Burning Man’s Gift-Driven, Event-Centred Diaspora

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This article arrives on the heels of a pilot project conducted in early 2014 at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) investigating the translation of Burning Man’s Ten Principles in Europe. Mounted in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert every August, Burning Man is the world’s largest temporary city—Black Rock City—which is a unique event-culture governed by founding principles emphasizing an immediate, participatory, and non-commercial ethos. For over a quarter of a century, Burning Man has grown from a loosely affiliated group of disenfranchised Bay Area artists into a non-profit public benefit organization with a global mission. After three decades of the event’s operation, in 2014 the Burning Man Project nurtures a worldwide diasporic movement consisting of affiliates in 30 countries hosting dozens of Regional Events translating the city’s Ten Principles. This movement demonstrates proclivity towards gifting, volunteering, resource-sharing, collaborative art projects, and other spontaneous behaviours emically coded as evidence of an empowering “do-ocracy”. Based on a preliminary socio-cultural investigation of the transposition of the Burning Man ethos among EuroBurners, and illuminating an exemplary global event-culture emerging at the intersection of leisure, religion, and counterculture, the article offers a preliminary statement on the diasporisation of Burning Man.

VARIOUSLY IDENTIFIED AS AN ARTS FESTIVAL, UTOPIAN EXPERIMENT, ‘EPHEMEROPOLIS’, ETC., MOUNTED IN NEVADA’S BLACK ROCK DESERT EVERY AUGUST, BURNING MAN IS THE WORLD’S LARGEST TEMPORARY CITY. FEATURING PUBLIC WORKS, ZONING POLICIES, LAW ENFORCEMENT, MEDICAL AND LEGAL FACILITIES, WASTE MANAGEMENT, AS WELL AS MANY OTHER SERVICES, INCLUDING NEWSPAPERS, RADIO AND AN OFFICIAL CENSUS TEAM; DESIGNED WITHIN A GRID OF RADIAL AND CONCENTRIC STREETS ORGANISED AROUND A STANDING FIGURE CALLED “THE MAN” AND ANOTHER PIVOTAL TEMPORARY SCULPTURE, THE TEMPLE, BLACK ROCK CITY IS GOVERNED BY FOUNDING PRINCIPLES EMphasizing AN IMMEDIATE, \[1] MAUSS stands for Mouvement anti-utilitariste en sciences sociales, founded in 1981, and honors Marcel Mauss’ contribution to social theory. The present website, as well as the Revue du MAUSS semestrielle, an interdisciplinary social sciences journal, are its dissemination platform. The MAUSS is committed to a critique of utilitarian epistemologies and explores the possibilities that a theory of gift, derived from Mauss’ seminal Essay on Gift, open as concerns transcending the structuring opposition between holistic and individualistic methodologies and articulating structure and agency.

[2] See a summary of responses to Part One of the survey at
Participatory, and non-commercial ethos.

Defined by founder Larry Harvey in 2004, these Ten Principles are: Gifting, Radical Inclusion, Participation, Radical Self-Reliance, Radical Self-Expression, Leave No Trace, Civic Responsibility, Communal Effort, Decommodification, and Immediacy (Burning Man Ten Principles). Unique among Burning Man's characteristics is its philosophy of personal accountability, its gifting practices and participatory ethos, as evident in a vast network of volunteer activities, art projects, co-created rituals, and community “theme camps”. While a theme is nominated for each annual event by Harvey and camps emerge to embody this theme, the peak expression of the event, where “Burning” gather to observe the burning of “The Man” on Saturday night, holds no official defined meaning.

Conceived in San Francisco in 1986 and migrating to Nevada in 1990, each year this week-long event attracts growing numbers of self identified “Burning”, with 70,000 people inhabiting Black Rock City in 2014. But while pilgrims are drawn to this quintessential “do-ocracy” in the desert, Burning Man has grown into a global movement. In 2012 almost one quarter of BRC habitues were non-US residents, with almost 10% hailing from Europe. For over a quarter of a century, Burning Man has grown from a loosely affiliated group of disenfranchised Bay Area artists into a non-profit public benefit organization with a global mission.

Over its history, Burning Man has become the subject of considerable attention from social and cultural researchers. Despite its proliferation, researchers have rarely cast their gaze beyond the original event, and studies of the translation, modification and adaptation of the Ten Principles are largely absent. This article draws on the results of preliminary research conducted with research grant support from the University of Fribourg (Switzerland) in early 2014, and which constitutes the first formal research of the diasporisation and efflorescence of Burning Man. The pilot project initiated a socio-cultural investigation of the transposition and translation of the Burning Man ethos among EuroBurning. This research has shown that this cultural movement is at the leading edge of contemporary global event-cultures that have emerged at the intersection of leisure and religion, consumerism and counterculture. As this article illustrates, the project demonstrated that the EuroBurner movement is a disparate echo of the mother event in Nevada whose principled flourishing warrants further comparative ethnographic study.

BURNING MAN AND ITS ETHOS

Burning Man has generated considerable appeal among academics, and has been excavated with a variety of methodological tools from manifold disciplinary angles to numerous ends. For example, the event has been mined for a variety of insights for studies of religion, art history, sociology, psychology, cultural geography, anthropology, architecture and marketing (e.g. Wray 1995; Pike 2001; Kozinets 2002; Chen 2009, Gauthier 2004a, 2011; McRae et al. 2011; St John 2014a). The event has been poached for data deployed as apologia for diverse agendas, from countercultural (Doherty 2004; Davis 2005) to post-Christian missiology (Morehead 2011). Ethnographers have reported on the special significance for attendees, many behaving more like pilgrims than punters, worshippers than spectators, devoted participants than consumers of entertainment (Gilmore 2006, 2008, 2010). Journalists have charted the event’s “neotribalism”, tracing its roots in West Coast festival culture (Davis 2009), or reporting its “renaissance” (Jones 2011). Historians have recognised the event’s indebtedness to radical art movements native to the San Francisco Bay Area (Evans et al. 2013), or understood it as an expression of the frontier mentality integral to the American character (Diehl 2010). And management organisation scholars champion its principles in the design of “whole person experiential training models” (Hoover 2008, 2014). At the same time, media profiling of the event has grown dramatically in recent years, with reports ranging from moral guardianship, to challenges to commodification (Bilton 2014), to genuine interest in the event’s social architecture and its wider movement propensity (Wachs 2014). Yet despite Burning Man’s efflorescence beyond the Black Rock Desert, the growing tide of scholarship, and media attention, the gaze of social researchers has rarely been cast beyond the main event.
Among our chief concerns is whether there is an identifiable ethos governing Burning Man and to determine how such an ethos might manifest in the event’s wide and varied proliferation. It appears that the event’s gifting ethos—allowed expression as a result of on-site decommodification and the ban of advertising—is foundational to relationships formed among participants. The proclivity towards volunteering, non-coercive contributions, random acts of kindness, resource-sharing, collaborative art projects, and other spontaneous behaviours emically coded as evidence of an empowering “do-it-yourself” and “do-ocratic” culture, form the grounds upon which citizens of Black Rock City distinguish themselves as “Burners” outside of Burning Man. A common perception among participants is that Burning Man, i.e. the Burning Man community or the _playa_ itself (the landscape of the Black Rock Desert), has _gifted_ them this identity, which is received as a revelation holding a lasting influence over beneficiaries. In their commitment to relive, prolong, and promote the experience, these gifted legates appear to have grown dedicated to reformulating this defining characteristic in westernized regions worldwide.

Gifting is among Burning Man’s Ten Principles, where it is stated that “Burning Man is devoted to acts of gift giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value” (Burning Man Ten Principles). In our understanding, the gift appears as the structuring principle at the core of Burning Man. But while gifting is axiomatic, its centrality has been continually overlooked in scholarship, although this oversight seems less apparent among media commentators (see Jaenike 2014). While the gift is a central concept of socio-anthropology since Marcel Mauss’ seminal _Essay on the Gift_ (1950), a thorough analysis of Burning Man from this perspective is required. The perspectives here are twofold, empirical and analytical. On the first hand, the practices and dynamics of gift-giving (and receiving) must be given due attention, both within the mother-event and its _playa_ proliferation on “The Grand Playa”. Faced with the dissemination of Burning Man and its principles within European and worldwide countercultural networks, our particular interest here lies in how the gift is re-actualized in the concrete practices which re-interpret the Ten Principles beyond the ephemeral setting of Black Rock City. Second, gift theory, as it has been developed within the networks of the MAUSS[1], can provide a heuristic suited to understanding contemporary event-centred cultural phenomena and their religious, economic, political and social dimensions, while shedding light on the complex interplays of identity and belonging today.

**The Global Mission of the Burning Man Project**

When Burning Man became a non-profit public benefit organisation in January 2014, Larry Harvey announced that “after 24 years of tending our garden in the desert, we now have the means to cultivate its culture worldwide” (Burning Man 2014). The non-profit officially known as the Burning Man Project (BMP) is today a globalized phenomenon that has directly touched hundreds of thousands of people worldwide, not only through journeys to Black Rock City from North American and international points of origin, but through the transposition and mediation of this artistic, social, and cultural experiment. BMP founding member Marian Goodell has stated that Burning Man is today committed to “expanding the values born of the playa—by thinking of the world itself as The Grand Playa. What transformational in Northern Nevada for one week a year can, with the right tools, be manifested everywhere” (Burning Man 2014). And the BMP has recently scaled to affect this expansion, a consequence of the efforts of a network of non-profit and volunteer groups, including the Black Rock Arts Foundation and the disaster relief group, who have collaborated to take the Burning Man ethos to the world. The BMP provides infrastructure to support local communities in applying the Ten Principles through arts, civic involvement, and educational programs. In a 2011 press release, it was stated that the BMP had a vision “to bring experiences to people in grand, awe-inspiring, and joyful ways that lift the human spirit, address social problems and inspire a sense of community and cultural engagement” (Hanusa 2011). Integral to this approach is the BMP’s stated mission to support Regional Events and their communities in regions around the world.

In its commitment to foster a global movement, in 2007, the BMP initiated the annual Burning Man Global
Leadership Conference in Oakland, California, for contacts in the world Regional Network. This movement commitment is replicated in Black Rock City where the BMP’s Everywhere pavilion has been a centre for world Regional Network participants to communicate their year-round activities. Since 2011, Black Rock City has also hosted the Circle of Regional Effigies (or CORE) Project, a collaborative exhibition of sculptures from world regional groups. As is stated at the CORE Facebook page “CORE teams work together throughout the Spring and Summer to create art that celebrates their regional identities and showcases the collaborative artistic efforts of their community members” (CORE). Such projects are designed to enable participants from regional communities, including those in emergent regions, to express local initiatives on the global Burner stage. In 2014, the BRC arts theme Caravanserai exemplified the BMP’s desired transnationalisation of Burner culture.

Following the first Regional Event, Austin’s Burning Flipside and its temporary city Pyropolis (which emerged in 1997), a network of regional contacts have been responsible for transposing Black Rock City elsewhere around the United States and the world. The annual post-Burn Decompression held in San Francisco since 1999, and similar events like Recompression in Vancouver and those held in London, Tokyo, Moscow, Ireland, Italy, and elsewhere would permit the ease of return from the desert pilgrimage, enable continuing associations and introduce the event ethos to novices across North America and worldwide.

From over 30 State Regionals in the US to, among others, Ontario’s Burning Mooseman, Spain’s Nowhere, France’s Burning Night, Sweden’s The Borderland, South Africa’s Afrikaburn, New Zealand’s Kiwiburn, Australia’s Burning Seed, and Israel’s Midburn, over the last decade over 50 Regional Events have emerged worldwide. While official Regional Events operate in compliance with Burning Man’s founding Ten Principles, these events are not straight-forward exports or simulacra, since each appears to offer a unique interpretation of the operating formula. Many more communities are inspired by Burning Man, with their gatherings influenced by the model of Black Rock City. Around the world, Burners maintain contact and promote the social ethos of Burning Man using the Internet (e.g. blogging and social networks), facilitating the virtual perpetuity of Black Rock City and its growing network of satellite communities year-round. This global network includes affiliates in approximately 30 countries involved in civic engagement, art, social enterprise and affiliated events.

This movement is by-and-large Western, with Europe the geographical region where the movement is most strongly represented outside North America (Burning Man Regional). As of 2015, there are annual European Regional Events in France, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Latvia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK, along with Burning Man inspired events and CORE projects in Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Holland, Lithuania, Netherlands, Russia and elsewhere. At the same time, Black Rock City hosts EuroBurner enclaves and theme camps that grow in size and population year after year. With the rapid increase in Regional Contacts in Europe in recent years, and with the growth of the EuroBurner network, the Burning Man Project held its first European Leadership Summit in Berlin Feb 7-9, 2014, with the second Summit to be held in Amsterdam in Feb 2015.

Details have emerged on the dissemination of Burning Man’s inclusive community logic in collectivities beyond its geographic and temporal boundaries (Chen 2011); quality and innovation experts figure how the Ten Principles can catalyse radical innovation in organizations, especially higher education (Radziwill and Benton 2013); sociologists celebrate the impact of a “living model of commons-based peer production” on the San Francisco Bay Area’s new media industries like Google (Turner 2009: 91); and journalists field reports on the status of Burner ‘neotribalism’ flowing between San Francisco and Black Rock City (Jones 2011). But Burning Man movement research remains in its early phase. The current project contributes to the study of centrifugal developments by tracing the event’s transnational adaptation (in Europe) in the light of studies addressing the social impact of ubiquitous events (see Bennett et al. 2014; Richards et al. 2013), the role of post-traditional festivals in the “cultural public sphere” (Giorgi et al. 2011), and religion in the context of a hyper-mediatised and globalising consumer culture (Gauthier 2014b).
We recognise that a chief predicament in Burning Man scholarship is that the phenomenon eludes circumscription. There is telling evidence for a conceptual short-fall in existing models of analysis from any of the disciplines through which Burning Man has been configured. In our own attempt to overcome this conceptual crisis, Burning Man is recognised as a unique globalising event-cultural movement. Event-cultures are ubiquitous in contemporary social and cultural life (see St John 2014; Gauthier 2014a). These are popular cultural movements for whom the event is not an occurrence held in support of an external cause, but is itself the principal concern of the organisation, and the raison d’être of its membership whose commitment to reproduce and reconvene the event is a lasting motivation. These optative, participatory, event-centred movements—that which have been identified as “neotribes” (Maffesoli 1996), “elective centres” (Cohen, Ben-Yehuda, and Aviad 1987), and “superliminal” cultures (St John 2015)—are far from mere leisure cultures, as they provide their memberships identification, belonging, and a sense-of-the-sacred independent from traditional sources (e.g. church, state, family) (see St John 2012a).

Much work remains to be performed delineating the contours of these movements, but in participatory event-cultures where identity is defined not by one’s beliefs and ideals, but in one’s actions, where recognition and merit derive from one’s immediate collaborative experience vis-a-vis others, we recognise how event-cultures can be distinguished from cultural events, where faith, ethnicity, and nationality are typically definitive. Eliciting a wide raft of alternative lifestyle practices and countercultural responses, event-centred movements are illustrative of non-traditional diasporas (Brubaker 2005), like that identified in global music and dance cultures (D’Andrea 2007; St John 2012b, 2013, 2014b).

Such events may be more accurately designated countercultural diasporas. This phrase is appropriate to us in the light of the history of Burning Man, how it came to be, why it takes place where it does, the populations who have gravitated there (and call it “home”), and the cultural and political forces with which it has contended and against which it has survived. It makes sense in terms of the generations of experimentalists who have built Black Rock City, and those who have dispersed to form “regional events” and enduring communities, first in North America, and then worldwide, including Europe, Australia and Israel. Cues are taken here from D’Andrea’s (2007) study documenting the movement of a privileged, experimental, hypermobile, and largely European (though not exclusively), “freak diaspora” through such sites as Ibiza and Goa. In this “negative diaspora”, rather than ethnicity, faith, and racial oppression, dispersion is characterised by “a fellowship of counter-hegemonic practice and lifestyle. Other than making one’s soul the Promised Land, expressive individualism opposes diaspora as a basis of personal identity” (D’Andrea 2007: 13–14). Our research indicates that the Burning Man movement can similarly be cast as an expression of such an anti-diaspora diaspora.

Exemplified by Burning Man’s principles of “Radical Inclusion,” and “Radical Self-Expression”, not homogeneous or unequivocal, these cultures are ecumenical, cosmopolitan, and heterotopian (Hetherington 2000; St John 2001, 2014c), attracting disparate stakeholders who parlay over the definition and purpose of the event. While these voluntary conclaves and ephemeral societies enable habitués to derive meaning and authenticity from shared forms of consumption (Gauthier 2008a, 2012, 2014), they enable temporary experiments in cohabitation holding significance beyond the confines of the event, even if only to cultivate and optimise future events. As a transnational phenomenon that is immediate and co-created, embodying a cooperative legacy that is internally heterogeneous, Burning Man is an expression of this social impulse demonstrating appeal among middle class populations in Europe (and worldwide) (Gauthier 2012).

These cooperative event-centred gift cultures are, moreover, unique realms of religious expression, for those who typically espouse non-religion. Sociologists of religion and religious studies scholars who have studied contemporary alternative religious and post-secular sensibilities that are stridently non- or even anti-religious have deployed approaches that serve to understand this paradox. Commentators identify a religion that is spiritual (Heelas 2008), a spirituality that is not religious (Fuller 2001), an occulture that is
popular (Partridge 2004), and a religion of no religion (Kripal 2007). Since they provide opportunities for expression of religiosity outside of traditional religious frameworks (Gauthier 2004a, 2004b; Gauthier and Ménard 2001; Gauthier and Perreault 2008; St John 2004, 2012a; St John and Baldini 2012), and as they appear to enable their participants to derive meaning and value from shared commitments to alternative consumption practices (Gauthier 2013), global event-centered cultural movements represent increasingly popular social experiments. As an event-culture that is optimally ritualized albeit non-dogmatic, spectacular yet participatory, temporary yet ubiquitous, a city more than a festival, Burning Man may exemplify the leading edge of religiosity without religion characterizing middle class lifestyles in contemporary consumer driven and neoliberal pressured democracies (Gauthier, Martikainen and Woodhead 2013; Gauthier and Martikainen 2013).

**BURNING PROGENY**

In early 2014, a pilot research project enabled expanded comprehension of the scope of the European Regional Network. The project, Burning Progeny: The European Efflorescence of Burning Man, was supported by a Research Project Development Grant and a Research Pool Grant from the University of Fribourg, Switzerland. In consultation with BMP staff, a survey was designed in collaboration with the Black Rock City Census team and promoted on Burning Man’s e-newsletter Jack Rabbit Speaks. Attracting 286 respondents, the survey yielded statistical data on EuroBurner demographics and identity, elicited qualitative responses on participant experience with the Ten Principles and Regional Events in Europe more widely, and secured the cooperation of key networkers, innovators, and spokespeople in on-going research.[2]

Among the survey’s key findings in support of the project’s aim to delineate a “religion beyond religion” was that, while 72.1% (199) of respondents indicated that they “do not belong to a religion”, 42.8% (119) were “spiritual but not religious”. While a detailed evaluation of the survey’s qualitative responses will be written up in future reports and publications where appropriate, it is worth stating at this nascent juncture that respondents offered sometimes detailed accounts of the translation of founding principles, and their in/appropriateness and in/applicability in a variety of European contexts. A diversity of views were expressed concerning the adaptation of Burning Man in Europe. For a significant proportion of respondents, Burning Man is reported to be a catalyst, inspiring participants to be more “creative,” “sustainable,” “caring,” “sharing” upon their return from Black Rock City. But while EuroBurners become purposed to practise the ethos of Burning Man in the “default” world and preserve its format in local events, others express reservations about the scale of the event, the financial costs of travel, exclusivity, dogma, and the event’s reputed ecological unsustainability. With some respondents questioning whether BRC, or its Ten Principles, remain relevant in the European context, the survey exposed tensions and partisanship in the research population. It is our intention to explore the nature and character of these tensions in the future through sustained multi-sited research.

The Burning Progeny pilot project found that Burning Man is currently flourishing in its regional development in Europe, and found indications that this efflorescence is not a “cookie cutter” duplication of the original, but illustrates creative, practical, and diverse appropriations shaped by personal, cultural, national, and geographical factors. While inspired by the prototype, progeny events modify Burning Man according to the life histories, cultural backgrounds, local circumstances, skills and innovations of its co-creators. This study then anticipates that the event’s defining cultural-economic legacy will be re-envisioned in local reiterations populated by stakeholders who, while having a common cause in Black Rock City, possess varying backgrounds, motivations, and expectations. Further comparative ethnographic research, including interviews with regional event leads and community spokespersons, is essential to determine the direction of this development. Investigating the adaptation of the Burning Man ethos (i.e. its Ten Principles) in Europe (and indeed around the world) promises important insights on Burning Man as a diasporic event-centered movement—i.e. a movement at the nexus of leisure, religion and counterculture—and the role of event-cultures more generally.
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