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The Burning Man: A geographical analysis of a new-age pilgrimage

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## Synopsis

The Burning Man represents perhaps the most significant contemporary periodic mass movement of people. In late August 2002, 29,000 people from all over the world made the pilgrimage to Black Rock City, Nevada, to participate in the weeklong event.

This paper will trace the roots of the event and describe why The Burning Man should be viewed as a religion. The paper will also detail events of 2002's Burning Man and descriptions of Black Rock City. The experience of the pilgrims during the week will be described, including pre-pilgrimage rites and the pilgrimage itself. Finally the socio-cultural and economic ramifications of The Burning Man will be examined, and the outlook for The Burning Man as a catalyst for socio-economic and religious change will be analyzed.

## Glossary of Terms

- Black Rock City - City in the Black Rock Desert, Nevada, where The Burning Man is held
- Black Rock City LLC - Corporation that runs The Burning Man
- Burners - Participants and adherents at The Burning Man
- The Burn - Either used to refer to the entire week of The Burning Man at Black Rock City or to Saturday's burning of The Burning Man itself
- The Burning Man - Either used to refer to the entire religion or to the actual effigy that is burnt

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.burningman.org/bman2002/>

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, Larry Harvey only coined the name The Burning Man at 1998's event

<sup>3</sup> The effigy – the actual Burning Man itself – would eventually become the symbolic representation of the entire religion

<sup>4</sup> Significantly, a bystander clasped a hand of the effigy as it was burning – this has been noted as the first "spontaneous performance" of the religion. Spontaneity would later become one of the defining characteristics of participants and events at the Burning Man.

[http://www.burningman.com/whoweburningman/about\\_burningman/bm\\_timeline.html](http://www.burningman.com/whoweburningman/about_burningman/bm_timeline.html)



*"If you've never been to Burning Man, it's impossible to explain; if you have been there, no explanation is necessary."*

- Popular saying<sup>1</sup> amongst Burners

## I. History and evolution of the Burning Man

The Burning Man traces its roots back to 1986, and San Francisco's Baker Beach. Larry Harvey – the founder and dedicated proponent of the religion – and his friend Jerry James constructed a rough, improvised wooden effigy of a man and burnt it on Baker Beach. They built this first Burning Man<sup>2</sup> in honor of the summer solstice<sup>3</sup>. This curious event drew some of Larry's friends and several passer-bys, who all stood around and watched as the man burnt. There were 20 participants<sup>4</sup> in all. From these humble beginnings, the Burning Man has grown exponentially, in every possible sense. In 2002, there were 29,000 participants at the weeklong festival in the Black Rock City, spanning an area of approximately four square miles in Nevada's Black Rock Desert. Countless more adherents were not able to travel to Black Rock City (BRC henceforth), but surely celebrated the event wherever they were. The phenomenal growth of the religion makes it perhaps the most significant and influential of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Within four years, the Burning Man expanded more than tenfold – there were about 300 participants in 1989. During that time, it grew to encompass a whole hodge-podge of people – artists and artisans, fire dancers, hippies, high technology-crazed engineers, musicians, hedonists and anybody with a desire to experience a very liberal, perhaps Bohemian lifestyle (if only for a

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.geometer.org/bman2002/>

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, Larry Harvey only coined the name The Burning Man at 1998's event

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[http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about\\_burningman/bm\\_timeline.html](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/bm_timeline.html)

matter of hours). There were also (and still are) some people who just came to watch<sup>5</sup> everybody else. Since the freedom to express oneself in any which way is highly valued by the Burners<sup>6</sup>, everybody from astronomers to zoologists with something (often – but not always – it was something unusual or “alternative”) to create or share attended. The only constant at the “Burns”<sup>7</sup> was the burning of an effigy of a man – the Burning Man. Not much else was ever repeated. Every year, different creations from various sources would find their way to Baker Beach, where they would be shared and celebrated. Every form of expression was encouraged, as long as it did not infringe in any way on the safety of other Burners. The event itself always culminated in the burning of the effigy.

1989’s Burn was also a major turning point in the religion’s evolution, one that would have a profound impact on its dispersion and growth. At the 1989 Burn, San Francisco policemen approached the Burners and their various creations, and famously asked, “Who’s in charge here?” This was the spark that would eventually lead to the movement of the religion’s home to BRC.

With increasing media coverage, the Burning Man had garnered a degree of curiosity, suspicion and notoriety in the Bay Area. Nobody quite knew how to describe or define it. In 1990, the construction of the man itself took on new proportions – the Society of Carpenters<sup>8</sup> joined Harvey and James in constructing the 40-foot effigy. However, just prior to the burning, the Park Police arrived at Baker Beach and prohibited it. The religion’s phenomenal growth – and hence Baker Beach’s inadequacy – coupled with the increasing law enforcement prompted

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<sup>5</sup> These people – “observers” – are still frowned upon because they are perceived as not contributing to the community, but merely indulging in the efforts of others. Indeed, one of the foremost mantras of the Burning Man is that “There are no observers, only participants.”

<sup>6</sup> I will define Burners as any and all adherents to the Burning Man religion

<sup>7</sup> Burners refer to each year’s festival as the “Burn”.

<sup>8</sup> The Society of Carpenters, The Cacophony Society and other artistic groups in San Francisco and elsewhere have close ties to The Burning Man

Larry Harvey to find an alternate venue. He eventually decided on staging 1990's Burn in the middle of Nevada's Black Rock Desert – a barren, desolate playa, where hardly any living organisms could survive<sup>9</sup>. The timing of the Burn was also moved from mid-summer to Labor Day weekend. Although only 90 people attended the actual Burn in the desert, 800 Burners are noted to have participated in some way. This move was perhaps the most significant event in the religion's history. In the space of a year, the Burning Man went from being a loosely collaborated (albeit increasingly large) social gathering of sorts to a formal (in 1991), meticulously planned "festival"<sup>10</sup>.

With the proper structuring of the event itself also came Larry Harvey's explanations of the values<sup>11</sup> he espoused, and the meaning of the Burning Man. What had till then been a rather implicitly shared set of values amongst Burners was now an explicitly celebrated way of living – a model of how humans should be interacting on a daily basis. Harvey's overriding goal was (and still is) that Burners would come to the event to learn values that they would later take back, practice and share within their individual communities.

Now that the Burning Man had a concrete form and purpose, proselytizing began. Burners began to spread the word to their close friends<sup>12</sup>, and the media's interest and involvement<sup>13</sup> in this "strange gathering" boomed. The Burning Man thus grew relentlessly to its present state.

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<sup>9</sup> Harvey's choice of the Black Rock Desert was carefully thought out– his reasons will be elaborated on in the following chapters.

<sup>10</sup> As mentioned, it has not been easy to define the Burning Man. In subsequent chapters I will show why the Burning Man has become a religion, and why the weeklong festival is essentially to Burners in a year what perhaps Sunday School is to Christians in a week – a time to receive spiritual manna, to learn and to strengthen oneself for the challenges of "regular society", until the next event.

<sup>11</sup> Larry Harvey's values will be discussed in subsequent chapters

<sup>12</sup> Even today, a commonly heard remark from virgin Burners is "I just have to bring so-and-so for this next year."

<sup>13</sup> Most Burners still exhibit a strong disdain for the media – a topic that will be touched on later



## II. The Black Rock City LLC

With the religion's phenomenal growth came the need for a larger, more structured organizational infrastructure. In 1986, Larry Harvey and Jerry James were able to host and organize the small event. By 2002, the event's 29,000 participants were supported by a full-time staff – including Harvey – of about 25 people, hundreds more part-time support staff and thousands of volunteers. They were now organized as a Limited Liability Corporation (BRC LLC). In 1997 Harvey had decided to form the corporation<sup>14</sup>, in order to protect themselves legally, and to provide transparent accounting of the tremendous amounts of money that were flowing through them (2001's budget<sup>15</sup> was about US\$5.2 mil). While the full-time staff are paid a decent salary, the 6 founding members of the corporation avow that all profits will be saved for future Burns.

For the 25 full-time staff, the Burning Man is a year-round commitment. They oversee everything from ticket sales to fire control to the massive set-up of portable potties (“portapotties”) to serve 29,000 people. Although descriptions<sup>16</sup> of the work done by all full-time staff is beyond the scope of this paper, descriptions<sup>17</sup> of the jobs of the six members of the LLC will provide a good understanding of the breadth and depth of work involved in the Burning Man.

### *The members of the BRC LLC*

#### **Larry Harvey, Chairman**

Larry serves as chairman of Burning Man's Senior Staff and BRC LLC. Besides overseeing all functions of the Corporation, he is also its figurehead and spokesperson. As de facto messiah of the religion, Harvey is often interviewed and asked to give talks or write columns about the Burning Man. His views on

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix A – Organizational Chart

<sup>15</sup> See Appendix B – Financial Chart

<sup>16</sup> See *The People of Burning Man*: <http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/people/index.html>

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/people/project\\_bio.html](http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/people/project_bio.html)

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politico-economic structures, alternative lifestyles, the media and the Internet (amongst other things) are often sought. Harvey thus involves himself with high-level corporate functions, and has effectively divorced himself of much of the brunt work and responsibilities – which are now handled by the rest of the LLC.

**Crimson Rose, Fire/Pyrotechnic Performance Director, Administrative Director**  
Crimson is responsible for all fire and pyrotechnic performance and art at The Burning Man, most importantly events surrounding the burning of the actual man<sup>18</sup>. She is also the administrative director, responsible for ticketing, merchandise, registration and office procedures.

**Harley K. Dubois, Director of Community Services**

Harley is responsible for the content and design of BRC. Her responsibilities include placing all services (e.g. medical), camps and villages<sup>19</sup>, managing volunteers, coordinating Playa Information Services, Greeters<sup>20</sup>, Burning Man Recycling and organizing staff meetings and functions. She is the equivalent of BRC's operations manager.

**Marian Goodell, Mistress of Communications**

Marian is responsible for all forms of communication and dissemination of information regarding The Burning Man. This includes newsletters, online articles and Burning Man survival guides and press and governmental relations. Perhaps more importantly (yet not reflected in her title), she manages all legal, business and accounting aspects of The Burning Man.

<sup>18</sup> The burning of the Man has evolved to a gargantuan show, involving hundreds of fire dancers and other performers – this will be elaborated on in subsequent chapters

<sup>19</sup> The choice and positioning of Theme Camps is crucial to the success of The Burning Man, as will be explained in subsequent chapters

<sup>20</sup> Greeters welcome all visitors to BRC for The Burning Man



**Danger Ranger, Ambassador & Director of Genetic Programming**

Danger founded the Black Rock Rangers in 1992, and is responsible for their

activities. The Rangers<sup>21</sup> are a group of volunteers who serve as “non-

confrontational community mediators<sup>22</sup>” at The Burning Man. This essentially

involves ensuring that nobody gets hurt during the event – their activities can

range from giving fire briefings to breaking up fights.

**Will Roger, Department of Public Works (DPW) Chief of Staff**

Will is in charge of the Department of Public Works, which is responsible for the

creation and subsequent dismantling of BRC. This entails everything from

demarcating camp boundaries to setting up and maintaining the portable potties.

*Visit to BRC LLC Office*

I had the pleasure of visiting the BRC LLC on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July 2002. The office is located at 3450 Third St., San Francisco, CA 94124.

Inside the office, there is a large central living room, a meeting room and a slew of smaller office rooms around. Almost all office room doors were wide open, and different people were constantly streaming in and out of the different rooms – one could easily see into each room from the central living room. All around the office was strewn various sculptures, art pieces, photos, flyers and postcards – emphasizing the strong pro-art disposition of almost everybody associated with The Burning Man. I was ushered in by one of the part-time staff who told me to make myself at home and to feel free to walk around and speak with everybody. There was minimal security in the office, and this played a part in lending a very relaxed and casual atmosphere.

<sup>21</sup> The Black Rock Rangers are an integral part of The Burning Man infrastructure, and will be discussed later

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.rangers.org/who.html>

Each room was highly individualized by its occupant. For example, Lady Bee's (one of the Consulting Staff) office was decorated with eclectic art and her photographs. As she manages the archives of Burning Man photography, there was a tabletop slide projector in the middle of the room; photography slide cabinets along one wall; and shelves stacked with videotapes of the many documentaries and features<sup>23</sup> made about The Burning Man.

On this day, the majority of the office had taken time off to watch a new documentary (screening was scheduled for 3pm) made of the 2001 Burning Man, entitled "Confessions of a Burning Man". Therefore, at around five to the hour, various employees started sauntering out into the living room area, where the television was. I was introduced to all of them and they each told me specifically what they did at the BRC LLC. Larry Harvey then introduced himself with a brief but friendly, "I'm Larry", to which everybody else laughed – he probably made the correct assumption that I knew exactly who he was.

Despite the fact that there is an organizational hierarchy in the BRC LLC, there were no ostensible signs of this. All interactions between the employees were extremely casual, and it was not uncommon to see different people coming up to Harvey, tapping him on the shoulder and sharing a joke with him. The entire LLC appeared like a well-functioning team.

Harvey was thrilled by the fact that I was studying The Burning Man. He even told me that although other students had written papers on it, I was the first to study it from a geographical point of view. This reinforced my belief that Harvey and crew wanted to proselytize as much as possible – they saw my work as another means of telling the world what The Burning Man is. This also completely debunks the popular notion that The Burning Man is

<sup>24</sup> However, an argument can be made that the prohibitive costs of attending The Burning Man pre-selects the generally middle to upper-middle class adherents.

<sup>23</sup> As The BRC LLC are very protective of all images taken at The Burning Man, only approved material – perhaps only a fraction of all that has been made – actually makes it to the public sphere.

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an exclusive event<sup>24</sup>, organized for and by a select group of people who want to shy away<sup>25</sup> from  
the world's gaze. On the contrary, as will be explained in subsequent chapters, they seek to share  
their vision with the world.

Another interesting aspect was that many of the staff used nicknames to identify  
themselves, like Lady Bee (Christine Kristen) and Action Girl (Andie Grace). However, as I  
would discover later at the event itself, this was merely a microcosm of the role-playing that  
characterized The Burning Man.

Snacks and drinks were served and everybody sat down to watch the documentary. At the  
end, there was a short and friendly question and answer session, where the BRC LLC staff told  
the directors what they liked, and what they thought should be omitted<sup>26</sup>. It was all very cordial,  
and it gave the directors a better understanding of the portrayal of The Burning Man that the staff  
wanted propagated.

I left shortly after the screening, but not before everybody had a chance to thank me for  
visiting the office. They gave me more informational flyers, newspapers and postcards, and  
Action Girl offered to answer any and all queries I might have about The Burning Man, at a later  
date.

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<sup>24</sup> However, an argument can be made that the prohibitive costs of attending The Burning Man pre-selects the  
generally middle to upper-middle class adherents.

<sup>25</sup> Still, as mentioned before, there are adherents within the religion who feel that The Burning Man has grown too  
big, and constantly hark back to the days when it was small and exclusive.

<sup>26</sup> The only "censorship" exercised was the deletion of what the staff felt was unnecessary nudity



### III. The Burning Man as a religion and a way of living

Larry Harvey describes the Burning Man as a temporary experimental community – a social laboratory of sorts. Burners attending the Burning Man essentially serve as test subjects in a social experiment to determine if there is a viable alternate way for man to live. The economic base that supports this society is the Gift Economy<sup>27</sup>. The Gift Economy is one without a monetary system – where labor is performed for and motivated by not money, but the desire to help others. It is a system grounded in altruism, where each participant self-selects – as opposed to being channeled by forces of demand and supply – what he or she is good at, and performs that service for others, without any expectation of remuneration.

While the Gift Economy drives socio-economic life in BRC, there are many other tenets and values that Larry Harvey promotes, and that thousands of Burners subscribe to:

i) Freedom of expression:

The belief that man should be free to creatively and artistically express himself in any way, as long as he does not infringe upon the boundaries of others.

ii) Rejection of current societal norms and boundaries:

The belief that man's thoughts and actions have been indelibly shaped by the society around him – and the fact that those societal norms might be impinging on man's innate desires, or natural tendencies.

iii) Rejection of current political and economic structures

Disgust with an economic system that forces man to conceptualize many facets of life in terms of money and returns led to the evolution of The Gift Economy. Harvey and followers

<sup>27</sup> In its nascent years, The Barter System predominated in Black Rock City. However, Larry Harvey soon realized that Burners were starting to treat goods to be exchanged as stores of value – and therefore would demand something perceived to be of similar value from the potential recipient of their gift. He thus articulated and explained the basis for The Gift Economy, and started promoting it. However, I did still notice many exchanges done on the basis of barter.

are also apolitical, and believe that citizens of BRC – except for the most basic public services like law enforcement – can be left to fend and provide for themselves, without political guidance.

iv) Geopiety<sup>28</sup> – Reverence for the earth

Reverence for the earth and all its beings, and the belief in sustainable consumption, lie at the heart of much of the social consciousness of Burners.

v) Pacifism<sup>29</sup> and allocation of resources

Burners have also been disgusted with the way in which large swathes of the earth's resources have been dedicated to the production of weapons<sup>30</sup> and defenses. They believe that man is inherently good, and has instead been conditioned to "fight for limited resources".

Harvey is a firm proponent of utilizing earth's resources for the benefit of all – hence the drive to create artistic objects that can be enjoyed by all Burners.

vi) Direct Experience

The basis of direct experience is the belief that life is merely a compilation of experiences, and they each have a temporal<sup>31</sup> aspect to them. A corollary of this is that no material object has any value in and of itself, but its value is instead derived from the experiences that it can provide to people. Therefore, the burning of artistic creations – such as The Burning Man itself – are not in essence a terrible loss, as the material object is worthless. The fact that it

<sup>28</sup> Tuan, Yi-Fu. Geopiety: A Theme in Man's Attachment to Nature and to Place.

<sup>29</sup> While there was much homage paid to victims of 9/11 at Burning Man 2002, there were also many powerful anti-war statements and creations

<sup>30</sup> Burners are however free to expend any pent up aggression on inanimate objects, as long as the environment and other Burners are not affected

<sup>31</sup> To analogize, viewing the Mona Lisa today is very different from viewing it tomorrow, because of inherent physiological and emotional differences in the participant and external social differences around the participant between the two days.



was enjoyed<sup>32</sup> is enough. This also ties in to the belief in constant renewal so as not to rely on any particular object for too long<sup>33</sup>.

vii) Community

The firm belief that no man is an island, and that only through the presence of a sharing community can man survive. Just like any other community, there are people (e.g. Larry Harvey) who willingly step forward and take responsibility for certain functions.

The Burning Man has grown so rapidly that there are now thousands of Burners who subscribe to these tenets. Many Burners strongly believe that The Burning Man is a model of utopia<sup>34</sup>, and that the majority of mankind has instead been brainwashed into believing that capitalism and the current American way of life is the only one. Only by actually experimenting in their vision of utopia can Burners prove to the rest of the world that there is an alternate way of life. Many Burners I spoke with were delighted with the fact that The Burning Man is something that evolved during their lifetime – they see it as their gift to future generations.

It is therefore ultimately very difficult to define exactly what The Burning Man is. On the one hand, it is a temporary experimental community. Many also call it a festival, a gathering of disillusioned souls, a place to engage in whatever you want without the chains of societal norms and even simply a giant camp. I contend that The Burning Man must be viewed with the same religious lenses that are used to study all other nascent religions in the world.

Religion itself is notoriously difficult to define, and there are many definitions floating around. These are a few:

<sup>32</sup> The burning *itself* – aesthetically and symbolically – brings joy to many

<sup>33</sup> Artists are encouraged to constantly innovate and create new objects of beauty

<sup>34</sup> Obviously there are many inherent difficulties in implementing The Burning Man way of life across the world, and these will be discussed throughout the paper

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*"For limited purposes only, let me define religion as a set of symbolic forms and acts which relate man to the ultimate conditions of his existence."*

- Robert Bellah

*"Religion...is the attempt to express the complete reality of goodness through every aspect of our being."*

- F.H. Bradley

*"A man's religion is the expression of his ultimate attitude to the universe, the summed-up meaning and purport of his whole consciousness of things."*

- Edward Caird

*"Religion is the expression of man's encounter with and response to the Sacred (i.e., the Really Real) by means of a theophany or a kratophany, as a result of which his own identity as a man, his place in the community and the universe, and the meaning of his existence are revealed to him." (Paraphrase)*

- Mircea Eliade

*[Religion is]...."the impulse for coherence and meaning."*

- Yi-Fu Tuan

Perhaps the greatest difficulty in defining The Burning Man as a religion is the element of the supernatural, or rather the lack thereof. Many Burners are actually areligious, and seek to distance themselves from notions of the supernatural or anything not grounded in the hard sciences. However, while the feelings of *Mysterium, Tremendum* and *Fascinans* that Otto<sup>35</sup> wrote about might not be easily conceptualized with respect to a Holy Other, they can be seen in Burners belief in the tenets and values that The Burning Man symbolizes. In other words, Burners might actually experience that sense of *Mysterium, Tremendum* and *Fascinans*, but do not frame it as a supernatural element. The basis of their faith is instead grounded more in science and observable phenomena. This is symptomatic of the fact that The Burning Man evolved in the high-technology capital of the world (Bay Area, CA) amongst a generation of disillusioned<sup>36</sup> urban folk. Explaining the decline of the sacred in industrial and urban societies is beyond the scope of this paper, but I contend that the lack of a supernatural element should not preclude The

<sup>35</sup> Otto, Rudolf. *Das Heilige* (The Sacred)

<sup>36</sup> Disillusioned with current world socio-politico-economic norms

Burning Man from being defined as a religion. In fact, it is hard to envision a new religion with a supernatural element ever sprouting out from urban America – the experience of sacred hierophany<sup>37</sup> is as likely to land somebody in a mental institution as at a Church's pedestal. Similarly, The Black Rock City LLC should not be seen as a corporation per se, but as a vehicle for the religion's organization and expansion. That Harvey and crew had to organize themselves this way is a reflection more of the prevalent economic and societal conditions and structures rather than their desire to "set up a business".

To understand The Burning Man therefore, one has to conceptualize it is a religion. Adherents firm belief in its tenets and values, their insatiable desire to proselytize, and the spread, growth and independent evolution of The Burning Man away from its heart all lend it to comparison with other religions of the world.

Larry Harvey, therefore, must be seen as the first messiah of this religion. I met many Burners who referred to him as "God", "Our Pope", "Visionary", "Genius" and a slew of other reverential terms. While not many would attach a supernatural aspect to Harvey's character, they hold him up high as their de facto leader and guide. In fact, one of the Burners I met was so deliriously happy that he actually got to meet, shake hands and take a photograph with Harvey that he was running around his camp showing the photograph to any and everybody.

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<sup>35</sup> I am using fictitious names for all pilgrims I met during the course of the pilgrimage, and at BRC itself. The only accurate names belong to the member and employees of BRC LLC, like Larry Harvey.

<sup>36</sup> Fictitious name

<sup>37</sup> Theme Camps will be elaborated on in subsequent chapters

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<sup>37</sup> Eliade, Mircea. The Sacred & The Profane: The Nature of Religion.



#### IV. The Pilgrimage to BRC

*August 23<sup>rd</sup>-26<sup>th</sup>, 2002 - Pre-pilgrimage rites*

I had decided to travel with a group of three pilgrims from Phoenix, Arizona. One of the pilgrims, Andy<sup>38</sup>, is married to a relative of mine. He had first described the Burning Man to me four years ago. I remember the day quite vividly, for Andy was adamant that I not inform any of our other extended family members of the Burning Man, nor of the photographs he had taken of past Burns. This had obviously fueled my curiosity, and I subsequently did extensive research on the event. I decided to travel with this particular group of pilgrims – Andy, Jenny & Tracy – primarily because I knew one of them well, but also because Andy and Jenny had attended about 10 Burns between them, giving them a large base of experience and knowledge with which to answer my many queries. Incidentally, Tracy, just like me, was a virgin burner. Except for his first time, Andy (and Jenny) had spent every Burning Man camping with a larger group (of about 30 people) known as “The Tribe<sup>39</sup>”, who were themselves part of a larger Theme Camp<sup>40</sup>, Gigsville.

I flew to Phoenix on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 2002<sup>41</sup>. Although we were only due to set off from Phoenix on the 27<sup>th</sup>, I had wanted to observe and participate in any pre-pilgrimage rites. I spent the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> with Andy and his family only. We chatted about the Burning Man, and Andy would periodically give me little nuggets of information and survival tips, in order to mentally and physically prepare myself for the week ahead, in the Black Rock Desert. Andy’s wife was surprisingly<sup>42</sup> calm and collected about the whole event, but this was due to the fact

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<sup>38</sup> I am using fictitious names for all pilgrims I met during the course of the pilgrimage, and at BRC itself. The only accurate names belong to the member and employees of BRC LLC, like Larry Harvey.

<sup>39</sup> Fictitious name

<sup>40</sup> Theme Camps will be elaborated on in subsequent chapters

<sup>41</sup> See Appendix C – Timeline

<sup>42</sup> Stories abound of the worrisome week that spouses of Burning Man adherents have to endure while they are away

that this was going to be Andy's 6<sup>th</sup> Burn – she had been through this many times before. In fact, she constantly reminded me to ensure that we (Andy and I) left no mess behind in the house when we set off, lamenting the fact that Andy only believed in a post-Burn cleanup.

In our discussions, Andy reiterated several main points. Firstly, he regularly mentioned how harsh the conditions in the Black Rock Desert could get – burning days, freezing nights, dust storms, the lack of proper showers, the scarcity of water, the mediocrity of the food and the general dearth of creature comforts that one might be used to at home, that had absolutely no place in a barren desert. Secondly, he also told me about how important it is that I go there with an “open mind”, hinting that there would be lots of gatherings, activities and social customs and practices that I had never imagined existed, let alone experienced.

Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, he also spoke about how much sheer fun I was going to have, interacting with other Burners, experiencing a variety of things and appreciating absolutely stunning art. Whenever he described what he saw as beautiful about the Burning Man, he would speak about it in a nostalgic, dreamy tone, which would invariably get the two of us really excited. Andy was genuinely thrilled to be attending the Burning Man once again. Importantly, he constantly emphasized that the greatest joy for him was to see all the other members of The Tribe again – he spoke of them as his family members, people he felt as close to as he did his blood relatives. This was an event that Andy had been looking forward to for a year.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>, we also bought a lot of the necessities for the week ahead. Food was a big expense, for not only did we have to bring enough for us to eat during the week, but Andy and I were also in charge of cooking two meals for everybody in The Tribe. Most of the food we bought were quick-heat, pre-cooked packages. However, for the two meals we had to make for The Tribe, we bought fresh produce and meat, prepared it at home, Zip-locked it, and then froze

<sup>44</sup> Many artists are known to start work on their next Burning Man project as soon as the current year's event is over.  
<sup>45</sup> The Black Rock Desert is remote enough that cell-phones are rendered unreliable.



it. We also bought some nutritional bars that could theoretically suffice had we an emergency.

Although water was an important commodity as well (potable for drinking, non for most other uses), another member of The Tribe had already agreed<sup>43</sup> to bring our share.

Andy and I also made an important stop at the drug store, where we bought lotions, sunscreen, medicines, insect repellants, film and other small necessities. When we arrived home, I began the painstaking task of Zip-locking almost every item, to protect them from the harsh conditions in the desert – many adherents spend the entire week living out of an essential mix of stuffed Zip-lock bags. It is important to note that the preparations that Andy and I had made were merely the basic, bare-bones tasks that every Burner has to do. Food, water, clothing (we packed our own) and personal items were absolutely essential to survival in the desert. On the other hand, many Burners build or bring elaborate structures and exhibits, most of which involve a significant investment of time<sup>44</sup> and money.

On the 26<sup>th</sup>, Andy and I completed all our last minute preparations. We were due to pick up the rental van the following day, when we would also meet and pick-up Jenny and Tracy. I had decided earlier to dye my hair partially blond, so Andy helped me do this with a homemade kit. My reason for dyeing my hair was simple – many people view The Burning Man as an opportune occasion to do something that they cannot ordinarily do, because of the social strictures of “regular society”. Dyeing my hair blond was something that I had always wanted to do, but never felt comfortable about.

Due to the difficulty<sup>45</sup> in contacting anybody outside of BRC during the week, Andy and I spent a few hours typing e-mails, making phone calls and just making sure that all our regular

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<sup>43</sup> The meticulous planning and division of labor that occurs within big groups and camps will be elaborated on in subsequent chapters

<sup>44</sup> Many artists are known to start work on their next Burning Man project as soon as the current year's event is over

<sup>45</sup> The Black Rock Desert is remote enough that cell-phones are rendered unreliable

obligations for the week were fulfilled. Andy also made a trip to the office where he worked. He had just shaved his head bald (one of his Burning Man guises), and some of his colleagues were shell-shocked when they saw him. There was a lot of playful banter, and while they wished us the best for the journey, they also teased him about the fact that they would be covering his work for the week.

Finally, we rented several books-on-tape, one of Andy's pilgrimage essentials. Throughout the day (it was the eve of our departure) there was an air of excitement, as we pondered and enthralled about the week ahead.

*August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2002 – Pilgrimage to BRC*

There was a frenzy of activity on the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup>. Andy and I were due to meet Jenny and Tracy at the latter's house, at about 2pm, from where we would set off to BRC. We were planning to leave Phoenix by 3pm, both to avoid the evening rush hour, and so that we could reach BRC (16-18hr drive) by the next morning.

The first thing we did was to rent the van. There was a mini-celebration at the rental office when Andy managed to convince the rental agent to add my name to the list of drivers', for no added premium, despite the fact that I was below 25. Andy was hugely relieved at not being the only declared driver – he obviously needed help driving such a long distance (Jenny and Tracy had already opted out), but perhaps was hesitant to add me on if that would jack up costs significantly. We spent a reasonable amount of time picking out our van, a good investment as I would discover later during the pilgrimage, and indeed during the entire week at BRC – the van served as our makeshift storeroom and hideaway<sup>46</sup> there.

We then drove the van back to Andy's house, where we then began the arduous task of loading it up with our supplies. Andy and I had to remove the back seat of the van to make space,

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<sup>46</sup> Amongst the hustle and bustle of dense BRC, the van often provided brief moments of privacy and solace

and then we filled it – in a relatively organized and structured way – with boxes full of our supplies, four tents and two bicycles (mounted on the roof). This took about half an hour.

Then we ate a little snack at home before leaving for Tracy's house. On the way to her house, we stopped by a shop that sold dry ice – the refrigerant of choice for all our food. We later carefully stored the dry ice in the iceboxes, with the food. The dry ice did a decent job of keeping most<sup>47</sup> of the food cold for the next four days.

We finally reached Tracy's house at about 2.30pm. Jenny and Tracy were ready and waiting, with what looked like a lot of belongings. That was my first time meeting them, and they were extremely cordial. They embraced me, and both mentioned how wonderful it was that I could join them for the Burn this year – they were immediately welcoming and comforting. Jenny and Tracy's personal bags were relatively small, but they had a lot of extra things to bring. Jenny was the de facto bar tender of The Tribe, and thus had several boxes of alcohol and mixers. She also had a couple of boxes of bar accessories and other paraphernalia. Andy and I realized that it would take a mammoth effort to fit everything in, and that the best way to go about this would be to unpack everything that we had already put in the van, and then repack. It took us well over an hour, but we finally managed to squeeze everything in, with inches to spare. We shared a real sense of achievement at the accomplishment of this seemingly improbable task. All three of my fellow pilgrims told me that the packing was an essential ritual, congratulated me on having helped squeeze everything in, but then warned me that the unpacking and setting up in BRC was going to be just as tiresome. Throughout this time, Jenny, Tracy and Tracy's son were helping us pick up stuff, and were standing by with glasses of cold water – the draining heat of late summer Phoenix was only a prelude to the conditions we were to encounter in BRC.

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<sup>47</sup> There is an interesting commentary at The Burning Man, such that one never feels like one is surrounded by  
The ice-cream – a lovely treat in the desert – melted, unfortunately



We finally finished packing at about 4pm. During the course of the past hour, although

Tracy's son (he is five) was joking and talking with us, he was visibly disheartened by the imminent loss of his mother for six days. When it was time for us to leave, he was inconsolable, and even asked his father to "stop those people from taking mummy away!" The idea of his mother spending the next few days traveling with people she hardly knew, and then living amongst others whom she had never met, seemed foreign. Tracy's husband was a bit more comfortable about the trip after having met us, but still appeared to have his reservations. It then struck me that it must be difficult for most people to envision a makeshift city in the middle of a desert – where one is surrounded by "strangers"<sup>48</sup> – being safe, let alone enjoyable.

After numerous goodbyes, and despite the fact that Tracy's son was still crying, we left her house. A mere two minutes later, Andy realized that we had forgotten something, and so we returned to her house. Her son was, quite understandably, delighted to see us return, perhaps hoping that his mother had a change of mind. When we told him that we had just forgotten something, he was in tears again. We repeated this cycle once again (further forgetfulness) and this entire "now-mom's-back, now-she's-gone" ritual must have been torment for the little boy.

When we finally did get on the freeway out of Phoenix (by which time we got stuck in the same rush hour traffic that we had so smartly planned to avoid) Andy and Jenny were laughing at the fact that every year they forget something and have to return home. In fact, the first hour or so of conversation was dominated by Andy and Jenny reminiscing about how the same things happen every year – same forgetfulness, same freeways, getting lost at the same points and so on.

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<sup>48</sup> There is an interesting camaraderie at The Burning Man, such that one never feels like one is surrounded by strangers, but rather by new friends. This rapid forging and development of friendships will be elaborated on more in subsequent chapters.

Jenny, Tracy and I also spent a significant amount of time just getting to know one another better (Andy was the only member of our group who knew everybody else intimately). Jenny had been living in Chandler, Arizona for some time, but had recently moved to Bloomington, Indiana, with her husband. She was a Burning Man veteran, and thoroughly enjoyed not only the event, but the pilgrimage there as well. This was evident from the fact that she chose to fly to Phoenix and drive with us from there, when it would have been far easier for her to fly to Sacramento, and hop on a fellow Burner's car there. She would have saved a good 10 hours of commute time that way.

Andy and Jenny had a wonderful time remembering past Burns – whenever Tracy or I asked them a question about The Burning Man, that would invariably set them off on a long tangential explanation. It was enlightening to hear them speak of The Burning Man with such fondness, they really seemed to cherish the event, and the people they knew and met there. One hot topic of conversation was simply finding out who from The Tribe was going to be attending this year's event. Andy and Jenny were really looking forward to meeting their friends (or "family", as they would say) who they had not seen for a year. They also spent a long time talking about almost every member of The Tribe, describing in great detail the coterie of people Tracy and I were going to be meeting and staying with. They also joked about the string of humorous e-mails that had been exchanged on The Tribe's listserv. The atmosphere in the car was relaxed and jovial, and we were all becoming more comfortable with each other. Jenny had also decided to begin her traditional bar tending duties in the van during the pilgrimage, and so was duly pouring glasses of wine for Tracy and myself. Amongst all the joking and banter, there was also time for one or two longer, perhaps more serious conversations. The four of us thus developed a pretty good understanding of each other during the time in the van.



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Andy and Jenny had performed the pilgrimage from Phoenix to BRC so many times that they had pre-set (non gas) stops in mind. The first was to eat near Las Vegas. There was slight disappointment that their favorite sandwich place had closed by the time we reached there, but our ravished stomachs soon guided us to Wendy's. It was about 11pm by the time we ate. I then took over the wheel, and Andy had a chance to get some rest. Jenny and Tracy too were dozing at the back.

The next important stop for Andy was a shower facility about an hour from BRC. He told me repeatedly that this would be our "last chance for a good shower". Despite his promptings, tiredness overcame me, and I slept in the car while the three of them showered. These necessary stops were important markers on our way to BRC. They were checkpoints that pointed towards our progress, and for Andy and Jenny they must also have served as important subconscious signals that they would be seeing their friends again, and would be living in BRC again soon. The familiarity of both the food and the shower stop delighted Andy and Jenny, and they exclaimed several times about how "the place hasn't changed a bit."

After their showers, I resumed driving, and we arrived at the town of Gerlach – which is just outside BRC – at about 8am on the 28<sup>th</sup>.

As we drove into Gerlach, we noticed clear signs of the pilgrimage. Traffic became increasingly heavy (despite the fact that it was still quite early in the morning) and we started to watch the very interesting vehicles that were trudging along with us – some<sup>32</sup> people had decided

<sup>30</sup> <http://ecostats.census.gov/dnv/NV/1601227125.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> This is similar to the success of businesses that crop up around other pilgrimage sites around the world, such as Lourdes in France

<sup>31</sup> Adding to the mystique of the area, and the event, is the presence of a road in Gerlach called Guru Drive, where the late Gerlachian Duane Williams etched his reflections and thoughts on stone, and placed them along the road. See pictures here: <http://www.micropark.com/Phil/Id/> & <http://www.radioparamerica.com/slides/anna/gumdi1.htm>

<sup>32</sup> Roughly half of the cars that we saw had some form of decoration

## V. Arrival at Black Rock City

*"The stillness of death reigns over this vast plain, - not the rustling of a leaf or the hum of an insect, to break in on the eternal solitude."*

- George Keller, speaking of the Black Rock Desert, Nevada, 1850

Gerlach did make one final stop in Gerlach - mostly to fill up their gas tanks. It was a jovial

Gerlach is an interesting little town bordering the Black Rock Desert. It was established as a Western Pacific railroad town in 1905. Gerlach has a population of about 500<sup>49</sup> people and several basic services - like a gas station and a post office. The residents of Gerlach have had a love-hate relationship with Burners over the years. On the one hand, the yearly infusion of more than 20,000 people brings significant economic activity to Gerlach<sup>50</sup>. Some entrepreneurs even set up little street stalls along the roads in Gerlach, selling a variety of Burning Man paraphernalia, like light sticks. On the other hand, the sheer scale of The Burning Man often results in negative externalities for the residents - thousands of cars bringing pilgrims to and from pass through the town; in the past, waste has been dumped in Gerlach by inconsiderate Burners; some Burners also infuriate locals by bathing in nearby Pyramid Lake. However, the Black Rock City LLC, well aware of the importance of maintaining good relations with the residents of Gerlach<sup>51</sup>, has been vigorously informing Burners of what not to do in Gerlach, and its surrounds.

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<sup>49</sup> <http://censtats.census.gov/data/NV/1603227325.pdf>

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<sup>52</sup> Roughly half of the cars that we saw had some form of decoration

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to dress up their cars with stickers, paint, glitter, cardboard, metal structures and many other simple decorations. These pilgrims were, quite literally, arriving *in style*. I felt a tinge of disappointment<sup>53</sup> that all we could cough up was a dust and insect coated rental van. Many pilgrims did make one final stop in Gerlach – mostly to fill up their gas tanks. It was a jovial atmosphere all round – mutual admiration of vehicles, random chatting and excited yet nervous preparations for the departure from “regular society”. For Gerlach *was* the last vestige of urban America that Burners would experience. The week ahead entailed a very different life, in a very different environment.

*The Black Rock Desert*

The Black Rock Desert of Nevada is one of the most unique habitats on earth. It is a perennial dry high altitude lakebed – the remnant of ancient Lake Lahontan – and at over 25 miles long and 15 miles wide, is one of the largest flat pieces of land in the world. The playa, as it is commonly known, receives minimal precipitation<sup>54</sup>, and that is generally concentrated around the winter months. The thin layer of sand that seems to float over the surface of the parched lakebed contributes to its almost frictionless quality – indeed, this is the land where jet powered rocket cars set<sup>55</sup> world land speed records. It sits at about 4000 feet above sea level, and is surrounded by several mountain ranges with elevations from 4,800 to 8,400 feet. When it does rain, the fine sand coagulates into a sticky mud – an occurrence that set off wild mud baths at previous Burning Man events. The desert is completely devoid of life, bar the one week of The Burning Man. It is a place so barren and so secluded that campers are advised to exercise

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<sup>53</sup> The idea of reciprocating the gifts of others is a key concept in *The Burning Man*, and will be touched on in later chapters

<sup>54</sup> See Appendix D – Gerlach Climatic Data

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.cnn.com/TECH/2710/15/brits.land.speed/>



extreme caution when camping here. The Nevada Bureau of Land Management (BLM) manages the land, and is the body that the Black Rock City LLC has to deal with yearly.

A few miles from Gerlach is a turning off onto a dirt road on the playa that leads to The Burning Man site. We drove slowly along this road – strict speed limits were repeatedly emphasized – for another mile or so before reaching the ticket counters and the guarded entrance. While we were driving in, I noticed a couple of off-road vehicles screaming across the playa towards the site. They had avoided the circuitous, but correct, path that we had taken, and had instead decided to drive along what looked like a straight line from the direction of Gerlach, kicking up a huge dust cloud behind them. Andy told me that there used to be a lot more aggressive driving around the playa, but that was curbed<sup>36</sup> abruptly when an SUV inadvertently crashed into a campsite, killing some people. Andy and Jenny both expressed their disgust<sup>37</sup> at the speedsters.

We drove up and parked our van in the makeshift parking lot in front of the ticket booth. This was still a good mile or so before the actual Burning Man campsite. Getting off the van, I once again had an encounter with other Burners who had just arrived. They were instantly friendly, offering smiles and random musings. Here was also my first encounter with the ubiquitous portable toilets – porta-potties. I found them surprisingly clean, with full rolls of toilet paper inside. Andy later told me that porta-potty cleanliness was a function of location and time of day. The ones here were extremely clean firstly because they were relatively low use potties (being so far away from the actual campsite), utilized mostly by the ticket booth attendants and the security personnel at the main gate (which was adjacent to the ticket booths). Secondly, I was

<sup>36</sup> The evolution of laws in Black Rock City will be discussed in later chapters.

<sup>37</sup> There is a lot of conformity to BRC norms – especially for unwritten laws – stemming from peer pressure.

**VI. Layout and Functional Stratification of Black Rock City***Entrance to Black Rock City*

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using them just a short while after their morning cleaning<sup>58</sup>. Andy told me not to get too used to clean porta-potties.

After using the toilet, I proceeded to the ticket booth to collect my will-call ticket. The attendant was charming, and we chatted briefly about where I was from. In what was to become a common occurrence, the attendant was puzzled by the fact that somebody from Berkeley (5 hours drive away) would choose to fly to Phoenix first and then drive from there. However, as soon as I mentioned that I was traveling with a bunch of pilgrims who I knew, his doubts were cleared. I had made no mention of my thesis and the fact that I was actually studying the pilgrimage. This also led me to believe (a hypothesis confirmed resoundingly through subsequent interactions with other Burners) that it is not uncommon for pilgrims to choose a longer pilgrimage route if it allows them to travel with loved ones. The pilgrimage thus – just as Jenny had intimated earlier – is a key component of the entire experience. He gave me a beautifully designed ticket for the event.

The ticket itself is worth mention. It “contains 100% HEMP fibers and post-consumer recycled paper”. The stock is “printed with Soy Inks”. This obviously reflects the environmental consciousness of Burning Man organizers and adherents. The disclaimer on the back is also interesting:

***YOU VOLUNTARILY ASSUME THE RISK OF SERIOUS INJURY OR DEATH BY ATTENDING.***

*You must bring enough food, water, shelter and first aid to survive one week in a harsh desert environment. Commercial vending, firearms, fireworks, rockets and all other explosives prohibited. You agree to read and abide by ALL rules in the Survival Guide. You agree to follow federal, state, and local laws. This is a LEAVE NO TRACE, pack it in, Pack it OUT event. You are asked to contribute 2 hours of playa clean up in addition to your own camp before departure. Commercial use of images taken at Burning Man is prohibited without the prior*

<sup>58</sup> Living in Black Rock City, one quickly becomes familiar with both the locations of porta-potties and their clean schedule. In fact, many Burners try and plan their excretion usage around these timings – invariably, many arrive too late. The setup and maintenance of these porta-potties is a mammoth, unenviable task carried out by the DPW



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*written consent of Burning Man. You appoint Burning Man as your representative to take actions necessary to protect your intellectual property or privacy rights, recognizing that Burning Man has no obligation to take any action whatsoever. All vehicles, trucks, trailers, and RV's entering and exiting Burning Man are subject to search by the Gate Staff.*

[In big font below the disclaimer]: PARTICIPATE

The message on the ticket does therefore give a clear, if brief, idea of many of the main themes – both explicitly and implicitly – of The Burning Man.

Once we all had our tickets, we got back in our van and drove to the security checkpoint. The checkpoint serves two purposes – the guards ensure that we are all in good shape for the week ahead (good health, sufficient resources etc.) and checks that nobody without a ticket is trying to smuggle<sup>59</sup> in. Once past the security checkpoints, it is another half mile or so on a narrow dirt lane till the Greeters. Along this lane, there are many interesting caricatures of what to and what not to do while in Black Rock City – humorous, introspective reflections are juxtaposed with important messages.

We then reached the Greeters post<sup>60</sup>. The Greeters are a key institution of The Burning Man – they are the bridge between Black Rock City and the outside world. There are several Greeter posts lined up next to each other, each manned by at least one Greeter. Several vehicles can, therefore, be “greeted” at the same time. The Greeters themselves are Burners who volunteer<sup>61</sup> – for it is a wonderful opportunity to meet a whole hodge-podge of fellow Burners as they arrive, and to have a bit of fun with them. The Greeters serve as a playful sort of social barometer for would-be Burners – one cannot enter Black Rock City before satisfying any whims

<sup>59</sup> The prohibitive cost of The Burning Man ticket (\$160-\$200) has resulted in numerous smuggle attempts over the years. There are many stories of how people smuggled in many of their friends by hiding them in trailer toilets, underneath mattresses, within storage compartments etc. The Black Rock City LLC has obviously wised up to this chicanery, and thus the security guards now perform extensive searches of all vehicles

<sup>60</sup> See Appendix E – Black Rock City Guide

<sup>61</sup> Burners volunteer to serve as Greeters ahead of time. Jenny told us as we were driving in that she had volunteered to perform Greeter duty from 12-4am on Thursday morning. When we expressed surprise at her choice of times, Jenny said that “Greeting” entrants at night is exciting as the low level of lighting makes for more surprising encounters.

and fancies of your Greeters. One of our two Greeters was topless and that was my first sight of nudity. Although I had known about the prevalence of nudity at Black Rock City, it still was a bit of a surprise to see people strutting around nonchalantly without clothes. Nobody was staring at them, nor did they really seem out of place. It appeared as natural as covering your body *with* clothes.

The Greeters greet Burners with the famous "Welcome Home". This is indicative not only of the fact that many Burners I spoke to consider fellow Burners as part of their family<sup>62</sup>, but also of the fact that for many this felt more like home to them than wherever they came from. The atmosphere and social structure (if maybe not the actual environmental conditions) of Black Rock City is in their minds far preferable to wherever they subsist for most of the year. Some Burners I spoke with even told me that they would idealistically like to live in Black Rock City their whole lives<sup>63</sup>! "Welcome Home" is perhaps the very first formalized rite in the passage of pilgrims into the liminal stage<sup>64</sup>. It is an absolutely crucial juncture in the pilgrimage, and one that every single pilgrim crosses.

The Greeters then asked us whether we had any "Virgin Burners" in the van. Andy answered with a resounding "Two!", and within seconds Tracy and I had alighted and were standing on the playa with the Greeters, who playfully chatted with us. They then asked us to pick up this big mallet and gong one of these big bells that they had at their post, while shouting our name and whatever else we wanted to. Since the Greeter can theoretically ask virgin burners to do anything that so pleases them (as part of the welcoming rite), I was relieved to have been

<sup>62</sup> For many, other Burners *were* their only family. They came from broken homes and/or had lost – or chose not to keep – contact with their blood relatives a long time ago

<sup>63</sup> This touches on a very important aspect of the religion – its expansion not merely across geography and people but also temporally, in that many seek to lengthen The Burning Man experience from what they consider to be a very short week.

<sup>64</sup> Victor Turner described three stages in a ritual process – separation from community; liminal; reintroduction into community

given this relatively simple task. I was actually quite nervous (and I imagine other virgin burners were too) that they might ask me to do something that I felt was socially awkward and embarrassing. Having gonged the bell, we both jumped back on the van and drove past the Greeters post.

### *Layout of Black Rock City*

We had been given the Black Rock City Guide<sup>65</sup> at the ticket counter. The layout and size of Black Rock City has obviously evolved over the years, but one aspect that has remained constant over the past few years is the arrangement of camps in concentric circles around The Burning Man itself, which sits dead center of the circles. From a bird's-eye view, one can envision the city as the face of an analog clock:

The Burning Man sits at the fulcrum in the very center. 12 o'clock is due northeast. The straight dirt roads (Main roads) which all point towards the Man range from 2 o'clock to 10 o'clock, which are the outer boundaries<sup>66</sup> of the built-up city. These roads are named depending on their angular difference (in a clockwise direction) from 12 o'clock. For instance, the road at 2 o'clock is named 60° and the road at 10 o'clock is named 300°. There are seventeen of these roads in total, in 15° increments.

Perpendicular to these angular roads are the concentric circular roads ("principal avenues"). There are nine concentric circles and each of these is named depending on the Theme for the particular Burning Man. For instance, the Theme for this year's Burn was The Floating World – therefore, these concentric roads had names like Mainmast, Abyss and Bowsprit. Throughout the length of any concentric road, one is equidistant from The Burning Man itself. As such, each of these concentric roads can also be referred to in

<sup>65</sup> See Appendix E – Black Rock City Guide

<sup>66</sup> i.e. 10 o'clock to 2 o'clock is open playa



terms of the number of feet from the Man. For example, the Esplanade, which is the smallest circle, is also called 2100'. The Abyss, which is the outermost circle, is also called 3900'.

There are little road signs at almost every junction, and it is not easy to get lost. Typical addresses of camps are either at junctions (e.g. 120° and Mainmast) or between roads (on Mainmast, between 120° and 135°). While navigation at night may seem daunting, the friendliness (and, usually, navigational acumen) of fellow Burners is a great help. In addition, The Burning Man itself serves as a wonderful landmark, and allows one to orientate oneself immediately.

This layout has very interesting practical positional implications. The most significant is the fact that wherever you are in the city, you can get a basic idea of your position by looking at The Burning Man, and judging your position in relation to its. While the concentric roads may not offer a clear view<sup>67</sup> of the Man, one can almost always get a clear view by walking to one of the angular roads, which all line up in a straight line to the Man. The Burning Man here is the Mt. Meru of the religion. Lying dead center of the city, it is the symbol that everything gravitates towards. It is immediately reassuring, standing as a beacon of light for the lost. Its sheer size ensures that it looms large over the entire city. Lee<sup>68</sup> said,

*"First, a center should have meaning. Second, the location should be a matter of their choice; we have the right to select the foci of our worlds. And finally, a center-universe should be defined in spatial terms."*

The Burning Man thus fulfills the conditions for it to be designated as the symbolic center of BRC.

<sup>67</sup> Except for The Esplanade, all the other concentric roads are sandwiched between camp sites, which may or may not (depending on the size of camps and structures) obscure the view of The Burning Man

<sup>68</sup> Lee, David R. In Search of Center.

*Functional Stratification of Black Rock City*

The Center Camp, itself a large circular area, is located on the 180° road, its diameter around 800 feet, from the Esplanade to Mainmast. If the Burning Man is the heart of the religion, Center Camp is its brain. All the administrative functions are carried out here. There is a medical station, the Black Rock Rangers office, a recycle camp, a hardware station, a media office, a Playa info camp, a bicycle<sup>69</sup> repair station and a number of other famous camps and exhibits. All questions and queries can be answered by somebody in one of the camps or offices in Center Camp. People often seek and find solace here – it is the most reliable place to go to with concerns.

Here are also the only two official places where money<sup>70</sup> has any currency – Camp Arctica, which sells ice, and the Café, which sells coffee 24hrs a day. The Café, however, is much more than simply a coffee dispenser. There are stages set up inside the Café, where random performers entertain the crowds. There are also plenty of chairs where one can sit and chat with random burners. It is a cozy and comfortable area, and you can invariably find burners there at all times of the day or night. People often go to the café with no specific purpose in mind – one can be entertained, can meet new people or can just sit and laze around. The coffee itself is, therefore, merely a peripheral refreshment. One also often finds people just sleeping in the Café – usually the result of a combination of tiredness and a disinterest in trudging back to their camp.

<sup>71</sup> While the Temple of Joy is not actually denoted on the Black Rock City Guide, it, and David Best, have become institutions at The Burning Man. The burning of the Temple of Joy on Sunday was almost as much of an event as the burning of the actual Man.

<sup>69</sup> Bicycles are a common means of transportation around Black Rock City, and will be elaborated on later.

<sup>70</sup> Illegal monetary transactions – prohibited but still prevalent – will be discussed later.

## The Burning Man: A geographical analysis of a new-age pilgrimage

The Promenade is a splendid wide walkway that leads from Center Camp to The Burning Man. It is flanked by beautiful tall lamps. Past The Burning Man, one can keep walking towards the Temple of Joy<sup>71</sup>, the latest creation from famed artist David Best.

There are two plazas located at 90° and 270°. These are simply mini-versions of Center Camp, and offer a Rangers station, medical station, bicycle repair and a radio station.

There are also burn pyres located around the Esplanade, at the end of the Main (angular) roads. While indiscriminate burning of material was prolific in the early years of the religion, it has since become a much more structured process. There are strict regulations on what can and cannot be burnt, and where items can be burnt. This has been in response to potential environmental and human hazard.

On the Black Rock City Guide, there are several shaded rectangular areas, which denote pre-determined Theme camps. These are camps that have established their names over the years, and have become institutions at The Burning Man. The process for registering a Theme Camp begins well in advance of the event. Theme camps are known for providing a certain form of entertainment or type of art exhibit (e.g. the Mad Scientists STS Project – where communication with extra-terrestrial life forms was attempted) or providing for a certain brand of living – for example, Gigsville, the larger Theme Camp that The Tribe (our camp) was a part of, had a strict no media policy. As almost every Theme Camp desires foot traffic<sup>72</sup>, there is intense competition for the most densely traversed locations, like the Center Camp area. In fact, before we departed

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See <http://www.geckapeak.net/burningkids/Pages/Image120.html>

<sup>72</sup> While the motivations behind most of the artistic creations might indeed be altruistic, there is certainly social capital to be gained from having your exhibit or piece of expression raved and ranted about by others



Black Rock City on Sunday night, the conversation in The Tribe's camp was dominated by talk of how good of a location they would have for next year's event.

**Crowd** The non-shaded rectangular areas are locales where Burners with no pre-determined place to stay can set up their camp. These are generally decided on a first-come, first-serve basis. While many of the camps here do not ostensibly contain any attraction for fellow Burners, the campers are extremely friendly and many welcomed me into their camps, and shared food and drink. Unsurprisingly, there is far less foot traffic here than in the inner circles of the city. The Walk-in Camping area is similar, except that motor vehicles are prohibited.

**entertainment** The open expanses of space around The Burning Man and beyond (collectively referred to simply as "the playa") are filled with a myriad of art exhibits and structures (e.g. The Temple of Joy). This is also the main play area for Art Cars. Art Cars are pre-registered vehicles that are allowed to drive around Black Rock City. For the most part they cruise around the playa, but occasionally venture into the streets of BRC. Art Cars typically have detailed decorative work done on them, pertaining in some way to the theme of the event. For example, at this year's event, there were Art Cars dressed up as whales, fish and pirate ships. They almost always have some platform or seating arrangement that allows random Burners to hop on and off. While they do serve as an excellent means of moving around the playa (walking becomes tedious), the fact that they often have no set route acts as a deterrent for those seeking to go to a specific place, but as an incentive for those seeking merely to cruise around aimlessly while making some new friends. Many Art Cars also have on-board bars, serving a variety of alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages. Art Cars usually have to be pre-approved by, and must register with, the Department of Mutant Vehicles. There is significant rivalry between Art Cars, as they zip by each other, showcasing their beautiful work. Occasionally this playfulness erupts into chaos – once one of

<sup>20</sup> In 2002, it was the Temple of Joy. The year before, it was the Mausoleum, or Temple of Tears.

the Art Cars (accidentally?) hit the Pirate Ship Car around the Center Camp area, resulting in disgruntled drivers and passengers.

### *Growth and Demise of Black Rock City*

One of the most interesting observable phenomena is simply the growth of Black Rock City. Unlike almost every other pilgrimage site, BRC is a constantly evolving one. A week before the event, there is hardly any sign of life on the playa. However, from the moment the first artist begins construction on the playa till a week after the event (when it is returned to its lifeless status quo), the city is in a state of flux. Almost every second, there is somebody new entering the city and building/setting up a new camp or structure. This makes for a very disorienting atmosphere – just when you become accustomed to the quiet little 100 square foot plot of empty land in front of your tent, you wake up one day to find a huge multi-colored tent pitched there. Or maybe even a giant metal sculpture.

On the one hand, this endless construction prevents your mind from ever forming a definite image of any part of BRC – in fact, perhaps the only constant<sup>73</sup> in the whole city is the Man itself, which stands stationary for the entire week, till it is burnt on Saturday night. On the other hand, these changes ensure that walking around BRC is never a monotonous activity. Even while walking along a road that you have traversed countless times, you will spot something new. It makes for a wonderfully varied experience daily.

People begin leaving BRC after the Man is burnt on Saturday night. In what has become a tradition over the past two years, there is also a burning of David Best's work<sup>74</sup> on Sunday night. While many people have started staying on till Sunday night to watch this burn (the four of us – Andy, Jenny, Tracy and myself – only left after it), the exodus does indeed begin on

<sup>73</sup> It is precisely for this reason that the Man is the safest landmark, or point of reference, to use when trying to orient oneself.

<sup>74</sup> In 2002, it was the Temple of Joy. The year before, it was the Mausoleum, or Temple of Tears.

Saturday night. Therefore, while the building and growth of BRC is a protracted two-week<sup>75</sup> long process that culminates in the burning of the Man<sup>76</sup>, the deconstruction of the city is a much more rapid<sup>77</sup> process that begins following the burn.

Similarly, while the period leading up to the burning of the Man is one where new things are constantly added to your visual landscape, the reverse process begins after. To add to the navigational difficulty, the Burning Man is no longer there to serve as your guide. Many Burners I spoke to on Sunday morning said the loss of the man caused them great confusion – they could no longer just look up, spin around, find the Man and realize where they were in the city. This loss of the Mt. Meru certainly had adverse effects on many. Having said that, on Sunday many Burners were already looking forward to the following year's Burn! This belief in constant renewal is another hallmark of The Burning Man religion.

All the other members of The Tribe were instantly friendly to Tracy and I, the two "newbies". In what became a very common ritual, a Tribe member would approach Andy and Jenny, embrace them lovingly, and then come introduce themselves to Tracy and I with a "Oh, you must be Tracy and Sudhir, we've heard so much about you! It's wonderful to have you here!" Tracy and I had been communicating with the rest of The Tribe for some time via their e-mail listserv, so it was comforting to finally be able to attach faces to the many names that had up till then represented virtual friends. Members of The Tribe alternated between catching up with Andy and Jenny, and chatting and introducing themselves to Tracy and myself. Every single member of The Tribe who Tracy and I met chose to greet us not only verbally, but with a hug as well – I found this initially odd, given that we had never met these people before. However, after

<sup>75</sup> Although adherents are only officially allowed into BRC on Sunday (6 days before the Burning Man burns), some artists do arrive a week early to begin work on their exhibits

<sup>76</sup> Indeed, there are adherents who only actually get to BRC on Saturday itself

<sup>77</sup> Many adherents choose to burn whatever they can – their art work included – rather than carry it back with them



**VII. Burning Man 2002: The Floating World**

*The First Day: Wednesday, August 28<sup>th</sup> 2002*

Having been greeted by the “Greeters”, Andy, Jenny, Tracy and I proceeded to drive our van very slowly towards our campsite. We had been given detailed directions on how to find The Tribe’s camping spot<sup>78</sup> within the larger camp of Gigsville<sup>79</sup>. However, it still took us some time to find our spot, primarily because not all the campsites had been filled up yet, and hence the roads were not as easily differentiated from the sites.

Andy finally spotted some fellow members of The Tribe, and this immediately excited Jenny and himself. We all also breathed a collective sigh of relief at having completed the long and somewhat arduous journey. It seemed all the more amazing to me when I thought about how we had effectively traveled to an uninhabitable desert in the middle of Nevada, and inside that managed to find our friends amongst the multitudes. There was joy all round.

All the other members of The Tribe were instantly friendly to Tracy and I, the two “newbies”. In what became a very common ritual, a Tribe member would approach Andy and Jenny, embrace them lovingly, and then come introduce themselves to Tracy and I with a “Oh, you must be Tracy and Sudhir, we’ve heard so much about you! It’s *wonderful* to have you here!” Tracy and I had been communicating with the rest of The Tribe for some time via their e-mail listserv, so it was comforting to finally be able to attach faces to the many names that had up till then represented virtual friends. Members of The Tribe alternated between catching up with Andy and Jenny, and chatting and introducing themselves to Tracy and myself. Every single member of The Tribe who Tracy and I met chose to greet us not only verbally, but with a hug as well – I found this initially odd, given that we had never met these people before. However, after

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<sup>78</sup> See Appendix G – The Tribe

<sup>79</sup> See Appendix F - Gigsville

many subsequent similar interactions, I realized that on average, social interactions at the Burning Man are intensified such that two people can go from being strangers to friends and then maybe close friends in a very short span of time – in that respect, physical contact is often the norm, with kisses on the cheek also very common. We all stood around chatting for about 15 minutes, before Andy decided that it was time we set up our tents – the plastic five square foot abodes that would be our homes for the next five days.

Andy and I had decided to sleep in the same tent, while Jenny and Tracy each brought their own. Pitching the tents was an exhausting exercise because of the environmental conditions. Firstly, despite the fact that it was still only about 8.30 in the morning, the desert sun was out, spraying its 100° F + rays on us. Second, the potentially windy conditions in BRC demanded that we firmly ground our tents with long L-shaped metal stakes – hammering these stakes into the dry hard sand of the desert was a largely futile exercise – it took us about an hour and a half to set up all four tents. Just like when we were packing up the van at Tracy's house prior to departure, there was significant cooperation in the setup. Given my workshop experience in the military, I volunteered to be the stake hammerer, an unenviable task that by the end which of I had broken one fingernail. We also setup a central table for the four of us, where we could cook and simply place random things. Therefore, our three tents surrounding a central table represented our micro-organization within a bigger camp, The Tribe; which was itself within a bigger Theme Camp, Gigsville; which in turn was part of Black Rock City. We took a well-deserved 15-minute break after we were done setting up, during which time Andy emphasized that the setting up was as much a ritual for him as were the preparations and the pilgrimage proper. Setting up was certainly a largely mechanized activity that we performed in the knowledge that its successful completion was crucial to our enjoyment of the Burning Man.

The four of us then walked over to The Tribe's Communal Area. The Communal Area was the center of activity for The Tribe's 30-odd members. There were several foldable camping chairs arranged in a rough circle around a table. Next to the table was a tall heating device that came in very handy during the cold nights. At one corner of the Communal Area was a beautiful Bar that Sparky, a Tribe member, had built for Jenny. Jenny fell in love with it, and soon made that her domain. She ran the most efficient one-person bar I had ever known – whenever somebody met her, she would enquire whether he or she needed a drink. She was there with the Bloody Mary at 9 in the morning, the Pina Colada at 2 in the afternoon and the Rum 'n' Coke at 8 in the evening – within a matter of hours of our arrival, Jenny became synonymous with the Bar.

Besides the Bar, there were several "creations" around The Tribe's camp. Sparky and Johnson, The Tribe's "leader" of sorts, were responsible for most of The Tribe's logistical arrangements and activities. They were also the brains behind many (though definitely not all) of the artistic creations that littered our campsite – the Bar, the Communal Area structure with its wondrous ornaments and the Golden Shower<sup>80</sup>. The Golden Shower, The Tribe's official shower facility, was a triumph of both style *and* substance – it consisted of a female mannequin in a squatting position with her arms stretched out. This mannequin was raised about 10 feet off the ground, and was suspended above a wooden deck, placed inside a small inflatable plastic bathing pool. To shower, one hoisted an outdoor plastic shower bag (that had a neat plastic tube with a plastic shower head at the end, with which one could control the outflow of water) up to the mannequin's back, using a simple pulley system. When in place, the person stands below the mannequin and slowly releases water through the showerhead – it then appears as though the mannequin is urinating on the person taking the shower. The Golden Shower was perhaps The

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<sup>80</sup> [http://images.burningman.com/index.cgi?image=7820&q\\_photog=dmarr](http://images.burningman.com/index.cgi?image=7820&q_photog=dmarr)



Tribe's most famous exhibit, and it was not uncommon for me to open my eyes after having shampooed my hair and see passer-bys standing and staring at this mannequin over naked me. Many of them even took photographs while their friends posed next to the exhibit. While most other camps built private enclosed cubicles in which to take showers, The Tribe's Golden Shower was as flashy as it could get. Though initially uncomfortable with the idea of stripping and standing naked in the middle of a desert under a urinating mannequin, while countless passing Burners immortalized that image with their Nikons, by the second day (and shower) I had shed most of my inhibitions, and even found myself dancing and singing while showering, to the delightful Middle-Eastern music that our neighbors had blaring out from 8 to 11 every morning. The Golden Shower thus certainly helped to loosen me up, and liberalize me somewhat for the other unusual events and personalities that I was to encounter in BRC.

I then met a few more Tribe members in the Communal Area. There was one girl whose name Andy had earlier told me was Leila. However, when I actually went up to say hello, she introduced herself as Naomi. I just assumed that Andy had gotten her name wrong. However, in a few minutes, I overheard Andy saying to Leila, slightly incredulously, "Oh, you're Naomi this year, are you?" This was the first instance of role-playing (or perhaps simply name-giving) that I had witnessed. However, during the course of the week, I met many people who went by names that were most probably not theirs at birth – many named themselves after animals, action heroes, or even adjectives or attributes. There are several reasons why Burners choose to adopt a different name. Some do it for the very functional purpose of hiding their true identities, while they "play and engage in activities that they would not want people from their regular lives knowing about"<sup>81</sup>. Others I met do it because they feel that names are arbitrary tags given to them, and may even in some way inhibit them (i.e. they do not feel as free as they want to with

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<sup>81</sup> Verbatim, from a Burner I met on Wednesday, 28<sup>th</sup> August 2002

their current name, which may have been derived from specific custom's naming conventions).

Others still did it because they felt that their new name described them better – this was especially true for those who named themselves after animals whose characteristics they felt fit them. Another group of people I met did it simply because everybody else was doing it, and they did not feel the need to reveal their true identity when nobody else was. I introduced myself as Sudhir the entire time.

By this time, lots of The Tribe's members were relaxing and chatting in the Communal Area. There was still a lot of catching up to be done, and people would engage in long conversations with one another – however, the prolific use of the listserv throughout the year ensured that nobody was really out of touch. Everybody was extremely friendly to Tracy and I, and seemed genuinely interested in learning about us. Quite a lot of the conversation was also dominated by talk of how wonderful it was for us to have our own little space in this wide desert – that offered us some privacy in this very public environment<sup>82</sup>. There were also lots of discussions about Black Rock City and the Burning Man this year – in particular where the cool exhibits were, what the weather outlook was, whether there had been any attractive Burners (of either sex) around, whether anybody from The Tribe had “gotten lucky” the night before, what everybody's plan for the week was and so on. There was also a lot of anxiety about the whereabouts of other Tribe members who were late arriving. After chatting for a while more, I decided to go and explore BRC.

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<sup>82</sup> The magnitude of a four square mile city with 29,000 inhabitants does not quite hit you until you try to see it all

<sup>82</sup> A microcosm of that would be the privacy in one's own tent

### Daily Cycle

I spent long periods of time exploring Black Rock City daily. One of the first things that you realize when walking around is how extraordinarily *big*<sup>83</sup> the city is. Before the event, I had made rough plans to walk around and explore the *entire* city in the first two days, and then to just talk to fellow pilgrims for the remainder of the time. I soon discovered that this would not just be a gargantuan task, but an impossible one – there is no reasonable way that any pilgrim can see all the Burning Man has to offer in a fortnight, let alone five days. Once I had resigned myself to this inevitability, I felt a lot more comfortable. It certainly did disturb me – especially after I had experienced some of the fascinating art on display and met many unusual characters – that there might be other beautiful exhibits and interesting people that/whom I might never get to see/meet. It then also occurred to me that no one pilgrim could ever conceivably see the whole of Black Rock City. This makes for an extremely varied week – depending on where you go, what you see and who you meet, a Person A can experience an entirely different Burning Man 2002 from Person B. Therefore, aside from the unifying experience of watching the Burning Man burn, the entire week consists of a myriad of different adventures – indeed, you can let the week play out exactly as you choose. I finally thus decided just to randomly<sup>84</sup> walk around, taking in whatever sights and chatting with whomever I met on the way.

Before heading out of The Tribe's camp every morning, I performed a strict cleansing and preparation ritual. First, I took a shower at the Golden Shower – the amount of dust and grime that gathers on your body during the course of one day is truly astonishing. Then I would return to our van, which was parked behind our tent. The van served as a convenient hideaway

<sup>83</sup> The magnitude of a four square mile city with 29,000 inhabitants does not quite hit you until you try to see it all

<sup>84</sup> This lack of field structure actually allowed me to simply follow my senses wherever I went, and offered me wonderful flexibility in my ethnographical work.



from the dust and the wind, and I would sit inside writing notes, and packing my backpack for the day. The contents of my bag would include cameras, film, a notebook, granola bars, baby wipes, lozenges, a book, medicine and suntan lotion. I would then slather my body profusely with skin and suntan lotions – the harsh hot and dry conditions were brutal to unprotected skin. Jenny would often kindly volunteer<sup>85</sup> to rub down my back. My typical day attire was simply a pair of shorts, socks, running shoes and a baseball cap. I also strapped my backpack and my Camel-Bak<sup>86</sup> on my back, and was ready to go.

Andy and I had brought one bicycle to BRC, and we took turns using it. Most Burners bring their own bicycle, for it is the fastest way to get from Point A to B. I found that I never saw or interacted as much when I was on the bike versus walking, but it did allow me to race to different parts of the city, from where I *then* parked<sup>87</sup> and walked around. Each street would be littered with a mixture of pedestrians and cyclists – the Esplanade invariably experiencing the heaviest traffic, thinning out as one approaches the outer edges of the city. Some people would be rushing by, obviously with a destination in mind. Others would simply be sauntering around, examining everything that caught their eye, offering smiles and chatter to all.

I too would simply move around BRC, without a specific destination in mind. I chatted with many pilgrims along the way – either on the roads, in the Center Café or in the camps I visited. Visiting the camps<sup>88</sup> (and not merely their exhibits) of others was always refreshing. I

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<sup>85</sup> Doing small personal favors for others is another common practice at The Burning Man – daily people offered me rub downs, massages, sprinkled water all over my burning torso, and so on

<sup>86</sup> Approximately 60% of Burners walked around with a Camel-Bak – a handy water storage pouch with a tube through which one can drink. To survive in BRC, one has to literally keep drinking water constantly. After a day, I felt lost without the Camel-Bak.

<sup>87</sup> Bicycles, like most other valuables, can generally be left at certain bike posts without fear of theft. Having said that, theft and other crime is certainly existent, but is largely negligible

<sup>88</sup> In the same way that I was visiting and being welcomed into the camps of others, there were at any one time a few members of The Tribe who would stay in camp to welcome any visitors who came by

## The Burning Man: A geographical analysis of a new-age pilgrimage

was often welcomed in, seated down somewhere and given a drink<sup>89</sup>, a snack or offered a cigarette. It was a wonderful village atmosphere – while each person had a particular place to stay, and often did perform some sort of social duty<sup>90</sup>, he/she also was free to simply walk into the homes of his/her neighbors and chat with them. The whole of BRC had a real communal feel to it. I spent hours experiencing different forms of art, and then hours more talking to their creators and their friends.

I tried to eat lunch back at The Tribe's camp, for we had collectively planned out a detailed food roster. However, there were days when I had just drifted too far away from our camp that it did not make sense to trek back simply for food. On these days I easily found other Burners who would willingly<sup>91</sup> offer me lunch – in fact, even on the days when I was heading back to camp for lunch, I got offers of food on the way. I would also always invite Burners I met back to our camp for food and drink.

The majority of my days were therefore spent exploring BRC and chatting with her citizens. At around 7pm, I would start heading back to The Tribe's camp for dinner. The sun would be setting about this time, and the temperature would quickly plummet.

Returning to camp felt like going home. After a day spent meeting new people and seeing new things, the familiarity of old friends and the camp area was comforting. Fellow members of The Tribe would always ask me about interesting things or people that I had seen or met, and they would return the favor, offering advice on “cool” places to go to, or people to chat with. There would be collective exclamations of amazement when a particularly stunning exhibit was

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<sup>89</sup> Alcohol was served in almost every camp, at most hours of the day

<sup>90</sup> Defined here very broadly – everybody who did create something which was enjoyed by others

<sup>91</sup> Offering food and drink to other random Burners is certainly not a ubiquitous practice. It usually only happens in camps that have brought more than enough food and drink for themselves. I did have the slightly unfriendly experience of having my request for water rejected once, by a curt Burner who honestly told me that his camp did not have enough for their own use, and had started rationing. I often found that in most camps there would be one or two people controlling the food and drink resources carefully.

being discussed. Everybody was excited about what they considered to be the very high level of art on display. The people who spent time in the camp itself would also talk about the varied characters who dropped by during the course of the day.

Some of the veteran Burners in The Tribe smiled when I told them about all the wonderful things I had seen, and people I had met, during the course of the day. They told me that it was so reminiscent of the first time that they had attended the Burning Man. However, they said that over time, the allure of gallivanting around BRC constantly looking for new exhibits and people was disappearing. Now, instead, they preferred to spend most of their time relaxing in their own camp – chatting and catching up with all their old friends from afar, while still meeting new passer-bys who dropped in. I found this to be the overwhelming trend with a lot of the veteran Burners.

Dinner was a jovial event – the conversation, while largely the same, was now aided with generous amounts of food and alcohol. The Tribe as a whole had brought more than enough food, and Andy and I were in charge of the first night's meal, which was an unqualified success. Many members of The Tribe came up and expressed their thanks for that meal, and thus I felt like I had contributed significantly to the event. After the meal, everybody just hung around the Communal Area. Some were helping themselves to leftovers, while passer-bys had started drifting in after smelling the food.

Almost everybody went out at night. We would all change our clothes<sup>92</sup> – indeed, many people all over BRC had brought extravagant night party clothes to wear. Many of the costumes looked like dress I had seen in San Francisco's Castro on Halloween night – they generally had a dark and secretive (masks were rampant) yet beautiful look. I wore a sarong and a plain t-shirt most nights. I was however chided and teased by some of the members of The Tribe for not

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<sup>92</sup> Primarily to pull on something warmer