By the time I first got to Burning Man in 1996—which turned out to be a pivotal year for the event—it had already changed dramatically from its humble beginnings a decade before. On summer solstice eve in 1986, a man named Larry Harvey and his friend Jerry James decided, for no premeditated reason, to host an impromptu gathering on San Francisco’s Baker Beach, where they constructed a primitive wooden effigy and burned it. Having invited just a handful of friends to join them, they were delighted to discover that as they set flame to the eight-foot-high sculpture, the spectacle attracted onlookers from up and down the beach. As Harvey tells the often-repeated tale, someone began to strum a guitar, others began to dance and interact with the figure, and a spontaneous feeling of community and connectedness came upon those gathered—friends and strangers alike (see DVD, chap. 1). Flushed with the unanticipated success of the gathering, Harvey and James soon decided to hold it again the next year; with each subsequent iteration, both the crowd and the sculpture grew substantially.

Numerous legends have accumulated around the birth of the festival and—as is often the case with largely oral traditions—the elements of the narrative have shifted with each retelling, as some aspects have been emphasized and others lost in the dust. For his part, Harvey insists that he had no consciously preconceived ideas about the meaning of the Burning Man, let alone about starting a global movement. But this has not prevented observers and participants from ascribing a fanciful array of intentions and interpretations to the event’s origins.
Over the many years that I have been studying the event I have noticed that most longtime Burners know the story of its origins and subsequent developments, but many recent attendees do not seem to have been introduced to this lore. Still others—both participants and interested observers—have heard half-truths, misrepresentations, and other distortions that have been propagated through popular culture and the media. It therefore seems helpful at the outset to lay the groundwork for the remainder of this work by putting the event in context. In so doing, I explain how Burning Man evolved into its present form and provide brief accounts of other festivals to which Burning Man can be compared, as well as an overview of the current state and organization of the event. This history also begins to illuminate some of the themes and issues that have most prominently shaped the event—spirituality, ritual, transformation, symbolic and artistic expression, countercultural resistance, and the challenges and opportunities of the desert setting—that are explored in the chapters that follow.

Creating the Man

One of the most widely circulated legends surrounding the festival’s inception contends that Larry Harvey was motivated by the demise of an important romantic relationship, a tale that has become a frequently repeated and occasionally distorted media myth: Larry was burning his ex-girlfriend; Larry was burning his ex-girlfriend’s new boyfriend; Larry was burning his ex-girlfriend’s lawyer; and so on. While Harvey characteristically shrugs off such notions, he admits that prior to the inception of what was to become Burning Man he had attended a number of “spontaneous art-party happenings” with his girlfriend. At these happenings (staged by an artist named Mary Graubarger) attendees were invited to build small sculptures out of driftwood and scrap and burn them at Baker Beach on the summer solstice. Harvey has stated that the memory of these visits to the beach with his now-lost love were on his mind that first year, but he insists that this was not the cause or, more important, the meaning of the Man’s creation and destruction. He instead credits his inspiration for the event simply to a spontaneous desire to have fun. This absence of conscious intention or specified significance became a cornerstone of Burning Man’s guiding philosophy from the outset. As Harvey stated many years later, “The Burning Man’s famous for our never having attributed meaning to him, and that’s done on purpose. He is a blank. His face is literally a blank shoji-like screen, and the
idea, of course, is that you have to project your own meaning onto him. You’re responsible for the spectacle.”

(See fig. 1.) With the Man remaining a blank canvas—an open signifier devoid of explicit or fixed meaning—the amorphous image continues to be available for multiple interpretations, as individuals are invited to transfer their own impressions and feelings onto it.

What started as a small gathering of friends in 1986 proceeded to grow phenomenally in size over the next few years, as word of the event spread through San Francisco’s art and alternative culture scenes. By 1988 roughly 150 to 200 people joined in and the figure, now thirty feet high, was officially dubbed “the Burning Man.” By 1990 there were approximately 800 in attendance when the local Park Police stepped in to prevent the combustion of the Man, by this time forty feet high. As the crowd grew restless and unruly, it became clear that the event was no longer sustainable as a free-for-all beach party. Undaunted, Harvey teamed up with a group called the San Francisco Cacophony Society—a loose-knit federation of self-proclaimed “free spirits” and “pranksters” who orchestrated absurd public performance happenings and theatrical private parties. Members of the Cacophony Society had already been attending and helping to spread the word about Burning Man for a couple of years, and with the organizational support of these Cacophonists—in particular, John Law and Michael Michael—it was determined to take the Man out to Nevada’s Black Rock Desert to meet its fiery destiny. James (who withdrew from the event after 1991) and other Cacophonists had gathered there a year before for a wind-sculpture exhibition. For his part, Law had also been thinking about organizing an as yet unspecified Cacophony event in the Black Rock Desert. Thus various forces serendipitously converged, and a plan was hatched to orchestrate a collective pilgrimage to Nevada on the next Labor Day holiday, the first weekend of September.

The stark setting of the Black Rock Desert has significantly influenced how the event has unfolded over the decade and a half since this fateful decision. Located approximately a hundred miles northeast of Reno, it is dominated by a four-hundred-square-mile prehistoric lakebed, or playa. Ringed by distant mountains, this expanse of hardpan alkali clay is completely flat, bone dry, utterly empty, and devoid of vegetation and animal life. (See DVD, chap. 1.) The weather is extreme, as temperatures in late summer typically range from below 40 to well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit, and fierce dust storms with winds sometimes exceeding seventy-five miles per hour are not uncommon. The winds vigorously assault all in their path, easily taking down tents and shade structures that are not adequately
secured with guy wires and rebar stakes, and even then they can wreak havoc on participants’ temporary homes. Dehydration is also a constant threat, as the intensely arid environment inexorably wicks the moisture out of one’s body, such that all participants need to be constantly drinking water. And then there is the dust. Though the surface of the playa is baked hard after the winter rains—which temporarily return this expanse, once home to prehistoric Lake Lahontan, to a shallow lakebed—the sudden influx of thousands of people breaks up the encrusted plain into a fine alkali powder that coats everything within moments. The high-powered winds capture this particulate matter, thereby fomenting dust storms that can create whiteout conditions and that have been known (albeit on rare occasions) to last for days.

This dramatic landscape can seem like the surface of an alien planet and presents numerous physical challenges. In its seemingly endless expanse and otherworldly terrain, the Black Rock playa evokes feelings of both fantastic and limitless possibility, and the austerity of the desert stirs up the themes of hardship, sacrifice, mystery, and boundlessness that are deeply ingrained in the Western cultural imagination. It is not without significance that deserts have a long history as loci of transformative possibilities—from Moses to Muhammed and from Christ to Carlos Castaneda—and Burning Man plays to these ideational sensibilities. Participants today often speak of being “on the playa” in a way that references this sense of environmental and cognitive otherness, helping to set the stage for transformative experiences.

Also significant has been the festival’s relationship with the nearby towns of Gerlach and Empire and the surrounding counties of Washoe and Pershing. Perhaps one of the reasons Burning Man was able to thrive in this location during the early years is the fact that there was a certain sympathy (and a shared enthusiasm for recreational firearms) between the eccentric and reclusive residents of this remote high desert and the aging punks and pranksters of the Cacophony Society, both groups identifying themselves as cultural outsiders. Like every other aspect of this event, the relationship between Burners and locals became more complex as the years wore on, but by and large Burning Man continues to be tolerated by local residents, supported in no small part by local businessmen who profit directly from the annual influx of thousands of people in need of gasoline and other last-minute supplies, as well as by the organizers’ conscientious efforts to participate in and give back to the local community.

Fewer than one hundred individuals made the trek out to Black Rock for Burning Man’s first desert adventure in 1990, which was dubbed a
“Zone Trip,” as Cacophonists called their practice of occasionally taking events on the road.6 (See DVD, chap. 4.) These trips were conceived as adventures of both the imagination and the body, as participants traveled to a conceptual otherworld of space and time. The Zone could just as easily be an ordinary American suburb—approached with a nonordinary gaze—as a remote desert, although the playa lends itself well to a sense of the surreal and mysterious. The original announcement in the Cacophony Society’s monthly newsletter, Rough Draft, read:

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.7

This invitation to seek transformation in and through the heat and emptiness of the desert, coupled with the sacrificial notes sounded by the Man itself, already evoked the event’s central, symbolically resonant elements. As one of the original travelers later described the experience:

Did we know what we were doing? Probably not. Did we care? Yeah! We knew that whatever we were doing, it would be different. If only for that weekend, we were going to put some meaning into a special experience, recreating an ancient pagan ritual that was actually 1000s of years old. In Cacophony, we called these adventures a “Zone Trip.” The Zone was some other dimensional place, it could be the past, the future, something weird, it didn’t matter. We were going there, and we would challenge it and be better for it. . . . We all got out of our cars as one member drew a long line on the desert floor creating what we accepted as a “Zone gateway.” This was one of our Cacophony rituals, for the zone as we defined it took on many forms, it could be a weird house, a particularly strange neighborhood (like Covina, CA), or a desolate, deserted warehouse. Today it was the base of a mountain range in Northern Nevada. We crossed the line and knew we were definitely not in Kansas anymore.8

As these intrepid adventurers literally stepped across a threshold from one Zone into another, they performed a ritual passage into what Turner and van Gennep termed a liminal realm—a conceptual zone “betwixt and between” the everyday and the extraordinary, the sacred and the mundane, where transformation and the unexpected can occur.9 Par-
participants would eventually turn to another Zone metaphor, specifically, the concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (or TAZ), proposed by the cultural critic Hakim Bey: “The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to reform elsewhere/elsewhen before the State can crush it. Because the State is concerned primarily with Simulation rather than substance, the TAZ can ‘occupy’ these areas clandestinely and carry on its festal purposes for quite a while in relative peace.” First published in the early 1990s, just as Burning Man was itself beginning to take off, this concept quickly caught on among Burners, despite Bey’s original intention that “the TAZ be taken more as an essay (‘attempt’), a suggestion, almost a poetic fantasy,” rather than a specifically instituted (and institutionalized) reality such as Burning Man has become. Yet this concept seemed to appropriately capture the “ontological anarchism” inherent in the Burning Man spirit, especially in its earlier, more anarchistic permutations, and continues to be an ideal among Burners and other countercultural denizens.

A somewhat similar concept in this regard is that of the heterotopia—a term coined by the philosopher Michel Foucault to contrast with the literal “no place” of a utopia. Heterotopias are instead taken to be “places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted [and which is] capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.” As Burning Man grew into a site resounding with the strains of multiplicity, difference, paradox, and countercultural ideology, this would serve as an increasingly apt description.

The marriage of these elements—a voyage through the desert into an otherworldly and heterotopic zone to meet oneself in the guise of a burning effigy—readily forms a compelling symbolic stew that has remained central to the Burning Man mythos throughout its evolution, shaping its trajectory and persisting as a foundational narrative to this day. Despite its clear symbolic references to ancient transformative rites, the festival remains explicitly unaffiliated with any religious movement—Pagan or otherwise. Instead, both participants and organizers consistently reject any one fixed meaning for the event, locating it outside the realm of doctrine and dogma. But these refusals of canonical significance notwithstanding, neither the Burning Man festival nor the effigy
for which it is named emerged out of a vacuum. The Man conveys allusions to a wide range of mythological and prehistoric rites of sacrifice and regeneration that can be traced to ancient sacrificial bonfires, carnivals, festivals, and other similar cultural acts.

**BURNING THE MAN**

Among the oldest popular legends are those concerning massive wood or wicker figures containing human or other living sacrifices that are said to have been erected and burned by the ancient Druids. Julius Caesar wrote of such practices nearly two thousand years ago in his tale of the conquest of Gaul, although corroborating archaeological or other evidence remains ambiguous at best. Nevertheless, numerous bonfire-centric folk practices persisted in the British Isles through to medieval and contemporary times, and there remains a reasonably widespread belief that such events did in fact take place in ancient Europe. This notion was popularized in part by Victorian sources such as James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, which proposed, among other things, that myths and rituals concerning a dying and reviving vegetation deity were a universal religious phenomenon, a claim that has long since been disproved. Some believe that echoes of these bonfires can be found in popular events such as the English tradition of Guy Fawkes night, in which effigies of an Elizabethan-era Catholic rebel—the “Guy”—are set ablaze in bonfires throughout the Commonwealth in early November—although most scholars hold that the origins of this celebration are coincidental.

In North American and European popular culture, the idea of ancient sacrificial bonfires flourishes in association with the 1973 horror movie *The Wicker Man*, which drew on Frazer’s and others’ ideas to imagine a quaint, remote, and fictional Scottish island where such practices are reborn with malicious intent and a hapless, puritanical police officer is caught up in the community’s annual fertility sacrifice. Beginning in 2002, a music event called the Wickerman Festival has taken place in Scotland each July, patterning itself in part in homage to the romantic neopagan ideas presented in the film. Culminating in the burning of a thirty-foot-high “wickerman,” this commercially sponsored independent music festival is in the tradition of several other summertime music fests in the United Kingdom, such as Glastonbury and the Stonehenge Free Festivals of the 1970s, that also lay some claim to England’s pre-Christian “Pagan” heritage.
Imagined Celtic wicker men are far from the only effigies that are central to carnivalesque events. For example, in northern India during September and October numerous regional pageants, celebrated in conjunction with the annual festival of Dussehra, reenact the epic *Ramayana* in which the divine Lord Rama rescues his wife, Sita, from the clutches of the demon Ravana. Highlighted by several daylong “Ram-lila”—or plays about Rama—these festivals typically culminate in spectacular conflagrations of Ravana effigies, often towering over one hundred feet high. Another, much more recently devised example is the annual Zozobra festival in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in which a fifty-foot marionette called Zozobra—or “Old Man Gloom”—is burned in early September. Organized by the local Kiwanis Club, Zozobra is said to date to the 1712 introduction of the Spanish fiesta tradition in New Mexico. However, records indicate that the Santa Fe Fiesta as currently celebrated began in the early twentieth century, and the figure of Zozobra was the brainchild of the artist Will Shuster, who first devised the puppet in 1924. Another contemporary event to which Burning Man has been compared—with even stronger ties to the “dominant” culture than Zozobra—is the Bohemian Club’s annual revels at their Grove in the Northern California redwoods. The Bohemian Club, which began as a writers’ guild in San Francisco in 1872, is today a private men’s social club whose membership roster infamously includes the highest-ranking U.S. and international politicians and businessmen. The group’s annual July encampment in the Bohemian Grove opens with a mock-Druid rite known as the “Cremation of Care,” in which a humanoid effigy (“Care”) is sacrificially burned by costumed “priests.” The intention here is that these world leaders should let go of “dull care” for the duration of the two-week event.

Contemporary events such as these, each in its own way, take some inspiration from romantic and exoticized ideals of a bygone era, and there are doubtless many more such festive events featuring sacrificial effigies and bonfires across cultures and histories, too numerous to cover thoroughly here. But the obvious parallels notwithstanding, Harvey and his fellow organizers have repeatedly emphasized that their Burning Man is not to be taken as an explicit re-creation of any particular mythological symbol or rite, and they have made several statements to this effect, including the following:

Larry informs us that he had not seen this film [*The Wicker Man*] in 1986 when he first burned the Man. However, while listening to the sound track of a video made in 1988 at Baker Beach, he did hear a bystander shout,
“Wicker Man.” Provoked by this, it occurred to him that “Lumber Man” would be a more appropriate, though not particularly inspiring, name. He decided to call the figure (which had been anonymous) “Burning Man,” and so it has remained. Any connection of Burning Man to “Wicker Man” in fact or fiction—or, for that matter, to Guy Fawkes, giant figures burned in India, or any other folk source—is purely fortuitous. With or without a central flaming figure, there are countless other popular and alternative culture festivals, both contemporary and historical, to which the Burning Man event owes some debt for its existence. Burning Man takes its place in a lineage stretching back at least as far as the European medieval pilgrimage and carnival traditions and including the popular Christian camp revival meetings of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “Great Awakenings” in the United States, along with much more recent events like 1969’s Woodstock concert. Traces of these diverse predecessors can be found throughout a contemporary network of alternative camp-out events that flourish across the United States and elsewhere. These include the relatively well known Rainbow Gatherings—free camping events held on public lands in the United States—that annually attract thousands of “hippies” and other countercultural types. There is also a thriving network of contemporary Pagan and other alternative spirituality-oriented camp-outs and nature retreats such as the Pagan Spirit Gathering in the Midwest, Ancient Ways in Northern California, and Starwood in upstate New York, among many others. In addition, numerous small-scale music-oriented and other camp-out events take place in the United States and internationally.

Members of the international community of Burning Man participants have formed local networks in order to organize a number of Burning Man-esque events—ranging in form and scale from parties and art exhibits to multiday camp-outs—many of which are officially endorsed by the Burning Man organization. Among these events are Flipside in Texas (the first such spin-off), Playa del Fuego in Delaware, InterFuse in Missouri, Toast in Arizona, Element 11 in Utah, Apogaea in Colorado, Critical Massive in Washington State, and Soak in Oregon, to name just a few. Most of these so-called regionals involve—like the Burning Man festival that inspired it—some kind of flaming effigy, though these are often constructed to be different from the Burning Man itself, such as the Texas Flipside community’s “Stranger,” which changes in appearance from year to year.

These various camp-out festivals are in many ways radically different from one another in their thematic or aesthetic orientations, as well as in
their outlooks on commercial activity and expectations of participants, yet they also share similarities and cultural legacies. There are countless parallels, overlaps, and connections between these events, not only symbolically and thematically, but also in terms of constituency.

CACOPHONISTS AND CULTURE JAMMERS

Another cultural thread to which Burning Man owes its existence is a practice that has come to be called “culture jamming,” referring in this context to various acts of public surrealism, reversal, and irreverence that aim to throw a conceptual monkey wrench into the cogs of normative social expectations and orders. These acts are often intended to demonstrate the absurdity or injustice of globalized, corporate society, although some culture jammers may intend their pranks to be just good (if weird) fun, taking delight in confounding hapless citizens and bending the boundaries between everyday social expectations and surrealist sensibilities. Much of the inspiration for these varied movements can be traced to the dadaist works of Marcel Duchamp and others, the Situationist International movement theorized by Guy Debord, and Jean Baudrillard’s conceptualizations of hyperreality and simulacra, as well as the “happenings” originated by the artist Allan Kaprow, Ken Kesey’s band of Merry Pranksters, Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies, and the quasi-satirical Discordian religious movement, among many others.

The Cacophony Society in particular is an important and influential exemplar of this larger phenomenon. Its roots can be found in a group called the Suicide Club, which started in 1977. The Suicide Club recommended that one should “get all worldly affairs in order, to enter into the world of Chaos, cacophony and dark saturnalia, to live each day as if it were the last.” The group lost momentum and disbanded in 1982, after performing such feats as repeatedly scaling both the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges, entering a Bank of America in downtown San Francisco dressed as clowns and Keystone Kops singing, “We’re in the Money,” and modifying commercial billboards to make ironic statements about cultural hypocrisy (leading to a related group that would come to be called the Billboard Liberation Front). Former Suicide Club members, including John Law, regrouped in 1986 as the Cacophony Society. Michael Michael soon became involved and, with fellow Cacophonists, organized numerous similar public pranks and other edgy events during the late 1980s and the 1990s.

One version of its mission statement, which, in keeping with the mercurial nature of the group, is always in flux, declared:
The Cacophony Society is a randomly gathered network of free spirits united in the pursuit of experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society through subversion, pranks, art, fringe explorations and meaningless madness. We are that fringe element which is always near the edge of reason. Our members include a wide variety of individuals all marching to the beat of a different din. We are the merry pranksters of a new decade. Our ranks include starving artists living on a diet of sacred cows, underemployed musicians listening to their own subliminal messages, postmodern explorers surveying urban environments, dada clowns working in the neural circuits, and live actors playing the theater of the street. We are nonpolitical, nonprophet and often nonsensical. . . . You may already be a member.33

Most Cacophony events have typically been geared to acts of public weirdness, although members have also orchestrated clandestine events such as “sewer tours,” in which participants dressed in elegant formal attire and hip waders for (literal) underground cocktail parties. Perhaps most famous, or infamous, among all Cacophony and Cacophony-inspired events are those known as Santarchy or SantaCons, in which hundreds of people don cheap Santa Claus suits at Christmastime and irreverently roam the streets and shopping malls of various U.S. and international cities, including London, Tokyo, and Berlin.34 From its inception on Baker Beach, Burning Man attracted participants from various segments of San Francisco’s artsy alternative scene, including several denizens of the Cacophony Society who left an indelible fingerprint on the festival through their active involvement in and co-organization of the event throughout the early 1990s (although their specific presence as an organizing force ceased after 1996).

Each of these social movements has contributed to the context from which Burning Man emerged and in which it has flourished. Ancient burning icons, traditions of carnival, festival, and pilgrimage, and bands of Cacophonists—our Burning Man rides these cultural streams, often referencing and projecting romanticized concepts of premodernity into our so-called postmodern context. Burning Man organizers acknowledge these historical antecedents but disavow any direct causal relationship between their event and these various parallels. With no preconceived source or definitively ascribed interpretation underlying either the image of the Man or the annual rite of the Burn, its meaning is left open to individual interpretation and imagination.
BUILDING BLACK ROCK CITY

Once Burning Man took root in the Black Rock Desert, the event began to take on what would become its defining characteristics as a major international festival. For starters, it roughly doubled in size each year, so that by 1996 there were about 8,000 “citizens” of what by this time had come to be called Black Rock City. In many ways 1996 would prove a watershed for Burning Man. Previously, the event was able to get by with minimal organization and oversight, and many saw it as an essentially anarchistic event where one of the only guiding rules was, “Don’t interfere with anyone’s immediate experience.” The festival’s image as a feral and potentially dangerous happening was fueled not only by the ecstatic tenor of the Burn itself but also by highlights such as the Drive-by Shooting Range, located several miles from the main campsite and targeting stuffed animals.

Also contributing to this perception in 1996 was the event’s first “annual theme”—The Inferno, loosely inspired by Dante’s Divine Comedy and often referred to as “HelCo,” after a prominent art installation that year. Intended as a spoof of corporate culture, this theme feigned a hostile takeover of Burning Man by HelCo, said to be fresh on the heels of its successful leveraged buyout of hell. It was an ironic comment on Burning Man’s potential—and refusal—to sell out, even as the event underwent radical population growth and became increasingly structured. The mock–strip mall of the HelCo art installation featured larger-than-life facades emblazoned with sarcastically modified corporate logos: CacaHell in place of Taco Bell, Submit in place of Subway, and Starfucks in place of Starbucks, along with other cleverly mutated brand images. The Inferno also featured the City of Dis—named after one of Dante’s levels of hell—which was an impressive forty-foot-high, three-towered sculpture with large gargoyle-like heads made of mud and wire mesh and designed by the artist Pepe Ozan (see DVD, chap. 6). In conjunction with this installation, Ozan and friends orchestrated an ambitious opera titled The Arrival of Empress Zoe, featuring nude and seminude performers depicting devils, demons, and insects and chanting the lyrics “devils’ delight, fire tonight” while dancing around the hollow structure, which was filled with wood and set aflame. Such satirical flirtations with religious (and irreligious) symbolism have become typical of Burning Man, here simultaneously acknowledging and lampooning the event’s ostensibly “heretical” tendencies.

In addition to these outward affectations of defiance and danger, the first serious accidents occurred in 1996. A few nights before the official
opening of the event, a man riding his motorcycle on the open playa—reportedly playing chicken while very drunk and with his headlight off—collided with another vehicle and was killed. Later, two other people were seriously injured when their tent was run over by a driver who was said to have consumed a large quantity and variety of illicit drugs. These tragic incidents—which remain among the most serious accidents related to Burning Man to date—spurred an awareness of the need to establish more effective safety regulations.

An additional ramification of the fact that until 1997 cars were allowed to come and go as they pleased was that gate crashers could not be easily prevented, as the “gate” was nothing more than a trailer off the side of the highway, staffed with one or two volunteers who provided directions to the event, which during these early years was located several miles into the interior of the playa. Presuming one could find Black Rock City in the featureless expanse of the playa without guidance, this meant that paying the then-$50 admission fee was deemed optional by some. In 1996 in particular, the gate was disregarded by a large influx of local Nevada youths on the final day and night of the Burn who drove onto the site with no supplies other than cheap beer, apparently intent on gawking at the freaks (and the sometimes scantily clothed or unclothed women). Although organizers encouraged locals to attend, they also needed them to be prepared for survival in the occasionally capricious environment of the Black Rock Desert and, furthermore, wanted them to participate and immerse themselves in the experience along with everyone else. It was from incidents like this that one of the event’s guiding principles was born: “No Spectators.”

As with the final Burn on Baker Beach in 1990, the difficulties of 1996 made it clear that the event could not sustainably continue as it had. From this point forward, the default world of government bureaucracy and business interests intervened more vigorously, requiring organizers to work much more closely and carefully with the local Nevada authorities, who up to this time had been relatively uninterested. These authorities primarily consist of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)—the federal agency that oversees the Black Rock Desert—and Washoe and Pershing Counties, which straddle the playa. Burning Man’s organizers correctly understood that they would have to impose certain limits and more explicit rules if the event was to continue. John Law, who had been a driving force behind Burning Man, did not want to see things move in the direction of greater regulation and control, so he withdrew from the organizing team and has not attended since.40 Harvey and
many others, however, wanted to see Burning Man continue to grow so that as many people as possible could have the opportunity to experience what was understood to be a remarkable and potentially life-changing event, and they proceeded to take the necessary steps to reorganize and restructure the festival as it exists today.

In order to institute a new organizational and fiscal umbrella for the event, Harvey formed the Black Rock City Limited Liability Corporation (BRC LLC) with Michael Michael and other longtime friends and co-organizers, Crimson Rose, Will Roger, Harley Dubois, as well as a relative newcomer, Marian Goodell, who became involved after the 1996 event. These individuals would fulfill important roles in event management. For example, as Director of Business and Communications, Goodell manages Burning Man’s public interactions, including negotiations with local governments, the BLM, and the media, thereby serving a key role in shaping the public’s perception of the event. Rose is Managing Art Director, which also entails oversight of pyrotechnics and fire performances during the event; and Michael (also known as Danger Ranger) could perhaps be best described as a futurist and visionary, fulfilling the enigmatic role of Ambassador and Director of Genetic Programming. As Director of Community Services, DuBois has perhaps the most noticeable impact on participants’ experiences of the event itself as the City Manager of Black Rock City. Roger’s active role in managing BRC’s infrastructure was scaled back in 2003, although he still serves on the LLC board and as Director of Nevada Relations and Special Projects.41

In 1997 these organizers instituted a number of changes to address safety and other infrastructural concerns. Driving on the festival grounds by vehicles other than official or emergency transport was henceforth prohibited, although an important exception was made for “art cars,” which were now prohibited from traveling at speeds over five miles per hour. Also known as “mutant vehicles,” art cars are creatively and often elaborately modified autos that have been transformed into various sorts of mobile interactive sculptures (fig. 2; see also DVD, chaps. 1 and 2). A roaming community of art car aficionados had started attending Burning Man in the early 1990s and became a beloved feature of the event.42

In addition, the event site was relocated much closer to the highway so that the gate and festival boundaries could be more tightly controlled.43 Now, rather than embark into the immense void of the playa—with fingers crossed that sufficient attention to the odometer would in fact bring
one to the event site—one must typically wait in a long line of other vehicles before proceeding through an uncompromising ticket-taking station, where the surly, desert-hardened punks of the Gate and Perimeter staff brook neither fools nor stowaways. Where once the threshold into the Zone was physically and symbolically breached by stepping across a

Figure 2. “Mahayana Bus” and “Silver Skull” art cars by unknown artists, 2003. Photo by Lee Gilmore.
simple line, this extended entrance is now marked with numerous and frequently humorous signs intended to help set the tone and evoke the annual theme. Following a rigorous check for tickets, adequate supplies, and stowaways, arrivals proceed to a Greeters station, staffed by a much more cheerful bunch of volunteers who warmly welcome “home” both newcomers and old-timers. Their role is to orient people to community standards and expectations, as well as to help people figure out where to set up camp or, for those whose friends are already on-site, how to locate pre-arranged campsites.

The journey to Black Rock City requires considerable preparation. At a minimum, everyone must supply their own food and water—at least one and a half gallons per person per day—along with other survival gear such as tents and general camping equipment. Most participants also construct a temporary shelter or shade structure to shield themselves from the blistering sun, and these must be securely tied down and capable of withstanding the occasional near-hurricane force winds. Popular shelters include store-bought canopies and carports, homemade lean-tos, covered geodesic domes, and other temporary buildings pieced together out of PVC pipe and tarps or constructed of colorfully painted plywood. (See DVD, chap. 1.) Some participants rent recreational vehicles for their journeys to and stays on the playa. Admission is itself a nontrivial expense, as tickets in 2010 ranged from $210 to $300, depending on date of purchase, a cost that typically rises incrementally each year. In addition to these basics, many participants make enormous commitments of time, energy, and money—well above the cost of admission and supplies—in order to create and transport the event’s numerous elaborate art projects, theme camps, and costumes.

After overcoming numerous external and internal political challenges during the late 1990s, the Burning Man organization achieved relative financial and social stability. The rate of Black Rock City’s annual population growth is no longer exponential, having slowed to a more manageable rate. In addition to the LLC board, the organization now employs several full- and part-time salaried and contract office and event staff. Participants occasionally refer to this body as “the BMorg,” pronounced “bee-morg,” but sometimes shortened to “the Borg,” a derogatory reference to a dystopian race of cyborgs from the Star Trek television shows. The Borg moniker indicates the extent to which many Burners contest and resist social structures deemed authoritative or hierarchical, but for their part, Burning Man organizers and staff members dislike this term and prefer that their collective endeavors be referred to as “the Project.”
In addition to paid staff members—and perhaps more important—there are several thousand volunteers who help make the event happen every year, collaborating with paid staff leadership to provide the infrastructure and basic civic amenities for Black Rock City. This includes a volunteer peacekeeping force of specially trained Rangers, who act as intermediaries with various governmental and law enforcement agencies that maintain a presence at the event and whose roles also include conflict mediation, crowd control, and emergency response. There is also a couple-hundred-person-strong construction crew known as the DPW (Department of Public Works) who begin building the city’s infrastructure more than a month in advance. Although participants are encouraged to travel around Black Rock City’s several-square-mile terrain on foot and bicycles, art cars are now “licensed” by the DMV (Department of Mutant Vehicles). Burning Man staff and volunteers also liaise with and contribute to professional emergency medical services, and a local agency, the Reno-based Regional Emergency Medical Services Authority (REMSA), is hired to staff the event. To facilitate communication, from 1994 to 2004 organizers published a daily newspaper, the *Black Rock Gazette*, which in 2005 was reduced to a single “gate edition” following a decision to reallocate resources. Other participants have independently produced their own daily publications during the event, most famously the long-standing and self-proclaimed alternative newspaper *Piss Clear*—named after a phrase used colloquially at the event in order to promote sufficient hydration—which published from 1995 to 2007. Black Rock City is also home to dozens of low-frequency radio stations, including the official Burning Man Information Radio station. The Center Camp Café serves as a central gathering spot in the heat of the day and provides a venue for participants’ spoken word and musical performances. (See DVD, chap. 1.) A final and indispensable civic requirement is met by several hundred chemical toilets, regularly serviced by the Reno-based provider Johnny on the Spot.

Many Burning Man participants organize themselves into groups that create “theme camps.” (See DVD, chaps. 1 and 2.) These are usually presented as imaginative temporary locations dedicated to a particular motif or affinity, each functioning both as interactive entertainment venues for the city populace and as hubs for their own extended communities. Some groups also organize “villages,” which are larger groupings of smaller theme camps that share some collective identity and organizational effort. A typical theme camp might be devoted to a particular preference in music, such as the Church of Funk or Spike’s Vampire Bar,
and many theme camps host nightly deejayed dance venues—typically involving some genre of electronic, or “techno,” music—that are open to any and all interested revelers.\(^{50}\) Others feature regularly scheduled performances or theatrical contests of some type, as is the case with the “Thunderdome”—faithfully adapted from a scene in the *Mad Max* movie of the same name and reproduced every year since 1998 by the Death Guild theme camp. Another popular contest called Dance Dance Immolation, based on a popular interactive video game, “Dance Dance Revolution,” appeared at Burning Man in 2005–6. Where the original game’s goal is to correctly keep up with a programmed sequence of dance steps, at Dance Dance Immolation participants (safely ensconced in fire-proximity suits) were blasted with flames whenever they made a mistake. Still others might proclaim themselves sanctuaries for particular erotic identities and practices, such as PolyParadise, the Temple of Atonement, JiffyLube, or Bianca’s Smut Shack. In other cases, theme camps are based on idiosyncratic parodies of well-known popular figures or corporations, such as the Spock Mountain Research Labs or Motel 666. The Burning Man organization, for its part, now carefully oversees a theme camp proposal and mapping process; those groups that successfully indicate that their efforts will create an exceptional venue for interactivity and participation are given preferential placement along Black Rock City’s main drag—usually called the Esplanade—which faces a large, central open area reserved for art installations, as well as other close-in locations that are mapped in advance.\(^{51}\)

The city itself—now more than ten times larger than a decade ago—is ringed by a dozen or so precisely surveyed semicircular rows of campsites bisected by cross streets at regular intervals (chart 1). The latitudinal streets are typically named in accordance with the annual theme—for example, Authority, Creed, Dogma, Evidence, Faith, Gospel, Reality, Theory, and Vision in 2003 when the theme was Beyond Belief—while the longitudinal streets are designated by degrees of time ranging from 2:00 to 10:00.\(^{52}\) Participants generally refer to the city’s open area simply as the playa, although technically this term applies to the entire landscape on which Black Rock City resides. This uninhabited zone—an open-air playground of the imagination—is conceptually and physically distinguished from the city’s residential area and is populated by dozens, if not hundreds, of participant-created and frequently interactive works of art, including the Burning Man itself standing at Black Rock City’s geographic center.\(^{53}\)
The layout of Black Rock City is designed to generate a particular sense of community, and Harvey has stated that he chose to leave the circle open because he wanted to invite a sense of boundlessness and wilderness into this civic space and also because he wanted the Man to reside at some distance from the main camp area. When viewed from above, the semicircular layout is reminiscent of a labyrinth or mandala. The placement of the Man at the center of the city’s concentric semicircles and radial spokes readily suggests a template that the historian of religion Mircea Eliade called the *axis mundi*—a symbolic manifestation of the sacred center of the cosmos and the location of hierophany, the eruption of the sacred into the profane world. Here the Man forms the axis around which space and time are fixed—space, because the Man forms the locus around which streets are laid and in relation to which most of the other art is placed; and time, because the Burn is generally perceived as the festival’s zenith.

Starting in 1996, Burning Man organizers devised a series of annual themes, beginning with The Inferno, as previously mentioned. Although intended in a satirical and cacophonous spirit, the Inferno theme contributed to a somewhat dark atmosphere in 1996. Hence subsequent annual themes have attempted to inspire a more cheerful or contemplative mood: Fertility (1997), which vaguely nodded to notions of goddess worship, love, and sexuality; Nebulous Entity (1998), hinting at beliefs in extraterrestrial intelligence; the Wheel of Time (1999), a loosely millennial theme in which the Black Rock City layout became patterned as a monumental clock face; the Body (2000), featuring artistic representations of body parts arranged as kundalini chakras along the city’s central causeway; the Seven Ages (2001), which celebrated the human life cycle from birth to death (see chart 1); and the Floating World (2002), which loosely alluded to the Japanese artistic tradition of *ukiyo-e* (images of the floating world), although the artwork inspired by the theme largely had nautical and watery motifs, transforming the desert into an oceanic spectacle of boats, fantastical marine life, and pirates.

The 2003 theme, Beyond Belief, was intended as an exploration of the boundaries of the world’s religions, rituals, and faiths, drawing the event closer than ever before into direct dialogue with notions of religion and spirituality. The Vault of Heaven (2004) paid homage to cosmic grandeur, alien worlds, and scientific discovery; and Psyche (2005) encouraged reflections on the mind, dreams, and the unconscious. The Future—Hope and Fear (2006) set out to examine both utopian and
dystopian notions of what may come; the Green Man (2007) invoked a popular pagan motif while also striving to improve the event’s environmental profile; and the American Dream (2008) invited participants to imagine, reimage, critique, and celebrate the mythos of this contested nation. Most recently, Evolution (2009) examined change, chaos, nature, and culture, while Metropolis (2010) set out to explore questions of urbanity and civilization. These annual themes are advanced in order to furnish a conceptual common ground and provide a starting point for the event’s creative expressions. The themes serve to spark the collective imagination and occasionally provide opportunities for both self- and cultural reflection. Yet, in keeping with Burners’ typical resistance to authority and fixed meanings, many participants pay little heed to the themes, nor is all the art necessarily congruous with or inspired by them. It is much more important that artworks involve some form of interactivity, in keeping with the event’s participatory philosophy.

**NO SPECTATORS!**

Over the years Burners have cultivated and nurtured an overarching ethos that reflects and reinforces the values and standards developed within the larger community of participants. These ideals were eventually explicitly formulated by the organizers into the “Ten Principles,” which serve as guidelines for community behavior: radical inclusion, gifting, de commodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leave no trace, participation, and immediacy. The organizers conscientiously promote these values through their Web site, newsletters, e-mails, and personal appearances, and they are embraced and championed by participants, who propagate them throughout the community. In advancing these principles, the organizers have not only framed and helped to define the nature of Burning Man but also selected for a set of participants who are, by temperament and social location, more likely to be drawn to an event of this sort in the first place.

A handful of established rules are spelled out in the *Survival Guide*, required reading for all participants; given the antiauthoritarian bent of most participants, these are sometimes referred to as “Participant Responsibilities” and “Community Standards” rather than “rules.” However, a few points are officially codified as the event’s “Ten Fundamentals,” prohibiting dogs, firearms, vending, driving non-art cars, leaving garbage behind, and camping outside the limits of Black Rock City and requiring that everyone purchase a ticket, follow basic sound and safety
ordinances, and adhere to all applicable local and federal laws. In this vein, the concepts of participation, radical self-expression, and radical self-reliance serve more as behavioral ideals than as strictly codified doctrines.

The need to preserve the natural desert environment led to one of the event’s primary mandates: leave no trace, a catchphrase initially developed by the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, and the BLM in order to encourage visitors to wilderness areas to protect the natural environment from potentially damaging human activities and waste. This requirement—both enforced by the BLM and largely embraced by the community—entails scrupulously cleansing the playa surface of all physical traces of the festival at its conclusion, down to the last pistachio shell, cigarette butt, or speck of glitter, and requires participants to pack out all their own garbage. This means that as the playa is returned to its natural condition, Black Rock City disappears like Brigadoon at the festival’s conclusion and must be rebuilt from scratch each year. Because Burners generally support environmental responsibility, and share a deep appreciation for the rugged beauty of the desert, they have by and large earnestly adopted this model, packing out all their own refuse and methodically combing over their campsites to remove as much minute litter as possible. The community has even coined its own unique moniker for random debris: MOOP, which stands for “matter out of place.” This principle was extended in 2007 when organizers sought to reduce the event’s carbon footprint by arranging for solar- and biodiesel-powered generators to supply all their infrastructural power needs, in keeping with that year’s Green Man theme.

However, the implementation of this edict is not always perfect, and some participants inevitably leave behind messes, both large and small. Another problem has been that garbage bags are sometimes found strewn along the side of the highway between Black Rock City and Reno, due to failure to securely fasten them to roof racks or trailers or to willful littering. Either way, it’s a problem that has brought the event to the attention of the local communities in a distinctly negative fashion, and as a result the organizers have made concerted efforts to educate participants about this problem, which seems to have reduced its incidence. Also, the organization uses its e-mail newsletter to publicly shame groups that leave behind large amounts of garbage by announcing the name of the camp, if known, or the location of the problem camp within the Black Rock City grid, as the dominant attitude among most Burners is that such behaviors are unacceptable. After the festival is over, many volunteers
remain behind for weeks to finish the clean-up, as the BLM randomly checks parcels of the event site in order to verify that only a very small amount of MOOP has been left on the playa, a stipulation on which the annual permit depends.

The principles of *decommodification* and *gifting* mean that both corporate and independent artisan vending is strictly prohibited at Burning Man, as are advertisements. The no-vending policy distinguishes Burning Man from both commercial events like the neo-Woodstock concerts or the Coachella Music Festival, as well as from other so-called counter-culture festivals such as the Rainbow Gathering and most contemporary Pagan festivals, at which many attendees fund their travels by selling food or arts and crafts. As an alternative, organizers promote the event as a *gift economy* in which participants are encouraged to freely share their resources and creativity while also practicing *radical self-reliance* in keeping with the requirement to supply all one’s own food, shelter, water, and any other items needed for survival. By and large, Burners have come to heartily embrace this edict, and indeed the promise of a space temporarily removed from the consumer culture that dominates in the default world is for some a main attraction of the event.

The innumerable creative acts that drive the heart and soul of Burning Man are also seen as contributions to the gift economy. In this regard, Harvey has been especially inspired by the poet and literary critic Lewis Hyde’s meditation on gift economies as an “erotic” commerce, based on relationship, attraction, and union, that binds communities together by creating ties between individuals, where art itself becomes a form of gift giving. This ideal situates Burning Man within a larger cultural critique of corporate consumption and commodification and also blends seamlessly with the other key principles, as individuals are encouraged and inspired to share of themselves as a way to participate in the larger community.

The Burning Man organization consistently refuses all offers of corporate sponsorship and is vigilant about maintaining an event free from outside corporate advertising, product placement, and vending of any sort. This means that the event is funded almost exclusively by ticket sales, although the organization also produces a limited supply of products such as T-shirts and calendars, which are available for purchase only via the burningman.com Web site. However, the income generated by these sources constitutes a minuscule portion of Burning Man’s annual budget, which was nearly $8.4 million as of 2006. These funds are used to rebuild the considerable infrastructure of Black Rock City.
each year, pay the hefty BLM fee, cover insurance and miscellaneous administrative costs, and sponsor select art projects, such that the organization basically breaks even every year. Participants tend to be vocal critics of any perceived breach of the gift economy principle, and some have charged that—given the high ticket prices and increasingly complex bureaucracy—the Borg itself has become overly corporate or commercialized, despite its rhetoric. In response, the organizers carefully distinguish their own revenue-generating activities as “commerce,” not “commodification”:

We have drawn a dividing line around our desert event in order to separate direct, immediate experience from the commercial world of manufactured desire. It’s not that we are against commerce, but we are against commerce without community, consumption without purpose and profit without value. The small amount of schwag we offer to the public is created by and for participants. Its aim is to communicate the experience of Burning Man and your involvement in our culture. We do not advertise outside of our community. We challenge other commerce to provide an equal value.68

Once past the gate, money can be exchanged in only two places within the Black Rock City limits: the Center Camp Café and an ice concession devised as a theme camp called CampArctica. The Café, which sells only beverages such as coffee and chai, has been a feature of Black Rock City since 1993, with its proceeds mostly serving to fund its own existence. (See DVD, chap. 1.) Given the length of time during which participants must maintain perishable food supplies in the desert heat, the pragmatism of an ice concession seems indisputable, and some portion of the profits of this enterprise are traditionally donated to the local communities of Gerlach and Empire. However, some participants still find the Café controversial, feeling that it represents a commodified space, providing a service that participants would do better to fulfill in their own self-reliant (and gifting) ways. Indeed, many longer-term and other attendees never go into the Café, a fact also borne out by the fact that most of interviews I conducted there were with first-time (and sometimes solo) attendees who may not have had anywhere else to find shade and shelter in the heat and dust of the day.

In addition to declining all offers of corporate sponsorship or product placement, the organization vigorously defends the Burning Man “brand”—with its indisputable hipster cachet—from being used by any outside party or to promote anything other than the event.69 Most participants would perceive blatant commercialization of the event—such
as corporate logos on tickets, the sale of branded beverages or food, or any statement like “Burning Man is brought to you by [fill in the name of any commercial entity here]”—as a betrayal of the event’s core values. In resisting corporate branding, many participants go so far as to carefully mask or creatively alter all logos on the rented trucks and other gear they bring with them, so that Black Rock City can remain a kind of purified space, ideologically (if not practically) removed from the tainted forces of the market.

The consumer researchers Robert Kozinets and John Sherry examined the ways in which Burning Man simultaneously resists and participates in traditional market economies. Noting that participants must engage in commerce with some corporate interests in order to obtain supplies for the event—a conclusion reached in part by the extent to which the task of traveling to and adequately supplying themselves for Burning Man resulted in the rapid depletion of their research budgets—they also observed that participants distance themselves from corporate consumption once they have arrived at Black Rock City. Kozinets concluded:

Rather than providing a resolution to the many extant social tensions in contemporary life—such as those surrounding the beneficial and oppressive elements of markets—it offers a conceptual space set apart within which to temporarily consider, to play with and within those contradictions. It falls short of some ideal and uncontaminated state, but it may be all the consumer emancipation most consumers want or need.\(^7^0\)

Yet, even if only a fleeting ideal, it is one that participants sometimes embrace and promote even more enthusiastically (almost fanatically) than the organizers.

Finally, perhaps the most popular principle at Burning Man is the injunction to participate, with the corollary that there should be, as stated above, no spectators. (See DVD, chap. 1.) The concept of participation undergirds the entire event, which, simply put, means that everyone is expected to actively engage in Burning Man and make a positive contribution to the collective experience, in whatever unique way individuals so choose. As the organizers state, “The people who attend Burning Man are no mere ‘attendees,’ but rather participants in every sense of the word: they create the city, the interaction, the art, the performance and ultimately the ‘experience.’ . . . We often like to say there are no spectators at Burning Man. It doesn’t mean there isn’t a lot to look at—it means that even the process of viewing is active.”\(^7^1\) The twin concepts of radical self-expression and radical self-reliance are closely allied with
the ethos of participation. The term *radical self-reliance* underscores the edict that participants are expected to supply their own material needs at the event and also reflects the values of responsibility, autonomy, and freedom that are extolled at Burning Man. However, this injunction is not intended to breed isolation or greed but rather is framed such that individuals are encouraged to turn their self-reliance outward, starting with the self and reaching out to the greater community. The term *radical self-expression* is likewise intended to encourage creative and reflexive exchanges between individuals and the larger community. As Harvey has stated, “We [ask] that participants commune with themselves, that they regard their own reality, that essential inner portion of experience that makes them feel real, as if it were a vision. . . . No one can say what that vision might be. We just ask people to invent some way of sharing it with others.”

In this regard, there is no official mandate as to how, specifically, one should participate in or express oneself through the event. (See DVD, chap. 1.) For some people, this may mean volunteering in some capacity for the Burning Man organization, which has developed a number of volunteer teams that are responsible for managing diverse aspects of the event. There are those who assist in administrative capacities year-round—for example, the Media Team or the Web Team—as well as those whose efforts take place on-site at the event, including the Greeters, the Rangers, and the DPW. Others produce the event’s numerous and often ambitious artworks or organize elaborate theme camps, and still others play and interact with those objects and camps while decked out in eclectic and whimsical costumes, thus contributing to the performative and ritualistic ambience that saturates the festival. Furthermore, the various elements of this ethos—especially participation, radical self-expression, and radical self-reliance—have come to be among the key elements of the event that participants most frequently cite as having inspired a sense of life transformation or critical change in perspective, as I explore further in chapter 4.

**CONCLUSION**

Ritual, religion, and spirituality have always been thematic undercurrents at the Burning Man festival. Soon after Larry Harvey and his compatriots first erected an artistically primitive effigy on the beach, Harvey discovered that he had tapped into something powerful, something that had the ability to touch people in compelling and potentially
transformative ways, even if only by providing a momentary joy or a fleeting sense of connectedness to others in the age-old fascination with fire. Although there was ostensibly no conscious intention behind that act, religious or otherwise, the simple performance and the spontaneous community that formed around it tapped into a primal attraction to fire and referenced ancient “pagan” sacrificial rites and totems, triggering a mood that was at once contemplative and celebratory. A few years later, when Harvey and his culture jamming friends in the Cacophony Society first set foot on the playa, intent on burning the Man, they consciously evoked the liminal metaphors readily suggested by the desert’s otherworldly terrain in stepping across a threshold into the Zone. In this simultaneously imaginal and physical space, they could be “reborn through the cleansing fires of the trackless, pure desert,” framing the experience as a rite of passage.

This once-simple event grew into an increasingly complex and well-organized festival as participants have created a mini-metropolis on the surface of a barren and unforgiving desert floor. Thousands now perform this annual pilgrimage to the Black Rock Desert, taking part in a long legacy of carnivalesque celebrations and retreats into the wilderness in search of a temporary heterotopia or an alternative to the mundane routines of the default world, and perhaps a sense of connection to something larger than oneself. Today’s Burners bring with them an extraordinary proliferation of artwork, much of which references global religious symbolism in both overt and subtle ways. (See DVD.) In tandem with this, many participants use Burning Man as a space in which to create quirky, unorthodox, and hybrid forms of ritual expression through which participants cobble together independent symbol and meaning systems. Many also report that the shared, immediate experience of the event contains deeply transformative and spiritual dimensions, although they typically refuse to associate Burning Man with any explicit metaphysical, theological, or religious doctrine.