LEAVING TRACES:
TRANSFORMATIVE EVENTS AND THE POROSITY OF HUMANS AND ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

Transformative events are described by participants as ephemeral, appearing in and then disappearing from particular landscapes. What were cities teeming with costumed participants, art, and music seem to become “empty” deserts and meadows once again. Most transformative events have some version of the rule “Leave No Trace,” yet they leave many kinds of traces, material and immaterial, intentional and unintentional. What matter stays on-site, altering the land and what comes back to the other “home” that is lived in the rest of the year, altering participants’ lives away from event spaces? This article will focus on material traces, generally unintentional, left by some events in the western United States, including Burning Man (Nevada), Symbiosis/Oregon Eclipse/Global Eclipse (California, Oregon, Patagonia), Beloved (Oregon), and Lucidity (California). What is left behind includes impacts on the land and nonhuman species at event sites, the carbon footprints of events, the trash, ash, and other detritus that remains behind. Traces that are carried away and taken home to participants’ other homes away from event sites include material aspects—dust, mud, ash, sun exposure—absorbed by the bodies of participants. This article explores ways in which we might account for and understand the ongoing material effects of transformation on event participants’ bodies and on event sites. It focuses on continuities as well as discontinuities between transformative events and the “default world” or “mundania,” and the various tensions between heterotopia and home. The article draws on ideas of “porosity” to explore lasting—not ephemeral—material transformations of event participants, human and nonhuman.
Leaving Traces: Transformative Events and the Porosity of Humans and Environment

Sarah M. Pike

Every summer, the first time I use my car’s air-conditioning, I smell dust from the Black Rock Desert, the site that Burning Man makes over every year into “Black Rock City.” Memories of fifteen “Burns” flood back with that smell, as I remember taking in lungfuls of dust, dressing in colorful Burning Man clothes never worn anywhere else, riding my bike across the desert, and looking at huge sculptures with the sun setting behind them. In 2020, I attended Burning Man’s virtual “Multiverse,” held online after the real-life event was canceled due to COVID-19. In preparation for the final ceremony of the week-long virtual event, another participant in an online chat posted a photo of a jar of playa dust sitting next to his computer as part of his preparation for the ceremony. These two examples of traces left by the physical site of Burning Man (my car’s air-conditioning and the jar) suggest that material substances—in this case, dust—may play a significant role in transformative event experiences, not only during events, but also in ongoing ways, crossing the boundary that many events construct between event spaces and the outside world.

Events like Burning Man are characterized by a dynamic set of tensions captured in my two examples of dust: place and placelessness, the ethics of leave no trace and leaving traces, ephemerality and permanence, and boundedness and permeability. These tensions enhance and problematize the transformational experiences that many participants report during and after these events. This essay explores ways in which we might account for and understand some ongoing material effects of transformation by focusing on continuities as well as discontinuities between transformative events and the “default world” and the contrast between “heterotopia” and home. I draw on ideas of “porosity” to explore lasting, rather than ephemeral, material transformations of event participants and event sites. Attention to material traces, especially around the relationship between human and nonhuman nature, reveals some ways in which transformative events, bounded in time and space, are increasingly emphasizing porous boundaries and their greater impact beyond the festival setting. Finally, I explore how these issues play out in the context of a virtual event, made necessary in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this essay, I aim to put my many years of ethnographic research at Burning Man into conversation with other events that I have researched online, focusing on Leave No Trace practices, as well as material traces events leave in bodies, at sites, and in the larger society.

A Place Apart

There is a fundamental tension at transformative events between a bodily experience and materiality grounded in specific places and a transcendent community, what religious studies scholar Erik Davis describes as a “neotribal . . . borderless network of cultural collaboration” that may seem placeless. Burning Man, for example, is both deeply tied to Nevada’s Black Rock Desert and exists globally through a network of events guided by its core principles. Symbiosis, founded in 2005, which later collaborated with other festivals to launch Oregon Eclipse and Global Eclipse, has moved from various sites in California to Oregon in 2019 and to Patagonia in
2020. Although these festivals may migrate beyond their original locales and move beyond what might be considered a “festival,” wherever they take place, they tend to be created and imagined as sacred places apart from ordinary life in which extraordinary experiences are possible in part because of the physical sites themselves.

Creating a sacred space out of a specific physical site depends on its opposite, the profane, outside world participants travel from to experience an event. Twenty-first-century American transformational festivals, even though they only last from a few days to a week, epitomize what David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal have described as American sacred spaces that coalesce “sacred meaning and significance, holy awe and desire” and become sites of “intensive interpretation.”

Life back home away from festivals is stripped of these qualities because festivals have tended to shore up a binary opposition to enhance their reputation as sacred destinations. In an early essay on Burning Man, I drew on Rob Shields’s notion of “place myths” (composites of rumors, images, and experiences that make particular places compelling) and Michel Foucault’s “heterotopia” (“counter-sites” that contest and invert other sites) to identify some of the strategies participants draw on to establish festivals as places apart from everyday life: making these events into liminal destinations in contrast to their lives “back home”; inverting and contesting what they call the “default world” outside festival bounds; imagining the festival site as a blank canvas of unlimited potential and possibility; borrowing the language of pilgrimage to describe the journey to and within the event; and identifying the festival community as “home” and “family.”

Remote sites and the journeys to get to them are important ways that these strategies work to
The natural environment often plays an important role in the construction of transformative events as special places apart from ordinary life. Graham St John explores this relationship in detail, focusing on the “sublime aesthetic” of Burning Man’s site in the Black Rock Desert’s “playa,” the flat desert lakebed where the event takes place, as essential to the event’s transformational effects. St John argues that three natural qualities of the Black Rock Desert playa contribute to this aesthetic: otherworldliness, ephemerality, and limitlessness. The Black Rock Desert’s otherworldliness includes its unique archaeological heritage and the ways it is reminiscent of the ancient sea that once covered Nevada over twelve thousand years ago. As St John explains, the Black Rock Desert playa is both an absolutely remote place and a place that lies “in-between space and time,” creating a “quintessential realm of pure possibility.”

According to William L. Fox’s study of playas, Playa Works: The Myth of the Empty, a playa functions as a “white hole” with “no illusion of permanence.” The Black Rock Desert playa shaped Burning Man’s development as a realm of pure possibility because it could be conceived both as a “white hole,” defined by an absence of meaning and as intensely present in the stark landscape of dust and mountains that confronts participants. The distinctiveness of the desert as a place apart from life back home is in tension with a sense of placelessness that allows an event like Burning Man to become a kind of utopian city. This sense of a utopian event that is placeless is divorced from the natural world that is the precondition for its very existence as a place apart.

Like Burning Man, other transformative events highlight the natural beauty of their sites, places where participants might access the sublime St John discusses in the context of Burning Man. In an interview with Jason Adamchak on Beloved’s website, Elliot Rasenick, the founder of Beloved, “a sacred art, music, movement, and yoga festival” held in rural Oregon since 2007, describes Beloved’s physical site in this way: “the site itself is extraordinary. We are about 30 miles inland of the ocean. When the wind is right you can still smell the ocean. . . . The site feels completely isolated. You feel like the only thing that is happening in the universe is happening right there in the forest.” Symbiosis, which moved from site to site in California and Oregon, was searching for “the next Shangri-la.” For Oregon Eclipse 2017, organizers chose the site of Elephant Lake in rural Oregon, described on the event’s website as follows: “Nearly 50 acres of luscious goodness provided a sublime daytime atmosphere . . . the lake itself was a perfect place to rinse off a mud mask or last night’s festivities, or to reinvigorate after a beautiful sunny day.” The smell of the
ocean in the midst of a forest or the feeling of washing mud off one’s body heightens the effects of music, art, workshops, inspirational talks, and camaraderie with other people, the experience of participating in “the only thing that is happening in the universe,” to borrow Rasenick’s phrase.

The Black Rock Desert is not really a blank canvas, as many Burning Man artists have imagined it, and it is not a “new frontier” to its many past, previous, and present inhabitants, human and not human. Although “Welcome Home” is a common greeting at transformational festivals, in the United States such festivals become home for participants within the context of a legacy of colonialism and settlement of Indigenous lands. A long history of removal and displacement of Indigenous people and many nonhuman species are the preconditions, often hidden, that make transformative events possible. According to The Burning Man Project’s website, the Black Rock Desert has “an 11,000+ year history that includes the Numu (Northern Paiute), as well as the Nuwu (Southern Paiute) and Newe (Western Shoshone).” The black rock itself is part of an ancient island chain and is composed of volcanic rocks and limestone (with its marine fossils). The playa where the event takes place is a prehistoric lakebed, where woolly mammoths, petrified wood, and other fossils have been found. Gypsum and silica are in the dust, as are Anostraca or fairy shrimp, sleeping crustaceans that lie dormant until rain falls. The many-layered natural and cultural histories of festival sites are complex. Some festivalgoers emphasize the natural beauty of a site at the same time as they acknowledge the history of colonization and settlement that exists in tension with the site as a sacred destination.

This contested history of festive event sites is highlighted by the increasingly common practice of acknowledging Native people’s presence on the land. Beloved’s organizers called attention
to the deeper history of their site in a description on their website in 2019: “We ask that all Beloved attendees deeply consider the legacy of the land and its original inhabitants where we hold the gathering.” In addition to apologizing for the legacy of colonialism, organizers planned conversations with local tribal leaders whose homelands lie in the area of Oregon where Beloved would be held in 2021. In some instances, instead of being hidden, Indigenous people play an active role in ritually inscribing a site with an aura of authenticity and specialness. The land’s role at Oregon Eclipse 2017 was underscored by an opening ceremony which the organizers described on the event’s website as “guided by Indigenous elders asking permission from the land” for the gathering to take place. In this ceremony, the land’s agency and Indigenous people’s presence become explicit. Acknowledgements of the tragic and violent history of sites where festivals are held and Indigenous involvement on-site both intensify the attraction of these sites and problematize non-Native eventgoers’ sense of belonging to and being at home on them.

**Leave No Trace and Leaving Positive Traces**

Temporary festive cities that are created at these scenic natural venues are composed of iridescent fabrics, electronically lit art works, plastic products, art cars and art boats, elaborate sound stages, and so on. Participants bring in all the products of the world outside to create a place apart from that world. For this reason, in the 1990s, West Coast festivals started emphasizing a “Leave No Trace” guideline modeled on the outdoors recreation ethic promoted by US federal agencies such as the US Forest Service since at least the 1970s.\(^{16}\)

Festivals by their very nature leave massive traces: significant carbon footprints, rampant consumerism involved in buying costumes, shelters, and décor to take to the festival, trampled plants and sunscreen-filled waters, and piles of trash left on-site or thrown on the highways as participants head home. All festivals and similar events impact the land and the many species that live on-site, leaving traces in these places imagined as sacred and sublime. As Beloved’s website points out, “we must be honest that gatherings like these cannot truly be sustainable. ‘Sustainable festival’ is an oxymoron.” Beloved’s Rasenick explains the dilemma this way: “There is a fundamental hypocrisy that we choose to play with in talking about the looming ecological crisis while inviting thousands of people into a remote delicate ecosystem, asking for thousands of cars to drive, establishing a power grid, and bringing a ton of materials and water into this remote space.” To offset this impact, Beloved has championed a number of initiatives to protect the “battered Oregon Coastal Range ecosystem.”\(^{17}\) According to an article in the *Economist*, these efforts include a biodiesel powered Ecoshuttle, composting toilets, promotion of reusable dishware and flatware, and capture of grey water which is reused on the land. Like other twenty-first-century festivals, Beloved endorses a Leave No Trace guideline for its participants and endeavors to leave the site as pristine as possible, restoring the natural beauty that made it an attractive venue in the first place.

Burning Man, founded in 1986, predates Beloved, Symbiosis, and Lucidity and many of its guidelines provided models for these other events. In 2004 Burning Man included Leaving No Trace in its “10 Principles.” At first this guiding principle encouraged attendees to take out everything they brought with them and involved trash pick-up for weeks after the event, a practice called MOOPing in which every trace of human presence is collected and taken away. As St John explains, MOOPing is a “guerrilla art practice and a purification ritual” that restores the playa’s
sublimity. Burners have also created a number of other sustainable practices to minimize the event’s environmental footprint, especially through Earth Guardians, a community within the larger event that promotes recycling and other initiatives to facilitate leaving no trace, such as training people how to make grey water evaporators to keep wastewater off the desert floor.

During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, most West Coast transformative events’ promotional materials highlighted efforts at sustainability as another way they are forward-thinking and future-looking, “Social Architects of the Now,” as described in an online “Festival Fire Festivals Guide” in 2014. They developed sustainability policies beyond packing out trash, such as solar-powered stages and ridesharing networks to reduce their carbon footprint. Since Lucidity’s founding in 2012, as part of its goal “to recognize and actualize our potential to be co-creators with the Earth” and “move from extractor consciousness to steward consciousness,” the festival has promoted reusing and repurposing, described in detail on the event’s website. Lucidity’s website encourages attendees not to bring single-use containers, but rather reusable or repurposed containers. The event features what it calls “Mindful Feeding . . . a zero-waste zone of nourishment . . . a hub of recycling, compost and dishwash stations.” After the event, volunteers on Lucidity’s “Green Team” sweep the site for waste and recyclables. They boast a clean-up record in which compost outweighs trash bound for the landfill. Like Burning Man’s efforts to leave the Black Rock Desert pristine, Lucidity emphasizes “preserving” its site in the Los Padres National Forest: “It’s our responsibility to preserve the site’s natural beauty. . . . Keep in mind your individual role of climate action towards life on the land: from birds and mammals to the natural vegetation.” The language of preserving and sustaining, leaving natural sites without
a trace of human presence, emphasizes the responsibilities of festivalgoers and showcases sustainability practices, at the same time acknowledging the contradiction inherent in the notion of a sustainable festival.

These Leave No Trace practices shore up the boundary between the event site, ideally left in a pristine state, and the default world where all the trash and other detritus came from in the first place. However, by 2020, in response to public awareness of the growing seriousness of climate change and both internal and external critiques, the emphasis at many transformative events shifted beyond Leave No Trace to what Lucidity calls “Leave It Better,” a commitment to leaving “positive” traces and “regeneration.” As the organizers of Lucidity put it on the event’s website, “We know large scale festivals like Lucidity are inherently UNSustainable, and each year we look to lower our impact and leave a positive mark in our wake.” In order to facilitate regenerative practices, Lucidity hosts a Regenerative Action Day on-site the day before the festival and encourages participants to “leave Live Oak [the campground where the event is held] better than before.” As Lucidity organizers see it, Leave No Trace (LNT) is a good policy, but “it’s not enough. Many festivals bolster this ethic and put it into practice, but it doesn’t reverse the damage to the earth. . . . LNT is based on the imaginary idea of a faraway place, where your trash disappears when you leave the event. Even if you leave your campsite sparkling clean, the trash you produce goes somewhere else.”

From this perspective, a festival site is directly linked to the default world outside festival bounds where event organizers hope to have a positive impact as well, calling into question the whole notion of these gatherings as “festivals.” In a similar strategy to make these connections explicit, in 2019 the Burning Man Project released a 2030 Environmental Sustainability Roadmap, aiming to turn Black Rock City into a carbon-negative and ecologically regenerative event by 2030. The plan includes three goals: “No Matter Out of Place. Handle Waste Ecologically,” which includes buying less in the first place as well as on-site clean-up practices; “Be Regenerative. Create a net positive ecological and environmental impact”; and “Be carbon negative.” According to the Project’s website, the carbon footprint for Burning Man’s Black Rock City is likely around one hundred thousand tons, so the goal is to “Remove more carbon from the environment than we put into it,” especially through techniques such as planting mangroves. These initiatives insist that such practices should be lasting, not transitory, and should leave positive traces outside as well as within event sites.

The rhetoric of regeneration seems more in keeping with transformative events’ emphasis on transformation, while sustainability and Leave No Trace approaches imply the preservation of a status quo. By shifting to an emphasis on regeneration, event participants break down the opposition between the festival as a space apart from the default, everyday world and connect events to global issues such as climate change and ecological degradation, linking the supposedly bounded-off festival sites set apart from everyday concerns, back to those very concerns. Global warming knows no bounds and regeneration strategies acknowledge the fact that event boundaries are both concrete (there is a fence that is patrolled) and porous. By shifting from Leave No Trace to regeneration, these events challenge the notion that ephemerality is central to the transformational festival experience.
Ephemerality and Permanence

Transformative events have typically been characterized by their transitory nature. For instance, in his analysis of the sublime aesthetic at Burning Man, Graham St John observes that ephemerality is one of the aspects of the playa “integral to Burning Man’s status as ‘transformational.’” But among regenerative practices that are most striking given transformative events’ ephemeral nature is the growing turn to permaculture, which is by definition not ephemeral, but intended to leave permanent traces on the landscape. Transformative events’ engagement with permaculture and other regenerative work outside of the time and space of the event itself is an example of material transformation that continues over time as well as space.

Symbiosis/Oregon Eclipse/Global Eclipse and Lucidity have held permaculture workshops on-site and invested in ongoing permaculture activities. In 2020 Lucidity’s “Regenerative Action Day” at the event’s site in Los Padres National Forest was facilitated by a local permaculture instructor. According to Lucidity’s publicity about this event, permaculture “teaches us how to sustain life while healing the damage that’s already been done. . . . Permaculture is about regenerating.” Symbiosis planned its first permaculture intensive in 2006 and featured similar intensives in the years that followed. At the Symbiosis cosponsored 2017 event, Oregon Eclipse, a permaculture design course took place during the fourteen days before the event. Students learned about bioarchitecture, fruit tree forests, integrated pest management, efficient living spaces, using windbreaks, and other topics. In his MA thesis, “Altar States: Spirit Worlds and Transformational Experiences,” informed by fieldwork at Oregon Eclipse, artist Peter Treagan identifies a convergence of the eco-village movement and transformational festivals in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. According to Treagan, in 2015 the Permaculture Action Hub and Symbiosis focused on the possibility of creating permanent communities in a workshop on “Eco-Villages and Intentional Communities.” Some of the ideas discussed would require a long-term, continuous relationship with, rather than temporary occupation of, a site, creating a permaculture land base for a festival community. As Treagan explains in his thesis, these efforts transform the temporary festival community into a visionary vanguard that blends art and engineering to craft practical, permanent, land-based solutions to social and environmental challenges.

In a similar move to create lasting positive effects on the landscape, in 2016, the Burning Man Project bought Fly Ranch, a 3,800-acre property next to the event site, in order to create a more permanent presence in the desert and a “year-round opportunity to explore the potential of the Burning Man community,” according to the Burning Man Project’s Fly Ranch website. Such efforts may shift the meaning of the transformational from ephemeral to long-lasting institutionalized change (if “transformation” can be institutionalized). Yet an eco-village or unique restoration project like Fly Ranch is still to some extent defined in opposition to and apart from the outside world. In a sense, then, festivals are extending into both space (moving beyond festival sites to local communities, working on initiatives that cross state and national boundaries) and time (establishing permanent, ongoing relationships with specific sites such as Fly Ranch or Live Oak Campground).

One direction of these initiatives is to dig deeper into specific places (challenging the idea of the festival site as transitory), and the other is to extend practices shaped by event communities
into society more generally (breaking down the opposition between festival site and outside world). Burners Without Borders, a movement within Burning Man founded in 2005, exemplifies the ways in which event-based initiatives transgress the bounded space of festivals and make lasting contributions to communities elsewhere. According to their website, Burners Without Borders came together in 2005 in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina when Burners left the Nevada Burning Man event and traveled to the devastated area, where they helped rebuild a destroyed Vietnamese temple in Biloxi, Mississippi. In 2019, Burners Without Borders partnered with Permaculture Action Network to sponsor “Leave a Positive Trace: Permaculture Action Day with Burning Man” in Oakland, California. The event included hands-on projects such as installing solar panels and creating rainwater catchment containers. Regenerative projects like these, envisioned and supported by transformative events and their participants, go beyond temporary

![Figure 4. Burners Without Borders information at Burning Man 2016. Photo by author.](image-url)
workshops within festival sites and aim to both establish permanent relationships with particular places and to bring festival ethics and practices into the broader society, even to communities far removed from event sites.

**Porous Bodies**

Festivalgoers’ porous bodies, like these ongoing initiatives, reveal and constitute the permeability between event spaces and the world outside these events. Here my understanding of porosity has been shaped by environmental humanities scholar Stacy Alaimo, among others. Alaimo describes human bodies as porous and permeable: “Far from being impenetrable castles with well-defined boundaries defining what is inside and what is outside, bodies are permeable down to their most intimate recesses. Bodies are more like sponges than marbles.”

Transformative events leave traces in the bodies of participants, who return home transfigured by dust, mud, ash, and water. The stuff of event sites taken into the body and then home with participants includes other species, especially invisible ones such as microorganisms. In the case of Burning Man, dust, the most universal experience at the event, marks participants as Burners, but it also makes them into participants in the deep geological and cultural history of the Black Rock Desert. As Burners roll their bodies in the dust and breathe it in, the tiniest fragments of fairy shrimp and ancient fossils enter their bodies. Their bodies become a kind of geological and biological record of all those who have come before: plants, animals, and peoples who passed through or lived in the area over time. After the event, participants take dust home, in their lungs, clothes, and cars. Dust is also carried home intentionally, in jars and other containers, to keep the experience of being in the desert present in participants’ everyday lives.

The centrality of dust in Burners’ experiences and the ways event sites permeate the bodies of participants both during events and in ongoing ways exemplifies how material objects, even tiny ones, exert agency on participants. One example of the way dust acts on Burners’ bodies is a physiological phenomenon called “playa lung” that can happen during or after the event. It may involve a cough or loss of voice, but is the result of breathing in dust daily during the week of the event. Air-quality specialists studied the particulate matter (dust, smoke, ash) during Burning Man to understand its impact on its desert surroundings and found that air quality during the event is “atrocious, far exceeding national air quality standards.” In an environmental impact statement prepared by Burning Man organizers in 2012, additional potential health hazards of playa dust were acknowledged: “Silicon dioxide (silica) is present in the playa sediments . . . and is regulated by the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) as a known carcinogen.” Different kinds of dusty residues function as vibrant presences of the event, evoking memories and linking physiological effects to the Black Rock Desert. When I smelled playa dust after turning on my car’s air-conditioner, I was transported back to the event, reminded both of how my experience there stayed with me and also that it was in the past, both ongoing in sensual memories and complete within that specific time and place.

In these ways, Burning Man, like other transformative events, is situated ambiguously in relation to the site where it is staged, as both an extraordinary place apart from the “default world” and in continuity with the vibrant things that make up the world inside and outside of the event’s boundaries.
The Material Reality of Virtual Events

Approaching Burning Man 2020, porosity was on my mind. As nothing more life-altering than the COVID-19 pandemic has proven, we inhabit permeable bodies that are not containers separate from the animals, plants, and microorganisms with whom we share the world. In 2020, most transformational festivals were canceled. Lucidity staff issued a statement on Lucidity’s website recognizing that given the theme of regeneration they had originally planned for 2020, taking “a break from Live Oak” would allow the land “a respite from our yearly gathering to literally regenerate on its own terms.” Global Eclipse in Patagonia went ahead with an in-person event (with some streaming of musical acts accessible online), even though Argentina had a number of travel restrictions. In contrast to these events, Burning Man decided to go virtual and create Black Rock City online.\(^{29}\) Burning Man’s trajectory toward making a net-positive environmental footprint began before COVID-19 and shaped the organization’s response to the impossibility of having a live event in 2020 due to the virus. For Burning Man organizers, a virtual event offered a chance to “explore new ways of connecting and convening online,” as well as “deepen” their commitment to environmental sustainability.\(^{30}\)

When the Burning Man Project announced that the annual Nevada event would be online, some Burners writing comments on the Burning Man website dismissed a virtual event as a video-game version of the real event and criticized the organizers, while others argued that the experience would be different but still powerful. Burning Man 2020 took place in the "Multiverse," across eight "Universes" on different platforms as well as through many other events organized by participants in their neighborhoods and local communities. In some sense the virtual event worked to reverse the movement I have described above, of crossing the bounds between festival site and ordinary life and extending festival communities into more permanent and ongoing relationships to the outside world. Because the virtual event took place in people’s homes on their computers, participants tried to find ways to intensify the boundary between festive event and daily life. Here too, I want to explore the tensions between ephemerality and permanence and the festival as a bounded or porous place.

In a variety of ways, Burners created a sense of the virtual event as a place apart from daily life even while participating from their bedrooms and living rooms or sitting at the same computers they used for working virtually. For many participants, there was a technological "journey" to get to the event because technology required for some of the Universes was challenging for participants who were not video gamers or computer programmers. The various Universes were on different platforms and often required downloading applications. When participants entered the virtual Black Rock Desert (BRCvr), they waited in a line of cars, went through a Greeters Station, and entered Black Rock City. Designers recreated the cracked, parched appearance of the desert floor. On the Temple Guardians Discord channel I participated in, a number of Burners commented on how "realistic" the virtual playa seemed. In this way, the event site as a place, even virtually realized, played an important role in transporting viewers from everyday life to festival space.

Burners were aware of and discussed the significant challenge posed by the permeability of the event and daily life. As one Burner put it, the event seemed "too easy, too connected to everyday life," and lacked the extensive preparation, travel, and challenging desert venue.\(^{31}\) To
create a transition from daily life to festive space, participants set up virtual camps and built virtual sculptures in virtual Black Rock City (in BRCvr and other Universes), just as they had been doing for years in the Black Rock Desert. On-screen many participants dressed their avatars in costumes similar to what they might wear at the face-to-face event. Some Burners also dressed up their physical bodies (rather than their avatar bodies) as if they were at Burning Man, set up tents in their living rooms, and danced in their bedrooms to electronic dance music playing in the virtual Burning Man world. Others described on Discord placing jars of playa dust next to their computers, creating a material link to previous years in the Black Rock Desert.

On the other hand, some Burners reveled in the porosity between home and Burning Man and used the opportunity to bring Burning Man to their neighborhoods. Halcyon, a founder of Pink Heart Camp, a Burning Man theme camp, created a pink camp in his front yard in San Diego and invited neighbors for (socially distanced) free vegan ice cream, mimicking Burning Man’s gift economy. According to Pink Heart Camp’s Facebook page, Halcyon and others from the Pink Heart Camp dressed in pink costumes and invited friends to take a socially distanced Global Pink Bike Ride through actual streets in their local neighborhoods, filming and sharing over Zoom as they went. Halcyon admitted that over the course of the week he changed his view from expecting to “play” and “pretend” Burning Man to “We’re having Burning Man, just not in Black Rock City.” Halcyon and other Burners who transposed the event experience into their neighborhoods with humor, costumes, and gifting found themselves wondering why they had not practiced a Burning Man lifestyle outside the Black Rock Desert before. As Halcyon looked back on the week-long Burning Man 2020, he realized that “Home wasn’t in BRC or in my home, but everywhere.” From this perspective, Burners can bring the sense of “home” at an event to their everyday homes and as Halcyon sees it, “shine brightly in the default world.”

For many participants sitting at their computers, making the virtual Burning Man experience more “real” was accomplished with dust and memory. On Discord, one Burner suggested turning on a fan and throwing dust in it. In the Universe called Sparkleverse, dust storms sometimes shut down the Universe and computer screens went blank, just as in the case of a dust storm in the Black Rock Desert that causes a complete whiteout. On the other hand, some Burners emphasized the absence of dust from the virtual event. I was told during an “Orientation to the Verses” that the Universe known as “Burn2” (in Second Life), billed itself as a “dust-free electronic playa.” When they invoked dust storms, “dust-free” experiences, and the desert sun (“protect yourself from those solar rays” quipped a participant in the orientation), participants suggested that the role of memory is important in a virtual event experience. Familiar sights—the desert landscape, sculptures from past years, familiar camps, costumed participants—triggered the memories of participants who had previously attended the event in the desert. Participants bring inner histories composed of memories and sensual experiences of past events with them to event sites, and these histories are particularly important in shaping their experience of virtual events.

Memory was especially significant in the context of the Burning Man Temple. The burning of the Temple is one of two large-scale collective events that happen on the last weekend of Burning Man (the other event is the burning of a giant wooden effigy: “the Man”). The Temple is created every year at Burning Man to mourn and memorialize death and loss and then burned on the last night of the event. Throughout the week of Burning Man, Burners visit the Temple where
they leave offerings: letters, photos, altars, objects belonging to the dead, mementos. They read each other’s letters and look at photos of each other’s beloved dead, sharing painful intimacies with tens of thousands of strangers. They meditate, weep, play music, laugh together, sit with the dead, and comfort the grieving. On the last night of Burning Man during the Temple Burn everything is destroyed by fire and dust devils spin out from the fire as spirits of the Temple carry messages to the dead and release mourners’ grief into the dark desert landscape around them. As the glowing embers of the Temple fade into dust and ashes, Burners return to their camps, pack up their belongings, and head home. In 2014, on the morning after the Temple Burn, I went to look at the Temple’s ashes and noticed people were picking up objects. In addition to taking home dust-permeated bodies, Burners also carried away remnants of the Temple such as melted glass blobs to be reshaped into pieces of art. The material culture of the Temple lived on; the stories of its objects did not end when it burned. It traveled home through the smoke and ash absorbed by Burners’ bodies and the fire-forged objects they carried.

The virtual 2020 Ethereal Empyrean Temple (every year the Temple has a different name), conceptualized by Sylvia Lisse and Renzo Verbeck and created by Jeremy Roush, opened early in the week of the 2020 Burning Man Multiverse. Unlike other aspects of the Multiverse, it was specifically designed to be visually unlike the Temple in the Black Rock Desert, according to Jeremy Roush in a chat on his YouTube channel after the Temple Burn. Yet Burners interacted with the virtual Temple in many of the same ways they would have if they had been in the Black Rock Desert: they left messages and photographs, they meditated and wept. As Caveat Magister put it in an essay for the online Burning Man Journal, “The Temple is a digital structure made of photons and imagination that we can all visit, place offerings within, and gather around together for the ceremonial burn. The building won’t be real, but the gatherings and messages and loss will be.” Even Roush, who designed it to be unlike the real Temple, observed during a livestreamed event on his YouTube channel immediately following the Temple Burn that “it really felt like Temple.”

Unless this was their first time attending, Burners experienced virtual Burning Man and the virtual Temple through layers of memories of past events. Sensual memories of the Temple, the many altars I have looked at in the past, the smell of smoke, the closeness of other bodies all watching the Temple burn together, the way my body felt doing these actions in the past, shaped my experience of the virtual Temple. Throughout the week of Burning Man 2020, participants created offerings for the virtual Temple just like those they had seen or made before: written messages and photographs, remembrances of the dead, and statements about loss and suffering, as well as affirmations of joy and life. Burners visited the virtual Temple, viewed the many offerings and messages that had been placed there by friends and strangers, and shared their most intimate thoughts about love and loss: the father they never reconciled with, the child who died too young, the friend who died by suicide. By the time it was burned, according to the Temple Guardians Discord channel, the Temple held 3,141 offerings with a file size of 16.6 GB and the offerings were viewed 40,498 times.

On September 6, 2020, the Temple Burn began with dirge-like drumming; then the Temple was set on fire and the drumming stopped. Sitting in front of computer screens, we listened to the crackling flames, but we could not smell the smoke nor breathe the Black Rock Desert dust. Some Burners lit incense as the ceremony began, others gathered on Zoom with friends to watch...
together, while still others were alone in front of their computers, typing feelings and thoughts into an online chat. One participant wrote in a chat that they had to take apart their headset to clean out all the tears. According to comments on Discord, other participants were unable to watch the Temple Burn because of technical issues and they were frustrated and disappointed.

After the Temple Burn, all traces of the structure’s virtual presence were erased. A message on the virtual Temple website read: “The Ethereal Empyrean team will ritualistically destroy and erase all hardware, data, offerings, and custom code.” After the end of the Temple Burn, a hundred people watched a live video feed of Jeremy Roush dismantling the hard drive on which he had placed all the Temple offerings. As he worked, he commented on the strange reversal of deleting all traces, whereas typically in programming projects, a programmer attempts to make their work permanent and traceable, with multiple back-ups. As he carefully took apart each component, he noted the ways the familiar hardware had become meaningful: “it’s just parts, but noting what’s encoded onto it” made it feel special: a full Temple’s worth of offerings condensed, “down into something I can put my hand on.”

In the desert version of Burning Man, Burners take home the dust in their pores and pieces of the Temple, objects from the ashes of the Temple, and photos of the altars that were burned. While the virtual event would seem to come closer to leaving no trace because it lacked a material presence, in fact it left material traces as well. The hard drive with all the offerings was dismantled but not burned. Its components were glued into a design in a shadow box to be burned in the following year’s Temple in the desert. Online viewing of the Temple Burn and Roush’s dismantling of the hard drive were globally connected collective online rituals that marked the bounded end of the event by acknowledging the material continuity of a virtual experience beyond the event itself.

Other aspects of the Burning Man Multiverse also lived on after the official end date. The team
responsible for the main Burning Man 2020 Universe, BRCvr, sent an email to Burners at the end of the event explaining that they were “going to dust” for a few days offline, but that they would be back: “We envision a year-round destination for community, culture, creativity and conversation.” After the virtual event, participants could return to BRCvr to see art installations, but they could not return to the Temple; it was completely gone. In this and other instances mentioned earlier in this essay, participants created a temporary community—virtual or face-to-face—bounded by the space and time of the event and at the same time promoted an ongoing community outside the event bounds in both the global, virtual world and in local neighborhoods. Even at a virtual event, transformative experiences do not rely on the opposition between festival space and outside world. However, the dynamic tension between shoring up this opposition and breaking it down may shape Burners’ personal and social experiences. Material traces, even in virtual worlds or on a hard drive, express continuity of experience over time and space.

Events like Burning Man are ephemeral and yet always ongoing in their transfigured forms. These examples of the porosity between body and environment, festival space and the outside world, complicate oppositions between leaving traces and leaving no trace, ephemerality and permanence, presence and absence, boundedness and permeability. Festive events engage with these oppositions as they envision and put into place material transformations, even when they have to rely on memory and digital reproductions of actual bodies and places.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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