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# Understanding Burning Man through Fundamental Religious Studies Theories

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Introduction:

Burning Man is an arts gathering that has taken place every year up until 2020 in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada. The gathering brought together more than 70,000 “burners” in 2017 to create a massive community for nine days on a dry lake bed. The temporary city provides a space to explore and more deeply understand humanity and humanity’s relationship to religion. The event is unique, it is the participants’ responsibility to put on the show. Themed camps, art displays, and interactive settings are created by burners, for burners. A climactic burning of “The Man,” a massive wooden figure, takes place on the Saturday before Labor Day. In order to dig deeper into our understanding of this eclectic, one-of-a-kind, event I have employed Michael Taussig’s essay *Transgression*. Burning Man is transgressive in three distinct ways: to the individual, to society, and Burning Man transgresses itself. Questions of whether or not Burning Man is truly transgressive or remains within the boundaries of society also rise in this paper. Not only does *Transgression* help us understand Burning Man, but Burning Man also helps us understand the essay, *Transgression*, in a more complete manner. This is possible because Burning Man puts Taussig’s ideas into conversation with an event that occurs outside of a book, in the physical world. It is important for us to understand the idea of transgression, because it is through transgression that society changes and grows. I will give an explanation of Taussig’s idea of transgression before using it to dive deeper into our understanding of Burning Man as a cultural event.

Transgression:

In Michael Taussig's essay, *Transgression*, Taussig states that the concept of breaking defined boundaries is innate to an experience with the sacred. In order to understand Taussig's argument, the work of other theorists is helpful. Taussig makes use of Emile Durkheim's definition of the sacred: (a) anything that is not profane, is in turn set apart and forbidden; (b) the sacred has barriers built around it due to it being set apart and forbidden.<sup>1</sup> We read tones of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction theory in Taussig's writing when Taussig establishes that the forbidden-ness of the sacred is what saturates a system with meaning. Crossing into this forbidden territory often comes with an experience of this saturation of meaning. We can understand this experience as not only meaningful, but uncomfortable with help from Mary Douglas's, *Abomination of Leviticus*. Douglas wrote of people being uncomfortable with matter out of place, with matter transcending the borders that have been created for it. Taussig wrote that this discomfort was far more acceptable in religious systems of the past than systems today, humanity has experienced a Freudian repression of interacting with religious transgression. Humanity makes up for what they repress though, this shines through in Taussig's *Transgression* when he references and remixes Marx's quote, "[religion] is the opium of the people."<sup>2</sup> This idea that humanity may be losing touch of a mainstream connection to the sacred instead of progressing echoes Eliade's fervent belief that modern humans are not in touch with sacrality. Only by piecing together fragments created by others are we able to understand Taussig more wholly.

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<sup>1</sup> Taussig, Michael 1998. p. 349

<sup>2</sup> Marx, Karl 1986. Pg. 54

Emile Durkheim used a system of analysis in order to understand what is sacred and what is not. Taussig utilizes this system as a basis for his explanation of transgression. If one is to transgress barriers, there must be barriers to begin with. Barriers function in between things and Durkheim provides the two categories that the barriers are able to divide: sacred and profane.<sup>3</sup> Durkheim sees the sacred as existing only by it being separate from the profane world. Something that is set apart, forbidden. Things may be sacred for many reasons, but they are always set apart. The profane world is prohibited from interacting with something that is sacred. Taussig wrote, “one can only be struck full of wonder at the perverse and unexpected nature of this carefully worked out framework for analysis, and stand perplexed at the dizzying logic unleashed as the negative negatively defines something ineffable.”<sup>4</sup> This establishment of the “negative” can be understood through Derrida’s deconstruction theory.

Derrida’s theory of deconstruction encourages one to deconstruct the systems around them in order to understand what was excluded from any system in order for that system to exist. This excluded information is never gone, just excluded, and affects the constructed system.<sup>5</sup> Sacred is excluded from profane according to Durkheim, this is the negative. According to Derrida, this excluded part of the whole will still affect the profane. Because the sacred is excluded and forbidden a boundary between sacred and profane is formed. This boundary can be crossed. According to Taussig, the possibility of the boundary being crossed creates a tension. Taussig wrote, “this barrier is one of repulsion and attraction, open and closed at the same time.”

<sup>6</sup> The barrier calls for people to cross it and at the same time, pushes people away. Barriers are a

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<sup>3</sup> Durkheim, Emile 1926. Pg. 219

<sup>4</sup> Taussig, Michael 1998. Pg. 349

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, Jacques 1995. Pg. 12

<sup>6</sup> Taussig, Michael 1998. Pg. 350

defining part of what it means to be human, our lives are controlled by whether we decide to stay within the lines or to transcend them.

Taussig wrote, “mainstream religions in our time seem more concerned with controlling and eliminating transgression.”<sup>7</sup> This elimination of transgression is due to modern ideas of what is “civilized” and what is “savage.” Taussig refers to rituals such as: men masturbating together and acting upon their bodies in a violent manner<sup>8</sup>, women who are killed if they catch sight of a circumcision wound<sup>9</sup>, and modern day use of drugs.<sup>10</sup> This is all considered uncivilized behavior in a world whose goal is teleological progression and modernization. These rituals are also all forms of transgression. Happenings that require a crossing of one or many barriers. These may be barriers of the mind, or the body. They may be barriers created by the media, politicians, professors, parents, or friends. These are all ways in which people have left the profane and entered into something separate. Why is this transcendence avoided by modern religious systems?

Douglas wrote, “as we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder.”<sup>11</sup> People think of dirt as something that does not belong anywhere but on the ground outside. If dirt were to be placed on a dining room table, for example, the table would be considered dirty. A dirty table like this would lead to discomfort to some people because dirt is not supposed to be on the dining room table. If the ideas of sacred and profane are separated in the way we have described, when something transcends the barriers between the two discomfort will arise. When someone who is supposed to be “civilized”

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<sup>7</sup> Taussig, Michael 1998. Pg. 349

<sup>8</sup> Taussig, Michael 1998. Pg. 354

<sup>9</sup> Taussig, Michael 1998. Pg. 355

<sup>10</sup> Taussig, Michael 1998. Pg. 362

<sup>11</sup> Douglas, Mary 2003. Pg. 87

transcends into what people consider to be “savage” behavior, there will be discomfort, and perhaps panoptic punishment. Douglas also wrote, “to be holy is to be whole, to be one; holiness is unity, integrity, perfection of the individual and of the kind.”<sup>12</sup> For union to take place between two things that have not always shared union, there must be a transgression. There must be a crossing of a barrier. Douglas states that to be whole is to be in union, this means that in order to reach a state of whole-ness, one must transgress. Taussig would agree with the importance of transgression in a holy experience.

Thanks to Douglas, we have a better understanding of the fear that is felt around transgression. We may now examine Taussig’s belief of modern society’s discomfort with transgression more deeply. We may also call in another theorist whose writings on repression can explain the ways modern society transgresses today, Sigmund Freud. Freud believed that people repressed parts of themselves in order to fit into society. On repression, Freud wrote, “a permanent measure of discontent will persist within the culture concerned and this can lead to dangerous revolts.”<sup>13</sup> People who have repressed parts of themselves in order to fit into society will act up. Taussig wrote, “In referring to religion as the opiate of the masses, Karl Marx could not have known how literally correct his assessment would become, only that the equation could be read backwards as well as forwards.”<sup>14</sup> Taussig has shown the reader that modern, mainstream, religious systems have moved away from transgression, into a repression of the discomfort that comes from religious transgression. This transgression doesn’t just leave though. People transgress in different ways. Through the use of art, music, athletics, and intoxicating substances.

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<sup>12</sup> Douglas, Mary 2003. Pg. 54

<sup>13</sup> Freud, Sigmund 1989. Pg 15

<sup>14</sup> Taussig, Michael 1998. Pg. 362

This belief that people living in the modern world are losing touch of religious transgression, yet finding transgression in other ways reminds me of one last theorist, Eliade. Eliade wrote, “simply calling to mind what the city or the house, nature, tools, or work have become for modern and nonreligious [people] will show the utmost vividness all that distinguishes such a [person] from [someone] belonging to any archaic society.”<sup>15</sup> Eliade believed that people of the past lived in a world that was entirely governed and recreated by the sacred, people living in today’s world lack an understanding of being in touch in this way. However, Eliade also believed that modern humans could never escape the pull of the sacred. Taussig’s view on transgression reminds me of Eliade’s view of the sacred. Taussig acknowledges that modern religious structure does not encourage transgression, but he is sure that transgression shows itself in other ways. Eliade is sure that modern people have lost touch with the sacred, but the sacred still announces itself in the decisions that we make. On New Year’s Eve we reset the calendar and watch the ball drop from the sky to announce the new year. How isn’t this the sacred entering the world?

Caroline Bynum wrote, “Only supernatural power can reassemble fragments so completely that no particle of them is lost, or miraculously empower the part to *be* the whole (Bynum 14).” I have attempted to understand *Transgression* by Taussig by using fragments of Eliade, Freud, Douglas, Derrida, and Durkheim. What I understand Taussig’s message to be is this: There exists the profane which excludes the sacred, allowing it to exist. This exclusion creates barriers between the sacred and the profane. These barriers call attention to people, they exist to be crossed, they pull and push people like a magnet. The possibility of the barriers being

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<sup>15</sup> Eliade, Mircea 1968. Pg. 14.



crossed gives them a saturation of meaning. It is within the act of transgression that this saturation of meaning is often understood. Religious systems today discourage transgression, encouraging barriers to be obeyed. Yet, people's nature to transgress expresses itself in other ways. I take this to mean that transgression always exists, people will transgress as long as there are barriers through which they can because that is how we find meaning. One of the ways that humans have found meaning through transgression is at Burning Man.

### Transgression of the Individual

Burning Man acts as a transgressive event for individuals who attend. Through "collective effervescence," burners have experiences at Burning Man that change the way they think about the world and their place in it. Collective effervescence is a term coined by Emile Durkheim, the French classificatory thinker from the early 1900s. On collective effervescence, Durkheim writes, "a sort of electricity is formed by their collecting which quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation."<sup>16</sup> Here Durkheim is explaining that collective effervescence takes place when people gather in large groups outside of the ordinary pattern of their life to hold a religious ceremony. According to Durkheim, the group becomes open-minded to outside impressions and begins to act and think in unison. The excitement created at these gatherings can lead people to engage in behavior that they normally would not. This collective effervescence along with the structure of the event allows for participants to deconstruct and reconstruct society for the time that they are in attendance at the event. The art displays, infrastructure, transportation, and shelters that make up Burning Man are built by the burners themselves. This communal effort to create a temporary city in the middle of the desert gives

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<sup>16</sup> Durkheim Émile. 1926

participants a transgressive experience as they are able to reassess their own boundaries of creation. Burners are shown that society is built by humans, and they, as participants, are humans. They are shown that they are able to redesign the world around them for a time being, deconstructing and reconstructing society as they see fit.

The term collective effervescence appears first in Emile Durkheim's, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. The idea is Durkheim's basis for understanding religion. When members of a community leave their routine life and come together, sometimes they think and act in the same way, as a collective. Most of the community's life is spent on actions and tasks that Durkheim would call profane. This may look like hunting and gathering, building shelter, or taking care of others in the community. In our lives this looks like work, school, or anything that you know you will be doing everyday for the next week, month, or years to come. When the community comes together in times outside of this normal day to day, the event becomes sacred. This sacrality can be projected onto people or items within the event's lore and story (perhaps a massive burning man). This projection onto some object or person can turn that icon into the symbol, or motif of the community. This understanding of community coming together to create the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane makes religion, for Durkheim, a primarily social phenomenon. Through this reasoning, Durkheim establishes that god is actually the community, understood through the community's projection of energy onto the icon or motif.<sup>17</sup> These moments when the community comes together creates an energy that encourages members of the community to act in ways that they normally would not, transgressing their own boundaries.

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<sup>17</sup> Durkheim Émile. 1926

Although it is not completely clear as to whether or not Burning Man is a religious experience,<sup>18</sup> participants who attend the event act in collective effervescence. People travel from all over the world, leaving the normalcy of their lives to converge in the Black Rock Desert. The energy that is created here is then projected onto The Man and it becomes the icon for this group. This collective energy allows people to do things that would not otherwise do. One person that I talked to told me that “the contextual bubble of normal life is totally broken down... People are letting down their guards, just because everyone else is doing it, so it is really easy to get to know people really well.” He also said that due to the decommercialization of Burning Man, one carries a cup with them and accepts free drinks from strangers. This is acceptable due to the implicit trust that this collective energy inspires. These are explicit transgressions of peoples’ understanding of how social interactions work, with the collective effervescence that occurs, inhibitions go down. When one person’s inhibitions go down, so do the peoples’ around them, creating a collective web of trust and transgression.

Another factor that leads to transgression of the individual at Burning Man is the culture surrounding creation. Burning Man is put together by participants, with no one creating art, shelters, and performances, there would be no Burning Man. I experienced this first hand when I attended a non-affiliated burn, called *Juneplaya*<sup>19</sup>, in the Black Rock Desert. In order for anything to take place, people had to make the effort to initiate, motivate, and execute the vision at hand. I decided that I was going to build a geodesic dome to bring to the event. This would be

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<sup>18</sup> In Lee Gilmore’s book, *Theater in a Crowded Fire*, Gilmore dives deeply into understanding whether or not Burning Man is a religious event. To many who attend it does seem that way, and to many it does not. Spirituality versus religion is a theme of the book that is deeply explored.

<sup>19</sup> Due to Burning Man being cancelled due to Covid-19, this non-affiliated burn took place, more on this in the section of my paper: *Transgression of Burning Man Itself*. We took extreme caution to not leave the vehicle while in areas inhabited by vulnerable populations. When we did exit the vehicle outside of these areas, PPE was utilized to ensure the safest possible journey.

a structure that I built to contribute to the small event I was attending. Before attempting this project I did not think of myself as a builder or engineer. Now I do see myself as someone capable of understanding these concepts and executing them too. This was an effective transgression of my understanding of my own boundaries and abilities. Sharing this creation with others cemented the importance in my mind of learning new things and implementing them into my life.

Others at this event build incredibly impressive and complex structures and art pieces. One person that I talked to has built Tesla coils for Burning Man in the past and even for past iterations of *Juneplaya*. Others had brought flamethrowers, artistic explosives, and DJ equipment to the event I attended. I understand this event to be small in comparison to the things that people create at Burning Man. The individual that builds Tesla coils informed me that it was incredibly important to him that people feel encouraged to learn, build, and ask questions. This attitude encourages other people to participate in the transgressive creative spirit that surrounds the event. This attitude also shows that people can affect the world around them.

Being a part of a smaller version of Burning Man was incredibly empowering and inspiring. It showed me that people have the power to affect the world around them. When speaking about this with others at the event, this was a common transgressive realization that people had at Burning Man and these smaller events. I talked to one woman who said that this attitude had come with her out of the event and into the larger world, inspiring her to dig deeper, engage more thoroughly, and ask more questions about why we do certain things and if there is a better way to do said things. I could see this line of thought at *Juneplaya*. When building a stage, or setting up the geodesic dome, or building a pyrotechnic display, people would come by, ask

what was going on, who built the structure or art piece, and whether or not they could learn how to help. This is an effective transgression because people are breaking through their own boundaries of what it is possible for their community to achieve together.

Burning Man is a space in which individuals transgress their own boundaries. This takes place through collective effervescence, as explained by Emile Durkheim and through the creative attitude that surrounds the event. The transgression of the individual is a microcosmic example of other types of transgression that are found at the event, such as the transgression of society.

### Transgression of Society

Burning Man acts as a transgressive space not only for the individual, as we see above, but also for society as a whole. Societal norms and expectations are broken down at this event through the deconstruction and reconstruction of society. As we see above, burners are shown that they are able to influence and change their environment and this can travel with them from the event, to the world that is not Burning Man. Another example of the transgression of societal boundaries that takes place at Burning Man is the implementation of the ten principles. The implementation of these guidelines and suggestions for behavior at Burning Man are not typical of American society. While the group that is Burning Man lives in the Black Rock Desert, they are transgressing societal norms by constructing their own society and living in accordance with the ten principles.

During Burning Man, participants come to the Black Rock desert and build a city. Seth Cottrell writes in his article, *Burning Man's Mathematical Underbelly*, "at first blush, it may seem a little audacious to call a festival a "city," but by most definitions of the word, Black

Rock City qualifies, supplying sanitation, roads, lighting (by the Lamplighter's Guild), police, emergency services (including fire, of course), and even a Department of Mutant Vehicles."<sup>20</sup>

This city pops out of the alkali flat that is Black Rock Desert. This creation of a city is an opportunity for the participants of Burning Man. They are able to imagine their ideal creation of a temporary society and build the infrastructure to support it. By doing this they are essentially deconstructing society and reconstructing society in the way they see fit. Derrida would see this reconstruction as the participants deliberately and inadvertently excluding and including specific ideals, people, artwork, thoughts, and values into their new temporary city. Through this reconstruction, burners have an opportunity to transgress pieces of society that they don't want to include in Burning Man. This mentality can travel away from Burning Man as well.

While I was at *Juneplaya*, I talked to one person in attendance who told me that he had realized his dreams of building incredible pieces of moving art as a mechanical engineer. Outside of Burning Man this person works at an engineering company that hires interns. Due to his understanding that he has the ability to change the world around him, affecting others, he was able to establish his ideals in his own company as well as at Burning Man. He decided to allow his interns to choose their own hourly pay, putting them in charge of designing their own reality at their internship. I believe that this allowance for autonomy is due to his reflection on his own young life. He told me that it would have been his dream to have an internship like the ones that he was making available to young engineers. He effectively transgressed the societal norms in his company and put his interns into a decision making position similar to the ones that people fill at Burning Man as they construct their own reality out of the desert.

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<sup>20</sup> Cottrell, 2020.

Another way that Burning Man transgresses society's norms is through the enactment of the ten principles. The ten principles were established in 2004 by founder Larry Harvey, in order to encourage people to act in a way that reflects the values of the event itself.<sup>21</sup> The ten principles are: radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leaving no trace, participation, and immediacy.<sup>22</sup> These values are not reflected in common American society. When the participants of Burning Man attend the event, they are living according to different values than their day-to-day life. No one brings money to Burning Man in accordance with the principle of decommodification. In order to survive they bring everything that they need, lining up with the principle of radical self-reliance. Anything else that a participant uses on the playa is given to them by another burner, following the principle of gifting. We can see by observing these three principles alone, that ideas of using and sharing resources are very differently understood by the participants of Burning Man while they are at the event than the average person living a day to day life in a capitalist society. This shift in understanding and behavior is transgressive to society in itself.

After talking to two burners while they were not attending Burning Man, I understood that these values and ideals follow them from the event, to the world outside the event. The transgressive behavior that takes place at Burning Man due to the ten principles inspires these two people to examine the way that they live their life outside of the event as well. I could see that they incorporate the principles of radical inclusion, communal effort, participation, and immediacy into their everyday lives by creating a space where they live to build Burning

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<sup>21</sup> Gilmore, 2010.

<sup>22</sup> Gilmore, 2010.

Man-esque art and structures. They include many of their friends and family members in this process, inspiring the excitement behind building and creating something to share with others.

Burning Man effectively inspires transgression of society through a deconstruction and reconstruction of society and through encouraging burners to live through the ten principles, both at the event, and outside of the event. This is the second way that Burning Man is a transgressive event, but not the last. Society shifts and changes based on the transgressions that take place in the community. Within the community of Burning Man there is a transgression of society, but there is also a transgression of the event itself.

#### Transgression of Burning Man Itself

Finally, Burning Man is transgressive to itself. The event is constantly critiqued by the burners that attend. Burners are typically people looking to change or shift the way in which something works or something is perceived. The history of Burning Man is built on *culture jamming* and paradox; this culture of protest carries on today throughout the festival as burners attempt to undermine any “greater meaning” that Burning Man could possibly have. Guidelines, like the ten principles and other understandings of how Burning Man “should” take place are constantly protested by the burners that make the event happen. The layers of transgression that can be observed through Burning Man become obvious in this instance. Burning Man has been an event surrounded by and even started through transgressive activities, so when someone tries to codify a selection of rules or guidelines to govern the event the protest is loud and obvious. Burners protest on facebook and they even throw their own, smaller burns in the Black Rock



desert, without the same rules. Burning Man, much like the movie *Inception* is a commentary on the nature of dreams, is a commentary on the nature of transgression.

It is in the nature of burners to transgress boundaries. The event was established in part by a group known as the Cacophony Society from San Francisco. The Cacophony Society was known for participating and leading activities that would be considered as *culture jamming*: the disruption of mainstream understanding. The founder of the event, Larry Harvey teamed up with this group in order to bring Burning Man to the Black Rock Desert for the first time. (Originally Harvey had just burned the large wooden effigy on a beach in San Francisco). Lee Gilmore writes, “the festival fosters an ‘alternative’ atmosphere intended to directly challenge whatever is deemed culturally normative. Yet at the same time, Burning Man must increasingly capitulate to the demands of the default world, putting it in tension with what Turner called ‘structure’ and ‘anti-structure.’”<sup>23</sup> This attitude of protest, rebellion, and challenge to the norm is built into Burning Man’s construction. Societal transgression naturally takes place at the event due to this culture of challenging boundaries.

In 2007, The Man, the central effigy at Burning Man that is supposed to be burned on the same night every year, went up in flames four days early.<sup>24</sup> This is important to our discussion of transgression because someone snuck up to The Man and burnt it down. This is a transgression of the boundaries of the event. What Durkheim would call, Burning Man’s central totem, was burned outside of the permission of Burning Man and the entirety of its population (besides one, the person who burned it). This is interesting because many of the old-time burners were amused by the act and thought that it was done in complete Burning Man spirit. This action was a

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<sup>23</sup> Gilmore, 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Garofoli & Fulbright, 2007.

complete act of culture jamming, yet much of the Burning Man community was upset about this and they even rebuilt The Man to be burned again on the regular day. The discomfort shown by some of the Burning Man community establishes this action as truly transgressive. The man who burnt the effigy was even arrested and charged with felonies.

Another way that Burning Man transgresses itself is through alternative burns. People have been participating in non-affiliated burns in the Black Rock Desert for years. This year Burning Man was cancelled for the first time in history. Many people were participating in non-affiliated burns in many different ways this year. I was able to attend *Juneplaya*, mentioned above. We took extreme caution so that we would not have to exit the vehicle in areas that are home to populations vulnerable to Covid-19 and when we did exit the vehicle outside of these areas, we wore personal protective equipment. *Juneplaya* functioned as a protest to the increasing commercialization and bureaucratization of the official Burning Man.

Many people there wanted to attend a burn without the pressure of purchasing a ticket. Ticket prices have gone up in the past years and tickets are now about 475 dollars. Of the people that I talked to, three people in particular felt as though their identity had been cemented at Burning Man as artists and they wanted to attend a Burn without the pressure of creating a large scale art piece. The art pieces at Burning Man are massive and incredibly complex. The pressure that many feel to put together a massive installation, transport it, set it up, and then babysit it throughout the whole event can require a lot of energy and money. It seemed as though this event was a more relaxed way to enjoy time in the Black Rock Desert for some. Many people at the event believe that Burning Man has made too large of an appearance on social media, taking away from the authenticity of Burning Man as a whole. Part of these people's reasoning in

attending *Juneplaya* was to transgress the social media waves of Burning Man. One person I talked to wanted to create pyrotechnic art that wouldn't be as practical at Burning Man, these consisted of massive explosions that were not sanctioned by the Bureau of Land Management. These reasons all acted as transgressions of the event itself. *Juneplaya* was a transgression of and protest to Burning Man.

But is Burning Man Truly Transgressive?

Even though Burning Man can be seen as obviously transgressive to the individual, society, and to Burning Man itself, the event has become bureaucratic in ways over the years. The event's rulebook has grown from no rules, to some rules. There are undertones of heteronormativity and colonialism that waft through the event's culture, reminding one of the society that one may be trying to transgress through attendance. Finally, the event is a pay to attend event, burners are paying for a simulation of anarchy. These observations seem to take away from some of the authenticity of the transgression that used to and still does take place at the Burn.

Burning Man started as a loose operation, people came to enjoy the expanse of the desert and to see what it was like to be in a space with no rules. Here is the original announcement in the Cacophony Society's newsletter, the *Rough Draft* for the first Burning Man:

“An established Cacophony tradition, the *Zone Trip* is an extended event that takes place outside of our local area of time and place. On this particular expedition, we shall travel to a vast, desolate white expanse stretching onward to the horizon in all directions... A place where you could gain nothing or lose everything and no one would ever know. A place well beyond that which you think you understand. We will be accompanied by the Burning Man, a 40-foot-tall wooden icon which will travel with us into the *Zone* and

there meet with destiny. This excursion is an opportunity to leave your old self and be reborn through the cleansing fires of the trackless, pure desert.”<sup>25</sup>

This shows the flexibility of what Burning Man was at the beginning of its journey, a space for people to come and discover the landscape and themselves, with very few rules. Now there is an organization that oversees Burning Man.<sup>26</sup> This makes sense due to the fact that Burning Man now brings in a crowd of over 70,000 people. Some sort of governance is required for a gathering like this to exist in our society, but it is definitely not the same as it once was. With more governance comes more rules and regulations. Taussig wrote, “mainstream religions in our time seem more concerned with controlling and eliminating transgression.”<sup>27</sup> This seems to partly ring true with Burning Man’s turn towards more rules. Taussig also explains that transgression is human nature, people will transgress. In the same way that people attend events like Burning Man instead of religious events, people burn down The Man a day early instead of just following the rules. Although Burning Man’s regulations could seem like they take away from the transgressive attitude of the event, they may just create more boundaries for burners to transgress.

Burning Man has hints of pieces of our society that I find myself wanting to transgress: patriarchy, colonialism, and the social media boom. This seems to be a reaffirmation of societal boundaries instead of a transgression of them. Burning Man is called Burning *Man*, and the central figure of the whole event is called The *Man*. Using the term *man* for both the name of the event and the most central piece of the entire event can affirm the idea that perhaps Burning Man

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<sup>25</sup> Gilmore, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Burners call this organization the *BMorg*. Gilmore, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Taussig, 1998.

is just a recreation of the patriarchal society that we live in today, not a transgression of that society.

Burning Man is primarily comprised of wealthy white people<sup>28</sup> entering the desert and setting up a city there. The term *blank slate* is often used by this population to refer to the desert. One person that I talked to this summer pointed out that the desert is in fact not a blank slate, there is an ecosystem there, geological forces are at play, and communities that surround the desert are affected by it in different ways. He pointed out that Burning Man represents neo-colonialism, Burning Man could be seen as an exploitation of the desert environment by an affluent white population.

Impressively, Burning Man has been collecting demographic data on participants since 2002. This data shows that the average burner is a white, wealthy, man. In 2019 82.9% of the event was made up of White people. Asian people made up 3.7% of burners, Hispanic/Latinx people made up 3%, African American people made up only .9%, Native American people only made up .5% of the Burning Man population, and 9.1% of burners surveyed responded to this question with the answer: other or multiple. 17.2% of burners have an income of \$50,000-74,999 a year, 13.4% of burners earn \$75,000-99,999 a year, 16.7% of burners earn \$100,000-149,999 a year, and 12.2% of burners earn \$150,000-299,999 a year.<sup>29</sup> Most burners make more than the average American did in 2018, which was \$32,621.<sup>30</sup> Despite the principle of Radical Inclusion, Burning Man is not accessible to everybody, one has to be able to take time off of work and away from their family, they have to be able to afford a ticket and travel to the event, and for the experience to align with the Burning Man community, they need to have access to tools and

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<sup>28</sup> Census, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Census, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: United States, 2019.

other resources to be able provide shelter for themselves. If they want to build an art project this may cost even more.

These examples seem to show that Burning Man is not only transgressive, but also reaffirming of societal boundaries. This does not discount the transgressions that occur here, but it is important to acknowledge that Burning Man does not exist outside of society, it is a part of society that reaffirms some of society's boundaries and norms while still being transgressive. This is crucial to understanding the importance of this research.

What is the Importance of this Work?

Understanding transgression is incredibly important, society is made up of transgressions and affirmations of boundaries. The ruling class codifies law through their comfort with different ideas, this becomes the boundary. The boundary of society is built into law, and sometimes society is even uncomfortable with the boundary of law. Their comfort zone can fall behind the rules or the laws that exist. When someone transgresses these boundaries, discomfort can be felt in the society (remember matter out of place). The ruling class isn't always right though. The social norms that fill our society do not benefit everybody in the same way that Burning Man is only accessible to a small chunk of our society. This is where transgression is incredibly important. Transgressions must take place for change to occur. There will always be discomfort with these transgressions as Taussig explained. There will also always be transgressions. For a society to function properly, there must be a balance between these transgressions and affirmations of boundaries. Without boundaries, there is no stability and nothing to transgress. And without transgression, there is no change.

“A tree without roots shall not live, but a tree with no braches shall not grow.”

- Stand High Patrol

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