:

release from mundane structure; homogenization of status; simplicity of dress and behavior; *communitas*; ordeal; reflection on the meaning of basic religious and cultural values; ritualized enactment of correspondences between religious paradigms and shared human experiences; emergence of the integral person from multiple personae; movement from a mundane center to a sacred periphery which suddenly, transiently, becomes central for the individual, an *axis mundi* of his faith; movement itself, a symbol of *communitas*, which changes with time, as against stasis which represents structure; individuality posed against the institutionalized milieu; and so forth. (Turner and Turner 1978: 34)

On first reading this passage, I was struck by the number of qualities that Burning Man similarly evinces. Yet on further consideration, I also began to recognize numerous ways in which Burners' experiences also *do not* exhibit these traits.

For example, in leaving behind the "default" world of their daily lives—and in framing their sense of separation with such language—Burners experience a *release from mundane structures*. In this journey from the urban en-

vironments that most call home to the remote and inhospitable wilderness of Nevada desert, Burners also move from *center* to *periphery*. The playa itself evinces an apparently otherworldly and “liminal” quality—with Black Rock City poised distinctly “betwixt and between” its raw nature and domesticated civic space. Burners have even adopted their own term that parallels the *aggregation* phase—decompression—a reference to the difficulty many participants experience in reorienting to their ordinary lives following the event. Yet the *separation* here is not total. As different as Burning Man or the playa itself may be from the “default” world, Black Rock City is a *para-urban* environment that consciously recreates a familiar “civic” infrastructure. In addition, many set up reasonably comfortable camps and also often travel in the company of friends and family, thereby diminishing the severity of separation.

The Turners also identified *ordeal* as among the core qualities of pilgrimage, and Burning Man generally does not disappoint in this regard. Participants must be prepared to endure a degree of physical hardship and moments of trial in the harsh environment of the desert. The shared experiences of extreme heat, cold, wind, and dust can serve as visceral reminders of the fragility and limits of this human body we inhabit. Burners also often commit enormous amounts of time, energy, and money well above the non-trivial expense of admission and supplies in order to create elaborate art projects and theme camps, and this “gift” to the community can become a kind of a personal sacrifice. However, these elements of adversity are also mitigated by many of the amenities of modern living—automobiles, RVs, ice chests, and the ability to truck in ample water being chief among them. In comparison, I think of the pioneers en route to the Oregon territory not much more than a century ago, who would occasionally make an ill-advised turn late in their truly arduous journeys and find themselves in the Black Rock Desert. Some died, while others sacrificed all but what was absolutely needed for survival, leaving their possessions alongside the trail in an attempt to avoid perishing.⁶ Yet for Burners, their trip to the playa is a choice—a vacation, even—and the technological advances of our contemporary world have made surviving, and even thriving, in this forbidding realm ultimately quite manageable (indeed, part of the fun of “playa living” can be to attempt to live as decadently as possible).

The collective emphasis on *community* invites a consideration of and comparison to Turner’s concept of *communitas*. Burners’ notion of “community” often references emotional sentiments of connectedness, egalitarianism, and unity that bear similarity to what Turner intended by “*communitas*.” A feeling of connection to others (or to an “other” realm) was referenced by numerous participants who reported experiences of social, emotional, and

cognitive liberation within this event, and the collective desire for this sense of “oneness” tends to peak during rites such as the Burn. This valorized sense of community, situated in critical opposition to social hegemonies, also includes a pervasive sense of egalitarian ideal and social leveling. There is a very real sense in which the playa becomes a level playing field—inviting the *homogenization of status*—as many of the standard roles individuals play in the “default” culture fall away at Burning Man by means of the shared experiences all must undergo in order to arrive at and survive in the desert (although in this context participants’ shared condition is more typically marked by flamboyant and eccentric dress and behavior, rather than simplicity). Burning Man also provides opportunities to *reflect on the meaning of basic religious and cultural values* as they relate to negotiations of self, others, identity, boundaries, community, nature, and spirituality. Roughly three-quarters of the hundreds of participants I queried in the course of my research affirmed that Burning Man had, in various ways, changed their life or perspective on these realms, supporting Turner’s assertion that through experiences of liminality individuals can undergo profound experiences of transformation.

Yet the parallel between the ideal of *communitas* and Burners’ sense of community is limited for on a pragmatic level the term “community” is at times employed here to refer simply to the physical dimensions of both person and place. Furthermore, Burning Man is deeply heterogeneous, as manifested in the multitude of ways in which participants frame and construct their experiences of the event. Indeed, while participants and organizers alike may strive to achieve an ideal of utopia on the playa by means of a carefully formulated ideology, participants in turn vocally criticize the event whenever it fails to live up to that ideology. In this critique, Burners express their desire for the utopian ideal of *communitas*, while simultaneously rendering the space a heterotopia—that is, Foucault’s concept of a space “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (1967)—through their polyvocal discourses on the event’s meanings and aspirations.⁷

For many, Burning Man may be a profoundly life-changing and perhaps spiritual experience, while for others it is only a grand party, an excuse for debauchery and a license for transgressive behavior that is disconnected from any overt sense of the sacred, or any occurrence of significant change in one’s life or perspective. Of course, these aspects need not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Indeed, many Christian pilgrimages were historically associated with simultaneously occurring festivals, which were often the real attraction for many pilgrims, as the Turners themselves noted (Turner and Turner 1978: 36). With its strong emphasis on playfulness and a healthy dose

of decadent display, the carnivalesque aspects of Burning Man can certainly be seen to function within that legacy.

Still, there remains an extent to which Burning Man participants inevitably replicate society's class structures and other differences within this context, thus undermining the ideal of *communitas*. For example, some can afford to travel and stay in RVs, others cannot; some have the resources to create large, technologically complex art projects, others do not. The expense of the event also renders the festival mostly inaccessible to those without sufficient middle-class incomes.⁸ Finally, there is also a differentiation in status at the event between more experienced Burners and first-time attendees, sometimes (semidisparagingly) called "newbies." These differences can become sources of tension on the playa.

In a similar vein, for many longtime attendees the once extraordinary experience becomes almost routine and the festival loses its initial enchantment. Even those who have experienced significant life or perspective adjustments through this festival often outgrow what was once a deeply radicalizing experience, as the opportunities to see the world and one's position in it from a different vantage point may not be ongoing. Many formerly avid participants have stopped attending or "burned out," and chosen to move on to new interests and other life experiences. Others who do keep attending often do so primarily for that sense of common community it provides: their time in Black Rock City becomes a "family reunion" of sorts in the opportunity to spend quality time with good friends. This phenomenon is related to the propensity of a growing number of longtime participants to criticize various aspects of the event as increasingly lacking in whatever quality of magic it was that initially, and repeatedly, drew them to the event in the first place. In this regard, we can see that Burning Man is what anthropologists John Eade and Michael Sallnow described as "a realm of competing discourses" (1991: 5). Burning Man evinces a plethora of diverse voices and attendant discourses that are deployed as participants seek to frame their individual experiences of the event. Most prefer to conceive of the event as "whatever you want it to be."

Burning Man has changed a great deal since its initial spontaneity and anarchistic flavor drew many to the event in its earlier days. It has had to negotiate the concerns of the State in its various institutionalized aspects and thereby become more safe and sustainable. This is in turn reflected in the tone of the event, down to its most basic rituals. For example, both the dynamic and aesthetic of the culminating rite of the Burn have changed noticeably over the years. What was once a simple and stark humanoid figure alive with flame against the night sky is now elevated on increasingly elaborate platforms (initially devised primarily as a way to increase visibility for the ever larger crowds) and accentuated with increasingly professional

and ostentatious pyrotechnic displays. There is also a qualitative difference between stepping across a physical threshold etched upon the surface of the playa, as the first attendees did, and waiting in a long line of cars to have one's ticket checked at the gate, as is now the shared experience of entry.

In this regard, Burning Man can be traced to Turner's differentiations between *spontaneous*, *normative*, and *ideological communitas* (1974: 169). At its inception in the late 1980s, friends and strangers *spontaneously* gathered on the beach to create and burn an effigy for the simple and immediate joy of doing it. More recently, as population growth has necessitated the ever more highly systematic, professionalized, and bureaucratic organization of the event, a *normative* structure has been created to support free expression at what was once a much wilder event. Finally, in promoting and performing a distinct and consciously articulated *ideology*—keynoted by the ideals of community, participation, radical self-expression, etc.—the event provides a quasi-utopian social model, in keeping with Turner's concept.

The successes and failures of Turner's theoretical model can in large measure be accounted for by his tendencies to broadly constitute ritual in general (and pilgrimage in particular) as fitting into a universal model. In this light, Turner's theories must be cautiously employed, for despite the relative ease with which his ritual theories are applicable to this festival, numerous other discourses clearly operate within Burning Man as participants seek to disrupt traditional and popular perceptions of community, culture, self, ritual, and spirituality. Furthermore, although the ideal of spontaneous communitas may have at times dissipated in this context, participants are thereby compelled to critique its absence, pointing to the extent to which communitas remains a fundamental *desire* within the dynamic and multifaceted experiences of this festival.

However, in addition to these generalized parallels and disjunctures, Turner's theories are also in evidence in a handful of specific ritual performances that have been features of this festival, in which references to the concept of liminality, the imposition of a threefold structure, and the adoption of terms from his theory of social dramas have been explicitly deployed. Most conspicuous among these was a performance piece held in 1999 called *Le Mystere de Papa Loko*, which was one among a series of ritualistic "operas" that were prominent features of the festival from 1996 to 2000.

THE OPERA

Beginning in 1993, San Francisco artist Pepe Ozan began sculpting conical towers at Burning Man from rebar and wire mesh, covering them with dried

mud from the playa's own clay-like surface, and dubbing them "lingams" after the sacred phallic symbols of the Hindu Lord Shiva. Each hollow spire would then be filled with wood and set aflame—forming a lovely glowing, crackled chimney. After a few years of progressively more complex and elaborate versions of these lingams, Ozan began to produce elaborate "operas" to accompany his sculptures. Each of these operas—which were scripted and scored by Ozan and a team of collaborators, and then enacted by dozens of participants who rehearsed for several weeks beforehand—flirted with a variety of religiously and culturally embedded symbols. The first was entitled *The Arrival of Empress Zoe* and loosely merged thematics from both the Byzantine Empire and Dante's *Inferno*. In 1997, *Temple of Ishtar* continued this tradition with a Mesopotamian "sacred marriage" motif, and in 1998, a Hindu theme was adopted for *The Temple of Rudra*.

Although participation in the operas was theoretically open to all who committed to rehearsals in advance, a clear boundary between audience and performers was maintained. This conflicted with Burning Man's primary ethos that one should be a *participant*, not a spectator, such that the operas became a topic of controversy among those who disliked being passive audience members in this context. Ozan responded by devising a way for some members of the audience to interact with the performances. Thus, for *Le Mystere de Papa Loko* in 1999—which adopted a Vodou theme—many audience members were guided into the performance space, where they passed through a "portal of life and death" between the structure's two towers (Ozan and Fülling 1999). In order to research Vodou for this production, Ozan and a few of his associates traveled to Haiti, where they met a Vodou priestess and priest and wound up unexpectedly being guided by these individuals into a week-long initiation rite. One of these travelers wrote of his experience: "Once the ceremony began, I was immediately struck [by] the beauty of the songs, dance, and drumming. The *sense of community was overwhelming*. Seems to me that one of the most important aspects of Voodoo is that it is the glue that holds the community together. Everyone is connected. All are one. Kinda like Burning Man" (Twan 1999). The emphasis here is the writer's own, and his description of this overwhelming sense of "community" seems to speak quite clearly of "communitas." The similarity noted in his narrative between this encounter and his experience of Burning Man is also noteworthy.

Taking their experiences in Haiti as inspirational fodder for that year's "opera," Ozan and his collaborator Christopher Fülling set about writing the script for *Le Mystere de Papa Loko*. They described the performance as a "rite of transformation" in which performers, or "devotees," as they were referred to in the script, passed through three familiar stages (Ozan and Fülling 1999). The first was called the *Requiem for Time*, in which devotees were

“taken out of the world of time, responsibility, and individuality.” The second stage was the *Breach*, described as a “liminal stage [in which] devotees are betwixt and between the positions assigned by life and society. This ambiguous state is likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to bisexuality and to darkness.” Finally, came the *Ordeal*: “In order to emerge from the liminal stage deprived of all information, the devotees rip off their clothes and throw them to the fire along with altars, flags and objects of adoration as their last step towards total liberation from the past and from their identities. They are reborn at the time of the origin of man, naked and bewildered ready to descend into their ancestral subconscious” (*ibid.*). With language and framework both unmistakably lifted from Turner’s work on liminality, tripartite rites of passage, and social dramas, *Le Mystere de Papa Loko* directly appropriated elements of this ritual theory into its structure, providing a particularly conspicuous example of the recursive mirroring of popular scholarly theories in this context.⁹

TURNER AND CULTURAL REFLEXIVITY

The above examples have not been provided simply as evidence that Turner was either spot-on accurate or dead wrong in his assessment that ritual dynamics necessarily hold to some universal structure. Yet while an idealized or narrowly applied notion of *communitas* breaks down quickly here—as there is a lot more going for people emotionally, experientially, and conceptually in this event—there remains a clear and intriguing resonance to be untangled here.

The first piece of the puzzle is that, on a metalevel, Turner was often writing more about his own cultural milieu than about the tribal African societies that were ostensibly his subject matter. Turner’s interpretations of indigenous rites were inseparably embedded in his own Western cultural worldviews, and thus at times inevitably imposed Western perspectives and frameworks onto the expressions and enactments of non-Western “others.” Furthermore, it is surely no coincidence that Turner was writing some of his most important work amid the turbulent social world of the 1960s and 1970s. While his data emerged primarily from his fieldwork with the Ndembu of Zambia, he also on occasion referred to pop-cultural themes of the day, such as “hippies” and “dharma bums,” as well as figures like Allen Ginsburg, Bob Dylan, and Malcolm X (Turner 1969: 113, 164, 1974: 168–169). These references are in turn reflected in his conceptualization of *communitas* as emanations of anti-authoritarian, antistructural, and subversive sites of free expression and love, an analogy that renders his theories particularly seductive.

The extent to which Turner drew on the contemporary “social dramas” of his day reflects the extent to which his theories were reflexively in dialogue with the world around him. I believe that a primary reason he perceived the existence of “liminoid” events pervading numerous cultural and historical contexts was that he was deeply intellectually and emotionally engaged with these concepts. Thus, he began to see the processes of liminality and communitas in all the social phenomena he studied, from the contemporary hippie sub-culture to Catholicism and its history, and these events in turn influenced his theoretical conceptualizations.¹⁰ Ritual theorist Ronald Grimes, a one-time student of Turner, also noted this cultural reflexivity, stating “some would say Turner absorbed it from his students in the 1960s; others would say his students of the 1960s absorbed it from him. The truth is probably that the relations between culture and counterculture are circular, or systematic” (Grimes 1990: 21). From this perspective, it can be seen that both scholarly and popular constructions of ritual’s “inherent nature” or its capabilities are reflexively constructed in resonance with particular understandings, visions, and issues that are being negotiated within the cultures from which they emerge.

The second piece of the puzzle was observed by another contemporary ritual theorist, Catherine Bell, who—in arguing that ritual is best understood as a category of analysis that has been specifically constructed, or “reified,” by Western scholars—noted that people are now looking ever more explicitly to ritual theorists like Turner for models by which to create “new” rituals, or what Grimes referred to broadly as “nascent ritualization” (1995: 60). As she stated:

There are few ritual leaders and inventors these days who have not read something of the theories of Frazer, van Gennep, Eliade, Turner, or Geertz, either in an original or popularized form. *Turner, in particular, by identifying a “ritual process” weaving its way through micro and macro social relations and symbol systems, has been the authority behind much American ritual invention. . . .* For modern ritualists devising ecological liturgies, crafting new age harmonies, or drumming up a fire in the belly, the taken-for-granted authority to do these things and the accompanying conviction about their efficacy lie in the abstraction “ritual” that scholars have done so much to construct (Bell 1997: 263–264, emphasis added).

We saw this popular recourse to the authority of ritual theory most clearly with Ozan’s *Papa Loko*. Yet even where this appropriation is not made so explicit, Turner’s ideas appear to have subtly filtered into popular culture so that they not only serve as apt descriptions of Burning Man, but have also helped to define the context in which such an event has taken shape. For example, the phrase “rite of passage,” introduced by Arnold van Gen-

nep back in 1908, now enjoys widespread use in the English vernacular. But in extending van Gennep's initial insights—and, I strongly suspect, being generally more widely read in most college classrooms—Turner was almost certainly a primary force behind the popularization of this term.

As Bell noted, Turner is not the only scholar whose theories have been popularized and adopted as models for ritualization. For example, Burning Man contains both implicit and explicit references to Eliadian concepts of sacred space and time. The Man itself can be perceived as an exemplar of Mircea Eliade's (1959) *axis mundi*—a symbolic manifestation of the sacred center of the cosmos and the location of hierophany, the eruption of the sacred into the profane world. Here, the Man forms the axis around which time and space are fixed—time because the Burn is generally perceived as the festival's climactic zenith, and space because the Man forms the event's locus, around which streets are laid in concentric semicircles and in relation to which most of the other art is placed. In 2003, this longstanding correspondence was at last explicitly acknowledged when the Man's central locale was labeled “axis mundi” on a Black Rock City map.¹¹

Some of the correspondences between Burning Man and ritual theories are due in part to director Larry Harvey's conscious efforts to imbue the event with both subtle and overt ritual intentionality. In this endeavor, he carefully designs “annual themes”—such as *The Inferno* (1996), *The Wheel of Time* (1999), *The Floating World* (2002), and *Beyond Belief* (2003)—for each iteration of the event. Ostensibly advanced in order to furnish some common ground for the event's artistic expressions, Harvey draws upon various cultural and psychological theories in conceiving and articulating these themes. A highly intelligent and well-read individual, Harvey has named scholars such as Mircea Eliade, William James, and Heinz Kohut (among others) as special influences on his thinking about how to frame this festival from year to year. However, Harvey had not read Turner until two of Turner's sons, Rory and Alex, actually contacted the Burning Man organization some years back in order to find out whether or not the festival had been in any way intentionally modeled after the elder Turner's theories.¹² Unfortunately, neither Harvey nor the Turners could recall further details of this encounter. But this story serves to underscore the ready association of this event with Turner's most compelling ideas.

CONCLUSIONS

Turner's theories can be criticized for their tendency to universally ascribe qualities such as liminality or *communitas* to rites of passage or pilgrimages,

and for giving insufficient attention to the ways in which these frameworks may—at various times and in various contexts—be inapplicable. Yet despite the importance of viewing it through a critical lens, Turner’s work remains seminal for the study of ritual and performance, as the existence of this volume demonstrates. In this regard, part of my project here has been to recover some of Turner’s fundamental insights by situating them within more nuanced contexts and discourses. Certainly, if one tries to apply many of his ideas in straightforward or universalistic ways, they rapidly break down as the complex and polyvocal reality of human cultural expression emerges. But clearly in Burning Man, the concepts of *communitas* and liminality are important aspects of the discourse—that is, they are among the qualities that participants most frequently reference in framing their experiences of this event—even as other, “competing” discourses are also at play.

By tracing some of the elements of Burning Man that both reflect and trouble Turner’s theories, this chapter has sought to unpack both how and why Turner shows up in general and specific ways in this context. Because on a metalevel Turner was saying as much, if not more, about Western culture in general and popular “countercultures” in particular, his ideas often speak in visceral ways to those embedded in those contexts. Thus, even where the aspects of Burning Man that invite comparison to Turner’s theories have been unconsciously adopted, these scholarly frameworks aptly, reflexively, and dialogically help to explain some of the appeal and transformative power of this festival. Burning Man bears witness to the recursive absorption of ritual theory in contemporary quests to create unconventional or innovative rites that are ideologically positioned outside of more traditional religious contexts. In this regard, we can see that theories of religion, ritual, and culture not only reflect, but also *shape* our cultural conceptions of what “ritual” should be, thus serving to outline the context in which an event like Burning Man comes to life as an alternative to conventional religion.

NOTES

1. For other scholarly perspectives on Burning Man see Gilmore and Van Proyen (2005), and Gilmore (forthcoming).
2. Harvey credits his friend Jerry James, who withdrew after 1991, with cofounding Burning Man. A great deal more about the history of this festival can be found in Doherty (2004).
3. For more on the Cacophony Society, see <http://www.cacophony.org>; accessed 17 March 2005.
4. It is also worth noting that, despite the rejection of the term “religion,” the Burning Man organization does explicitly describe its mission as, in part, to

- “produce positive spiritual change in the world.” See http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/mission.html; accessed 15 April 2005.
5. A minimal portion of Burning Man’s revenue derives from sales of products such as t-shirts and calendars, as well as a percentage of proceeds from independently produced books and videos. For more on the organization’s finances, see <http://afterburn.burningman.com>; accessed 30 January 2005. For analyses of Burning Man’s paradoxical relationship to the market see Kozinets (2002) and Kozinets and John Sherry (2005).
 6. The Black Rock Desert was declared a National Conservation Area in 2000, in part as a recognition of the historical value of these emigrant trails. See <http://www.nv.blm.gov/Winnemucca/blackrock/NCA%20Act%20of%202000.pdf>; accessed 20 February 2005.
 7. For a more in-depth analysis of Turner’s concepts of *limen* and *communitas* as modified by Foucault’s heterotopia, see Graham St John (2001).
 8. The Burning Man organization does make small number of low-cost “scholarship” tickets available.
 9. The introduction of this language into the script can be credited to Christopher Fülling, a professional opera singer and director who holds a BA in anthropology, and a MFA for which he studied with a former student of Richard Schechner, Mady Schutzman. Personal communication with Christopher Fülling, 27 March 2005.
 10. This likely accounts for a certain tendency toward circularity in some of his theoretical constructions—i.e., “these phenomena illustrate my theory of *communitas* because they exhibit features of *communitas*.”
 11. See http://www.burningman.com/themecamps_installations/bm03_theme.html; accessed 23 October 2003.
 12. Personal communication with Larry Harvey, 8 January 2005. Also personal communication with Rory Turner and Alex Turner, 22 March 2005.

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