Book Review:
“Theater in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man”

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Theater in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man. Lee Gilmore. Berkeley: University of California Press. 2010. xiii + 237 pp. + DVD (30 minutes). Paperback, \$24.95 USD, £16.95 GBP. ISBN: 978-0-520-26088-7.

Lee Gilmore (and co-editor Mark Van Proyen) introduced a previous volume on Burning Man (*AfterBurn: Reflections on Burning Man*, 2005) with a quote from James Clifford on *experience* as an “effective guarantee of ethnographic authority” (*The Predicament of Culture*, 1988). In this new ethnography of the festival Gilmore writes from the authority of her experience, citing Clifford in support of her reflexive ethnographic strategy. Gilmore has extensive experience at the festival, having first attended Burning Man in 1996 as a participant and later returned as a researcher and participant observer. This new volume, *Theater in a Crowded Fire*, grew out of her dissertation research at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley (completed in 2005). As an interdisciplinary work in Religious Studies and Anthropology, the book draws from theory in both fields while maintaining a central focus on ritual studies.

One of Gilmore’s aims is to “paint a comprehensive and definitive ethnographic portrait of the Burning Man festival” (p. 14). Her method is participant observation, specifically a reflexive engagement in the lived cultural context of Burning Man. Through discussion of her own experiences as a participant, informal as well as semi-structured interviews, and analysis of survey data she explores how and why the experience of Burning Man is said to be transformative by participants and examines how festival participants challenge normative ideas of religion, spirituality and ritual. The ethnography is composed of six chapters, three appendices and an audio-visual DVD. The first chapter (Into the Zone) explores the development of the festival from its inception, and provides a concise reference for those seeking an overview of the festival’s history.

The second chapter (“Spiritual, but Not Religious”?) examines participants’

narratives for evocation of spirituality and religion. This chapter also includes the presentation of Gilmore's data on the religious beliefs and affiliations of participants. The chapter provides an analysis of the response ("spiritual, but not religious") frequently given by participants when interviewed about their religious beliefs. Gilmore reports that participants regularly identify *spirituality* as fluid and free from dogma, while *religion* evokes oppressive limits on self-expression. Chapter Three (Ritual without Dogma) continues this inquiry into participants' construction of religious identity and examines the mutual shaping between creation of ritual at the festival and models of ritual theory (focusing on the work of Victor Turner). Gilmore convincingly argues that participants who describe themselves as "spiritual, but not religious" find opportunities to explore and ritualize that sensibility at Burning Man.

Chapter Four (Desert Pilgrimage) looks at participants' narratives of transformation, and the way they (and the author) read the festival as a pilgrimage. With a continued focus on Turner's theories of ritual and rites of passage Gilmore situates the festival in an economic, touristic and spatial context. Chapter Five (Media Mecca) explores the Burning Man organization's relationship with mass media, a subject Gilmore is familiar with from years of work for the organization's Media Team (from 1997-2001). This chapter may be of particular interest to NRM researchers because of parallels in the challenges faced by the Burning Man organization as they negotiate the sphere of public opinion and respond to stereotyping in the mass media (for a more explicit examination of Burning Man as an NRM see Sherry and Kozinets, *Comedy of the Commons: Nomadic Spirituality and the Burning Man Festival*, 2007). Chapter Five also includes a limited discussion of festival and participant activity in cyberspace.

The final chapter (Burn-a-lujah!) provides a summary of the previous chapters and an analysis of the work of Reverend Billy and the Church of Life After Shopping as a paradigm for the participatory and activist qualities that characterize performance at Burning Man. Appendix 1 contains demographic information compiled from Gilmore's online survey and those taken by the Burning Man organization; Appendix 2 is the text of Gilmore's survey invitation, consent form and online survey questions and Appendix 3 includes the Burning Man organization's official mission statement.

In her theoretical analysis, Gilmore situates herself as a long-time participant before she began to write about the festival from the position of a researcher. She draws on this

embedded position in the community to provide an “insider’s” view and calls on Clifford Geertz’s “thick description” as her method for providing ethnographic detail (*The Interpretation of Cultures*, 1973). An especially fine example of the quality of Gilmore’s ethnographic writing is her rich portrait of Reverend Billy and the analysis of his performances in the final chapter.

Gilmore frequently draws from Turner’s work on *liminality* and *communitas* to analyze ritual and community building at the festival, while Eliade and Durkheim contribute heavily to her Religious Studies framework. The central analysis throughout the ethnography focuses on use of the festival as a “theater for spirituality” (p. 98) through which participants creatively borrow cultural and religious motifs to engage in syncretic mash-ups of religious ideas and ritual construction. Gilmore proposes that these opportunities for religious and cultural remixing afford a self-conscious deconstruction and reconstruction of frameworks through which participants explore individual and collective spirituality and identity. She finds rich evidence for the reworking of spirituality and the creation of novel and syncretic ideas and practices across the fluid performative spaces of Burning Man. Gilmore expertly crafts a dialogue between theoretical issues and her experiences at the festival. She shows special care in her deployment of the terms “religious,” “spiritual,” “alternative,” and “ritual,” and consistently foregrounds the challenges of representing the multivocality of participants and their views in the context of this polysemiotic festival.

However, the exclusion of the ritual use of psychedelics in a spiritual context (hereafter entheogens) is a notable omission from this ethnography of ritual and spirituality at the festival. One long-time festival participant I spoke with summed up the problem well when she compared the omission to “writing a history of rock and roll without discussing the electric guitar.” Burning Man’s place in the lineage of North American psychedelic culture, from the “Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters” and the “Timothy Leary’s Millbrook” traditions, cannot easily be ignored. As a crucible of contemporary psychedelic culture, the Burning Man community is a locus for the emergence of a new generation of self-proclaimed psychonauts who construct ritual and spiritual practices around the traditional entheogens (such as LSD and Psilocybin) and who are inventing a new wave of neo-shamanic practices using “re-discovered” psychedelic sacraments such as Ayahuasca (see Pinchbeck, *Breaking Open the Head: A Psychedelic Journey into the Heart of Contemporary Shamanism*, 2003 as well as De Rios and Rumrill, *A Hallucinogenic Tea, Laced with Controversy: Ayahuasca in*

the Amazon and the United States, 2008). The electronic music, rave and post-rave cultures, also salient forces in the evolution of Burning Man, are unavoidably entangled with both ritual MDMA (ecstasy) and psychedelic use. These global dance music “scenes” have previously been examined as productive sites for religious and ritual activity (St. John, ed., *Rave Culture and Religion*, 2004).

Some questions raised by this omission are: Which factors are involved in this “discursive partiality?” (Clifford, *Writing Culture*, 1986); and How does that partiality produce a particular view of Burning Man? Gilmore explains her decision not to discuss the use of entheogens at Burning Man in the introduction, arguing that it is “by no means a universal practice in this context” and that focusing on that question would distract from the questions of ritual and cultural performance in which she is primarily interested (p. 6). This justification is in part rebutted by Gilmore’s later analysis that, aside from the rejection of dogma, there are no “universal” expressions of ritual and spirituality at Burning Man. Gilmore proposes that it is exactly this “Burning Man is what you make of it” ethos that situates the festival as a site of semantic flexibility, and allows the construction of novel understandings of religion and spirituality which in turn fuel ritual creativity and set the stage for transformative experiences. As such, the fact that entheogen use isn’t “universal” doesn’t appear to account for exclusion of the practice from the ethnography.

In an endnote, Gilmore cites two additional justifications for excluding entheogens from her investigation that make the omission even more problematic: First, that the organizers of the event prefer that public representations of the festival not foreground this activity; second, that Gilmore does not take (or have interest in) psychedelics and therefore believes the absence of an insider’s perspective limits her ability to address the topic (p. 183). The first reason is elaborated further in the discussions about Burning Man organization’s media management in Chapter Five, and could be understood as a common ethical guideline for participant observation fieldwork; namely that the researcher should defer to the ethnographic “subject” on matters of sensitive or taboo topics. However, in this case Gilmore applies the Burning Man organization’s media policy to her ethnography “out of respect” and it is not clear whether the organization requested the exclusion of the topic from her work (p. 183).

The second reason cited, that she does not engage in the practice herself, if carried to conclusion would limit the practice of ethnography to autobiography. Gilmore explores areas

of inquiry in this ethnography that once fell outside her personal experience, but does not explain why she was unwilling to become a participant observer in the area of ritual entheogen use as she did in other experience-far arenas. In the introduction to this volume, she cites James Clifford in support of her reflexive ethnographic strategy (p. 12). Clifford critiques the authoritative voice of the ethnographer in his analysis of experience as an “effective guarantee of ethnographic authority” (*The Predicament of Culture*, 1988 & *Writing Culture*, 1986) and cautions against smoothing over informants’ many voices with the ethnographers own “monophonic authority” as narrator and interpreter. Through much of the ethnography, Gilmore is careful to avoid this problem by regularly quoting festival participants. However, we do not hear from participants on the question of entheogen use, and are instead left only with Gilmore’s voice assuring us that the practice is not relevant. The gap, however, does not reduce the value of Gilmore’s ethnography. Gilmore’s book may not be a “comprehensive and definitive ethnographic portrait” (p. 14), if such a thing can even exist, but it is a vitally important collection of illuminating voices from the diverse actors at play in the theaters of Burning Man.

Theater in a Crowded Fire skillfully explores how participants at Burning Man engage in renegotiation of normative ideas about religion, spirituality and ritual and come to construct community through that process. It is a carefully crafted portrait of “religion on the ground” at Burning Man. However, the decision to exclude entheogenic practices leaves a gap in the ethnographic picture of ritual and spirituality at the festival. That lacuna notwithstanding, I recommend this volume as the most current ethnographic text on the subject of ritual and spirituality at Burning Man. The book will be especially useful for those concerned with ritual studies, particularly the application of Victor Turner’s theories in the study of contemporary “counter-culture” festivals.

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