



The Pilgrimage of a Burner: Motivations behind the Global trek to the Nevada Wasteland

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ABSTRACT

While Burners themselves do not label the Burning Man site as a religious pilgrimage, I argue Burners have many motivations to traverse this desolate location in the Nevada desert from a religious and anthropological studies' perspective. By conducting research on this unique, sacred journey, I examine their main motivations to travel across the U.S. and the globe to this site. Do they travel for religious or spiritual purposes, individual interpretation or communal dependence/unity, admiration for intricate art sculptures and creativity, or has Burning Man become an outlet for the ultimate party? I decipher the complexities that constitute the Burning Man experience and foster understanding for why Burners migrate to this dusty wasteland. I examine three prominent religious studies' theorists, focused on pilgrimage, and compare their theories to three recent pilgrimage scholars who studied Burning Man as a pilgrimage site. In concluding my argument, I apply the anthropological method of ethnography by using my cousin's personal account of working and journeying to Burning Man to support my thesis. My audience is primarily those interested in pilgrimage studies, anthropology, and sociology, but is not limited to these fields. By examining Burning Man, I contribute to the field of religious-pilgrimage studies and social sciences by stating that pilgrimage can exist by functioning and manifesting outside the constraints of organized religious movements, expanding the view of religious pilgrimages. Pilgrimage studies are applicable outside major religious pilgrimage sites for structured belief systems. I seek to understand from an anthropological view why Burners, a distinct and diverse group, journey to this site and create a temporary city only to destroy it and return to that locale yearly. My research is a more holistic interpretation of the Burning Man pilgrimage site, proving that social scientists can study through multiple lenses.

WHAT IS BURNING MAN?



Burning Man is an American pilgrimage site which takes place on the "playa", a vast uninhabited landscape located at the "ancient Black Rock Desert lakebed" situated close to Reno, Nevada (Feldman 2013:17). The first Burning Man gathering occurred on the eve of the 1986 Summer Solstice (Gilmore 2010:17). Burning Man as a pilgrimage still continues to this day during the preceding week before Labor Day weekend (Gilmore 2010:1). Burning Man is not the average, counterculture, art festival like Bonnaroo. Pilgrims come from all over the United States and the world to this locale and form an authentic, impermanent metropolis known as Black Rock City which becomes the "world's largest intentional community" (Rohrmeier and Bassett 2015:23). Black Rock City is so expansive that it is estimated that 50,000 pilgrims known as Burners journey to the desert every summer so as to experience this unique, artistic phenomenon (Feldman 2013:17). The city itself extends two miles in length and can be viewed from outer space with the use of satellite imagery (Gilmore 2010:1). Burners build extravagant art constructions and monuments at Black Rock City, but what makes Burning Man entirely unique is that the pilgrims leave no trace of the city, located in the Nevada desert after they leave each year. This means that Burners either burn all of their works of art (and other objects which they brought out to the playa) or they take their provisions back home. The leave no trace principle is imperative for the Burners in that it gives them the ability to protect the natural environment in which they utilized during their stay at Black Rock City. For Burners, the leave no trace precept is not the only ethic which the pilgrims have to observe. In fact, Burners adhere to ten principles while residing in Black Rock City. These rules include: "radical inclusion, gifting, de-commodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leave no trace, participation, and immediacy" (Gilmore 2010:38). What makes Burning Man inherently distinct from any other counterculture site or movement is that on the last day of the Burning Man pilgrimage, the Burners burn a 40 foot male effigy at the center of the city (Gilmore 2006:125). Burners continue this burning rite every single year.



WHY DO BURNERS JOURNEY TO BLACK ROCK CITY?

1. INDIVIDUAL INTERPRETATION OR COMMUNAL DEPENDANCE :

Black Rock City requires a tremendous amount of physical work for the pilgrimage environment to unfold. The pilgrimage in itself involves the "makings of many peoples' labors and bodies and imaginations and collective efforts" (Rossin 2010: 23). Communal participation is thus needed for the Burning Man experience to occur. Since communal dependency is extremely essential for the success of Burning Man, Victor Turner's anthropological model of (anti-structure, communitas, and liminality) helps to assure that this large, counterculture community based on equality can exist without social constraints which dominate Westernized American society (Turner 1974:166 and 177). Because Burning Man creates this secluded, liminal space apart from the rest of the nation, egalitarianism becomes the norm for the Burners living out on the playa during this one week. Lee Gilmore states:

The venerated sense of community that dominates at Burning Man includes an egalitarian idealism that manifests in feelings of connectedness, unity, and hope for humanity that are held to be absent in the default [Westernized] world. Participants' notions of community...often reflect emotional sentiments of fellowship, affinity, and oneness that are among the hallmarks of communitas (Gilmore 2010:116 and 117).

Gilmore's statement reinforces the notion that the Burning Man community is vital for the impetus of the whole journey of the Burner. Without the community, social stratification would most likely arise and egalitarianism would decline. As well, my cousin and informant, Logan Kristine McArthur, says that for Burners, "[pilgrims go out on the playa] with an open mind and [are able] to relieve themselves of silly social constructs. [so] everyone has close to possible absolute freedom" (McArthur 2015). With this understanding, Logan provides another example based upon her own pilgrimage experience which reiterates Burning Man as being a community built on liminal space and communitas where contestation ceases to exist:

What makes...[Burning Man] so seamlessly interconnect[ed] is the fact that everyone is out there doing what they want, right then and there. You want to run around in a t-shirt with your c*ck out then do it. You want to build an art car that is a giant sea turtle. done. Like everyone is building their own experience, but we're doing it all together and that's how we get such a strong community (McArthur 2015).

Since Burning Man is this pilgrimage site where there is no contestation among the Burners but rather ultimate communal dependency, Victor Turner's anthropological model of (anti-structure, communitas, and liminality) pertains to Black Rock City. While Burners, engage in this collective experience, simultaneously, Burning Man offers its pilgrims the opportunity to express themselves through individual artistic interpretation. Because individualism is apparent through the behavior of Burners in their styles of dress and individual ingenuity, I believe that Burners utilize both communal dependence and individuality in inhabiting the playa. I determine that both community and individualism, which are binary concepts, are applicable to the entire Burning Man pilgrimage experience. Even though it might seem that these two models contrast against one another in standardized, American society, I believe that at Burning Man, they work together in unison.



2. A SPACE FOR CRAFTING LIVING ART:

For the Burner, another one of the main motivations why pilgrims traverse to Black Rock City is to experience a community centered on art and creativity. At Burning Man, art is not only admired, it is lived. I believe that the Black Rocky City pilgrims become active pieces of art as they transform from their mundane identities into the personas of Burners. The playa figuratively and literally serves as a blank canvas for Burners to create beautiful scenes of living art on an uninhabited, desolate wasteland through the production of large sculptures, elaborately constructed art cars, electronic dance music, and outrageous outfits worn by Burning Man participants. Religious pilgrimage studies scholars, Simon Coleman and John Elsner, agree with my reasoning that artwork is imperative for the establishment of the pilgrimage environment:

The 'landscape' of any pilgrimage site consists not only of a physical terrain and architecture, but also of all the myths, traditions, and narratives, associated with natural and manmade features...[the pilgrimage is centered around the] physical terrain and to the idea of representing nature in art (Coleman and Elsner 1995:212).

Therefore, the playa in itself acts as a physical marker and landscape for art and creativity to cultivate in a vast communal setting at Burning Man. Without the natural, harsh terrain of the Black Rock desert, Burning Man would not be the prominent pilgrimage destination that it is. The art constructed by the Burners and the natural, artistic landscape which the playa offers harmonize with one another. The playa is an artistic and physical landscape where the Burners create and become living objects of creativity.

Black Rock City is truly a space where this creative and imaginative genius flourishes. Religious studies' scholar, Andrea Rossin agrees with the conjecture that Burning Man, does indeed function as an artist's paradise:

Burning Man is "a city of art and artists, signs and symbols [which] are at play in their display and presentation through numerous interactive and necessarily 'hands-on' installations that challenge perception, physical orientation, and even cognitive assumptions regarding cautionary decision making processes" (Rossin 2010:7).

So, art signifies a central theme for why individuals go on pilgrimage to the Nevada desert. Black Rock City is a landscape and a constructed space where individual and communal creativity is produced and appreciated. At Burning Man, "life is lived and the city is created through a potlatch of mutuality in expression. Reality bends back onto itself as art and life merge in emotionally potent expressions of feeling" (Rossin 2010:10). Therefore, Burning Man becomes a living aesthetic spectacle in an extremely, arduous environment.

3. AN OUTLET FOR THE ULTIMATE PARTIER?

Some Burners merely journey to Black Rock City to just participate in one of the most outrageous, counterculture events of the 21st century. Therefore, depending on the Burner, some simply join the Burning Man phenomenon to experience an epic party. My informant, Logan Kristine McArthur, agrees with this conception: "Some people see it [Burning Man] as just a giant party in the desert, not everyone is looking for their Mecca" (McArthur 2015) So depending on the Burner, they might have one motive or various reasons in travelling to Black Rock City. One of these objectives can be to experience party culture. I believe that it is whatever the Burner plans on getting out of Burning Man experience which really matters, so if that means letting loose and embracing their inner wild side, I am content with that intention. Burning Man scholar, Jeremy Hockett, agrees with my notion that Burning Man indeed serves as an outlet for the ultimate party. Hockett states:

Burning Man is certainly a great party, providing Bacchanalian spectacle and carnivalesque excess... The significance of Burning Man is the cultural and collective frame it manifests through which individuals can gain a sense of self and community. The collective ritual, festal, and carnivalesque aspects of Burning Man foster self-discovery and provide a context in which to explore the possibility of an alternatively ordered society (Hockett 2005: 80).

As a result, Burners find their identity through this party atmosphere. Party culture justifies a main motivation for Burners in going on pilgrimage to Black Rock City.

IS THIS A RELIGIOUS PILGRIMAGE?

By looking at Burning Man from a pilgrimage perspective, I have come to the conclusion that Burning Man is in no way a religious pilgrimage based on the principles of structuralized religion, but rather a spiritual journey. So on a pilgrimage spectrum, Burning Man would be labelled a spiritual excursion into the desert rather than a journey to a sacred, religious site. Burning Man Scholar, Lee Gilmore, agrees with my notion that Burning Man is indeed a spiritual pilgrimage rather than a religious trek. He states that:

Neither participants, nor organizers, nor observers see it [Burning Man] as constituting a religion...Burning Man "can be whatever you want it to be" (Gilmore 2010: 46).

This statement also supports pilgrimage studies' theorists, John Eade and Michael J. Sallnow's concept that the significance of the pilgrimage in itself for the Burner, the "sacred center", can only be determined by what the individual pilgrim puts into the journey and what they ultimately get out of the spiritual experience (Eade and Sallnow 2000:15).

As a pilgrimage, the motivations for each Burner is determined by their own unique experience out on the playa. My cousin Logan agrees with this idea. She says that "Every pilgrim adds different symbolism to their own pilgrimage experience. The whole Burning Man experience is open to each individual's interpretation" (McArthur 2015). For Logan, her time at Black Rock City was spiritual rather than religious: "For me, the burn is like a heavy weight being lifted off my shoulders and a push into my future. I left with so much excitement and inspiration to take on a world and conquer all my endeavors, the only limitations I have are the ones I set for myself" (McArthur 2015).

Burning Man organizers even credit the pilgrimage as a movement based on spiritual principles rather than religious affiliations:

We believe that the experience of Burning Man can produce positive spiritual change in the world (Gilmore 2010:46).

Since Burning Man has no religious association, I regard it as a secular or spiritual pilgrimage rather than a religious one.

CONCLUSIONS

From my research conducted on the Burning Man pilgrimage site, I have come to the conclusion that pilgrimages or spiritual movements can occur outside of the precepts of organized religious systems. This is what stimulated my interest with Burning Man. Burners do not travel to Black Rock City to worship a divine being. They go out in the desert to celebrate collective humanity, appreciate artwork, party, and find their inner spirituality. Yes, some ritualization occurs at Burning Man like the traditional burning of the male effigy, but this is in no way religious. Burners do not worship "the man". The man in itself symbolizes something unique for each Burner; it is not a deity. Overall, pilgrimages happen throughout the world and even though previous assumptions may have only regarded them as being religious journeys, I believe that secular or spiritual excursions can and do fit into the pilgrimage framework.



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