Film Festivals: Close-up on New Research © Locarno Film Festival

With guest-edited sections on:

Event Horizons & Party Tourism
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eds. Graham St John and Sarah Pike

Party Tourism
ed. Alix Boirot

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ABOUT THE COVER IMAGE

Felipe Correia
Brazil

I am passionate about strengthening and creating channels of communication in order to generate significant social impact and democratize access to photographic and audiovisual practices. While my trajectory began in commercial photography, over the years I have developed a unique aesthetic that dialogues with the psychedelic and visionary arts. My work has been shaped by immersion in electronic music festivals, countercultural universes, and the exploration of dissident and transient bodies. I seek to create new sensorialities through these experiences.

I use expanded photography to explore beyond conventional boundaries. In addition to photography, I also incorporate other forms of expression, such as interaction with RGB lights, projection mapping, and sound installations. My intention as an artist is to formulate new possibilities of thought and promote the notion of cognitive ecology, challenging hegemonic thoughts and encouraging the fusions of ideas. I seek to develop new artistic networks, expanding the limits of creation and providing unique experiences to viewers.

In short, my passion for photography and audiovisual languages is connected to my constant efforts to produce works that challenge and inspire, while also producing significant social impact. I look forward to collaborating, connecting, and creating innovative experiences in this exciting field.

The cover photograph was taken in 2020 at the Ziohm Festival in Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil. The festival is a celebration of alternative culture in the Brazilian Northeast. The image features the work of the amazing, multitalented visual artist and performer Bruxinha.
Here is a sample of Felipe Correia’s photographs. You can see more of his work on his website.

Figure 1. Equilibra performance group. Ressonar Festival, Chapada Diamantina (Brazil), 2020.

Figure 2. “The Portal.” Equilibra performance group. Ressonar Festival, Chapada Diamantina (Brazil), 2020.
Figure 3. Performance by Shankar and Shadhu. Zhiom Festival, Fortaleza (Brazil), 2019.

Figure 4. Morten Granau. Universo Paralelo Festival, Bahia (Brazil), 2020.
Figure 5. “Synesthesia.” Clay interaction workshop. Ressonar Festival, Chapada Diamantina (Brazil), 2020.

Figure 6. “Synesthesia.” Clay interaction workshop. Ressonar Festival, Chapada Diamantina (Brazil), 2020.
Figure 7. “Estrada do Festejo (Festive Road).” Banda de Pífanos Alvorada. São João Festivity, Caruaru (Brazil), 2022.

Figure 8. A character in the Figura do tempo (Figure of Time) performance. Ritual da Mata Festival, Recife (Brazil), 2019.
Figure 9. Stylized quadrilha dancing competition. São João Festivity, Caruaru (Brazil), 2022.

Figure 10. A Velha da Sombrinha e a Velha Do pássaro (The Umbrella Old Lady and the Bird Old Lady). Characters in the Reisado do Alto do Moura (popular festivity of the Brazilian Northeast), Caruaru (Brazil), 2023.
Editorial

In line with the growth of the field of festive studies itself, the length of this fifth annual issue noticeably exceeds that of previous ones. In addition to a short methodological contribution on doing auto/ethnographic work at electronic dance music events (Aydin Quach) and three stand-alone articles—one on visual representations of the Feast of St. Martin in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch art (Martin W. Walsh), a second on the Senegalese film festival landscape (Estella Sendra), and a third on the experience of senior volunteers in the South Australian city of Adelaide (Stuart Richards, Jessica Pacella, and Kim Munro)—we are featuring two thematic sections: one on transformational festivals, guest edited by anthropologists Graham St John and Sarah Pike, and one on party tourism, guest edited by anthropologist Alix Boirot.

Preceded by a stimulating introduction by St John, the section on transformational festivals comprises five research articles (by Amanda Lucia, Katri Ratia, Sarah Pike, Ian Rowen, and Graham St John and Botond Vitos). In accordance with our desire to experiment with various formats and methodologies, the section on party tourism includes an instructive introductory essay by Boirot; two research articles (by Hazel Andrews and Sitingawawo Kachipande); an interview with sociologist Thomas Thurnell-Read; a documentary film (and a companion essay) on Dutch youths in Lloret de Mar, Spain (by Annemarije Rus); and a comic on party tourism in Goa, India, that arose from a fruitful collaboration between scholar Benedito Ferrão, illustrator Angela Ferrão, and graphic designer Maria Vanessa De Sa.

Rounding out this issue is a series of ten book reviews on subjects as diverse as the rituals of early modern Afro-Mexican confraternities (Caroline Cunill), an Ottoman circumcision festival in eighteenth-century Istanbul (Annie Tozzi), Christmas celebrations on antebellum plantations in the US South (Anne-Claire Faucquez), emancipation festivals in the postbellum United States (Kris Plunkett), the diffusion of Día de los muertos celebrations outside of Mexico (Ruben Arellano), the Italian folkloric figure of the Befana (Fabian Alfie), queer carnivalesque events in the US South (Cora Gaebel), the queer underground techno scene in New York City (Kyle Rogers), the international VIP party circuit (Alix Boirot), and the evolving relationship between European cities and their festivals (Bernadette Quinn).

Aurélie Godet
Nantes Université, France
All together, these contributions showcase the vitality of the field while testifying once more to the merits of a multidisciplinary approach to festivity. We hope you enjoy them!

The year 2023 has seen several changes at the journal, including the onboarding of ethnomusicologist Andrew Snyder as our third coeditor in anticipation of my upcoming transition to a new role. Andrew did fantastic work on some of the contributions for issue 5, and I am convinced that he and Isabel Machado will take our journal to new heights of scholarly rigor while paying close attention to issues of inclusivity and interdisciplinary/intermedia dialogue. Isabel’s idea to solicit contemporary artists and designers for the cover of this issue and for one of the articles—which has led to beautiful collaborations with photographer Felipe Correia and interaction designer Daniel Wildberger—is only one in a myriad of innovations that they will be implementing in future years. I wish them the best of luck and certainly will cheer them on from the sidelines, in my new position as editorial board member and consultant.

Our next issue will include a thematic section (edited by anthropologist Laurent Sébastien Fournier) on “sports and festivity,” two terms that have rarely been studied together systematically despite the festive character of many sports events and the long-standing proximity between festivals and competitive displays of physical prowess. And we will soon publish a call for papers for issue 7, which will include a thematic section (edited by Latin Americanist Miguel Valerio) on “joy as resistance” across time and space. Please share it widely and do not hesitate to submit stand-alone articles to our journal too!
AUTHOR BIO

Aurélie Godet is an associate professor of US history at Nantes Université, France, and is currently at work on a multivolume history of festivity in New Orleans from the eighteenth century through today, tentatively titled “Festive City: The Politics of Play in New Orleans (1700s–2000s).” She has been the coeditor in chief of the Journal of Festive Studies since its inception in 2019 and will be a junior fellow of the Institut Universitaire de France (IUF) for the 2023–28 period, working on a collaborative research project titled “L’empire de la fête: Festive Practices, National Identity, and Creolization in the French Atlantic (1500s–1800s).”

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EVENT HORIZONS

Transfestive Horizons: An Introduction

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies conceptual lacunae, connections, and cross-talk in an interdisciplinary field of research targeting a wide distribution of events that possess an intentionally transformational—or “meta-transformational”—remit. While such events—including Burning Man and “transformational festivals”—are embraced by diverse groups as signature contexts for transformations of self, society, and culture, and while research in this field has grown apace across disciplines, there has been little effort to survey, define, or critically evaluate this field of research. The first part of the article defines nomenclature, outlines morphology, describes event models and their prototypes, critically reviews relevant literature, discusses interpretative frameworks, and highlights the complexity of “transformative events,” before focusing on Burning Man as a researched phenomenon. The second part outlines the issue content, before making observations on future research directions. By way of its attention to, and explanation of, novel nomenclature—e.g. “transfestival”—the article serves as an introduction: both to the issue “Event Horizons: Transformational Festivals, Movements, and Cultures,” and to a broad field of research on transformative events.

KEYWORDS

Transfestival
Transformative event
Transformational festival
Meta-transformational
Burning Man
Event culture.
Transfesteve Horizons: An Introduction

Graham St John

Around the globe, large-scale gatherings—for example, Burning Man, Rainbow Gatherings, alternative music and lifestyle festivals, and other events, including “transformational festivals”—are embraced by diverse groups as signature contexts for transformations of self, society, and culture. While research on such events has grown apace in anthropology and allied disciplines, there has been little effort to represent, compare, and challenge their “transformational” pretensions. The absence of such an inquiry belies the appealing and compelling nature of catharsis and experimentalism, and innovation and cultural change, associated with these events. Intentionally transformational events have emerged as vehicles, platforms, and showcases for a transformative zeitgeist. But what is altered, reconfigured, and transformed by such events? Independent arts, lifestyle, and music festivals, hybrid countercultural gatherings, “new paradigm” and “change maker” events promote transformation and make possible transitions in status, identity, and history. What is the character of these evental transitions, and what are the variations in aesthetic, structure, content, and population of events with an intentional “transformational” objective? How have individual events evolved unique ethos, principles, and culture? How do events that involve a significant carbon footprint also offer models of ecologically sound lifestyles? If the powerful potential of transformation is assured by the ephemerality and bounded space of a seasonal event, what changes when the event grows beyond these spatio-temporal limits to become a year-round cultural movement?

Such are among the inquiries that stimulated the current thematic section of the Journal of Festive Studies, which gathered momentum through two scholarly events: a symposium on “Burning Man and Transformational Event Cultures” at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, in November 2018, and an invited roundtable on “The Anthropology of Transformational Events” at the November 2019 Vancouver AAA/CASCA meeting, convened by the Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness. There were over twenty responses to the initial call for papers (circulated in 2018/2019) for this project. Through the selection and editing of full submissions throughout 2020, the list was whittled down to five essays, three with a Burning Man orientation.

Beyond introducing the individual essays in this issue, this piece serves as a prologue to a field that has, thus far, not enjoyed any such introduction. This oversight is quite extraordinary given that the phenomenon addressed has its roots in the 1960s and 1970s, and has existed in some form or another in the five decades since, with so-called transformation festivals representing a contemporary composite of an evental phenomenon that has morphed and mutated in transnational contexts over fifty years.

It is, then, with the responsibility of introducing a far-flung field of research that this article was produced. The pandemic quite obviously complicated this production, ringing in a period in which we, as researchers and contributors, were compelled to become distant from those festive domains of our personal becoming and professional labors. Festivities and “social distancing” are grim companions indeed.

This article has two parts. Part 1 will define nomenclature, outline morphology, describe event models and their prototypes, discuss interpretative frameworks, and highlight the complexity of events before offering a specific focus on Burning Man as a researched phenomenon. Part 2
Transfeste

Though the events under consideration possess a family resemblance, they are remarkably diverse—among the reasons classificatory efforts are so fraught. While the phrase “transformational festival” was introduced in 2010 by documentary filmmaker Jeet Kei Leung, for reasons clarified below, that convention presents a problematic solution to classifying events in this field. Recognizing that existing terms (including “festival” and “transformation”) are disputed, I made an exhaustive search for more appropriate terminology. A portmanteau of “transformation” and “festival,” “transfestive,” was adopted—a term with several advantages.

Foremost, there is a need for bridging language that recognizes the transformational intent of a broad milieu of festive gatherings (including those now labeled “transformational festivals”). Additionally, there is a need for nomenclature responsive to intracultural disaffection while remaining non-dismissive. That is, terminology is desirable that is responsive to grievances prevalent among organizers and participants across this event milieu for whom “festival” has become maligned as a misleading designation, given this term’s close association with mass-produced commercial music and dance events from which event cocreators seek to be distinguished. At the same time, appropriate language will acknowledge the seasonal “feste” roots and character of gatherings. Further, suitable language will be responsive to the way the term “transformational” has attracted critical scrutiny in application to events with a wide spectrum of objectives, motives, and content.

As “transfeste” is useful as a noun (and is also plural, as in “transfestives”) and an adjective, it holds the potential to enhance clarification of the diversity, ambiance, and milieu of the wide spectrum of events discussed here. Also, it should be clear that while the “trans” in “transfeste” does not specifically connote “transgender” identification, it does not necessarily exclude this connotation. While I feel the term offers a useful bridge across various event prototypes, field ethnography, interviews, and participant observation remain essential for recognizing inter-event variations, and intra-event mutations.

There is a further reason for adopting this neologism. Since transformativity and transition are themes native to festivals, there is a need to distinguish the transformational events under consideration from other festive events with transformative and transitional logics. Festivals have long been observed by anthropologists as contexts for “transformative” performances that shape identity, resolve conflict, and maintain values. Celebrations that mark the transit of seasons are essential for rejuvenating cultural memory, reinforcing tradition, and restoring order. Further, many festive events are intended to sustain national, regional, and ethnic objectives, notably in the face of social crises and economic downturns, where events implement reforms intended to encourage revitalization. As events in regional calendars become instrumental in generating growth and enhancing regional tourism, they can become pivotal to “transfeste”
agendas. Other times, events, for example, the neofestes of Mallorca, effectively transform conservative regional identities through newly invented traditions. While they contribute to regional development (notably in the field of music and performing arts) and may sometimes attract government aid, and while typically requiring permissions and licenses to achieve and maintain legitimacy, transfestives are marked by their relative independence from, and/or antipathy with, the state (e.g., arts grants and subsidies, law enforcement) and corporate sector (e.g., commercial sponsorship).

The first caveat to keep in mind when creating a classification for public events is that events tend to defy systems of classification. For that reason, no hard and fast rules are intended for what follows. The events under consideration do tend to possess a few primary characteristics that they share with other temporary destination event spaces in the calendar. They are recurrent seasonal phenomena, produced as unique annual (or sometimes biennial) editions. They are typically outdoor encampments, often located in rural regions remote from urban populations. They are, thereby, destinations necessitating travel, sometimes from great distances, and may attract a sizeable population of international visitors. These zones usually feature multiday events, sometimes operating for a week or more. Finally, participants generally dwell in close proximity to others—often strangers—and the natural elements.

Perhaps the most distinctive attribute of transfestivity is a “redressive” status—they are reflexive sites of (counter) cultural experimentalism. In other words, they are creative event spaces that are responsive to hegemonic sociocultural patterns. As conscious exercises in change making, they can be considered “meta-transformational.” Comprising hybrid forms that break from traditions in religion and leisure, and often promoted as evental panaceas in a world of growing uncertainty, the transfestive is a recurrent experiment in the pursuit of alternatives to modern life. These events, then, embody the postmaterialist values of Ronald Inglehart’s “silent revolution.”

Heir to the cultural and political dissent of the 1960s and 1970s, primarily, but not exclusively, the privilege of white middle-class populations, they have inherited the quest for equality, diversity, and individual freedoms characterizing that era. At this point, while I will not attempt an exhaustive list of the redressive cultural movement tendencies that have given shape to these events, two such tendencies stand out.

In the first instance, influenced by the human potential movement and its concomitant bid for self-realization, events in this milieu have borne the imprint of the postmaterialist quest for an evolved consciousness (which is as consonant with the New Age as much as it is with autonomous experiments in self-reliance). Providing yoga, meditation, and other “mindfulness” or “wellness” modalities and “healing” rituals, many gatherings with “transformative” formulae identify as retreat-like destinations intending to ameliorate the fractured conditions of the modern self. Such eventscapes are rich topoi for a growing population identifying as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). Eventalizing the departure from faith, and notably from Christianity, these events are platforms for privileging the self (the “inner” or “higher Self,” and “intuition”) as the ultimate source of authority and responsibility. While eventgoing enthusiasts turn away from institutional religion and monotheistic dogma, the SBNR participate in a monistic religion, radical spiritualities of self-expression, and are otherwise participants in the “religion of no religion” that has its epicenter at the Esalen Institute, Big Sur, California.

7. That the events in question themselves establish traditions and rituals, or otherwise incorporate traditional ritual forms, frustrates attempts to distinguish festivals that maintain from those that transform the social order. For example, transfestives are sites for marriage ceremonies, funerary rites, birthday parties, and sometimes births (although these in situ rites are typically unconventional).
9. This is reflected in the annual Black Rock City Census survey data. The most recent survey (2019) saw 47.7 percent of Burners identifying as conservative regional identities through newly invented traditions. While they contribute to regional development (notably in the field of music and performing arts) and may sometimes attract government aid, and while typically requiring permissions and licenses to achieve and maintain legitimacy, transfestives are marked by their relative independence from, and/or antipathy with, the state (e.g., arts grants and subsidies, law enforcement) and corporate sector (e.g., commercial sponsorship).
Not disconnected from this broader redressive mood, the second tendency I will mention carries the imprint of surrealist, bohemian, and revolutionary art movements answering to the plight of modernity, in particular the commodification of “art.” Protagonists in this tradition seek to hack patterns of consumer behavior, disrupt dominant artist/spectator distinctions, and create spaces of possibility. With influences as diverse as Alfred Jarry’s absurdist “pataphysics,” Antonin Artaud’s “Theatre of Cruelty,” Guy Debord’s Society of the Spectacle, and Hakim Bey’s Temporary Autonomous Zone, the result is “fourth wall” breaking, autonomous zones of cocreative theater, collaborative participation, and interactive immediacy. These developments gave shape to groups as diverse as the Rainbow Family and the San Francisco Cacophony Society (the latter exerting influence on Burning Man). The critical-practical attention to “space” is significant here. Alice O’Grady’s idea of festival as “relational performance” offers insight on the distinctive character of space in the transfestive milieu. This idea is indebted to various thinkers, including Edward Soja, whose “thirdspace” represents a radically inclusive spatiality positioned as an expression of resistance against the rehearsed and the fixed; and Doreen Massey, whose idea of space as “open, multiple and relational, unfinished and always becoming” was considered a prerequisite for “the possibility of politics.” With this in mind, festivals, or certain kinds of festive spaces, are reckoned as frames for, in O’Grady’s terms, “the politics of possibility.”

These and other tendencies (e.g., communitarian, ecological) have informed the character of transfestives which otherwise feature commonalities in form and content. As for content, they play host to variable shaping influences from a cornucopia of environmentalist, feminist, LGBTQIA+, Indigenous, surrealist, and other social and cultural movements. These interventions field a heterogeneity of practices that break conventions in architecture, diet, sex, drugs, and art. A conflagration of transgressive and progressive praxis is intended to disturb and transcend hegemonic practice. As a result of this profusion, temporary enclaves become dynamic cultural “worlds” or lifestyle centers of discourse and practice recognized as “freak,” “DiY,” “artisan,” “maker,” “queer,” “feral,” or “slow,” among other designations.

As for form, transformative event enclaves typically adapt the model of the rite of passage.

The observation of distinct events through their recurrence over the course of decades reveals a variation in outcomes. For example, the transition rite that is originally adapted to momentous change and even revolutionary ends may lose this impetus through seasonal recurrence (e.g., Glastonbury). On the other hand, events with less politically and more personally charged beginnings may historically gather cultural momentum to become significant cultural movements (e.g., Burning Man).

Socioculturally, the transitional morphology of these events echoes the complexity of travel for post-1960s generations (notably millennials). In a climate of authenticity seeking, eventgoers approach the definition of tourists—that is, “spiritual tourists” or “experiential” travelers committed to “existential transformation”—as much as they do pilgrims, of the secular-spiritual variety, who seek the “sacred” self and an awakened consciousness. A hybridized quest to resolve existential anxieties and achieve inner wellness and belonging makes for a complex set of possible outcomes for events that are intentionally “transformative,” and may be among experiences associated with post-tourism and postpilgrimage. Transfestivity demonstrates a noteworthy circumstance apparent to researchers of tourism, leisure, and spirituality: that the outer journey—
While events are circumstances enabling the performance and attainment of authentic selfhood—sometimes known as “radical self-expression”—these new, marginal centers of self-fulfillment are, all the same, intensely social. These events, then, contextualize the “deindividualized” empathic sociality of the “neotribe.”

These events may grow into cultural movements that evolve beyond the time-space framework of the event. Distinct rites, principles, and aesthetics derive from seasonal recurrence. Events attract and grow a “grassroots” population of volunteers (and typically, in time, staff) with a strong group identification. They develop internal merit systems in which actors are rewarded with status, position, and belonging. They respond to adversities, and internal disputes that threaten their survival. Administrative bodies, cooperative societies, and nonprofit organizations are formed to manage their reproduction, complete with distinct roles, structures, and rules. Some organizational bodies—notably, the Burning Man Project—encourage the emergence of nodes in an international sphere that attract circulating networks of artists, performers, and participants. Growth in size and scale precipitates crises, controversies, and debates that scrutinize environmental impact, inclusivity, and objectives. Growth in size and scale also entails obligations to comply with laws, standards, regulations, and insurance. The ensuing patterns of governance are remote from idealist depictions of “autonomy.” Thus, while infused with “poetic terrorism,” Bey’s TAZ—routinely applied to transfestive enclaves—is more a fantastic over-simplification than an accurate description.

Possibly the most compelling trait of the events under consideration is that they are intended to be spaces of liberty. Not only are they sites of freedom, these events facilitate different types of freedom. On the one hand, transformative events allow freedom from responsibilities, status, and inhibitions. These are behaviors characteristic of carnivalesque spaces: that is, typically periodic contexts permitting respite from labor and familial (and traditionally, faith) obligations. Within their temporary precincts, participants are licensed to behave unrestricted by the social norms and taboos governing life outside their bounds. At the same time, these events enable freedoms to experiment with alternate lifeways and practices that may persist beyond the return to the
“default” world. In traditional carnivals, as imagined by Mikhail Bakhtin, the world that is turned upside down is righted at carnival’s end, order is restored, and liminars return to the default world. The transfestive is a playful site of renewal, but it is also utopic, autonomous, prefigurative, and responsive to growing social, ecological, and political discontent. These potential states are not untypically ritualized within the context of events, where praxis acquired and performed in situ converts to life, status, and identity in the postliminal world. Possessing a conscious intent to transit from the old to new ways of life, these petridish events are complex sites of transformation. They fuse the prefigurative with the recreational and merge the ritualesque with carnivalesque forms.

In its varied forms, then, the transfestive approximates that which Victor Turner late in life identified as “liminoid,” that is, a modality of ritual that is creative, potent, and experimental. This is not the place to address the problems associated with this term, but it is useful to recognize that it was vaguely influenced by the “negative” and “positive” liberties to which political philosopher Isaiah Berlin lent attention. Turner’s terminology denotes the exploits of typically middle-class postindustrial populations in contexts outside traditional frameworks where individuals practice their “freedom from” religious, family, and workplace “contracts,” and their “freedom to” transcend, imagine, and play. As the transformative lifestyle events introduced here illustrate, these modalities are interdependent. Events that play host to the former modality are often dismissed as “escapist” while those that cater to the latter may be cast as “rebellions.” Given its multiple stakeholders, interpretations, and antagonists, freedom is the single most fraught condition with which the transfestive is associated.

### Transitional Worlds

Introducing examples of events and event cultures illustrative of this freedom dynamic, this issue of the *Journal of Festive Studies* begins to fill a gap in the research literature on transformational events. It demonstrates that, informed by proactive and avant-garde adaptations of Arnold van Gennep’s classic rites of passage model, a spectrum of events emergent in the post–1960s and 1970s have become style-of-life worlds and conscious models of living for urban-dwelling, cosmopolitans seeking belonging in a world devoid of meaning and purpose. In this way, they become meta-liminal domains in which “now” is extended as long as possible, where the process of transforming may become more significant than expected goals or outcomes, where the threshold is occupied by those seeking lifestyles suffused with liminality. At their most ambitious, “new paradigm” events with conscious evolutionary, entheogenic, and eco-millenarian agendas are propagated as vehicles for multispecies survival. In that way, consciously transformative/transitional gatherings are evidently responsive to the “transformational events” of late modern history: notably the Anthropocene.
The events considered here, and in this issue, have propagated in the gulfstream of “freak” travelers inhabiting a “global countercultural diaspora.” In Global Nomads, Anthony D’Andrea surveyed a hypermobile postnational constituency of Osho sannyasins, New Age DJs, raving neonomads, and other “expressive expatriates” who see themselves as part of “a trans-ethnic dispersion of peoples that despise home-centered identities.” The identity of this “negative diaspora” is not based on ethnic or national nostalgia, but on “a fellowship of counter-hegemonic practice and lifestyle.”22 While their predecessors may have sought alterity in exoteric and seasonal locales like Ibiza and the former Portuguese colony of Goa, India, these neonomads recovering from the collision of “Techno” and “New Age” subsequently located their “post-tourist” desires within temporary, exotic, and rural environs catering to their techno-spiritual demands. Such festive precincts are identifiable at the intersection of “horizontal” (geospatial) and “vertical” (psychological) “trips.”23 While participants in the freak exodus sought “the end of the world” at seasonal full moon trance dance gatherings on Anjuna beach, Goa, and proximate locations, their successors imported “the end of the world” back into their liberal, late capitalist homelands. They packaged the “Goa state of mind” in “Goa trance” festivals and other encampments of the “psychedelic,” “visionary,” and “well-being” arts.24 While Goa was but one neonomadic beachhead in this development, the transfestive legacy champions participation, as evident in radical expressions of the self and community. With their fuzzy boundaries between performer and audience, and artist and patron, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish consumer from producer in such “cocreative” spaces. As these participatory experiments are suffused with a transitional sensibility, their occupants are not unlike initiates. Given that these events do not simply recreate the past, but incite innovation, they become potent contexts for pioneer neophytes who occupy the interstices between the known and unknown. Occupying an extraordinary eventscape of wonder and novelty, inhabitants are exposed to new knowledge, praxis, and skills that may be adopted in their postevent lives. In language, practice, and exchange, these cocreative worlds tend to be characterized by bricolage and improvisation. Within these laboratory-like domains, novices are licensed to inhabit a mode of discovery.

Because such events typically require travel to sometimes remote locations involving endurance, hardships, and sacrifice, the novice is at the same time a pilgrim. Event participants behave like travelers who have arrived at the center of their faith, craft, or calling, which, through symbolic gestures, purification rites, and gift exchange, may be reaffirmed. A process of sacralization is notable where, over its operational life, an event destination becomes a center of identity (and even considered “home”) for a far-flung diaspora. Such events become transformational centers at the margins for alternative, disenchanted, and questing populations who convert marginal and peripheral sites into “elective centers.”25 While the Black Rock Desert’s playa—the site of Black Rock City (Burning Man)—is exemplary, most other sites perform comparable roles.26 The celebrations at which an eclectic, transnational populace of “eclipse chasers” observes a total solar eclipse provide a unique example.27 In this development, the celestial event is celebrated in a social event considered “home” even though this cosmic synchronicity is marked in different locations around the globe. Given the assumed revelatory and transitional effect for the self that corresponds to the cosmic transition (i.e., from daylight to umbra and back to daylight) occasioned by the sun’s total alignment with the moon, total solar eclipse celebrations can be recognized as the festive acme of the transpersonal, psychedelic, and visionary arts movements.

From greenfield raves to desert burns to celestial alignments, transfestives embrace the novice and pilgrim. The creative combination of novice/pilgrim aesthetics affords a *transitional* sensibility that is consciously adopted within event programming and design, with contemporary events not unlike superliminal ministates and interstitial republics of transition.\(^{28}\)

One effect of the ritualization endogenous to these events is that they are not only contexts for affirming affinity with other habitués—that is, as “Burners,” “Rainbows,” “ConFesters,” “Beloveds,” et cetera—or for affirming affinity with Earth (where pantheistic performances may give expression to identification with nature religion). As eclipse celebrations demonstrate, events can also occasion the transhumanist expression of extraplanetary consciousness. Such complex sympathies were identified in a study of “Gaian pilgrims” and their harmonic “power spots” in which Adrian Ivakhiv explored an alternative milieu of Earthen and New Age spiritualities, notably at Glastonbury and Sedona. In this “transepistemic cultural arena,” eco-spiritual immanentism and off-planetary ascensionism are said to be “two sides of a loosely unified spiritual-cultural movement: one seeks to rekindle the connection with Earth’s power directly, while the other looks for wisdom beyond our planet’s weakened frame.”\(^{29}\)

**Prototypes**

Now that various dimensions and attributes of what I have identified as transfestive events have been discussed, we can move to a discussion of event prototypes and the existing research that addresses them. With seasonal event organizations demonstrating a transfestive intent over decades of event management, today’s transfestive events have inherited hybrid means to augment the freedom dynamics addressed earlier. Those events identifying as “transformational festivals” have proliferated in the new millennium, notably on the North American West Coast, though they are more frequently mounted internationally, and have attracted growing international audiences.\(^{30}\) Lightning in a Bottle (California), Beloved (Oregon), Symbiosis (California), Shambhala Music Festival (British Columbia), Envision (Costa Rica), Tribal Gathering (Panama), and Boom (Portugal) are among the events named “transformational festivals” by Leung in webseries *The Bloom*.\(^{31}\) These events serve the purpose of fostering communities dedicated to environmentally conscious living practices, while enabling spaces supportive for transpersonal development.\(^{32}\) An early bar was set in the study of “transformational festivals” by Kelci Lyn Mohr, who negotiates the multidimensionality of Canadian transfestive festivals—Astral Harvest Music & Arts, Shambhala, and Intention, Alberta—in a methodologically innovative approach exploring how these events “nurture life-changing experiences by cultivating a specific ethos and aesthetic.”\(^{33}\) A benchmark event in this tradition, Symbiosis possesses an ethos of sustainable community and “right relationship,” notably given the commitments to creating permanent village culture, land stewardship, and festival life year-round, as well as establishing relationships with Indigenous cultures through “cross-pollination” rather than cultural appropriation of their beliefs and practices.\(^{34}\)

While events in this development are also regarded as “visionary arts” gatherings—with painters like Alex Grey revered in this community—these multisensorial events are equally zones of sonic arts, including notably electronic dance music. The prevalence of electrosonic body arts in these events was documented in the film *Electronic Awakening*.\(^{35}\) Events early identified as “transformational” are those featuring tents, stages, and enclaves with workshops, lectures, films,
and exhibitions designated as “chill spaces.” Offering participants respite from the main dance floor, these alternative zones—such as Boom’s Liminal Village—became distinctive pedagogical enclaves. While these events attract predominantly white participants, they feature concerted ceremonial efforts—for example, Oregon Eclipse (2017), Rainbow Spirit Festival (formerly Rainbow Serpent Festival, Australia)—to host Indigenous representatives, echoing a broader commitment to reconciliation with First Nations peoples. As typical to event design, ancestral and sci-fi themes converge in “ancient futurist” décor and stage design, or in invented traditions, such as steampunk.

The label “transformational festival” has now circulated long enough to characterize a large range of events, from Oregon Country Fair to Tomorrowland (a large-scale EDM festival in Belgium) to exclusive wellness gatherings like A-Fest, described in a VICE report as “an annual super-elite, invite-only festival that promises to radically change your life.” The popularization of the phrase and its application to Silicon Valley influencer happenings appears to have emptied the denomination of its original significance. Nowadays, any event tapping into the “transformational economy” might be considered ripe for this prefix, given their status as ostensible contexts for the “experience economy 3.0.”

With a complex and contested pedigree, transformational festivals are a composite of multiple event forms and regional traditions. The lineage of transfestive events (including transformational festivals) is intricate and synergistic. Demonstrating their inheritance from multiple lines, the prototypes are diverse. Probably the most prolific, mutant, and fraught strand is that of the “free festival.” While it may be futile to attempt to locate the Ur-moment, most commentators report that this product of the 1960s had its chief advent in January 1967 when one hundred thousand hippies gathered for a free psychedelic rock concert in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park named “Gathering of the Tribes for a Human Be-in.” Another event has, however, assumed greater notoriety—that is, when fences were torn down during a massive rock concert on Max Yasgur’s dairy farm in Bethel, New York State, in August 15–18, 1969. Iconic of the 1960s, the unintentional “free festival,” Woodstock Music and Art Fair/Rock Festival, provides stock mythology for countercultural origin stories. Within this festive tradition, “free” implied more than the absence of an admission fee (intentional or not). It referred to the free culture prefigured in autonomous enclaves of foment that in the UK were dubbed “free festivals.” In the UK, in the wake of huge free concerts in London’s Hyde Park in the late 1960s through the 1970s and into the 1980s, as marginal centers for hippies and “New Age travelers,” the early Glastonbury Festival and the Stonehenge Free summer solstice festival were pivotal, themselves nostalgic efforts to revive folk festivals and the medieval fair. Responsive to massive pop festivals such as the Isle of Wight festivals in which the freedoms of eventgoers were constrained according to the chief purpose of the event—that is, providing a spectacle for crowds to witness star musicians perform on a main stage—through the 1970s, events like Phun City, Windsor, Trentishoe festivals, and lesser-known festivals like the Psilocybin Fayre in Llanafan, Wales, were all self-proclaimed instances of “The Free State of Albion.”

As scholars like George McKay and others have observed, the cultural history of free festivals is a complex story of subversion, suppression, reform, and collaboration. Shaped by local cultural and political circumstances, subsequent music festivals worldwide have forged a utopian sensibility, the spaces of which are the subject of much attention and contention. Traced through
the work of geographers Henri Lefebvre, Massey, and Soja, Jelena Gligorijević has, for example, addressed the utopian spatial dimensions of music festivals, notably Exit in Serbia, with its opposition to authoritarian rule and right-wing populism, as “micronational” spaces, or spaces of “micrócitizenship.”

Another original and enduring model was founded in the United States in the early 1970s by the Rainbow Family. Since the first festival of “prayer for world peace” in Colorado in 1972, Rainbow Gatherings have been dedicated to cooperativism, healing arts, and world peace. Rainbow Gatherings became an evental platform for alternative spirituality traceable to nineteenth-century Chautauquas and lyceum programs. The path identified as the “Rainbow Road” promised a metaphysical palette, later culminating in transformational festivals. The Rainbow Gathering model has been adopted internationally since the early 1980s (see Katri Ratia’s contribution to this issue). In the US, Rainbow impacted contemporary pagan festivals, whose participants forged a model that in the 1980s emerged as popular alternative spiritual destinations. Marking the solstices and equinoxes, at neo-pagan festivals like Pagan Spirit Gathering, “nature” is the “event” in which those gathered become immersed, an immersion that potentiates a transformative experience. What are today called “transformational festivals” are hybrid occasions that facilitate the expression of pagan and gnostic esotericisms found within alternative spiritual networks.

There is considerable traffic between event types. For example, cross-pollination is evident in psytrance, an electronic dance music genre and event culture indebted to Goa trance and its worldwide progeny. This psychedelic festivalization is apparent in Boom (Portugal) and Ozora (Hungary), among a global concatenation of transfestive dance events. The Goa connection is a critical through-point to “transformational festivals.” While psytrance events are heir to traveler seasons in Goa (and the full moon gathering on Anjuna beach), they also derive their eventual élan, or vibe, in no small part from the underground rave tradition. Evolving music among other sensory technologies to optimize the dance experience, rave is itself a transfestive prototype which obtained an apotheosis with Acid House in the late 1980s.

The Acid House rave explosion in the UK has been identified as the “second summer of love,” the roots of which are traced through the free festival tradition. At the same time, rave also drew from multiple traditions of electronic dance music events, including house, techno, and trance, which had proliferated in event cultures worldwide representing regional adaptations of rave. For example, orbitals in the UK, teknival across western Europe, ruta destroy in Valencia, mesibot in Israel, doof in Australia, among many other regional variations. These electronic dance music movements have become integral to the transformative zeitgeist of contemporary festivals. Considerable research attention has been devoted to rave’s transformative ritualization, and the capacity for altering consciousness via an assemblage of sensory technologies, recognized to facilitate superliminalization—the deliberate augmentation of liminal conditions. While a clinical-juridical paradigm has conventionally targeted the prevalence of psychoactive substances (e.g., MDMA, ketamine, psilocybin, and LSD) as evidence of a pathological-criminal crisis, recent studies emphasize their “transformative” role. Given their presumed capacity to “expand consciousness” (“psychedelic”) or “awaken the divine within” (“entheogen”), the labeling of psychoactive compounds accessed in these spaces further illustrates their “transformative” potential. Investigating psychedelics/entheogens amid the “culturally seismic” role of the “4Ds”


53. Ibid.


56. Hetherington, New Age Travellers; Graham St John, "Alternative Cultural Heterotopia and the Liminoid"

("dance, drums, drugs, and sleep deprivation") in raves, participants make claims for the intense group "fusion" triggered "by awe-inspiring experiences" at these events. Furthermore, safety and integration are encouraged and harm prevented through education, psychological support, and drug testing.\(^49\) The impact on transfestivity of the psychedelic sensibility and aesthetics is significant. An exemplar was the Beyond the Brain event series mounted in the mid-1990s in North-East New South Wales, Australia, as documented by Paul Chambers.\(^50\)

### Transformational Heterotopia

As single events have many roots and are multivalent, sheer heuristics, whether critical or idealistic, are inadequate. Portugal’s Boom Festival exemplifies this complexity. While arguably emerging as the result of a desire among Goa travelers to festivalize the Goa "state of mind" in Europe, over twenty-five years, Boom grew to assume a much more complex, even schizoid, identity. While the event has been a premier occasion for enthusiasts to enter experimental and "visionary" states of consciousness (contextualized, for example, by its primary dance floor, the Dance Temple), it also makes strong claims toward advancing sustainability through its promotion of low-carbon lifestyles and practices that mitigate climate change (as explicitly tied to its 2022 theme, "The Anthropocene," and in its receipt of "Greener Festival" awards). Said to hold its place in a network of socio-ecological experiments or "ecotopias,"\(^51\) one study recognizes Boom among "living laboratories" whose participants are "active researchers and experimenters in the transition to a more sustainable future."\(^52\) Boom is thought to "envision a society-wide transformation in a way that conciliates nature restoration with life quality, well-being and social justice."\(^53\) But such characterization provides a limited perspective on a phenomenon that may be better served through the language of "heterotopia," which Foucault adopted in an approach to "other" spaces seeking to avoid the romantic pitfalls of "utopia."\(^54\)

It has often been said that free festivals, Rainbow Gatherings, and other events are utopic in intent if not in practice. It has been a common refrain, for example, that Burning Man is a "utopian movement."\(^55\) The complex historical and cultural conditions of events, however, problematize unidimensional views. Given that they gather celebrants with diverse identities, predilections, and expectations, events are plural domains, the meaning and significance of which are disputed by stakeholders. With this view in mind, "heterotopia" aids comprehension of the discordant and cacophonous potency of events.\(^56\) The search for innovative models is taken up in critical event studies where the "event" is conceptualized as "essentially contested."\(^57\) Multiplicity and contestation complicate the transformational character of transfestivity. Given event dissensuality, their ostensible "utopian" (or "dystopian") character needs rethinking. For example, while Burning Man is often declared to have fallen from its utopian origins ("jumped the shark")—a conceit burgeoning in media reports during the 2023 "Raining Man" event when a lockdown was temporarily implemented due to unusual rainfall—such allegations appear grounded in disputed idealism.\(^58\) Responding to the extremes of their historical moment, evental enclaves nurture principles that range from the surrealist to the environmentally sensitive. Their fusions signal a hybrid eventalism interfacing transgression and progressivism, outlawed and proactive agendas, combinations that signify what is sometimes described by scholars as "conscious partying" or "protestival."\(^59\)

There is a paucity of longitudinal research on transfestive events. Studies that could determine
Congested, multidimensional events pose challenges for researchers seeking to design research projects that recognize the spectrum of shaping influences, diversity in content, community of participants, creative compromises with state and commercial interests, and the range of possible participation outcomes. Given complex constituencies that have grown over decades of event making, the transfestive is contested. Events grow contentious among their publics as they are seen to devolve from grassroots and countercultural origins as participatory (or “cocreative”) and avant-garde (or “edgy”), into gated events that are consumed by patrons and which are observed to have unscrupulously monetized freedom, authenticity, and transformation. In one UK study positioning festivals somewhere between “technologies of neoliberal governance” and “a means of coping with neoliberalism,” “free party” activists dismiss the contemporary Glastonbury Festival as a simulacra that enables an illusory “freedom.”

Glastonbury, Lightning in a Bottle, and other enduring annual music festivals are seen by some researchers as examples of the “countercultural carnivalesque.” In this view, vestiges of their “transformational” roots are maintained and mythologized, while the events themselves remain highly regulated, surveilled, and subject to licensing laws. At the same time, a dedication to promoting a distinct identity in a marketplace competing for eventgoers results in events committed to branding and re-branding strategies. Festivalscapes in the world of electronica (i.e., “EDM festivals”) illustrate these strategies. Rooted in the San Francisco rave underground and today attracting hundreds of thousands to massive, corporate-driven spectacles complete with VIP areas, sponsorship deals, and licensing monopolies, Electric Daisy Carnival exemplifies the trend of commercialization.

Event organizers and communities critically responding to festival commodification and music industry monopolization have undertaken new event initiatives, while others have revised existing models. For example, with its roots in underground raves, operating from 1995 to 2011, the UK’s Big Chill was promoted under the banner, “More than a festival, it’s a lifestyle.” Targeting middle-class and ethnically diverse patrons and billing eclectic music and art, cabaret, gourmet food, and alternative therapy, the event pioneered an emergent and self-identified “boutique” formula. Catering to a discerning audience, subsequent intimate specialist events, like Bearded Theory and Secret Garden Party, were promoted as spaces resistant to commercial exploitation and independent from the concert model. Nevertheless, as Roxy Robinson points out in her
nuanced UK study, *Music Festivals and the Politics of Participation*, these events, while deploying “authenticating discourses,” developed uniquely profitable tactics. Furthermore, their rhetoric, and their implicit “alternativism,” appeared to echo the strategies of commercial rock festivals of the 1980s, which, as Simon Frith averred, were sites for the “reconciliation of rebelliousness and capital.” How “transformational festivals” may repeat reconciliations of this kind deserves close scrutiny. Additionally, given the prevalence of luxury or “VIP” camping (or “glamping”) options, there is scope for critical studies of intra-event stratification.

**Burning Man**

While commonly recognized as the primary prototype for contemporary transformational events, Burning Man is a multifaceted phenomenon. As its storied background and transnational legacy illustrates, Burning Man signifies the enigmatic character of “transformation.” As it grew from modest origins into a phenomenon widely labeled the “Burnerverse,” its own transformative profile evolved. There are numerous phases and elements to this development, each signifying transitions in magnitude, popularity, and complexity. Among the most significant transitions is that the event migrated from a sandy beach in California (San Francisco’s Baker Beach, initiated in 1986) to a dusty, desolate wilderness in Nevada (the Black Rock Desert playa, since 1990). What had commenced as a small-scale summer solstice effigy burn in the mid-1980s had, by the end of the 1990s, evolved into a world-recognized fire-arts gathering with distinct large-scale “burn” rites (notably Burn Night on which the eponymous effigy is incinerated, and, from 2000, the Temple Burn). By the early 2000s, Burning Man had grown from a Labor Day weekend holiday into a week-long settlement, Black Rock City, guided by an ethical system of “10 Principles” and hosting a population of circa thirty thousand (today eighty thousand). After two decades of seasonal burns mounted in Nevada, Burning Man expanded to become the Burning Man Project, a nonprofit which has fostered a large and evolving international network of regional events and inspired prolific civic engagement initiatives, exemplified by Burners Without Borders. In 2016, the Burning Man Project acquired a 3,800-acre property, Fly Ranch, for year-round projects such as land art, smaller community events, and sustainability initiatives. More recently, during the global COVID-19 pandemic, Burning Man went virtual, which coincided with the advent of unofficial Renegade Burns mounted in the Black Rock Desert. These combined circumstances have made for a complex evolving phenomenon, a Burner universe with a conglomeration of recurrent and ongoing elements, with both predictable and uncertain outcomes. This dynamic demands appropriately nuanced research.

In fact, various aspects of this evolving phenomenon have been addressed by researchers and commentators, many identifying as Burners. While the possibility of a complete and total understanding of the transformative architectonic of the Burnerverse is remote, collective observations enhance our awareness of its unique qualities. Spatial and topographical considerations demonstrate that Burning Man is essentially, as conveyed in the works of poet-geographer Bill Fox, transformative. That the Black Rock Desert *playa* is a topography subject to significant seasonal transitions has no small influence on the Burner phenomenon, not only as an ephemeral event, but as a culture and movement. As the *playa* annually cycles from wet to dry, its surface is renewed like a *tabula rasa*, its human visitors occupying a natural “blank canvas,” or “Etch A Sketch,” unparalleled in scale. Under a wilderness area mandate enforced by the Bureau of Land Management, the *playa’s* human inhabitants are compelled to “Leave No
Trace,” an edict giving shape to a purification ritual complex. At the same time, that this space provides an unparalleled context for large-scale fire performance amplifies the unique ephemeral stature of the experience.

Burning Man’s signature fire ritual complex has been addressed by various ethnographers. Others have addressed the role of urban planning in the annual re/formation of Black Rock City, an “ephemeropolis” specifically designed to be unbuilt. The organization of Burning Man was the subject of longitudinal research through the 2000s, notably as it became responsive to a spectrum of adversaries that have threatened its survival and shaped its organization. Over its history, Burning Man has evolved from a temporary “leave no trace” event into a movement that desires to “leave traces” in the world. “Leave no trace” itself presents a complex story, given that Burning Man is rooted in illicit surrealist urban stunts associated with the Suicide Club and the San Francisco Cacophony Society in which participants were expected to leave a temporarily inverted and revivified place without any prosecutorial traces of their presence.

The history and culture of Burning Man has received growing attention among scholars. There is increased awareness of the proliferation of “burns” and burn-inspired festivalscapes, like Catharsis on the Mall at the US Capital, or the Temple Burn in Londonderry. The Burning Progeny project based at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland (2016–19), was the first effort to study this development in a comprehensive longitudinal fashion. Studies have addressed the role of the principles integral to a proliferating cultural movement, the performance of which recreated Burner culture. Focusing on how Burning Man became a cocreated phenomenon that blurred the boundary between spectacle and participation, research has demonstrated how burns are a unique context for participation, with the blurred boundary between performer and audience, or producer and consumer (“artistic prosumer”), providing inspiration for events further afield.

Researchers have begun to take up the challenge of understanding the emergent and complex character of Burning Man, highlighting, for example, its implications as a city and a platform for artistic expression. Providing a case study for how “a fusion of art and pedagogy uniquely facilitates widespread and meaningful social transformation,” as one commentator suggests, Black Rock City is a civic-participatory context for socially engaged art (SEA). With its many layers—for example, city, nonprofit, network, spin-off organizations and events, and public art installations—Burning Man is an identifiably multidimensional project that illustrates the internal logic of SEA that successfully foments kin projects in a widening network.

Other recent research addresses the career of Burning Man in the world. Cultural geographer Ian Rowen—a contributor to this issue—understands Burning Man as a “subversive toolbox” for a “reimagined and reconfigured tourism,” notably as the Burning Man principles of “Participation” and “Civic Responsibility” are pursued outside the bounds of an event that is enacted by people “burning” 365 days a year. This widening scope of Burning Man and its culture is a circumstance underwritten by the global pandemic. Longitudinal emic research gave Rowen the insight to recognize that Burning Man has effectively transformed tourists of transformative events into participants in a broader movement. The changing conditions of the pandemic prompted community members to apply technical and organizational skills and collaborations honed through decades of experimentation in the harsh conditions of the Black Rock Desert.


71. See Evans, Galbraith, and Law, Tales of the San Francisco Cacophony Society.


example, in 2020, Burners Without Borders joined forces with over a dozen decentralized databases to create “the most comprehensive database of PPE needs and offers in the US, connecting people to 2.5 million units.”78 Such civic engagement initiatives are suggestive of the postfestival career of movements that have evolved from their evental roots, a development deserving further attention.

The Burning Man Project has, in recent years, committed to a “2030 Environmental Sustainability Roadmap,” which ambitiously aims to eliminate all nonsustainable waste streams from events and operations. With such intent, Burning Man resonates with the “Anthropocene Festival,” a label applied to a range of prefigurative experimental hybrid arts-science events modeling novel forms of environmental governance that generate new understandings of materiality and ecological community.79 While Black Rock City could be identified as a proto event in this category, events of this character are more typically indoor biennales, hackathons, and experimental conferences of digital arts and ecological solutions. These events tend to blur the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman. Examples include Citizens Unconference for the Environment (Hong Kong), Earth Lab (London), Bioneers (San Francisco), and the events discussed by Max Ritts and Karen Bakker (i.e., Climate Symphony and Terra0). Research on emergent transfestive events of this nature arising in response to planetary emergency remains in its infancy.80

Issue Content

This issue section features content illustrative of the transfestive morphology and content discussed above. Including scholars representing anthropology, cultural geography, and studies in religion, and deploying a variety of methodological and conceptual approaches, it includes empirically grounded research that interrogates transformative idealism and focuses on the lived experiences and actual practices, ritual and otherwise, of event participants and organizers. These articles critically explore the paradoxical parameters, internal inconsistencies, and disparate “transformational” agendas of events.

Three of the five articles offered here address Burning Man, its unique event culture, and its worldwide movement. Using conceptual tools like “heterotopia,” “hyper-liminality,” “diaspora,” and “shanzhai,” the authors of two of these articles analyze cultural dramas internal to Nevada’s Black Rock City and its global progeny; the comparative career of the “carnivalesque” and “ritualesque” in regional burns in Denmark and Israel; and a comparison of sanctioned burns and unauthorized commercial festivals in China. The third article explicitly connects issues raised in Black Rock City to other events, such as Beloved, Oregon Eclipse, and Lucidity. It explores the material traces of ephemeral events in a study of the porosity of event cultures. The remaining two articles explore a range of transfestive events in the United States and Europe, including Wanderlust, Lightning in a Bottle, and Rainbow Gatherings. These articles offer close analyses of the history, material culture, tiered legacy, ritual practices, and spatial sacrality of events. Specifically, these essays address: spatial meaning-making in a global circuit of transformational yoga festivals and the alternative political model of Rainbow Gatherings across Europe expressed through an “object biography” of the Talking Stick.

The events and their cultures included in this edition occur on a spectrum from those that are self-consciously “festivals”—transitory, festive, and bounded in space and time—such as...
Beloved, to event organizations contesting the "festival" label, notably Burning Man, now a year-round movement engaged in civic and artistic initiatives worldwide. This introduction to the "transfestival," then, offers a fresh approach to festival studies, calling for a critical examination of the context of events and event cultures that are commonly labeled "festivals." As articles question the continuing relevance of the label "transformational festival" (and implicitly document an ambivalence with terms like "transformation" and "festival"), this research begins to expose the fraught status of existing frameworks in festival and event studies. The acquisition of permanent sites (Burning Man’s Fly Ranch) and the development of eco-villages in connection with Oregon Eclipse/Global Eclipse are examples of the ways event cultures are transfigured into ongoing spaces outside the confines of the events themselves. In addition, initiatives that developed out of event cultures, such as Burners Without Borders and Lucidity’s permaculture initiatives, suggest some ways in which the cultural values of events are being implemented by participants in the broader society. As the authors in this issue section of the *Journal of Festive Studies* collectively demonstrate, while the various events contest, challenge, and problematize the "transformational festival" paradigm, they nevertheless remain seasonal festive spatial reoccupations with transformative possibilities.

The first essays in this issue section serve to illustrate the complexities of Burning Man as an evental movement. With its meaning, significance, and identity contested and debated by organizers and participants, no singular narrative defines the Burner universe. Building on the idea that the Burnerverse is a heterotopian archipelago, as conveyed by Graham St John and Botond Vitos in the first article, "Burnerverse: The Borderland, Midburn, and the Global Event Culture of Burning Man," heterogeneity grows more apparent the farther one travels from the center of the Burnerverse—Black Rock City—toward satellite burns and outlier events that are variously positioned vis-a-vis the prototype. Drawing on collaborative, multi-sited longitudinal research, the article addresses the transnation-al career of this transformative event culture. Through a study of two Burning Man regional events—Midburn (Israel) and the Borderland (Nordic)—and the ways they mimic and mutate, mirror, and contest, the prototype (Black Rock City), this study of event-cultural "hyper-liminality" assists our understanding of the mosaic of transformation within intentionally transformative events. Specific attention to ritualesque and carnivalesque characteristics within and across these events aids clarification of the performative means by which a transformational culture is transmitted, iterated, and transformed.

In further pursuit of the transnational trajectory of Burning Man, Ian Rowen’s contribution explores various manifestations and transformations of Burning Man embodied by different events in China and Taiwan in his article, "The Capitalist Surrealism of Chinese Burning Man." Rowen’s essay offers a rich discussion of the specificities of the Chinese context and reflects on ways in which Burning Man serves the very same capitalist systems its many proponents criticize. Drawing on his experiences as a Burner artist and regional event representative, Rowen traces the history of Burning Man’s various developments and manifestations in China and Taiwan, including Dragon Burn (China) and Turtle Burn (Taiwan). Rowen uses the notion of "capitalist surrealism" to analyze the ways in which Burning Man might be understood within the complex and multifaceted relationship between the United States and China. Even the "authentic" Burning Man itself, as Rowen shows, had already become immersed in its own romance with global capitalism, especially due to its close relationship with Silicon Valley, despite the important Burning Man principle of "Decommodification."
Rowen’s analysis of the tensions between Burning Man’s idealism, especially its 10 Principles, and the actual practices and function of these transformative events in the Chinese and Taiwanese cases is echoed in Sarah Pike’s article on similar contradictions involving Burning Man. In “Leaving Traces: Transformative Events and the Porosity of Human and Environment,” Pike calls into question the extent to which the widespread motto “Leave No Trace” is actually practiced at Burning Man and other events with similar environmental guidelines. As Pike argues, transformative events may be established as places apart from the outside world, but the boundaries between them are porous and frequently transgressed. Her essay explores some of the lasting material effects experienced in participants’ bodies and at event sites. As in other contributions, especially Lucia and Ratia in this issue, Pike explores various mnemonic and physical practices that sacralize event spaces, even when these spaces are virtual, as was the case with Burning Man in 2020.

Amanda Lucia also focuses on spatial sacrality and material culture in her contribution, “Marking Sacred Space: Altars and Yoga Mats in Transformative Events.” Drawing on extensive ethnographic research at a wide variety of events, including Bhakti and Shakti Fests, Wanderlust yoga festivals, Lightning in a Bottle, and Burning Man, Lucia explores the process of creating sacred space for self-transformation at these events. Touching on an important theme running through this issue section, she emphasizes that many event participants turn to the past for ancient wisdom (which becomes exoticized in these spaces), at the same time that they look to and envision new futures. Practices that shape and create sacred space at festivals through altars (public ritual space) or yoga mats (personal space) result in a unique material landscape that expresses distinctive religious and spiritual identities, even in more secular festive spaces such as music festivals. Like other contributions to this issue, both Lucia’s and Pike’s essays suggest new ways in which spirituality is configured within the contexts of transformative events, especially through material culture.

Rounding out this discussion of articles focusing on material culture and sacred space at a range of events, Katri Ratia’s contribution focuses on the European manifestations of one of the earliest transfestive prototypes, the Rainbow Gathering. In particular, Ratia investigates a unique ritual artefact and focalizing object essential to the practical functioning and lived experience of Gatherings, the Talking Stick, exploring the object’s significance in material, symbolic, and instrumental terms. Through her attention to the Talking Stick and its ritualized place in a horizontal political system, Ratia critically considers the complex power relations at Rainbow Gatherings, as well as the potential these sites have for developing new modes of participatory culture.

Research Directions

Festivals, gatherings, and other events have become social laboratories, cultural battlegrounds, and consciousness hubs for navigating contemporary crises. As diverse events and their cultures illustrate, “transformation” is a subject that is almost as fraught as that of “freedom.” As we continue to face a litany of dire ecological, social, and cultural conditions, and as a spectrum of transformative evental movements continues to emerge in response, studies such as those presented in this issue will continue to grow in number and significance. In such studies, the meaning of “transformation” and “festival” (and “event”) will become as much the subject of
debate and inquiry as that of “freedom” itself. Festivals may be a dynamic means for transforming society; their study is also a context for challenging the transformativity they ostensibly precipitate. The contributions to this issue section offer a small sample of the current range of events within the emergent field, sector, and industry. While the content provided is limited, the scope is broad. It is hoped that future studies will develop, explore, and challenge the insights offered here. While the content is weighted toward Burning Man, this reflects the editors’ interests as researchers and mirrors the weight of the Burnerverse in the transformative zeitgeist. Burning Man is a reservoir of novelty, an influential “change agent,” and a model prototype. And just as Burning Man is itself prototypical, its study informs research on other transformative events, festivals, and movements.

In the following, approaches, themes, and inquiries of possible interest to the emergent interdisciplinary field of transfestive studies are identified. Much can be learned from appropriately balanced research projects that are autoethnographic, ethical, longitudinal, comparative, and collaborative. With lessons drawn from past and existing projects, business models, event design, organizational framework, mission objectives, and cultural principles ought to be of interest. How do events compare with more traditional festive event forms, including those they actively counter, or from which they depart? How do mission, design, goals, and agendas of events compare with the empirical reality? We will benefit, furthermore, from studies designed to critically address the festivalized rebranding of “transformation” as an exclusive and lavish lifestyle experience (in the same way the rave became rebranded in “EDM” festivals). Such studies will address how transformation is, in a sense, being transformed. Other investigations may give greater attention to the relationship between transformativity and exclusivity. To what extent are innovation, novelty, and transformation the preserve of the privileged? How might practices echo patterns of privilege and opportunity determined by gender, sexuality, race, class, and ability? How does socioeconomic stratification manifest within transfestive precincts and movements?

As this article has outlined, appropriate research design and theory recognizes the complex transformative architectonic of the events under consideration—that is, that they are contested spaces with considerable variation in motives and expectations among participants and stakeholders. In acknowledgement of this complexity, a fruitful line of inquiry could address events as contexts for the interfacing of tourist and pilgrimage vectors. Does the transfestive represent yet another form of transformative tourism? To what extent are event habitués spiritual tourists and/or secular pilgrims? How might these characterizations differ across event types? What are the tourist and “post-tourist” characteristics of the events, including those integrated with local and Indigenous communities (e.g., in the form of creative workshops, heritage tours, billing local musicians and performers, art installations, and architectural design)? In what ways do events mirror and refract ways that tourism can facilitate “engaged contributions” toward others or the environment?

Transformational events possess large communities of loyal volunteers, logistics crews, and networks of departments, each with unique traditions, symbols, and rituals. Not unlike biographies, intimate cultural histories of these communities recognize how events pass through phases, come of age, make mistakes, unite with others, flourish, and expire. Such studies could explore the founder experiences—often transpersonal and life-changing—that shaped the event. Performed longitudinally, grounded studies will understand how these recurrent seasonal events
have shaped the lives of those serving in key positions.  

This field will also benefit from critical and comparative studies addressing the impact on events of the internet, new communications technology, smartphone apps, virtualization, virtual reality, and social media. If many transformational events emerged in the same period as the inception of the World Wide Web, and/or pressed the latter into the service of their cause, has the career of those events mirrored the fate of the internet, which was in the mid-1990s optimistically embraced for its inclusivist properties and peer-to-peer (or later Web 2.0) promise? Taking cues from Fabian Holt’s analysis of the “EDM pop” festival (notably Tomorrowland) as a mediatized event, culture industry–focused sociological studies could be designed to usefully address the mediatization, marketing, and massification of transformational festivalscapes. Attention to the virtualization of transformation could lead to useful inquiries addressing the roots and continuing significance of virtual eventalism. For example, with its origins in the 1990s, and held simultaneously in multiple worldwide locations, Earthdance is a global “prayers for peace” event and early adopter of the “cyberdelic” event-synchronizing streaming methods later adopted in the COVID-19 era. Extensive and critical research on virtual events could complement Sarah Pike’s study of the virtualization of Burning Man. Attention to the digital arts—and here one thinks of festivals like Transmediale or Mutek—necessitates recognition of a range of platforms, institutions, and industries whose year-round, transnational, or “glocal,” operations also serve to problematize the ephemerality implicit to the conventional understanding of “festival.” At the same time, such attention assists our interrogation of the standard view of “transformation” thought to derive from a singular temporary “event.”

Further research could potentially expand our understanding of the uniquely participatory character of the events in question. Departing from the view that event participation is primarily a consumer-end experience, nuanced research will address the voluntary work implicit to event production. What are the long-term postpandemic implications of the experimental responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, when—resulting from the implementation of national health and safety protocols—live events were suspended and replaced by live-stream events? Finally, while there have been limited studies of the impact of events on local communities, there is a need for sustained attention to wider social effects. If events are efforts to model change, what is the evidence for their success? How are individual participants impacted, and what are the longer-term local effects of events, for communities in wider regions and in global society? These among many other approaches and inquiries will assist our understanding of transfestive events and their transformative architecture.

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EVENT HORIZONS

Burnerverse:
The Borderland, Midburn, and the Global Event Culture of Burning Man

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ABSTRACT

Otherwise known as Black Rock City, Burning Man is a remote fire-arts gathering in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert that has catalyzed a global movement. An ephemeral community flowering in a desert, Burning Man is also a cultural proliferation of events that model and mutate the Black Rock City prototype worldwide. Cyclical and augmentative, replicable and mutable, Burning Man has evolved from a small cultural event into a transformative event culture. This article presents research from a longitudinal project addressing the ostensible “transformational” quality of Burning Man and its cultural archipelago of events. Informed by the complex spatialization inherent to Michel Foucault’s "heterotopia," it navigates the “hyper-liminal” dynamics of two “regional events” and their organization models: Midburn (Israel) and the Borderland (Nordic). The heterotopic process promotes insight on disparate practices within cultural “other spaces”: here, Black Rock City and the events, or “burns,” it has spawned. Tracking the storied career of the Burning Man ethos known as the “10 Principles” as this is transmitted via “ritualesque” and “carnivalesque” performances, the article sheds light on ways local circumstances refract, filter, and mutate Burner culture, from carbon-copied transplants to innovative independent solutions. In other words, the article explores how this transformative cultural movement undergoes transformation, specifically addressing how, as they mimic and mutate the prototype and its principles, regional burns are contexts for authorization and subversion. This multi-sited navigation of burn event spaces that are imitative and imaginative, and of a principled culture that is mirrored and contested, offers a unique contribution to the study of “transfestival” event cultures.

KEYWORDS

Burning Man
Heterotopia
Ritualesque
Carnivalesque
Transfestival
Burnerverse: The Borderland, Midburn, and the Global Event Culture of Burning Man¹
Graham St John and Botond Vitos

Introduction

Burning Man is a participatory arts gathering reinstalled annually in Nevada’s remote Black Rock Desert. Regarded as “the largest Leave No Trace event in the world,” Burning Man is the template for a global network of “regional events” or “burns.”² Over three decades, otherwise known as Black Rock City (BRC), Burning Man has evolved from a small-scale cultural event into an event culture widely understood to harbor an unparalleled transformational quality. A “transformative” architectonic has been observed within academia, in popular commentaries such as those promoting “transformational festivals,” and within the Burning Man organization itself.³ For example, in her 2014 appearance on TEDxTokyo, Burning Man CEO Marian Goodell announced that Burning Man was “a $30 million business and a worldwide transformational culture.”⁴ That the liminal architecture of Burning Man is not one-dimensional requires appropriate conceptualization. To that end, Burning Man has been explored in previous work as an exemplary “event heterotopia,” an experimental “other space” in which the “default world” of participants is mirrored and contested on a seasonal stage.⁵ In that work, a complex spatiotemporality was found to render problematic BRC’s stature as a “transformational festival.” Michel Foucault’s “principles” of heterotopia were deployed to interpolate the heterogeneous liminal quality—the “hyper-liminality”—of Burning Man. Heterotopia has also been adapted to cast light on a unique stage for the performance of paradox.⁶ This research built on formative studies investigating the Australian alternative lifestyle event ConFest and Portugal’s Boom festival as contested transformative spaces.⁷

While it has been shown that BRC is an “other space” that simultaneously echoes, defies, and subverts “default world” culture, in this article we demonstrate that this “other space” has, in turn, promulgated other spaces that simulate and mutate the prototype. Focusing on Israel’s Midburn and the Nordic event the Borderland and adopting an approach recognizing “ritualesque” and “carnivalesque” frames, regional burns are shown to provide a heteroclite assemblage of imitative, refractive, and mutative practices integral to “burning”—practices that combine to form the uniquely transformative profile of the “Burnerverse.”⁸ The study illustrates how the ethos of Burning Man—its “10 Principles”—is transmitted through variable acts of replication and innovation and builds a conceptual framework with applicability for the study of Burning Man and other “transfestive” (see this issue’s introduction) events and cultural movements.⁹ This approach to the proliferation of Burner culture benefits from qualitative research involving participant observation and semi-structured interviews conducted in pre-COVID-19 longitudinal field research, along with an in-depth review of scholarly literature on Burning Man and analysis of Burning Man Project (BMP) media. The events under consideration were chosen since they were both within the geographical scope of the study and comparative ethnography indicated they are significantly disparate variations on the model.

¹ Observations and interviewee material presented in this article derive from field research at Black Rock City, Nevada, and Burning Man regional events in Israel and Denmark, performed as part of the Swiss National Science Foundation–funded project “Burning Progeny: The European Efflorescence of Burning Man,” in the Department of Social Science, University of Fribourg, Switzerland (January 2016–December 2019). We thank Sarah Pike, Ian Rowen, and the anonymous reviewers for commentary on earlier drafts.


⁷ For ConFest, see Graham St John, “Alternative Cultural Heterotopia and
The Burning Man Mosaic

It was on Baker Beach, San Francisco, summer solstice, 1986, that Larry Harvey and friends first raised and torched an effigy. The ritual was repeated annually over subsequent years, until 1990, when authorities intervened to outlaw the burning of “the Man.” That year, the San Francisco Cacophony Society invited Harvey to burn the effigy in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert, where Burning Man, and its recent “renegade” spin-offs, has been held ever since. With the inclusion of the pandemic that compelled the postponement of the official on-playa event in 2020 and 2021 (along with most in-person Burning Man regional events worldwide), this “impossible city” has weathered a spectrum of colossal adversities—a remote alkaline expanse, extreme weather conditions, health and safety concerns, law enforcement priorities, media stereotyping, volunteer coordination, and an excess of nonparticipants—to enable creative expression on an unparalleled scale.10 While the immediate background of this “ephemeropolis” is apparent in the surrealist and Dada-inspired events of the Cacophonists, deeper roots lie in West Coast North American freak and festival culture, other utopian experiments in California and elsewhere, the “metaphysical America” percolating in Chautauquas dating back to the nineteenth century, and a frontier settlement legacy integral to the American character.11

The effort to identify, define, or classify Burning Man is confounded by its multiplicity. Burning Man is simultaneously a unique space (the Black Rock Desert playa); a festive fire-arts gathering with distinct burn rituals (notably Burn Night on which the eponymous effigy is burned and Temple Burn); a temporary settlement (in 2019, the population of BRC was 80,000, including 10,000 volunteers); a nonprofit organization (the BMP) with about 125 year-round employees and 800 seasonal employees; a global cultural movement (with a regionals program composed of 232 volunteer regional contacts in 114 regions in 34 countries); and a land steward (since 2016, the BMP has owned Fly Ranch, Nevada).12

That the BMP became a large property owner demonstrates that Burning Man is not only an event culture but also a phenomenon with a reach that extends well beyond the spatiotemporal parameters of a burn event.13 The cultural outreach of Burning Man is exemplified by the “community activation platform” Burners Without Borders (BWB) and in the activities of the Burning Man Arts Department’s Civic Arts Program, which holds the objective of “generating more engaged citizenship, more livable communities, and more participatory art in public spaces around the world.”14

Adding to its depth and magnitude, the Burnerverse embraces the virtual, as has been evident in year-round activity on BMP’s website, on the digital platform Burning Man Hive, and across social media networks.15 Where boundaries were once more clearly defined, notably in the pre-internet era, the distinction between “playa” and “default” worlds, and between burn event and ordinary life, has eroded over time, as web, digital, and “social” technology has enabled planning, collaboration, engagement, and performance. The development of the Burning Man Regional Network has further enabled the realization of “Burning all year round.”16 While Burning Man has long had a presence in the virtual world of Second Life, the virtualization of Burning Man was augmented over 2020 and 2021 during the global pandemic when BRC and its global progeny of events were postponed or cancelled and the BMP pivoted to virtual burns.17 At the same time,
Burners used the internet, virtual reality (VR), and social media to enact, live stream, and archive burn rituals performed at home and in local communities worldwide during Burn Week.18

The complexion of Burning Man is further magnified with the advent of "renegade" burns. Popular unofficial events dubbed “Plan B” transpired on the Black Rock Desert playa in 2020 and 2021 (i.e., when the official event was virtual due to the BMP’s compliance with COVID-19 “shelter in place” restrictions) and in 2022 (a much smaller scaled event immediately following the official 2022 Burning Man). Attended by 15,000 people, and despite the absence of fire and large-scale art (all of which were not permitted by the federal agency overseeing activities in the region, the Bureau of Land Management [BLM]), the 2021 Renegade Burn was decentralized and reportedly more “authentic” than the official burn, a contention echoing a culture war waged since the mid-1990s over the direction of Burning Man, which critics have variously denounced as overregulated, micromanaged, and evincing artworld institutionalism.19 While this coincidence of (virtual and physical) Burning Man metaverses—which was also replicated in the regional movement—offers a further ripple in the already multidimensional Burnerverse and further illustrates how the meaning of "Burning Man" is subject to dispute, the restricted scope of the present article prevents further attention to this development. The 10 Principles hold a shaping influence across all of these corners of the Burnerverse, including the virtual and renegade events where internal disputes signified intra-event struggles to identify the "real" Burning Man, or an "authentic" Burner, with various actors perceiving their own actions as principled.20

If “transformation” is encoded in this phenomenon, it is far from one-dimensional. In the face of this convoluted aesthetic, heterotopia provides a useful heuristic for comprehending the vicissitudes of transformation. In contrast to utopias, Foucault identified real places that are “counter-emplacements” or “effectively realized utopias in which … all the other real emplacements that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.” The understanding of these heterotopic sites as “absolutely other than all the emplacements that they reflect” aids comprehension of the interiority of spaces replete with paradox and uncertainty. Among spatiotemporal events, what Foucault identified as “festivals” are manifestly heterotopic. They “function fully when people find themselves in a sort of absolute break with their traditional time.” Compared with libraries and museums (i.e., heterotopic spaces that accumulate time), festive spaces are “linked to time in its most futile, most transitory, most precarious aspect.”21 While Foucault outlined six aspects or “principles” of heterotopia—all of which evoke festival spaces—this article will focus on his final musing, which addressed heterotopic reflexivity.22

It is our understanding that practices, symbols, ritual, and meaning in this heterotopic space are composite, contingent, and therefore contested. BRC’s Burn Night is illustrative. The BMP provides no authorized interpretative frame for the effigy destruction. Like the playa itself, the Man is likened to a "blank canvas" on which participants are invited to project meaning. Likewise, its destruction by fire is open to interpretation. The Man is itself infused with a mosaic quality, which aids understanding of the contempt for, if not general dissatisfaction with, popular signifiers, none more contested than “festival.” Contention escalated in response to creeping festivalization and a concomitant “culture of convenience” exposed in the wake of the so-called sherpagate crisis post-2014.23 These anxieties echo long-held concerns over spectacularization and its impact on a volunteer dependent participatory event. They echo tension resulting from an...


20. For a discussion of the principled paradox of Burning Man, notably in its ostensible advanced or "high culture" phase, see Caveat Magister (Benjamin Wachs), The Scene That Became Cities: What Burning Man Philosophy Can Teach Us about Building Better Communities (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2019).


22. The six aspects are abridged elsewhere (St. John, "Ephemeropolis") as universality, mutability, heterogeneity, heterochronicity, zonality, and reflexivity.


apparent undermining of BRC’s "do-ocracy"—that is, its advocacy of civically minded grassroots initiatives that enable bottom-up organization within the community. The BMP's repudiation of the "festival" profile is symptomatic of a contested space where struggles over meaning are dramatized via a variety of art forms. Less "festival," BRC more closely approximates a "frontier carnival" featuring strangely imbricated ludic and civic drives. The tension between these motives appears in the creative collision of immediacy and administration, in commitments to cultural transgression and transmission, orgies and organization, stimuli and simulacra, ritual and carnival: a cavalcade of living contradictions embodied in coexistent principles like Radical Self-expression and Civic Responsibility or Immediacy and Communal Effort. The 10 Principles are a deep paradoxical weave that may only be confronted (and known) in situ and never finally resolved. Following Harvey, Burner philosopher Caveat Magister, who contends that Burning Man is "not benign," discusses at some length the "creative tension" integral to Burning Man culture, which he states "avoids a larger, mandatory purpose"—like utopia or transformation—"in favor of encouraging authentic inspiration." The crux of this tendency to refuse an epistemic narrative is that, while Burning Man cannot be singularly transformational, it does possess transformative potential. Before we compare regional inflections of this development, let us briefly describe elements integral to this potential.

“We are no longer staging an event," stated Harvey after a decade in the desert, "we're coordinating a global community." The comment evoked Harvey's desire to forge a transnational community, which was realized with the advent of a legible and transposable ethos—that is, the 10 Principles, formulated by Harvey and the Regions Committee in 2004. In the formative years on the playa, Burners made a distinction between life on-playa and the "default" world. The distinction grew increasingly spurious, however, notably as relationships in the default became integral to event operations. These are relationships like those forged and maintained with local shires and the BLM, which is tasked to ensure compliance with "Leave No Trace"—the wilderness area standard partly informing the Burning Man principle of Leaving No Trace. While this precept and praxis have been essential to the reproduction of the event on-playa, the desire to "leave a positive trace" in the world has motivated Burner culture off-playa—including within "playaspaces" outside the Black Rock Desert (see also Sarah Pike in this issue).

Over the past two decades, no longer a remote space in a desert in Nevada, the "playa" mutated and proliferated. To repeat the phrase adopted by Goodell in her 2017 Burning Man Global Leadership Conference (GLC) plenary speech, through such initiatives as the GLC, which was held in the San Francisco Bay Area from 2007 to 2017, as well as its annual European Leadership Summits (ELS), Burning Man self-identified as a "platform for change." In keeping with the commitment to cultivating a movement, in the 2018 Burning Man Annual Report, Goodell reaffirmed that the organization is "dedicated to amplifying and replicating Burning Man culture across the planet." The strength of this proliferation lies in a network of events that are sanctioned affiliates of the Burning Man Regional Network. As of 2019, there were reported to be more than one hundred events holding standing as authorized affiliates of this network, the official status of which is established via a demonstrated accord with the criteria for regional events and an observance of the 10 Principles (fig. 1).
Ritualesque, Carnivalesque, and Burning Man

While this condensed background is useful for understanding the emergence of regional burns in general, it is also important for our interpolation of two burns undertaken with the assistance of Foucault’s musings on heterotopic reflexivity framed through a lens appropriate for festive events—and notably events with intentionally transformative profiles. In Foucault’s loose meditation, heterotopia possesses, “in relation to the rest of space, a function,” which is said to evolve between two extremes. While at one extreme, heterotopias create “a space of illusion that exposes all real space, all the emplacements in the interior of which human life is enclosed and partitioned, as even more illusory,” at the other, they create spaces that are meticulous and perfected contrasts to the disorderly spaces of everyday life.31 The brothel and the colony are said to exemplify these spatial types: the one a site of illusion and fantasy, and the other of replication and regimentation. At the confluence of these extremes are prismatic spaces where culture is illuminated and refracted, made transparent and distorted—like a hall of magic mirrors.

This provocative meditation inspires a perspective suited to the study of festive event spaces—notoriously ambiguous sites of governance and freedom. As echoed in varying interpretations of the people’s “second world” according to literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, the festal is at once disciplinary and liberatory, progressive and transgressive, civic and ludic.32 An empirically informed approach suited to Burning Man and other event phenomena subject to replication and remodeling recognizes a contested event in which the contrasting spatial logics of ritual and carnival are performed. The concrescence in the festive of what ritual theorist Jack Santino calls “ritualesque” and “carnivalesque” frames offers a useful heuristic for burns.33 At the same time, the model retains an approach to space that recognizes the confluence of imitation and distortion implicit to Foucault’s musings.

In Santino’s schematic, the ritualesque is the instrumental means by which social categories are constructed and reinforced. Symbolic action with enduring intentional consequences, ritual is considered the “agent of transformation.”34 From large-scale signature burn ceremonies (such as

33. Santino, “From Carnivalesque to Ritualesque.”
34. Ibid., 12.

Figure 1. The Global Network of Burning Man regional events. Courtesy of the Burning Man Project.
Burn Night and Temple Burn), to the rituals associated with various departments (e.g., Greeters and Lamplighters) and theme camps, to everyday practices (like “MOOPing”—i.e., clearing the playa of “matter out of place” integral to the principle of Leaving No Trace), BRC is densely layered with ritual practice. Practices that were once off-hand, spontaneous, or “jokes” crystallize over their iterations into conventions. The seasonal reenactment of these conventions is deemed essential to the reproduction of community identity. This process was self-consciously celebrated in 2017 when under the theme of Radical Ritual, the Man, then dubbed The Temple of the Golden Spike (fig. 2), became a sculptured embodiment of the “Golden Spike.”

Figure 2. The Temple of the Golden Spike (effigy design, BRC 2017). Photo by Graham St John.
The title refers to a gold-painted spike driven into the playa in a ceremony performed weeks before the gate opens at the site of the Man build. Once built, the Man in the form of a giant sculptured Golden Spike was encompassed by a viewing platform. Standing on the interior of a raised platform enabling Burners to gaze inward upon the eponymous omphalos, the golden effigy was designed to represent tradition. The conscious intention to commemorate the foundations of Burning Man was achieved through reflexive attention to the event’s own fundamental traditions, namely, its rituals and explicitly the rite that inaugurates the event in space and time. In his commentary, Harvey explains how the word “radical” in Radical Ritual was to be distinguished from its more popular denotation as the “breaking of boundaries and a shedding of restrictions.” In relation to the ritual building and burning of the Man (and indeed all other ritualized builds and burns in BRC), what was instead inferred was: “all that is fixed and fundamental in human nature.” In addition to celebrating the Golden Spike ritual, the 2017 theme also offered a rich affirmation of Burn Night, the ritual pageant instrumental to the community’s re-creation. Finally, the hyper-reflexive theme gave tribute to the dense ecology of cultural principles that are seasonally reaffirmed through ritual practice.

While ritual is instrumental, carnival is primarily expressive. As Santino outlines, carnival “refers to celebrations of great abandon, social inversion, public excess, sensuality, and the temporary establishment of an alternate society.” Such transformed space licenses category disruptions, the eruption of eros, before the “world turned upside down” supposedly returns to normal. Where cocreators are permitted to act “as if” the world were transformed, BRC is again exemplary. On the remote interstice of the playa, Burners rupture convention, embrace the forbidden, break taboos (e.g., prohibitions on public nudity), exhibit “gender terrorism,” and entertain camp aesthetics. Playful experimentation permitted within this other space promotes irreverence, corrodes order, softens edges, and mocks that which is “fixed and fundamental in human nature.” Such playfulness cultivates the satire and derision that breaks convention, while catalyzing community re/formation. In BRC 2017, among the twenty “shrine” projects that were awarded honoraria and positioned around the perimeter of the Temple of the Golden Spike—a surplus of signifiers in the desert of the surreal—stood a large golden toilet.

As BRC illustrates, the performance frames of carnival and ritual braid into a complex weave integral to the event’s transformative aesthetic. It is notable that burn rituals transpire within a recurrent celebration—a frontier carnival. This seasoned reoccupation of playaspace has enabled an intensely reflexive topos that casts prismatic light on what participants call the “default” world. The copying of official culture is not uncommonly permeated with an ironic sensibility designed to subvert categories, reminiscent of the Chinese “shanzhai” (see Ian Rowen’s contribution to this issue). While BRC may be likened, notably in its early desert phase, to a frontier settlement, and perhaps even a “colony” for Bay Area bohemians, such associations are typically exploited for satirical purposes. While many BRC “departments”—themselves born from mischief and irony—have evolved into actual departments with operational guidelines, leadership training programs, and identifying symbols and rituals, they often retain their eccentricities. As burns mimic and mutate the prototype, they become contexts for authorization and dissent.

Within an efflorescent global burnscape, the 10 Principles are duplicated at one extreme and reimagined at the other, with the creative tension between the ritualizing and carnivalesque mismatch that is pivotal to the Burning Man mode of operation.
That outlying communities must enter into a relationship with a centralized organization—that is, that assigns “regional contact” (RC) status to intermediaries—has been a noted bone of contention among protagonists. This tension exists given the echo with core-periphery power relationships associated with imperial (colony), corporate (franchise), and ecclesiastic (church) expansionism. For Gustaf Josefsson, past RC for Sweden and cofounder of the Borderland, the process holds resemblance to “building international expansion in a classic corporation.” We encountered Josefsson in Berlin in 2014 at the inaugural Burning Man ELS. Rankled that the 10 Principles held resemblance to the Ten Commandments, Josefsson challenged Harvey during the Q&A after his scheduled lecture. In a burlesque intervention, he wondered if Harvey hadn’t cast himself as a Moses-like figure emerging to shepherd the “lost tribes.”

Josefsson claimed that the Regional Network’s tendency to champion the prototype amounted to an absence of originality. With the increasing popularity of the hypermediated “mother event” and the commodification of its symbolic repertoire (signaled, for instance, by the international prevalence of uniform BRC paraphernalia), one must be, he contended, wary of the unquestioning simulation of tradition. In terms of content creation (e.g., art grants) and event production, Josefsson is a strong advocate of decentralization, admonishing Burning Man as a “traditional, top-down event management organization.”

Such reprovals are not difficult to understand. Burning Man matured in a desert, a hostile physical environment and a hospitable social space shaping a movement whose figurehead—“Chief Philosophical Officer” Harvey—appears at a “leadership” event attended by European-wide cultural emissaries. To the outside observer, the RCs, event leads, and other “community leaders” gathering in Berlin might have appeared not unlike the minions of a monarch, cult followers, or brand loyalists. In quiet tones, Harvey’s response to Josefsson meandered across themes central to his presentation. Although the BMP has adopted a hierarchical structure, Harvey defended the organization, which he stated values consensus decision-making, is nondogmatic, and is scornful of organized religion. The 10 Principles are, he clarified, not “commandments,” with Harvey then expounding on views expressed at the advent of the Philosophical Society, when it was stated that the principles “do not precede immediate experience.” His position was that Burning Man is non-expansionist and profit was never a driving concern (no commissions are leveraged from regionals). It was also apparent that the BMP is not a conventional political movement. Harvey and others articulate their roles as “cultural stewards” committed to the ongoing interrogation of a malleable ethos forged in the fires of a remote desert. Nurturing a leadership model that values stewardship, for Goodell, “we have a business that’s completely dedicated in the nonprofit framework to taking that cultural experience and studying it, and helping replicate it, and teach others how to replicate it.”

Creative iteration characterizes the growth of an international event diaspora adopting and adapting a culture recurrently fostered in an ephemeral desert heterotopia. Through a profusion of ritual and carnival frames in which BRC is simulated and subverted, perfected and transgressed, progenic translations/mutations of the prototype demonstrate the complex evolution of Burning Man. Two islands in this cultural archipelago—Midburn (Israel) and the Borderland (Nordic)—are now discussed to illustrate this rhizomatic development.
Midburn: The Start-Up Burn

A portmanteau of the Hebrew word for “desert” (רֶדֶם midbar) and the English word “burn,” Midburn has operated at Sde Boker in Israel’s Negev desert since June 3–7, 2014. Midburn was founded as a nonprofit organization on December 31, 2012. A crew traveled to BRC in 2013 to build the large-scale interactive multimedia sculpture Hand of Inspiration, a project included among thirty-two regional effigies that traveled to BRC that year where they comprised the Circle of Regional Effigies (CORE) (see Rowan, this issue). Preceded by a series of events, the inaugural Midburn attracted 2,800 people, and by 2018, Midburn City had grown to a population of 12,500, among the largest and fastest growing satellite burns.47 Midburn City is among the closest replicas of BRC: dis/assembled in a desert; surveyed in a concentric half-circle layout with an open “playa” and a central effigy built mid-playa and destroyed in a prominent Saturday night fire ceremony; a remote Temple, also destroyed in a fire ceremony; hundreds of “theme camps”; encouragement of collaborative interactive art projects; and mutant vehicles (otherwise known as “art cars”) (fig. 3).

Figure 3. Draktor mutant vehicle at Midburn 2018. Photo by Botond Vitos.

Additionally, Midburn departments, projects, and volunteer roles are modeled after those in BRC. For instance, the Nomads mirror the Black Rock Rangers, composed of volunteers who ensure public safety with nonintrusive methods, serve as internal community mediators trained extensively in dispute resolution, and act as mediators between Burners and law enforcement officials at the event while enjoying heightened legitimacy due to their insider/participant status.48 Another transmissible feature is cultural theming. Like BRC, each Midburn is themed. Midburn 2016, for example, was titled “Abra Cadabra: From Wasteland to Fulfillment,” and entrants were provided with a thick event guide (with English and Hebrew sections) that explained the 10 Principles and theme, listed the infrastructure and services, located the theme camps and their activities, and provided an art placement map (fig. 4 and 5). It therefore replicated the What, Where and When guide to which ticket-holding BRC entrants are traditionally entitled.

47. These earlier events included: a small gathering at David’s Farm, October 29, 2011; Mama Burn on Habonim Beach, April 6–8, 2012 (approx. 500 people); Octoburn on Habonim Beach, October 4–6, 2012 (approx. 1,600 people); and Contraburn, August 29–30, 2013 (approx. 1,000 people).

Figure 4. Midburn 2016 art placement map. From guidebook for Midburn 2016. Photo by Graham St John.

Figure 5. BRC 2016 art placement map. Courtesy of Burning Man Project.
That Midburn reproduced the prototype with such fidelity and efficiency is partially attributable to geopolitical and cultural conditions. According to volunteer spokesperson Eyal Marcus, as reported in the ISRAEL21c newsletter, “We are very good at dreaming big, being courageous and bringing big things to life fast.”

By adding that “Israel is the Startup Nation,” Marcus acknowledges Dan Senor and Saul Singer’s Startup Nation: The Story of Israel’s Economic Miracle, a book recommended to us by RC for Israel, “cultural entrepreneur,” and chairman of the Midburn Arts Foundation, Rei Dishon. Introducing the “special sauce” that explains the high-tech start-up boom in Israel—a small country with no natural resources, which by 2009 achieved a fiftyfold economic growth in sixty years—Startup Nation relates a story of persistence and tenacity in the face of adversity and is an overt to the immigrant’s propensity for risk-taking. The Israeli experience, according to Senor and Singer, exhibits collective goal orientation, an anti-authoritarian ethos, and a commitment to innovation coupled with a unique attitude toward (non-stigmatized) failure—all inflected by a compulsory two-to-three years of service in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) for most young adults.

As Dishon explained: “We’re stubborn…. And we’re learning from failure,… it’s embedded within our culture. It worked for start-ups, it worked for Midburn.”

Collectivism is a signature commitment of Nir Adan, Midburn’s founding CEO and former bodyguard for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. Accustomed to collaborating on mission-orientated teams—for example, in kindergarten, kibbutz, scouts, university, and notably military service—Israelis, Adan said, are “born into communities.” As evident in art builds, theme camps, and departmental operations, burn events benefit from the kind of teamwork provided by training in the military, where teams are typically composed of individuals from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. “Discipline, accuracy, sense of responsibility, execution, planning”: military training “sure helps from an organizational point of view,” he stated.

Former head of Midburn’s Department of Strategy and Development, Giora Israel is also a DJ/producer, certified police officer, and meditation teacher embodying the “biztu’ist”—Hebrew for someone who “gets things done.” When we encountered him at the 2016 GLC in Oakland, California, Israel related his role at Midburn in resolving a permit crisis the year prior. When police escalated event licensing terms, Israel worked with a team to negotiate with the chief commissioners of police and representatives from the parliament and municipalities to obtain a permit days before the gate was scheduled to open. “I know the language, and I know how they think,” recalled Israel. “I brought all my negotiation skills to the table.” A combination of tenacity and receptivity proved foundational to a unique partnership in which the police agreed to operate largely outside the event. In language reminiscent of a military operation, all parties were compelled to understand that they were “on the same side” with a shared goal: to ensure “everybody is coming home in one piece.”

Midburn illustrates how national and cultural conditions shape the appropriation of the Burning Man model, and notably the interpretation of the 10 Principles. Ensuring the survival of an event that must be sanctioned by authorities in order to maintain legitimacy (i.e., granting a permit), this example of high-level brokering is an expression of Civic Responsibility, the principle that underlines how community members must “assume responsibility for conducting events in accordance with local, state and federal laws.”
Captivated by his first encounter with BRC in 2001, Adan later sought to import the model whole cloth. That the Black Rock Desert playa accommodates “so many people ... different from one another” and permits participants to express those differences made a lasting impression. As a country comprising near seventy different nationalities, Israel, he felt, was prepared for an event model that can be a vehicle to “connect people from such a diversity of religions and cultures” and be “a safe environment for all cultures and nationalities.”57 In 2018, Midburn reported that nearly 10 percent of the population of Midburn City were non-Israelis traveling internationally (over 1,000 people), a statistic currying favor with the Ministry of Tourism. The figure resonates with the principle of Radical Inclusion, with some reservations. Although no census data exists to provide a clear picture of the ethnic background of Israeli participants, Arabs represent a very small minority of the event population.

As a result of such exclusivity, the non-representation of Arabs (17 percent of Israeli citizens) renders the principle of Radical Inclusion something of a failed enterprise or false promise at Midburn. This circumstance mirrors this principle’s mythic pretensions within the BRC prototype. Despite the championing of “inclusion,” in 2013, only 7.3 percent of the surveyed population of BRC identified as a person of color, as revealed by BRC census data. Although this is not the place for in-depth analysis, after years of dissensus and inactivity around this issue, in 2021, the BMP formed Radical Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity (RIDE), a cross-departmental stewardship and advisory group responsible for prioritizing, managing, and advocating for diversity and equity, while implementing anti-racist and anti-discriminatory strategies across the organization and throughout the Burner community.58 Over the next year, new outreach and support programs demonstrated a new culture of diversity in which those who previously felt unwelcome were provided necessary support and access. For twenty-eight-year Burner, person of color, and RIDE committee member Patrice McKay (aka Chef Juke), these efforts were starting to have an impact in 2022, which saw “the most people of color in Black Rock City ever.”59 It remains to be seen if and how Midburn will demonstrate similar self-reflexivity toward creating a diverse community and thereby living up to the principle of Radical Inclusion.

Inclusivity aside, a symptom of a concerted effort to model the prototype, Midburn suffered from the pressures of accelerated simulation, leading to the postponement of the 2019 event.60 As Midburn City was flooded with inexperienced participants in 2016–18, a significant proportion of the population was uneducated about the ethos that distinguishes a burn from a music festival. Not unique to Midburn, this concern was raised by Iris Ronly Riklis, who assumed the direction of Strategy and Development in 2018. Riklis lamented the avalanche of “touristic” visitors and the...
shortfall in volunteers. Additionally, in each year of its presence at Sde Boker, Midburn encountered more local opposition. The desolation of a fragile pastoral ecology caused by 12,000+ habitués was chief among the concerns, as was residential sound complaints. Riklis gestured toward the root of the problem, stating that members of the Midburn community were beginning to question the “copy-paste” approach. While identifying elements of the received “format” that are essential to operations—for example, the Rangers/Nomads, the Gate, and the 10 Principles—“we need to start finding our voice,” she added. To that end, Riklis spoke of a desire to establish “a philosophical center” to explore “the culture and the principles and their meaning, their deeper sense to us Israelis.”61

61. Iris Ronly Riklis, interview by authors, ELS, Aarhus, Denmark, April 14, 2019. The framing here replicates the strategy of the BMP, which earlier founded a philosophical center.


Since its protean dis/assembly in the Negev desert, Midburn has been more than a mere replica of the Burning Man prototype. Occasioning carnivalesque responses, modifications, and subversions of Israeli and Burning Man traditions, the event has accommodated culturally embedded and site-specific art projects, perhaps the most prominent being its central paired male/female effigy embodied by Adam and Eve until 2017 (fig. 6). Various large-scale burnable artworks illustrate how the mythological heritage of the “Holy Land” is interpreted by local artists. In 2016, a variation on Noah’s Ark—No One’s Ark—both celebrated and subverted Judeo-Christian mythology.62 Additionally, the design aesthetic of the Midburn 2016 entrant’s guidebook was “biblical” in all but name. With its page margins designed to look like worn and faded parchment paper, the guide was intended to appear Bible-esque—a tongue-in-cheek allusion to BRC’s What, Where and When guide, colloquially known as “the bible” (fig. 7). Echoing distant hopes for Radical Inclusion, in 2018, a spectacular wooden sculpture, The Flying Camel, emerged from the desert landscape, modeled after the emblematic statue of Tel Aviv’s Levant Fair symbolizing progress and East/West (economic) cooperation in the 1930s.63

Figure 6. Midburn 2016 playa (with the Temple in foreground and effigy in background). Photo by Yair Garfinkel.
Some camps explicitly transgress public order codes apparent within Israeli society and enforced on-site. Participating in the sex-positive Free Love camp in 2018, one of our interviewees organized erotic workshops as gifts to the community, aligned with the principle of Gifting. While her efforts were acclaimed by Burners, Nera mentioned that unlike BRC or European burns, nudity is not tolerated in public areas of Midburn, with authorities requesting the erection of a yurt wall to seal her camp off (theme camps are not normally surrounded by walls and include easily accessible, open guest areas).64

Conversely, the Israeli burn also features subversive projects that would likely meet resistance in Nevada, such as the Dadaist experiments of Midburn’s oldest running Shithole camp. As explained by cofounder Monkey, the camp was designed in creative response to the country’s hugely popular psytrance scene, implementing a range of provocative workshops and performances satirizing “hippy” festivals. This provocative approach explained the blending of Ku Klux Klan dress code with hippie batik colors during the 2015 Hippyhate March. This incident triggered the ire of a visiting BMP representative while authorized by the Midburn CEO.65 As we have discussed elsewhere, similar artistic subversions were apparent at Midburn 2018, produced by Shithole members and other conceptually affiliated artists.66

The transplanting of the Burning Man playa into the Negev desert is enabled by unique regional circumstances: environmental, cultural, geopolitical. Furthermore, as we have noted, the prologue to the Midburn saga had originated in prior attendances at the “mother event,” which urged the founders to initiate, as Adan formulates, “a community that grows an event on a certain point.”67
Aided by collectivist values and commitment ingrained in Israeli society, the rapid development of this community/event has paralleled that of BRC, with Midburn sharing not only the 10 Principles of Burning Man but some of its struggles as well. As we will see in the following section, the Nordic burn, the Borderland, modulates the prototype through very different trajectories, many of which can be traced back to the Swedish prelude to the event.

**The Borderland: Between Dream and Reality**

The Borderland is a Swedish-origin community operating an annual event held in various locations in Sweden from 2011 to 2014 and subsequently in Denmark in Boesdal Kalkbrud, a disused limestone quarry on the Baltic Sea south of Copenhagen from 2015 to 2017 (and in 2018–19 in Hedeland, Denmark) (fig. 8). While also overwhelmingly white and middle class, the Borderland represents a sharp contrast to Midburn’s modulation of the prototype. For Josefsson, who had attended Midburn, replicating the BMP’s top-down control model, Midburn “felt like Burning Man, but smaller.” Franchise-like imitation is deeply ironic for a culture celebrating innovation and diversity, he thought. It was disturbing to him that one could travel “halfway across the world” only to enter a simulation. With the goal to “create our own identity,” Josefsson committed to cofounding a local event that, while inspired by BRC, was designed to break what was understood to be a troubling pattern of imitation.69

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68. While the Borderland was postponed in 2020–21, with the community’s acquisition of land in Alversjö, Sweden, an event was held in that location in July 2022.

69. Josefsson, interview.

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Many original participants in the Swedish Burning Man community met in 2002 at Futuredrome, a live action roleplaying (LARP) event involving costuming, live music, performance, and film and virtual components. With 1,500 participants, this formative **allkonstverk**, “total artwork,” was mounted in an abandoned quarry in Kinnekulle, Sweden, the stage for the post-apocalyptic Drome City where an artificial intelligence (AI) kept the population in thrall to “the perpetual party.”
As Josefsson explained, “You were a connoisseur, you were a dancer, you were a decorator, you were a propagandist, you were a bureaucrat that went around rating all the parties, or you were, you know, a kamikaze partier or an aristocrat, and everyone had their own role in the party.”

Futuredrome organizers and participants drew inspiration from the Mad Max films, The Matrix, and Burning Man documentaries (no one had yet attended BRC). As Futuredrome co-organizer and film director and later Borderland cofounder Mathias Gullbrandson explained, Futuredrome had an original story design that failed. According to this narrative framework, performing improvised roles and enslaved by an AI-controlled party, Drome citizens were confronted by a “savior” who awakened them to their place in an illusory matrix beyond which there exists a “real” world. The awakened masses were expected to stage a “revolution” to overthrow the oppressive party machine. Alas, the people rejected the revolution and emphatically resisted the bursting of their bubble. “They just wanted to continue the party forever.” As Gullbrandson surmised, “we were ‘victims’ of our own story.”

Josefsson made first contact with BRC in 2009, returning to the Nevada playa in 2010, working with Olle Bjerkås and Jon Wingborg and their project Grand Flat Piano. That year, a team of twenty-eight Swedes kick-started BRC’s Nordic Camp. Subsequently, Josefsson was driven to cocreate a playa-inflected version of Drome City called the Borderland, a place “between reality and dreams, where you can dream big and be any character, and explore your potential.”

The result was a unique ripple in the Burnerverse. Stewarded by the nonprofit membership organization Föreningen Gränslandet Österlen, the Borderland has a robust autonomous identity. Embodying this independence, Borderland board member and creator of the Dreams grant platform Hugi Ásgeirsson is circumspect about Burning Man culture. “We are allies, and we have adopted the commandments of their Prophet of the West, but you might find rifts in reality that you were not prepared for.” For Ásgeirsson, the exploration of “the borderland between dreams and reality” supersedes any imported principles.

Converse to the hierarchical model of the BMP (and Midburn), the Borderland has experimented with decentralization and transparency. With a system that values peer relationships and with structures and practices in which participants are afforded autonomy in their domains and are accountable for coordinating with others, the organization has committed to Teal self-management practices and a supporting digital platform. They implemented a rotating committee of board members and a chairperson. Additionally, all participants are recognized as “members,” with the public annually invited to buy “membership” in a lottery (about 3,200 memberships were available in 2019). Successful “lottery winners” become legitimate cocreators of the event. That participants purchase “membership” and not “tickets” is proclamatory, given that ticketing is typically associated with a produced experience consumed within an entertainment marketplace—in other words, the standard festival experience. With Borderlings holding membership, the Borderland also actively challenges the potentially elitist “volunteer” status. Not only does this practice distinguish the Borderland from a “festival,” but the framework is also distinct from BRC, where, in the absence of such participant membership, the potential for formal (within the staffing structure) and informal (between volunteers and non-volunteers) stratification prevails.

A decentralizing philosophy is practiced within the Borderland community across the management of artistic content (a crowdsourcing granting platform called “Dreams”) and
in digital self-governing organizational structures (called “Reality” and “Talk”). The Dreams platform is a tool that enables approximately 70 percent of funds—in 2019, 170,000 euros—to be awarded to community art project proposals through membership “grantlets.” This distributive approach to arts granting contrasts with the BRC model where “honoraria” are awarded by select committees of the Burning Man Arts Department. Intended to encourage growth and inhibit elitism, Reality is a nonhierarchical project management tool devised to enhance the co-creation of event production, which incorporates “Reality Guides,” coaches and mentors who are experienced with a variety of practical roles and responsibilities in the organization. Talk is a digital platform that is integral to an “advisory process” that enables existing practice, process and roles to be contested, and alternatives proposed and discussed among peers, and that holds a consensual outcome as its ideal. The combination of these methods and tools comprises a “digital co-governance platform.” Since this is designed to enhance the transparency of decision-making, not only in matters effecting planning and production but also in relation to the organizational model itself, the platform has the potential to represent a truly co-creative, or co-governmental, and not merely “participatory,” model.

For Josefsson, these tools build long-term organizational capability, increasing the possibility for spin-off events and “the potential for a more distributed, a more networked, powerful community that can create a diaspora of events.” As Josefsson further stated:

Because we bring more people into central organization, we’re actively teaching organizational skills to all our participants... Burning Man is now talking about a hundred-year goal, but you’re still sitting with the fact that you have the same founders now as before... I believe that if you are really for the culture that is not built on hegemony or the kind of worship of the old, and the worship of leadership, then that has to be broken apart quickly... So to me it was also important to build a long-term community that needs to live without me, that needs to live without the other Borderland founders. So we need to get ourselves out of the equation as soon as possible.77

As its exponents clarify, the Borderland exists in the liminal zone between Dreams and Reality, a zone enhanced by decentralized processes that are never settled or finalized but always undergoing improvement. Other commentators describe this endeavor as “spreading the power, spreading the decision making and spreading the responsibility out towards the community and away from the Board.” Hierarchical structures, by contrast, “disempower people to accomplish their full potential in participation.” “The Borderland is self-organized and applies something called Consensual Do-ocracy for decision making. This means that decisions are neither managed through commands and control of a central authority, nor direct democracy. Instead, the general principle is that anyone can make any decision regarding The Borderland.”78

Practicing decentralization is not without its challenges, as underlined by the following example. The Borderland lost its location shortly before the 2018 event, and the then chairperson (“Chairmonster”)—an ardent advocate of the Teal system—called for the engagement of Borderlings instead of taking a firm top-down initiative in the emerging relocation crisis. Although paved with good intent, the initiative met with resistance as the chairperson was alleged to have acted non-collaboratively in accord with his own vision of the event, ostensibly undermining the ethos of a self-organized community. The resulting controversy was dramatized in a mock “Tribunal” staged at the 2019 ELS in Aarhus, Denmark.79 Echoing the Borderland’s roots


77. Josefsson, interview.


in interactive theater, this eighty-minute performance, complete with judges, a prosecutor, witnesses, and about fifty members of the audience (composed of community stakeholders), was rich in carnivalesque and ritualesque elements. Illustrative of the former, “witnesses” were sworn in on a solemn pink unicorn’s horn, and a secret conspiracy between prosecutor and defendant upended the verdict in the last minute. Besides these satirical elements, the performance provided a therapeutic framework for conflict resolution where the Chairmonster and other community stakeholders had the opportunity to elaborate their visions and opinions. The defendant was found “guilty” on one charge (prioritizing his dream of implementing the Teal system above the reality of the crisis) and “acquitted” on the other (not assuming enough operational responsibility). The Tribunal seemed to exemplify the way event management crises and their concomitant “social dramas” are performed within “redressive artopias”—in other words, through the redressive potential of “cultural dramas” enacted in event heterotopias.80 Furthermore, it demonstrated the direct accountability of the Borderland’s board members and served to reinforce a decentralized management model alternative to the BMP.

In a further distinction from BRC (and Midburn), rather than adopting the community safety model provided by the Black Rock Rangers, the Borderland features Clown Police. These clown-gussied members are modeled on their Futuredrome predecessors who were, as Josefsson recalled, “arresting people and locking them up for not having enough fun.”81 An email to the authors (St John) introducing the role to prospective Clown Police in June 2019 explained that, as pranksters trained in emergency protocols, “we are not professionals, nor are we rangers—we are clowns!” The Clown Police are “more than a community safety force, it is a proactive community engagement force, that promotes a sense of caretaking and social responsibility both from and within the community itself.”82 Clown Police are a dramatic embodiment of the ludic and subversive aspects of carnival crossbreeding with the civic and orderly aspect of ritual. The result is an uproarious hybrid of disparate figures: one officiating compliant conduct and the other an improvisational provocateur. For the duration of the event, these fun officials patrol the boundary that separates the sensible from the nonsensible, acting toward its dissipation, often with amusing outcomes. For example, at Borderland 2017, as a typically alternate means of achieving civic ordinance, Clown Police were responsible for distributing official notices under the windscreen wipers of vehicles parked outside of designated areas. “PIMP or MOVE: This car needs to be pimped beyond recognition or moved to the designated car park.”

Despite the divergences and resistances, the Borderland is a member of the Burning Man Regional Network and remains a burn in the calendar of this network. BRC is a source of inspiration for many Borderlings who often identify as “Burners” in this and other contexts, burn an effigy or effigies, refer to their event space as “the playa,” and seek to transpose the mood or vibe with which they are familiar in BRC. Many practices translate and iterate those from Nevada without being carbon copies. Burn Night offers a case in point. Echoing a BRC tradition—long abandoned on Burn Night, though evident at smaller art project burns—at the Borderland 2017, a great many participants danced naked around the Burn Night fire. Partly as a response to the proximity of residential properties and consequential sound complaints, the event also featured a “silent disco”—DJed music experienced through headphones that featured three separate channels with varying styles of music. Channels were indicated by unique color LED flashing on the headphones. With many revelers wearing nothing but headphones, Borderlings exhibited techno-primal hybrids. This technological accompaniment to raw human embodiment is one
illustration of how Borderlings “iterate” the model without simulating it. At the same time, the orthopraxy of this principled culture is transferred and contested through carnival and ritual frameworks. From the conflict management of the Tribunal to the community engagement practices of the Clown Police, the Borderland exhibits elements that blend into and highlight the heterogeneous liminality of the Burner event horizon.

Discussion

If BRC mirrors and mutates the “default world,” its prismatic diaspora modulates the prototype. Burning Man is not only an “ephemeropolis” in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert that represents and contests the default but also a proliferation of centrifugal “other spaces” that have variably transposed the “playa” in regions worldwide. Complementary to accompanying work resulting from longitudinal research on the Burning Man movement, the article has shown that Foucault’s musings on heterotopia offer a useful opening to the transformative complexity of BRC and the global network of events reimagining the prototype. In particular, we have explored the implications of his musings on heterotopic reflexivity for the study of transformative gatherings, festivals, and events. Enabling insight on tensions endogenous to transfestive spaces that simultaneously mirror and distort the lifeworld, this dynamic principle has been found useful for understanding the “frontier carnival” of BRC, as well as regional frontier events for which BRC represents the evental default.

The article addresses two satellite burn communities that iterate the BRC model, their translations shaped by distinct local, regional, and national circumstances. While each event in the global Burner diaspora is a unique variation of the prototype in Nevada, with unique regional—cultural and environmental—circumstances influencing how the 10 Principles of Burning Man are interpreted and applied, the events in this study illustrate imitative and innovative tendencies. While Israel’s Midburn has replicated the Burning Man model with the aid of operational capabilities acquired through compulsory military service, the Nordic event, the Borderland, is a unique experiment in decentralization shaped by LARP events. Copying the BRC prototype, Midburn adopted a ticketing model associated with broader trends in festival-going and has encountered similar difficulties related to rapid growth and spectacularization. The Borderland has developed a membership model that not only enables the crowdsourcing of art grant allocations but also facilitates event self-governance through “consensual do-ocracy” and transparent decision-making—practices that are designed to circumvent stratification and elitism. The Borderland demonstrates as much indebtedness to Futuredrome as it does to Burning Man. Whereas the enlightened participants of Futuredrome failed to overthrow the decadent party machine, as a cocreated event community, it appears that the Borderland eventually enacted the desired “revolution,” albeit informally and while also remaining among the more autonomous regional events in the Burning Man Regional Network.

These events cannot, however, be pigeonholed as automatons on the one hand or innovators on the other. While mirror-imaging BRC and its principles, Midburn also possesses unique traits with dissident and heterodox elements. Midburn artists were found to exploit an interactive art framework to unsettle and disturb the prototype. At the Israeli burn, the region’s “Holy Land” heritage provides mythological materials to sculpt the model, which is translated, dramatized, and iterated through cultural and historical frames. And although the Borderland, among the
most autonomous and unique regional events in the Burning Man network, has sought to break the mold, resisting an implicit center-periphery dynamic, BRC remains an abiding inspiration. We have shown how interactive art projects—the hard currency of an event-centered community arts diaspora—modulate the “Burner” way of life. The article has demonstrated that interactive and satirical projects like the “Tribunal” permit the reflexive performance of Burner principles and culture through ritual and carnival frames, frames that contextualize the variable transmission and subversion of Burner identity. Through a comparative lens, the article has begun to demonstrate how transfestive events variably model and mutate—in other words, transform—cultural tradition.

As with the prototype event, regional burns are themselves cultural mosaics shaped by multiple and competing interests. Demonstrating unique trends in the Burnerverse, these burns are uniquely contested sites. While the various facets of the BRC mothership are replicated in the regional burns, each event presents its own set of complications; its own roots and development; its own unique origin myths, influences, and constituents; and its own way of translating Burning Man and interpreting the 10 Principles. Each burn has a unique way of expressing and contesting Burner identity or lampooning the social world outside. For example, as indicated by our field research of German burns, organizational procedures, event workshops, and participant interactions may satirize local bureaucratic procedures or reveal the limits and challenges of adherence to the principles. Further attention to how Burning Man is modulated and transformed by way of its regionals would be useful, as would research addressing individual events—like those explored here and other events in the Burnerverse—as sites that provoke, challenge, and transform their “Burner” identity.

While “islands” in a cultural archipelago, the events under consideration are not isolated. There is considerable dialogue between burns and their organizing bodies, affiliates of which participate in forums like the GLC and ELS, which have served as cultural exchange hubs. Through such exchanges, Midburn representatives have, for example, eschewed the “copy-paste” mentality and, among other regional communities, have adopted a variation of the Dreams arts grant model developed by the Borderland. It should also be noted that not only do regional events modulate BRC, but progeny events also stimulate further satellite event communities operating seasonally within their regions. For example, the Israeli and Nordic communities are each composed of several annual events, from small-scale Israeli burns such as Midburnerot to Stockholm’s Urban Burn, modulating Midburn City and the Borderland.

This article has contributed to the emergent field of transfestive studies by addressing the internal dynamics of Burning Man, the world’s largest prototypically transformative event culture. By focusing on two regional event communities with attention to their unique background, cultural context, design, and interpretation of Burning Man ethos, the approach is a mere sketch of a complex event culture mosaic. It is our hope that future research of this global network will further investigate the diverse methods by which BRC-inspired events and initiatives model, mutate, and transform Burner culture. How national, cultural, and spatial contexts shape regional event design in the post-COVID world will be aided by appropriately designed comparative ethnographies. Studies that address the distinct ritual and carnival frames inherent to burns will be useful, as will studies addressing how Burning Man cultural principles are transmitted and transgressed through the performance of hybridized frames. Such future research should add to our picture of the internal dynamics of a transformational movement.
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EVENT HORIZONS

The Capitalist Surrealism of Chinese Burning Man

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ABSTRACT

Burning Man, the prototypical transformational event culture, has been described as “a guerrilla war against alienated spectacle and the commodification of the collective imagination.” At the same time, it has spawned spectacular efforts at the commodification of experience that span the United States, China, and Taiwan. This article follows these transnational flows and considers the circulation and contradictions of capital through a globalizing economy of event cultures. Based on the author’s long-term role as a Burning Man artist and regional event representative, the article provides a comprehensive history of Burning Man’s varied manifestations, transformations, and hybridizations in China and Taiwan. These include authorized events and art installations produced by participants who aim to adhere to the principle of Decommodification espoused by the San Francisco-based nonprofit Burning Man Project, as well as unauthorized commercial copycats, some of which have been financially backed by the Chinese Communist Party, that have sent major art pieces to the main event in the US and attempted to launch ambitious projects in the Gobi Desert. Tracing these connections offers a weirdly scenic vantage point for examining the global collision and recreation of cultural, financial, and political desire. Reflecting on the productive tension between creativity and commodification, the article concludes that Burning Man’s consolidation as a transnational symbol of cultural capital points to an ideological and social convergence between the United States and China, offering a counterpoint to the resumption of Cold War rhetoric that has highlighted a hostile turn in their geopolitical relationship. In so doing, it proffers a surreal, if not utopic alternative to the aesthetic of “capitalist realism” oft said to characterize the contemporary era.
Introduction

Burning Man constitutes “a guerrilla war against alienated spectacle and the commodification of the collective imagination,” wrote Erik Davis five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. A temporary autonomous zone where people could play—or at least play-act—as if there were an outside to the imperium of capital, it offered a sense of liberation, if not a utopian prefiguration of another world. That same year, sociologist Matt Wray wrote with a similar sentiment about his attraction to this “event that seemed largely outside the reach of corporate capital and somewhat beyond the surveillance of the state.” The “emancipatory illuminations” of the playa—the dry lakebed where Burning Man’s main Nevada event takes place—appeared so compelling that even a marketing scholar could prescribe participation as a salve for the totalizing effects of market logic on Western consumer society.

Such starry-eyed accounts of Burning Man's liberatory effects came in the years following the apparent triumph of capitalism over the nominal communism of the Eastern bloc, which for a time had also offered "a site, however fictitious, for the imagination of another world." The epoch-shifting collapse of this site for an alternative imagination led Francis Fukuyama to infamously prophesy “the end of history,” and hastened the claim of literary scholar Frederic Jameson that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism.

Extending Jameson's observation into the realm of cultural studies, Mark Fisher coined the pungent phrase "capitalist realism" to figure the emergent political affect and aesthetic of the post-Cold War era, “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.” Nonetheless, he noted a tension in this foreclosure of the imagination by asking: “In the 1960s and 1970s, capitalism had to face the problem of how to contain and absorb energies from outside. It now, in fact, has the opposite problem: having all-too successfully incorporated externality, how can it function without an outside it can colonize and appropriate?” Such a question followed a reflection on the fall of the Berlin Wall, but may as well have anticipated the eventual service to capital provided by seemingly outside spaces like those of Burning Man.

For all its prescience and perspicacity, Fisher's discussion did not note that other world-historical event of 1989, the massacre and mass arrests of Beijing’s Tian’anmen Square protestors. This episode consolidated the totalitarian rule of the Chinese Communist Party, foreclosing local political alternatives while paradoxically hastening the country’s global economic integration by consolidating China’s party-state as the planet’s most centralized force of capitalist production.

History had of course not ended in the decades following the apparent triumph of Anglo-American capitalism, and perhaps, neither had the Cold War. Rather, it had only gotten more surreal, as signaled by the 2018 arrival of Desert Guard, a fifty-foot-tall metal sculpture of a Mongolian soldier, in Black Rock City, Burning Man’s marquee urban manifestation. Financed through Chinese Communist Party–connected companies, the funders of Desert Guard later used its imagery to promote a commercial event, Gobi Heaven, pitched as “China’s Burning Man” and scheduled to
be held in the Gobi Desert. Gobi Heaven’s social media account went on to post a photo of the team holding a Chinese flag underneath the towering figure, endorsed by a fake tweet from US president Donald Trump with the text, “My God! is wonderful [sic]” (fig. 1). Such commercial use was in contravention of Burning Man’s injunction against commodification, enshrined in its “Ten Principles” (as Decommodification) and legally enforceable through its entry ticket stipulations.

Figure 1. Gobi Heaven Weibo Post from Gobi Heaven Weibo Account.

Although Gobi Heaven’s participation in Black Rock City aimed to boost their market appeal to domestic audiences, it so happened that they were not the first or only Chinese manifestation of Burning Man. Unbeknownst to these and similar entrepreneurs, groups of Chinese and Taiwanese participants, like “Burners” from other regions, had already built annual events, such as Dragon Burn and Turtle Burn, which had been authorized by the Burning Man Project, the San Francisco-
based nonprofit organization that manages Black Rock City and appoints representatives to steward the growth of its culture elsewhere. Such regional events arguably extended Davis’s vision of a guerrilla war, and Fisher’s hopes for new openings for alternative aesthetic and political practice, to new terrain.

Even as Burning Man grew a base of adherents who play-acted as if they were beyond the capture of capital, Gobi Heaven’s marketing campaign corresponded to the stunning rise in Burning Man’s political, cultural, and economic value in the US—just one year after their fake Trump post, a 2019 profile of presidential daughter and businesswoman Ivanka Trump revealed that a Burning Man photobook had been strategically placed on her desk, which sat a few blocks away from a major retrospective exhibit about the event, (un)ironically titled “No Spectators,” at the Renwick Gallery of the national Smithsonian Museum.6

Seen in this light, despite the late 2010s rhetoric of “decoupling” between a declining US and a rising China, or worse, a new Cold War, the aesthetic overlaps between the spectacular experiences of Black Rock City (and its authorized spin-offs), as well as the commercial ambition of Gobi Heaven, suggest a trajectory of integration rather than difference. In this sense, decades after the “emancipatory illuminations” of the 1990s playa, Burning Man looked less like a guerrilla war against commodification than new terrain for an incipient geoeconomic conflict between the United States and China, even as it served as a site for a perverse form of cultural courtship.

Global convergence of consumer desire, and the role of state actors in shaping it, has precipitated ongoing discussion on how best to characterize political economic difference between the US and China. While many scholars characterize China as a paradigmatic case of “state capitalism,” as opposed to the ostensibly less interventionist mode of the US, others have suggested that such differences may be overdrawn, and that all economies are mixed between state and non-state actors.7 For this article, I treat China as a paradigmatic case of what I call “party-state capitalism,” acknowledging the unique role of the Chinese Communist Party in shaping space and society to facilitate its own accumulation of capital. Further, I suggest that thinking through Chinese Burning Man may help us move beyond Fisher’s idea of “capitalist realism,” not toward postcapitalism or postcommunism, but rather to a notion of capitalist surrealism that may better figure the novel aesthetics of the industrial collisions and collaborations of the avowed capitalism of the US and the nominal communism of China—whether they take the form of a Mongolian warrior on the playa of Black Rock City or a dragon egg hatching at an off-the-grid regional event in Jiangsu.

The surreal capitalist “recoupling” of the US and Chinese elite imaginary by way of Burning Man can be read from the lyrical account of science fiction author Chen Qiufan’s visit to Black Rock City in 2018. Chen observed that his campmates, mostly Chinese tech entrepreneurs, there and elsewhere “act as the first generation of pioneers journeying into the virtual New World. They imagine themselves as packs of wolves in the Mongolian plains who can only survive and emerge victorious through bloody combat, incessantly stalking new territory and prey.”8 Reflecting on his campmates’ pursuit of success and power, their brazen business networking and status competition amidst the nominally decommodified spaces of Black Rock City, Chen concluded that the “combination of worshiping totems while pursuing practical benefits is quintessentially Chinese.” This behavior is also quintessentially American—as is the myth of a Western frontier, a geographical conceit shared by both great powers—making Burning Man and its Chinese


manifestations, as *frontier carnivals*, among the world’s more weirdly scenic places to watch the global collision and re-creation of financial, imperial, and technological fantasy.⁹

Taking such collisions and convergences as points of departure, this article presents an account of Burning Man’s manifestations and transformations in China and nearby Taiwan, in order to reflect on the circulation of capital through a globalizing economy of event cultures. This account is informed by my personal position as Burning Man Project’s first regional contact for China and Taiwan, as well as an organizer of several of the earliest Burning Man events and art projects in these regions, which means I write from the perspective of both practitioner and analyst and make little claim to critical distance.

As a structuring device, I use *authorized* to denote these events, projects, and collectives that aim to adhere to Burning Man’s principles and pursue or maintain a formal affiliation with the nonprofit organization that stewards them. These scenes feature people who identify as Burners, a subject position invented and appropriated by active participants that I interpret as signaling a community of practice, (re)produced through collective ritual, conducted in liminal spaces, and conducted explicitly in accord with Burning Man’s Ten Principles (although some Burners aspire to practice such principles beyond the playa), including “Decommodification.”

I use *shanzhai*, a rich and polysemic Chinese word, to denote companies that treat Burning Man as a marketing brand and seek to appropriate its aesthetic and appeal to promote commercial ventures. This category includes simulated events that tactically manipulate Burning Man iconography or spatial forms, complicating efforts at purification. Shanzhai literally means mountain fortress, a place where outlaws would hole up to resist corrupt authorities and enact a sort of temporary autonomous zone free from the strictures of polite society or rules of commerce. The term was coined in the classic saga *Outlaws of the Marsh* and gained renewed currency in the 1950s as a way to label small-scale Hong Kong factories that produced low-quality knockoff electronics. It achieved an apotheosis in the 2000s with a profusion of cell phones that shamelessly stole, remixed, and arguably even improved upon “legitimate” products by, for just one example, fusing a flame lighter to a flip phone.¹⁰ Some critics have celebrated shanzhai as a kind of liberating, democratic social movement aligned with an innovative, enterprising spirit, with all the contradictions and dynamism such mash-ups can bring. In this light, Black Rock City’s Department of Public Works and Department of Mutant Vehicles, which manage city infrastructure and vehicles, might be considered shanzhai versions of their San Francisco equivalents. It may be generative to theorize Burning Man as a global shanzhai urban movement, a shifting network of ephemeral cities counterposed to the so-called “default world” that burners leave upon entering their evental heterotopia. Here, I humbly use shanzhai to refer to events and companies that explicitly defy the Burning Man Project’s injunctions against commercialization.¹¹

The article proceeds by narrating a chronology of Burning Man culture in China and Taiwan, in both their authorized and shanzhai manifestations. As explained below, both authorized and shanzhai event spaces were populated through overlapping traffic of artifacts, projects, people, and ideas between China and Black Rock City, troubling efforts at typological stability.

The chronology first traces a history of authorized regional events within China and Taiwan before
turning to shanzhai event projects within China and Taiwan, and continues by looking at how these projects boomeranged back into Black Rock City, often accelerated by commercial travel ventures that promoted Burning Man as a vital site for tech industry networking. The article concludes by considering what these points of evental, economic, and cultural similarity and divergence can tell us about the persistence of “capitalist realism,” or rather its subsumption by what I name “capitalist surrealism” to illuminate fissures, imaginary and actual, in the dominion of capital that binds together the US and China.

Crafting Burner Spaces in China and Taiwan

Burning Man’s early projections of a Californian countercultural beach bonfire into an annual, ephemeral city in the Nevada desert, which grew from seventy to seventy-five thousand people between 1990 and 2019, are extensively documented. Its international manifestations, and their impacts on the Nevada event, are a more recent target of inquiry, with this article and that of Graham St John and Botond Vitos (in this issue) among the first such scholarly accounts. The first formal effort to reproduce Burning Man’s experiential and spatial structure was a Texas fundraiser to support the main event in 1997. Remembered as the first “regional event,” it grew into an annual gathering called Flipside.

Flipside’s success, and interest from other emergent communities, led the San Francisco-based Burning Man organization to develop a plan to legitimize and authorize “official regional events.” This included the codification of Ten Principles, to facilitate the transposition of Burner culture, and the establishment of the regional contact role, a volunteer position appointed by the Burning Man Project and (loosely) bound by a legal contract to foster community growth. Regional contacts serve to certify the legitimacy of events that seek formal recognition and contractual authorization as official regional events. They also help to investigate possible violations of the Burning Man Project’s intellectual property, which can include unauthorized use of Burning Man’s name, iconography, and other trademarked material, for which the Burning Man Project will sometimes threaten or take legal action in the name of protecting its culture from commodification.

Asia was a relatively late entry to the growing cultural economy of regional events, despite my own best efforts. After attending my first Black Rock City burn in 2001, I moved to Taiwan and later to China, and applied and was appointed to serve as regional contact for both regions. It took another decade and increased traffic to and from Black Rock City before China and Taiwan had enough capacity to hold semi-annual multiday events, now known as Dragon Burn and Turtle Burn, respectively. Meanwhile, as these regional events attracted increased media exposure, Black Rock City began diversifying and drawing greater participation from China- and Taiwan-based Burners.

The first authorized spaces of Chinese Burning Man were constructed by participants who identified as Burners and who had visited Black Rock City before the dominant Chinese media narrative of the event as a tech networking festival had consolidated. As a community-building exercise, in 2005 I began hosting an annual Chinese Speaker’s Tea Party on playa. In 2006, I co-organized a two-night Burning Man film festival in Beijing. Four years later in Shanghai, SvenAarne Serrano, an early participant in the Baker Beach burn and pre-Burning Man Cacophony Society events, convened meetings to stir up local interest.

These threads were woven into the first transnational Chinese art installation at Black Rock City in 2013: Enlightenment, a wooden effigy of a meditating man atop a lotus-shaped octagonal platform (fig. 2). Enlightenment sat facing the main effigy of the Man, the namesake wooden structure placed in the center of Black Rock City that burns as the ritual culmination of the week-long Burning Man event. The initial idea and primary design came from Vancouver-based maker space entrepreneur Derek Gaw. To incorporate material contributions from China, I suggested adding a lotus-shaped platform to be covered with petal-shaped fabric swaths calligraphed at the Shanghai home of Nick Kothari and Jen Childs, an American couple who went on to organize the first Dragon Burn. The effigy structure was built mostly by Chinese American and Taiwanese American Burners, and included as the China and Taiwan piece of the larger Circle of Regional Effigies (CORE) project. CORE, originally proposed by then-Hawaii regional contact Andrew Cuniberti, was a scheme to consolidate and showcase the art of Burning Man’s burgeoning regional communities. CORE featured thirty-two regionally produced effigies, many of which received limited logistical and financial support from Burning Man’s Art Department. The pieces were placed in circles around the Man and set alight simultaneously in the world’s largest-ever synchronized art burn.

Figure 2. Enlightenment. China & Taiwan CORE Project. Burning Man 2013. Photograph by Kenny Yu.
China’s (for now) only official Burning Man regional event, Dragon Burn, was named for its eponymous emanation of imperial power and first held in June 2014. To ensure privacy and security, organizers chose a challenging island location near Taihu Lake in Jiangsu Province. At least a six-hour journey from Shanghai, participation required taking a motor vehicle, a boat, and then a long walk. Most of the 282 attendees, a majority of whom were expatriates, had never been to a Burning Man event. Given the conception of the event as an experimental effort, the effigy was a modular oval symbolizing the egg of a dragon (fig. 3). The mountainous site, used as a film set and rock-climbing site, proved impossible to secure, leading to several tense incidents of gate-crashing. The following year, that site was acquired for a private hotel development, forcing the next wave of event organizers to find a new site in the Anji mountains of Zhejiang Province. This second event drew 190 participants, who burned a dragonfly-styled effigy.

Figure 3. Dragon Egg. 2014 Dragon Burn Effigy, Jiangsu, China. Photograph by Ian Rowen.
In 2016, Dragon Burn, by then run by a growing collective of mostly Shanghai-based volunteers, was again forced to move at the last minute after the site owner informed organizers that they were unable to acquire a permit due to new security arrangements made to prepare for the upcoming international G20 meeting in nearby Hangzhou, which forced the cancellation of all other large-scale events in the area. A new site was found on an island close to the first event site. With 520 people attending, organizers deemed the local community to have grown sufficiently large to justify burning a dragon-shaped effigy for the first time. In 2017, the event returned to the second-year site in Anji and saw a considerable breakthrough in organization, including zoning and self-organization of six theme camps which, like their Black Rock City counterparts, were themed camping zones whose residents collaborated to offer various services and experiences to participants, including dance parties, massage, yoga, and music improvisation. Increasing localization was evident as this was the first year for a Chinese national to produce the effigy—designed by artist Magic Ma, the sculpture resembled three different Chinese characters depending which side it was viewed from: 人 (man), 火 (fire), and 龙 (dragon). This year also featured Dragon Burn’s first temple, styled as a fire-fringed lotus, to serve, like its Black Rock City forebear, as a place for grieving and commemoration, to be ritually immolated toward the close of the event.

By 2018, what had started only four years prior as a semi-colonial expatriate project achieved a considerable degree of sophistication, stability, and local participation, and a new site with room to grow. This was evident in the massive spiral-shaped dragon effigy constructed of a bamboo frame and fallen branches carried from Shanghai, and enthusiastic support from the landlord of the hilly, forested, lakeside venue. In our conversations, the landlord expressed hope that the event would lead to permanent infrastructure and draw more year-round visitors. Approximately half of the eight hundred participants were Chinese nationals, including the first theme camp composed of a majority of Chinese nationals, the BDSM-and-fetish-themed Deeper Joy. Dragon Burn returned the following year to the same site and featured a larger effigy styled as a phoenix—the feminine consort of the dragon. Funded entirely through ticket sales and donations, roughly US$5600 was budgeted for art grants, with thirty-seven out of thirty-eight applicants receiving awards.¹³

Dragon Burn’s organizers aimed to keep a low media profile and spread via word of mouth, due to China’s tight legal controls on public gatherings. Despite this, the event was visited by journalists from state-owned or affiliated newspapers, including China Daily and Global Times, who published generally positive coverage. Shortly before the gates opened in 2019, the event also survived surprise inspections from the provincial-level Ministry of Culture, which had been tipped off to allegedly subversive behavior. It turned out that the national-level Ministry of Culture was also sponsoring the Gobi Heaven event set to take place later that year, as will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent section on shanzhai burns.

Across the Taiwan Strait, a distinct but related regional community began burgeoning around the same time as Dragon Burn, and shared several key personnel. Taiwan’s first regional event took place in October 2014, pitched as a “Decompression,” so named after similar regional events initially intended to help returnees from Black Rock City readjust to the “default world.” The event was held on the site of an abandoned beachside hotel next to a small Taoist temple in Honeymoon Bay in Yilan, on the northeast Pacific coast, and featured a rickety bamboo effigy...
standing on the rocky shore (fig. 4), portentously facing San Francisco’s Baker Beach, where Larry Harvey and Jerry James first burned a Man in 1986. Lifelong Yilan resident Fifi Albanese, her American immigrant husband, Dale Albanese, and I served as lead organizers. An unticketed affair graced by a surprise typhoon, feral pigs, 300 humans, and a tsunami, the conditions were so thrilling and traumatic that it took five years to hold a follow-up. Renamed Turtle Burn and again anchored by the Albaneses in collaboration with a volunteer collective, 120 people and five theme camps convened smoothly during the three-day Dragon Boat Holiday in June 2019 at a private campsite atop a mountain in Yilan. Like Dragon Burn and indeed all regional burns worldwide, its 2020 recurrence was postponed as a cautionary measure against the COVID-19 pandemic.
These regional events grew synergistically with increasingly elaborate projects on the playa. After the 2013 immolation of Enlightenment, 2014’s Silk Road-inspired art theme, Caravansary, saw the alignment of Burning Man’s geospatial imaginary with that of Chinese Communist Party leader Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road. As with the CORE installations of the previous year, regional contributions were arrayed alongside dozens of other international projects in a circle around the main Man effigy. Instead of free-standing installations, these projects were placed within custom-made canvas shelters meant to resemble a souk, or Middle Eastern market. The team that went on to run Taiwan’s Decompression event contributed a one-stop divination shop, the Taiwan Temple Market, a cross between a temple and a convenience store, two of the most ubiquitous and distinctive spaces in Taiwan. With Fifi Albanese, a dancer at the Taoist Songshan Cihui Temple, we carried from the temple a large banner of the temple’s goddess, Yaochi Jinmu, a thousand amulets, several red lanterns, and assorted dance props and altar pieces. Two doors down, past a Japanese calligraphy lounge, was the Dragon Den Dianpu, a lounge and activity space decorated by the Dragon Burn crew. Momentum from the Taiwan Temple Market project led directly to Taiwan’s “Decompression” one month later.

For the China and Taiwan regional project for the following year’s “Carnival of Mirrors” art theme, I conceived FoxCarn and the Betel Store, which was placed in the same canvas structures that surrounded the Man effigy the previous year. Styled as a luxury retail outlet with a sweatshop hidden in the back, this was a darkly satirical send-up of the relationship between Apple and its Taiwanese and Chinese contract manufacturer, Foxconn (fig. 5 and fig. 6). Overseen by uniformed supervisors, participants lined up to make “iSwag” blinky bracelets in the sweatshop. Upon successful completion of their menial task, they were paid a sum of wage tokens that was insufficient to buy back the product they just made, which went out for “sale” in the Betel Store. Exploited laborers and window-shoppers alike could attempt to “buy” back the iSwag or the Betel Store’s other (un)popular products, including the iGift (“1000 playa dust particles in a pendant, now with 50 per cent more workers tears!”) and the iMan (“20 per cent taller, burns twice as long!”). Given Burning Man’s imbrication with Silicon Valley, the project served as an immanent critique of the alienated labor and commodity fetishism that underwrites the globalization of the event culture, even (or especially) as it nominally adheres to the principle of “Decommodification,” a point to which I will return in the conclusion.

Black Rock City received another and considerably larger and higher-profile project from Taiwan in 2015, entitled Mazu: Goddess of the Empty Sea. This was an ersatz temple dedicated to a popular Taiwanese folk goddess whose likeness has long been used to foster commercial and political networks between Taiwan and China.14 The project was sponsored by the Dream Community, a privately owned arts-themed apartment complex in New Taipei City, already well known for sponsoring samba-inspired street parades across the island. Its owner, Gordon Tsai, who sometimes spoke of his dream of becoming “the Steve Jobs of real estate,” both enjoyed festival atmospheres and valued their commercial potential. Running out of room to build new apartments on his remaining land, Tsai considered ways to extend his operations across the Taiwan Strait toward China.

Mazu’s appearance at Burning Man afforded Tsai an extraordinary opportunity to cultivate connections between Taiwanese, Chinese, and American artists, entrepreneurs, and even politicians. Tsai opted to hire a team of seasoned Burning Man arts builders, none of whom were

Figure 5. Betel Store, Burning Man 2015. Photograph by Kenny Yu.

Figure 6. FoxCarn, Burning Man 2015. Photograph by Kenny Yu.
Taiwanese or Chinese, to visit Taiwan for design sessions before prefabricating a structure in Reno, Nevada, and moving it to the playa. The Dream Community’s commitment to this project, and their residential and meeting spaces, likewise afforded me an extraordinary opportunity to request Tsai’s support to host an Asia Burner Leadership Summit in May 2015. This brought together all of Asia’s regional contacts and primary event organizers for several days of private meetings and public events. These meetings and events were joined by Burning Man CEO Marian Goodell and founder Larry Harvey, who later attributed his decision to place the Man effigy inside a temple in 2017, as part of the “Radical Ritual” art theme, to this visit to Asia.

The Mazu temple build was fraught and difficult, but the piece, visited nightly by raucous parade troupes, proved very popular on playa before it was ritually burned. This project blurred the boundaries between the promotional and the ceremonial, the authorized and the shanzhai, with the Dream Community’s corporate branding appearing on the red lanterns that adorned the entrance to the temple. The effect was subtle, at least for non-Chinese readers. Tsai also brought along a legislator, Pasuya Yao, who in what was perhaps a world first, later used Burning Man imagery without permission in a television advertisement about “thinking out of the box” as part of his unsuccessful 2018 bid for Taipei mayor. Although the Dream Community opted not to formally participate in Taiwan’s Turtle Burn regional event, they continued to send smaller but still significant contributions to Black Rock City in following years, including an art car styled as the foot of the Buddha.

Another major Black Rock City art car hailed in part from nearby Hong Kong. Gon Kirin, a massive metallic mobile dragon, was conceived and co-produced by artist Teddy Lo, who organized several Ten Principles–based events in Hong Kong that did not pursue official regional status. Hong Kong also served as longtime home base for Jason Swamy, the cofounder of Robot Heart, among the playa’s most popular art cars. Swamy went on to serve as creative director of Wonderfruit, a dance music festival in Thailand heavily influenced by but claiming no affiliation with Burning Man.

Finally, following the Mazu Temple and Desert Guard, which will receive more extensive discussion below, the largest Black Rock City installation with a strong China or Taiwan connection was Tulpa Ashrams, a Tibetan Buddhist–inspired pagoda design with a forty-foot-tall central tower. This 2019 project was conceived, built, and paid for by longtime participants in Beijing’s art and design scene, including One Art Museum. All were first-time participants at Burning Man, and their future involvement remains to be seen.

In sum, Burning Man’s authorized regional events have included the mostly annual Dragon Burn in China and Turtle Burn in Taiwan, as well as a one-off Asia Burner Leadership Summit in 2015. These events were catalyzed by participation in Black Rock City art projects, several of which were devoted to nurturing the global growth of regional event communities. Other area groups have made major artistic contributions to Black Rock City and organized related events that did not pursue authorized regional status. While these events and projects have proliferated, their personnel have also become targets for recruitment by ambitiously commercial ventures. Such ventures are the subject of the following two sections, which chart courses of capital across the Pacific and back again.
Shanzhai Seeds: From China to the Black Rock Desert

The Dream Community’s Mazu Temple heralded a larger wave of investors, speculators, and pioneers from China proper, some of whom saw the Black Rock Desert playa as a place not only to settle but also to reproduce for profit on their own western frontier. Inner Mongolia was among the first destinations imagined by Chinese tech companies and Communist Party cadres as appropriate to conjure their own commercial versions of Burning Man, making Chen Qiufan’s geographical meditation even more prescient. This section will discuss playa-bound commercial projects before turning to their rebounded projections back into China.

In 2013, one of Beijing’s most prominent venture capital firms, Matrix, hired Zanadu, an event production company, to build them a Black Rock City theme camp and document their journey. Zanadu posted promotional videos on Weibo, a Chinese social media site, featuring Matrix executives talking about how they hoped to not only push their personal limits in the desert, but to connect with Facebook and Google staff. Matrix returned in 2016 with an art installation, Eastern Lights. Two years later, as a tenth-anniversary event for the founding of their company, they held a tech and music festival at a Gobi Desert location two hours away from Beijing. At least one attendee remarked on its aesthetic echo of Burning Man:

When people mention Matrix in China, the first word that came up is “Cool”—it organizes CEO trips to exotic places and encourage outdoor and exploration... When the car drove into the desert, I was immersed with huge art installations that remind me of the outer space and Burning Man. Both are set in desert and have a camp area with tents and RVs. The tech forum with Matrix CEOs and the MTA festival feel like SXSW [South by Southwest, the Austin, Texas music and tech festival]. In some way, it is a tech gathering where entrepreneurs and investors fly in to have meetings with other entrepreneurs.15

Matrix’s promotions accelerated a growing wave of expensive package tours that promised, and sometimes delivered, increasingly scarce Black Rock City event tickets and theme camp infrastructure to wealthy Chinese tourists. In 2018, I visited one of the most massive of these camps, China Village, registered by a Houston, Texas–based Chinese travel agent who had marketed his RV rental services on a variety of Chinese-language social media platforms. The village was composed of rows of identical yurts and RVs, with a few shared shade structures. Hung from the top of the largest of these structures was a huge banner announcing the space as a team-building center for Tencent, one of China’s largest tech companies, which owns WeChat, China’s ubiquitous social media app. Tencent’s travel coordinator had prepared a printed Chinese translation of the Black Rock City map, which listed dozens of actual art projects and also included an incorrect map point for electronic music act Daft Punk at the event perimeter known as the “trash fence,” inadvertently reproducing a long-running inside joke meant to mock music celebrity promotion on playa. According to my interview with Tencent’s handler, the organizer of an annual Chinese tech culture festival who had won a competitive bid, the executives flew in for the weekend after spending the week visiting entertainment and tech industry corporate headquarters in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Apart from this corporate group, the other residents of the village had rented their accommodations directly through the agent.

China Village was one of several such commercial camps that formed in the late 2010s. Another, promoted through travel outlet Oceaneer, aimed specifically at electronic dance music enthusiasts...
and offered an all-in experience led by a social media influencer for 33,000RMB (US$5100) per person. A competing outfit offered a camp that promised business networking: “To join with 80+ leaders of China’s top business schools/investment community members. To enter the world’s first blockchain theme camp, slow down, and listen to your inner voice.” This advertisement was promoted on Wechat and featured co-branding and affiliation with Capital Blockchain Media, Global Blockchain Business Council, China Blockchain Application Center, China Mergers and Acquisitions Association, and the Chinese Museum of Finance.

Joining such theme camps offered—or promised—Chinese participants a chance to expand their business networks in ways that would have been unimaginable back home. As a member of China Village told me over lunch, “There are a bunch of CEOs and founders here. There’s no way I’d be eating with all these people at the same time in China, if ever, or seeing them party so wildly.” Such fusions of the instrumental with the recreational fueled the ambitious dreams of several entrepreneurs to refashion Burning Man’s aesthetic into marketing events in the vast deserts of western China, the fever dream of the next section.

**Shanzhai Boomerangs: From the Black Rock Desert to the Gobi Desert**

The first explicit commercial effort to adapt Burning Man for the Chinese market occurred in 2012 when China Bridge Capital, an investment bank, helped a township in the frontier boomtown of Ordos, Inner Mongolia, reach out to the Burning Man Project to pursue a joint venture. During a meeting with the Shanghai regional contact in Beijing, company and township executives expressed hopes that collaboration with Burning Man would bring celebrities and turn the Ordos township into “a new Dubai.” After plans for a site visit fell through, both sides decided not to pursue any further collaboration.

The next commercial effort nearly materialized in 2016, when Zhu Guofan, a foot-massage franchise founder and outdoor sports enthusiast, incorporated a company, Beijing Black Rock City, and held a press conference to launch an eponymous event, described as “China’s Burning Man,” to be held in the Gobi Desert. Although Zhu’s team had actually been to Black Rock City and released several video travelogues of their experiences, they did not reveal their plans to the Burning Man Project and were unaware of Dragon Burn. After I repeatedly reached out to them about trademark infringement, they decided to retain their corporate name but change the event name to Phoenix Burn (fig. 7). This did little to mollify Dragon Burn organizers, who were nonplussed about possible confusion with their own event but did not pursue any legal remedy for it.

Phoenix Burn commissioned sculptures to adorn their event, including the metal-welded Mongolian warrior, designed by artist Lu Ming and later renamed Desert Guard. Although this pilot event was canceled when the local government denied them a permit, Phoenix Burn later rebranded as the Node 818 Festival and held several events in the desert of Qinghai province, adjacent to Tibet. Although they no longer claimed any affiliation with Burning Man, they did retain a number of familiar elements, including the open clock site layout of Black Rock City.

As mentioned in the introduction, Desert Guard found its way to Black Rock City in 2018 as part of a much more ambitious and government-backed effort spearheaded by Joshua Chen,
a Beijing-based marketing entrepreneur with deep ties to the Chinese Communist Party. Earlier that year, Chen, who had seen imagery of Black Rock City but not yet visited any Burner events, applied to trademark Burning Man under a new holding company, Beijing Burning Man Festival Brand Management Limited. He established "Beijing Burner Club" accounts on several Chinese social media platforms, and then sent an email to the Burning Man Project that included a link to a YouTube video which featured several dozen office workers waving a banner that read, "China Welcomes Burning Man."

After Burning Man Project staff forwarded me the YouTube-linked email solicitation and asked me to investigate further, I got in touch with Chen, who brought me to Beijing and told me of his plans to pursue a joint venture and brand collaboration with Burning Man. The dream was to begin with a bang—a fifteen-thousand-person event, titled Gobi Heaven, was already planned later that year in Inner Mongolia’s Gobi Desert. Chen took me to a cavernous warehouse on the outskirts of Beijing which he was using to produce a series of TV commercials with an estimated budget of US$200,000. These included a theme song with a heavily reverbed guitar riff and vaguely Turkic rhythmic elements, growled by an aging rocker who had recorded several minor hits in the 1980s. Chen said that he planned to pump these video ads into every karaoke outlet in the country. The next day, while we visited several of his prospective brand partners, it became clear that Chen had already misrepresented himself and Beijing Burning Man Brand Management as formal partners of the Burning Man Project, and signed multiple commercial contracts with Chinese artists and brands promising to serve as Burning Man’s agent.
A day later, Chen staged a press conference to announce the co-launch of Beijing Burner Club and Gobi Heaven. This included presentations from several advertising consultants about how their event would be akin to Burning Man but more suited for the Chinese market—one proposed slogan was, “Burning Man is about being lost, but Gobi Heaven is about being found.” The atmosphere turned tense and awkward when I reminded the staff that Burning Man Project is a nonprofit organization and therefore was all but certain to not approve a joint business venture. As a peacemaking gesture, I was later presented with a white scarf and a whole roast lamb in a heavily photographed ritual of quasi-Mongolian hospitality.

In the following weeks, Chen abandoned the Beijing Burning Man Brand Management Company and reincorporated his business under the Gobi Heaven brand. However, he continued to promote his event as “China’s Burning Man” to domestic media and business partners. Gobi Heaven’s Wechat channel and several other marketing companies posted videos that used uncredited Black Rock City imagery before cutting to Gobi Heaven promotional graphics. Gobi Heaven soon released their own idiosyncratic and emoji-enhanced set of Ten Principles, such as “No Complaining” and “Put Down Your Cellphone.” Large poster advertisements soon plastered the cinema entrances in Shanghai and other major cities for months.

What Gobi Heaven lacked in formal legitimation from the Burning Man Project, it compensated for with financial backing from deep-pocketed state and private enterprises, including the Chinese partner of Blizzard, the parent company of the World of Warcraft videogame franchise. Powerful and well-resourced state backers included the Ministry of Culture and Tourism; China Cultural Media Group, directly managed by the Ministry; and the Chinese Communist Party–owned investment vehicle, China Capital Group. A leaked slide deck from another state-owned conglomerate, China Merchants Group, among the ten most politically well-connected firms in China, revealed that it planned to support what it called “China’s Burning Man event, Gobi Heaven,” described as “China’s first collective carnival of highly educated people, China’s first collective voice of creatives, and China’s first deep integration of different cultural communities,” by financing business partners to build theme camps or provide art to be placed on an urban design grid that appeared nearly identical to that of Black Rock City. Unlike the original event, which placed a premium on “participation” by placing highly interactive theme camps in desirable locations, Gobi Heaven’s vendors could simply pay more for more central placement.

After many permit delays, Gobi Heaven finally held its inaugural event in August 2019. Based on photos, vlog reports, and personal communication from several attendees, it drew several hundred people, mostly paid staff or volunteers. Local media outlets filed reports recounting the names of party officials and state-linked corporate executives who attended the opening ceremony, which included a paid troupe of costumed Mongolian dancers. With attendance lower than expected, door prices dropped precipitously from 2800RMB to 80RMB. Hundreds of area village residents were bused in to populate the event for promotional photo-taking. Despite these hurdles, organizers declared success and announced they would do it again the next year. However, the COVID-19 pandemic put plans for a larger event on indefinite hiatus. In the meantime, as China reopened after its 2020 lockdown, Gobi Heaven launched a new sub-brand, “Theme Camping Party,” and held small-scale glamping events in collaboration with the city governments of Beijing and Kunming and a recreational vehicle company.
Besides Gobi Heaven, there was at least one other, more brazenly shanzhai state-backed commercial knockoff of Burning Man in 2020. Colorful World, the Hunan provincial outlet of the state-owned Windows of the World theme park group, internationally famous for its kitschy scale replicas of the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal, Buckingham Palace, and other monuments, held a nightly Burning Man event for one week in late March. Colorful World’s print and online advertisements featured a photo of a flaming Man effigy above a team of Lamplighters, the Black Rock City volunteer group that lights and raises kerosene lamps in a ritual procession, and announced that for an early-bird entrance price of 49.9 renminbi (US$8), spectators could witness fireworks, a bonfire, and an effigy burn set by Colorful World staff wearing mock Lamplighter costumes, all within walking distance from replicas of Mount Rushmore and the Sydney Opera House. Colorful World did not reach out to Burning Man Project staff or Dragon Burn organizers before holding this event, nor respond to my email queries about their plans. Searches for press reports have so far proven fruitless. With luck and persistence, intrepid scholars of the future may someday be able to acquire eyewitness reports of this extraordinary serial simulacra and save them for posterity.

Conclusion

Mark Fisher’s analysis of “capitalist realism,” with which this article began, goes some way toward anticipating the interplay of authorized and shanzhai manifestations of Burning Man, and its import for global capital. Gobi Heaven, an actually commercial if nominally communist shanzhai enterprise, aimed not only to “repeat older gestures of rebellion and contestation as if for the first time” but to trademark them ahead of the process. In this sense, rather than iterating “the old struggle between detournement and recuperation,” Gobi Heaven embodied what Fisher named the precorporation of subversive materials and potentials, “the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture.” That this precorporation was articulated through the productive forces of the Chinese Communist Party lends it an ironic, if not paradoxical character. Such a turn within China had been noted by historian Karl Gerth, who in 2010 coined a term, state consumerism, “to refer specifically to the wide-ranging efforts within China’s form of state capitalism to manage demand in every respect, from promoting, defining, and even spreading consumption of some things to eliminating, discrediting, or at the very least marginalizing private preferences for the allocation of resources.” This followed an earlier observation that “modern Chinese consumer desire,” whether state-directed or otherwise, “has expanded to the consumption of experiences, such as education, leisure travel, and cultural events such as the Beijing Olympics.” Were his book written but a decade later, he might as well have been talking about Burning Man, at least for the “creative” and “highly educated” strata targeted by Gobi Heaven’s backers.

Mark Fisher’s final piece of writing before his untimely demise in 2017 was the introduction to an unfinished book, “Acid Communism,” intended to reimagine the unrealized political potentials of the 1960s nexus of the psychedelic counterculture and social activism. Drawing heavily from the ideas of Jeremy Gilbert, Fisher argued that it took the “bravura intelligence, ferocious energy and improvisational imagination of the neoliberal counter-revolution” to conjure a new form of “individualism defined against the different forms of collectivity that clamoured out of the
Sixties” of the US and the UK, if not Cultural Revolution–era China. Reaching into the surreal experiments of the past, hoped Fisher, would uncover an antidote to capitalist realism’s grim foreclosure of the future figured by “capitalist realism.”

Burning Man’s own debt to 1960s US culture has been confirmed by no less prominent a participant than Stewart Brand, the organizer of the seminal psychedelic Trips Festival in 1966 and the human at the center of Fred Turner’s account of San Francisco and Silicon Valley’s twinned transition “from counterculture to cyberculture.” As Brand puts it:

> Burning Man has realized with such depth and thoroughness and ongoing originality and ability to scale and minimalist rules, but enough rules that you can function, and all the things we were farting around with, [event founder] Larry Harvey has really pulled off. I don’t think that would have come to pass without going through whatever that spectrum of the ’60s was, the prism of the ’60s, the spectrum of bright colors that we espoused for a while. It all got exacerbated by the Internet and sequence of computer-related booms, but I think it flavored a whole lot of the basic nature of Burning Man.

Burning Man’s refraction of the 1960s, like Brand’s own endeavors, can hardly be said to have intensified a revolt against capitalism, even if it did make visible heretofore unimagined possibilities for it. Indeed, by the mid-2010s, Burning Man’s growing significance for US financial and political elites was made clear in the claim of arch-industrialist Elon Musk that “Burning Man IS Silicon Valley,” and the appearance of a Burning Man photobook on Ivanka Trump’s desk noted in the introduction. The contradictions reached an apotheosis in October 2021, after the second Covid 19–forced cancellation of the ticketed Black Rock City event, when the cash-starved Burning Man Project went so far as to put price tags on the products of its nominally “decommodified” culture when it held a benefit art auction in collaboration with Sotheby’s, one of the dominant dealers of the commercial art world.

All this is to say (perhaps needlessly by now) that well before the materialization of “communist”-backed capital in the form of a metal-clad Mongolian warrior, Burning Man’s successful institutionalization had already undermined its late-1990s boosters’ visions of a guerrilla war against the commodification of culture or the reach of the state. It might be tempting to conclude that such developments signify the failure of Burning Man’s “guerrilla war against alienating spectacle.” Yet, as cogently argued by Graham St John, “While utopic yearnings and dystopian visions have motivated Burners, Burning Man was never a utopia.” Neither, of course, was communist China, but tell that to a commentator at Gobi Heaven’s launch who observed that Burning Man’s principles of “Decommodification” and “Communal Effort” may better approximate a communist society than whatever ideologies are at work in contemporary China. This was an intriguing observation, especially given the commentator’s use of the launch to market his own for-profit Black Rock City camp aimed at Chinese VIPs, an all the more confounding insight when considered alongside the fantasies of influential American political activists, such as Grover Norquist, who celebrate Black Rock City as a libertarian paradise.

Although Gobi Heaven may be among the more spectacular attempts to copycat this ostensibly decommodified but eminently commercializable community, if nothing else, its efforts alongside Burning Man’s own enterprising sprawl signal the event culture’s value and influence as a global totem of cultural capital. Indeed, such an uneasy coincidence points to the event culture’s consolidation into what literary scholar Lydia Liu calls a translingual “supersign,” a
“linguistic monstrosity that thrives on the excess of its presumed meanings by virtue of being exposed to, or thrown together with, foreign etymologies and foreign languages.”

Such surreal and confounding monstrosities animated the ironic spaces of FoxCarn and the Betel Store, the interactive factory showroom that satirized Burning Man’s inextricability from global supply chains and exploitation of land and labor, particularly that of China. That project, however dark, was driven by a kernel of hope. Even Mark Fisher at his most dire maintained that peering past the smoke and mirrors of the market can afford “glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities [that] can have a disproportionately great effect. The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again.”

Such affects of hope, fear, and possibility continue circulating and mutating far from Black Rock City’s dust storms and social media influencers, where its offspring in China and Taiwan—both official regional events and even its commercial pretenders—continue yielding opportunities to envision and enact yet more surreal and emancipatory versions of the future, capitalist or otherwise.

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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.

Figure 1. A place apart from everyday life: Burning Man sculpture and art car, 2016. Photo by author.

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.”7 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.”8

Remote sites and the journeys to get to them are important ways that these strategies work to
create the festival as a sacred space apart from daily life in “mundania” or the “default world,” as some participants refer to the world outside festival space. The experience of entering an event site is often ritualized and imprinted on the body in some way, which contributes to the passage from ordinary life to extraordinary festival space. Participants may enter sites through a distinct gate or threshold, ritualizing the passage into festival space “deeply into the bone,” to borrow ritual theorist Ronald Grimes’s phrase for the effects of rites of passage. At Burning Man, after a long drive through the desert, heading ever farther from the outside world, passing through miles of seemingly empty, barren desert, waiting in a long line of cars, and finally arriving at the “Greeters Station,” participants are welcomed “home.” They might roll in the dust of the desert, making a dust angel, ritualizing their relationship with the desert by merging their body with it. On arrival they don clothes to protect them from the sun and wear or carry with them goggles and masks for the dust when they set out to explore Black Rock City. Dressing up in festive clothing, painting their bodies, or taking off their clothes are all ways Burners signify that festival bodies look and behave differently in transformative event spaces.

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.
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.”26 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.27

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.”28 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.

![Figure 5. Screenshot by author.](image)

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.
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Marking Sacred Space: Altars and Yoga Mats in Transformative Events

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ABSTRACT

This article presents data gleaned from ethnographic research in transformative events, with particular attention to those that incorporate yoga practice as an important educational site for the inscription and dissemination of “spiritual” values and as a pivotal site for testimonials of spiritual “transformation.” It draws from nearly a decade of research and practice in yoga environments in a wide variety of transformative events, including Bhakti and Shakti Fests (held in the high desert of Joshua Tree in Southern California), Wanderlust yoga festivals (global festivals in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and multiple regions of the United States), Lightning in a Bottle (held in central California), and Burning Man (held in the Black Rock Desert in Nevada). This research focuses particularly on the innovative ways that practitioners materialize and ritualize sacred spaces that represent their eclectic and personalized spiritual understandings and beliefs. In their imagined transition from institutional religion to transformational spirituality, yogic practitioners seek to develop alternative forms of devotional materiality that reflect and express their new metaphysical values. In creating sacred space in festivals—through building altars and spaces for spiritual and yogic practices (including the ubiquitous yoga mat)—practitioners use material culture agentively to re-enchant what many believe to be a disenchanted world. These efforts to re-enchant the self and its surroundings can be understood as an impulse to create counter-modernities that challenge the current order of things by simultaneously returning to ancient wisdom and envisioning new futures.

KEYWORDS
Yoga
Spirituality
Festivals
New Age
Material religion
Utopia
Marking Sacred Space: Altars and Yoga Mats in Transformative Events

Amanda Lucia

Transformational festival events are extraordinarily diverse in their intents and purposes, missions, and visions. However, they overlap at the nexus of a fundamental desire to build forums for spiritual transformation, conscious evolution, and social change. In The Bloom TV series (2019–20), creator and director Jeet-Kei Leung introduces the multifaceted field of global transformative events as potent spaces for transformation, healing, and spiritual discovery. The festivals in this article are a subset within a broad spectrum of transformative events occurring globally. These transformational festivals are explicitly focused on spiritual growth and incorporate postural yoga as a central practice and a primary means to usher in personal transformation and consciousness expansion. In this article, I draw on my field research in transformational festivals, with particular attention to those that focus on yoga, articulated as a generative and transformative spiritual practice. I argue that in their attention to “transformational” spiritual practice, yogic practitioners develop innovative forms of material religion that reflect their spiritual ontological values and are emblematic of their aim to re-enchant what many believe to be a disenchanted world.

Yogic transformational festivals are sites in which practitioners actively re-enchant their worlds, wherein they turn toward ritual, chanting, devotion, and introspection. Producers and attendees alike curate the geographical territory of the festivals as sacred space, supplying a canvas on which participants collaboratively create. By building altars and by aligning their practice on their yoga mats, participants generate sacred centers readied for the cultivation of spiritual and transformative experiences. In so doing, they cultivate new selves that are both receptive and penetrable, those that social theorist Charles Taylor refers to as “porous selves,” that is, vulnerable selves that are readily affected and influenced by cosmic forces—energy, spirit, presence, and divinity. These efforts to re-enchant the self and its surroundings can be understood as an impulse to create counter-modernities that challenge the current order of things by simultaneously returning to ancient wisdom and envisioning new futures.

In this article, I build on extant research into spiritual and ritual practices in festival environments, but I focus particularly on data cultivated from my eight years of ethnographic research (2011–19) in transformational festivals, during which I examined the practice of yoga as a nexus of the cultivation and dissemination of spiritual values, that is, the metaphysics and ideology of those who identify as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). The ideals of SBNR have been discussed at great length elsewhere, but as a brief introduction one might take religion scholar Lee Gilmore’s sketch outline to heart. Describing spirituality at Burning Man, she writes that participants tend to see spirituality “as better found outside the realm of institutional religious structures and doctrines and [that it] evokes a broadly and variously conceived sense of connection with something more that is beyond the individual and the ordinary.” In my field research, I found that this resonated with the views of most participants, and I concur with Gilmore’s further conclusion that spiritualities expressed in transformational festivals tend to be experiential, reflexive, and heterodoxic.

But, as part of my larger project, which became White Utopias, I was also interested in how these spiritual populations tended to adopt only a distinctive set of spiritual discourses and practices. In particular, I was interested in how Indigenous and Indic (broadly conceived) religions became
intertwined, and I was curious about the foundational logics behind such confluences. I began my fieldwork by attending Bhakti Fest (about two to three thousand attendees) held in the Joshua Tree desert in southern California in 2011. While immersed in the Hindu-inspired devotional (bhakti) ethos of Bhakti Fest (and, in time, its sister festival, Shakti Fest), I found that yoga classes included sermon-like expositions of New Age–inflected yogic philosophy. A bounty of workshops formed the structure of the festival, and most were emotional, therapeutic, and devotional. Through yoga classes, therapeutic workshops, and devotional exercises, participants were transforming the self, by “removing layers” of resistance and baggage, and thus being made “raw” and “open.” The “spiritual work” of “self-transformation” held close the goal of deep engagement with—and deconstruction of—the psychological and metaphysical composition of the self; this was understood in the community as “doing one’s spiritual work.”

Through participant-observation and interviews with yogis, I began to recognize yoga practice as a conjoiner of multiple spiritual worlds and yoga classes as a key site for the dissemination—and maintenance—of spiritual values, a “yoga church” of sorts. Following this thread, and the yoga teachers and practitioners, I then entered other festival worlds; by 2014, I began attending multiple Wanderlust events and Lightning in a Bottle.

In 2014, I attended Wanderlust events in Oahu (Hawaii), Los Angeles and Squaw Valley (Lake Tahoe) in California, and Mont Tremblant (Quebec), and in the following years, Sunshine Coast (Australia) and Great Lake Taupo (New Zealand). Wanderlust festivals attract a more mainstream and less spiritually committed yogic audience. While some participants expressed reverence for a guru, lineage, or a distinct spiritual or devotional practice, most were dedicated postural yogis, who focused particularly on the presumed physical benefits of the postural practice (āsana). Wanderlust event producers recognized the “spirituality-lite” values of their intended market and targeted their programming accordingly. Wanderlust festivals engaged with yogic symbols and philosophy through their aesthetic (a strategy that calls to mind yoga scholar Andrea Jain’s critique of gestural subversions), while simultaneously they focused explicitly on wellness, outdoor physical activity, reverence for nature, and the neoliberal cultivation of the self.6 Mark Bentley, one of the producers, explicitly phrased it as such, saying that Wanderlust festivals—and yoga classes—are “filling that need for a secular church.”7 Wanderlust festivals and the yoga classes therein offered participants the experience of a kind of enchanted secularism. As I will discuss, yoga practice forms a kind of spiritual punctuation to the secular that invites affective forms of religious experience: cosmic connection, wonder, deep introspection, and emotional overwhelm.

That same year, I also began to attend Lightning in a Bottle, which was my first entrée into a more popular (more than twenty-five thousand attendees) and music-oriented transformative event. Though it has had multiple locations, beginning in 2014, it was held in Bradley, California (halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco). In contrast to the specifically yogic festivals that I had attended, Lightning in a Bottle was considerably more eclectic and less yogic in its “consciousness” programming. Workshops tended to focus instead on Indigenous wisdom and included a wide variety of spiritually oriented themes, mostly convened at four massive yoga tents spaced evenly across the event geography. But therein too, in yoga classes, teachers espoused their distinctive philosophies and cultivated spiritual experiences that aimed to “transform” the self, expanding beyond the physical practice and focusing on peak


mystical experiences. In efforts to evoke these peak experiences, yoga classes included *kīrtan* (devotional singing), mantra recitations, chanting of the names of Hindu deities, expositions of Neo-Tantric and Samkhya Yoga philosophies, emotional partnering exercises, ecstatic dance, closed-eye guided explorations of the interior self through postural practice, and lengthy guided meditations.⁸

In all, I attended twenty-three festival events, took ninety-seven interviews, and was a participant-observer in over one hundred spiritual workshops and yoga classes. In these events, I focused on a spectrum of forms of spiritual yoga or yogic practices that expand beyond expressions of physical exercise and postures (āsana).⁹ The yogis who attended these festivals were interested in yogic philosophy, devotion, ritual worship, meditation, healing, therapeutic resources, and a variety of spiritual paths, including learning from spiritual gurus.¹⁰ Participants may have come to these festivals for the yoga, but once there, they experienced bhakti, *kīrtan*, mantras, chanting, chakras, breathwork, labyrinth walking, meditation, sound healing, channeling, and neoshamanism. Therefore, these events (and practitioners) also operate in dialogue with a vast field of global transformative events and an even more expansive field of SBNR ideas and practices.

In what follows, I argue that transformational festivals are functioning as a new form of “religious” institution, even though their participants radically reject the traditional soteriologies, hierarchies, and institutions that conventional religions have established. Instead, participants are interested in building “spiritual” communities and thus they are generating “transformational” events wherein they publicly declare and teach their SBNR values. Although they establish “spiritual” values and practices in imagined contradistinction to conventional religion, there is visible irony in the fact that many of these spiritual practices often resemble those of conventional religions. These SBNR participants are building communities, sculpting the self, recognizing agency in the supernatural, and, as is the focus of this article, engaging with material religion. While scholars of religion may balk then at these informants’ rejection of religion, while seeing hypocrisy in their enacting its sociological structures and aims, I suggest caution in this hermeneutical framing and suggest that we reserve our etic presumptions of superior judgment. Instead, in the vein of anthropologists, we would do well to unfold and investigate the emic view. In so doing, readers may view the distinction these actors are attempting to create between the much-confused terms “religion” and “spirituality” and as a result better understand that which they reject, and the new social worlds they aim to create through “spiritual” and “transformational” work.

In what follows, I focus attention on their expressions of material religion (or more accurately, to stay closer to the emic view, *material spirituality*) and the ways these expressions illustrate a variety of spiritual ontological values. I argue that the festivals’ primary aim is re-enchantment, and this is made visible in multilayered contexts, expanded as participants go deeper into the “interior infinite” through spiritual engagement with the festival experience.¹¹ In particular, I analyze how altars become public collaborations to express distinctive spiritual ontological values. At the individual level, I show how participants use their yoga mats as sites for personal introspection, therapeutic release, and communal belonging. In conclusion, I show how these material practices reflect the attempt to create material structures of spirituality that are individually designed but also re-enchanting and are imagined to be opposed to the negative valence with which most participants perceive institutional religion.

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8. In 2016, I also began to attend Burning Man, wherein I continued my focus on yoga and spirituality, while participating in and organizing a relatively unrelated camp, the French Quarter Black Rock Bakery. I chose this camp over other yogic or spiritually focused Burning Man villages/camps in order to keep perspective in the fact that there are many participants at Burning Man who are atheists or do not consider spirituality or ritual practice to be a part of their “burn.” As Gilmore notes, some participants are adamantly against framing Burning Man as a spiritual experience. As one of her informants phrased it, “More and more pseudoreligious idiots are attending [Burning Man] desperately trying to apply all the insipid labels to this experience... Religion is the latest spoiler for me at this event” (Gilmore, *Theater in a Crowded Fire*, 97).


Placing Yogic Practice in Contemporary Spirituality

Many of these participants have become deeply engaged with yoga practice as a facet of their broader attempts to sacralize aspects of their lives, while rejecting direct engagement with institutional religions. As multiple scholars have noted, eclectic, autonomous, and personalized spiritual practices come together in incongruous yet collectively reproduced amalgamations of “exotic” religious resources deemed both available and productive for spiritual growth. This reach into non-white cultures for resources dovetails with assumptions about modernity and disenchantment, with Indigenous, Asian, and premodern European spiritualities providing fodder for re-enchantment of modernity and the sanctification of space and time (fig. 1).

These largely white, Anglo-European spiritual content creators turn to these alternative sources for inspiration under the broad-based and variously iterated presumption that the contemporary Western world—including its religions—has become corrupted and disenchanted in modernity. Furthermore, many participants see that disenchantment as the reason for the current crises of modernity, in that it fosters social isolation, anomie, melancholia, environmental destruction, and violence. These populations are nonspecialists operating within the popular myths of enchantment and disenchantment. They do not abide the scholarly notion that the myth of disenchantment is largely a discursive product of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe and not an objective reality.

The festival event—with its multifaceted explorations into various spiritual forms and practices—is a means by which to re-enchant and reconnect, though the notion of precisely what participants
are connecting with remains largely undefined. At Shakti Fest, Naomi explained,

I come to things like this because it stirs my spirit. It stirs what’s in me, which is the greater part that I am connected to, and tonight—I don’t know what—I don’t know how to express that…. I know that I am connected to the larger world. My spirits, my body, and my heart speaks, and I feel differently when I’m in places where there’s a certain energy. It’s very noticeable. Like people talk about how they feel God or whatever, well I feel spirit. I feel energy when I’m in places like this.14

Many festivalgoers identify as empaths, energy workers, or at least those who recognize “energy” as a powerful force in social relations and human existence. The practice of yoga, too, is often understood as a means to tap into energies that connect the self, others, the earth, and the cosmos. Carly, an empath from New Orleans whom I talked with at Shakti Fest, explained that she “did yoga because of energy.”

I didn’t do it to like build my abs. I did it because I was crying in [yoga] classes [and] had no idea why…. I’m opening the shakras [sic] [chakras] but I’m not knowing that it is happening. I just know that I go into a camel [pose], and then I’m in a child’s pose, and I’m sobbing—no thoughts. So, I knew that meant something because it’s so bizarre. So, I did yoga training for the spirituality, for the energy, for that—and it intertwines for me. So, then I found out [about] shakras—shakras [sic] are in Reiki. That’s what I mean. That they’re all kind of connected for me or at least the parts that I gravitated to. I mean the physical part I love and that’s also what is opening me up. I hold stuff in my body. That’s energy. So, that’s why I did yoga [teacher] training.15

Attuning to energy through metaphysical practices (yoga, Reiki, chakra balancing/healing, meditation, and so on) often becomes a primary focus for these spiritual seekers, and coming together in festivals becomes a means of fostering a collective experience of shared ideals and communal learning.

The communal gathering of the transformative event is relatively new, but this focus on becoming attuned to, gathering, channeling, and transmitting energy for spiritual purpose is a long-standing foundational practice of metaphysical religion, one that religion scholar Catherine Albanese traces to early twentieth-century confluences of Asian metaphysical ideas including chakras, meridians, and postural yoga.16 In her ethnographic research on those whom she calls “the new metaphysicals,” sociologist Courtney Bender notes, “The physical and fleshy body can be a ‘container,’ but it is also a channel, conduit, or ‘switch.’ Meditation, yoga, Reiki, acupuncture, and a variety of other activities provided ways to find and maintain physical bodies that were open, aligned, or relaxed, and therein properly attuned to the energies that simultaneously coursed through them and constituted them.”17 In this view, attuning and aligning with cosmic energies that course through and sustain all life is one of the fundamental ways the world becomes re-enchanted, and as this article will reveal, material objects become especially sanctified as portals for the sacred.

All of this spiritual work is done, however, outside of the category of religion, which my informants routinely critiqued as a source of violence, corruption, and corporatization instigated and supported by churches (and other conventional religious institutions). Many of my informants verbally processed their rejection of religion through their affirmations of their spiritual beliefs and practices. However, as multiple scholars working in “spiritual” (or SBNR) field sites have found, their rejection of religion does not mean that they had no interest in the supernatural, prayer,
ritual, or cosmological and soteriological questions. Quite the contrary: there is considerable
evidence that unchurched SBNR populations hold deep "metaphysical" convictions.18

One clear distinction, however, is that a primary characteristic among SBNR populations is
that personal experience (and not a religious institution or clerical figure) becomes the most
significant barometer of religious authority. As the scholar of New Age religion Paul Heelas
explains, "the inner realm of life serv[es] as the source of significance and authority, the realm
of transcendent theism does not enter into the monistic ontology."19 Religion scholar David L.
McMahan traces this focus on personal experience also to the nineteenth century, wherein the
term "spirituality" referred to

attitudes and practices oriented toward a transcendent reality to which all major religions might provide
paths and which was accessed not through the institutions of religion but through personal experience.... It is
characterized by a cosmopolitan embrace of the many different faiths as each having a "spiritual dimension,"
again over and above the institutional and social dimensions, and an emphasis on personal access to this
reality through serene contemplation or ecstatic experience.20

Thus, for the past several centuries, yogic spirituality has referenced a conglomeration of
European harmonialistic ideas of energy, ether, and spirit, and also a variety of extractions from
Indigenous and Indic religions (here glossed broadly to refer to religions originating in India,
primarily Hinduism, Buddhism, and Tantra).21 In this eclectic amalgamation, contemporary
spiritual worlds include tree spirit worshippers, yogis, Neo-Tantrics, Reiki practitioners, crystal
skull communicators, ecstatic dancers, silent meditators, and so on. In general, they draw heavily
from individualized forms of mystical and ascetic practices. In conversations at these festivals,
I found that a large majority correlated the term "religion" with Christocentric forms of religion,
specifically, and as a result, they tended to embrace noninstitutional and non-Western religious
forms, which seemed to be the defining category of that which was deemed "spiritual."

Enacting various spiritual practices eclectically drawn from multiple sources, these populations
enchant their worlds, building rituals and celebrating the confluences of a universe that is
often believed to be sending them signs. In their rejection of the catastrophic consequences of
modernity (totalitarianism, mass destruction, eco-death), they celebrate that which they regard
as emblematic of the premodern (often indexed as pre-Christian). As the religion scholar Jason
A. Josephson-Storm explains, "Moreover, the more 'magic' becomes marked as antimodern, the
more it becomes potentially attractive as a site from which to criticize 'modernity.'"22 The magical,
mystical, and supernatural intertwines with romanticized conceptions of non-Western forms of
religion as pure, unsullied ancient wisdom that provide alternatives to modernity.

In a fascinating convergence, the social event of festival also emerges as a site of communal
spiritual exchange and social revitalization that situates itself in contrast to modernist forms
of institutional religion. The French sociologist Émile Durkheim famously regarded the festival
as the most fundamental (and primitive) form of religion, arguing that the very foundations of
religion were developed through these sacrificial communal gatherings.23 Taking this to heart, it
is then somewhat unsurprising that contemporary spiritualists, when looking to re-enchant their
worlds and to build new transformational spiritually oriented societies, turn to the festival as a
potently generative event.

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18. According to a 2012 Pew
Research Center study, more
than two-thirds (68 percent) of
US nationals who identify as
either SBNR, agnostic, or atheist
(likely not the atheists) say that
they believe in God. Cary Funk
and Greg Smith, "'Nones' on the
Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No
Religious Affiliation," Pew Forum
on Religion & Public Life, October
9, 2012. See also Bender, New
Metaphysicals.

19. Paul Heelas, The Spiritualities
of Life: New Age Romanticism and
Consumptive Capitalism (Malden,

20. David L. McMahan, "The
Enchanted Secular: Buddhism
and the Emergence of
Transtraditional 'Spirituality,'
Eastern Buddhist 43, no. 1/2

21. Anya Foxen, Inhaling Spirit:
Harmonialism, Orientalism, and
the Western Roots of Modern
Yoga (New York: Oxford University

22. Josephson-Storm, Myth of
Disenchantment, 16.

23. Émile Durkheim, The
Elementary Forms of Religious
Life, trans. Karen Fields (New
Marking Sacred Space: The Altar

It is somewhat ironic that these adamantly “not religious” communities routinely invest energy in recreating the conventional religious form of the altar. Creative and personalized altars are commonplace in Hindu, Buddhist, Chinese, and Korean ancestral religions; Native American traditions; Catholicism; Neo-Paganism; and Wicca. Altars are designated spaces wherein relationships between humans and deities are established, maintained, and negotiated. In festival and gathering spaces, they are “ephemeral art,” and among Neo-Pagans, anthropologist Sabina Magliocco suggests that they are also an “individual performance—a display of the makers’ skill and artistry, their grasp of magical symbolism and affiliation with a particular tradition.” Building and maintaining personalized altars can be an important means to valorize, imagine, and sacralize ancestral paths while reinforcing ethnic, cultural, and religious identities.

In many religious traditions, they also function as sacred portals through which to commemorate and communicate with ancestors, including the most recently deceased.

Given their deep connections to traditional forms of religiosity, it is somewhat surprising that participants and producers at transformational festivals build altars throughout event geographies. But it is precisely the altars’ immediate denotation of religious import that makes them effective markers of sacred spaces, able to transform conventionally profane locales, such as parking lots, hotel conference rooms, canopied tent spaces, and empty natural landscapes. The collectively constructed altars punctuate these landscapes and instigate curiosity and reflection, invoke the divine, and cultivate a multiplicity of affective responses, including (but not limited to) reverence. Many of the altars draw on a wide variety of religious traditions, and a multiplicity of philosophical and religious ideas are enlivened and illuminated through their construction. They represent the particular vision(s) of their creators, but then they are often manipulated and modified as participants engage with them throughout the event. Interacting with the altars becomes a means by which to initiate meaningful and personal spiritual experiences.

For altar builders, creating altars can become an impactful means by which to experiment with and create their personalized spiritual vision and also to imprint that vision upon the festival space for others to experience. In 2012, at Bhakti Fest, Sarah, a dark-haired free-spirited woman in her mid-twenties articulated her passion for creating altars and what she called “temple spaces” for workshops and ceremonies at a variety of transformational festivals. She was proud of her work to “create an energy, create a harmony, [and] create a flow throughout each day” that would build throughout the course of the festival. As she recounted her experience several weeks prior as the lead builder for the Temple of New Beginnings in the Sacred Spaces Village at Burning Man, she was excited about the deeply impactful spiritual spaces that she and her community had created, and she was honored to have had the opportunity to “hold space” in that way. As a Reiki master, she felt that she was particularly attuned to processes of manipulating energy and organizing space to create energetic epicenters.

At Wanderlust festivals, producers create altars to help transform profane spaces into sacred ones and to create a sense of magic and wonder; they disguise streetlamps and parking lots and decorate grassy lawns and tented workshop spaces. Altars serve as an invitation to interact with the geographical landscape and call attention to the beauty of the natural world. They also
function as interactive displays, calling participants to connect with their poignant messages of spiritual communication. The altars are nontraditional in that they tend toward artful geometric designs, usually without direct references to deities. Participants do not interact with them through conventional religious practices, such as prayers, supplications, and offerings. Instead, the altars adorn the landscape with beauty and wonder, and participants sit next to them in quiet meditation or enjoy their spiritual backdrop while journaling, engaging in intimate conversations, or taking photos.

The altars at Wanderlust festivals invoke what McMahan calls an "enchanted secularism," meaning an attempt "to reenchant the disenchanted world, not through a rejection of disenchantment per se but through embracing the agents of disenchantment and reframing them in such a way as to reinfuse sacrality into the world."28 At Wanderlust, broadly, this means creating a space that cultivates "sublime experiences engaging with nature, personal introspection through yoga, and spiritual fulfillment in contact with community."29 The altars re-enchant the disenchanted world by repurposing natural materials, shaped to invoke the wonder of the natural world and the creative human spirit in combining them into something special and set apart—that is, sacred.30 Every altar is distinctive and reflects the particular spiritual preferences and proclivities of the crafters and designers. Volunteer altar builders are largely limited by the materials provided by those in charge.

In 2014, at Wanderlust, Squaw Valley, the main thoroughfare of the festival took over the storefronts of the off-season ski village, while massive tent canopies occupied the parking lots and created spaces for yoga practice, therapeutic workshops, and communal gatherings. Handcrafted altars helped to sacralize these conventional and commercial spaces. Altars were built with driftwood, crystals, sea shells, quartz rocks, polished glass stones, selenite crystal sticks, succulents, moss, roses, carnations, pinecones, and feathers. Some were constructed in circular designs, others in triangular or heart-shaped ones that invited participants into energetic focal points. Several of the altars boasted a central point with a figure seated in a meditative posture resembling a Buddha. In the example below (figure 2), the shadowed Buddha figure rested above decorative flowers, driftwood, and found natural objects, and, most interestingly, a mirror, flanked with more peacock feathers (a symbol of Krishna) and other bird-of-prey feathers (possibly invoking Native religions). Nearly all of the altars at Wanderlust, Squaw Valley, that year had small circular mirrors at their central focal points. The practical effect of the mirror was that when participants approached the altar, they saw a reflection of themselves, instead of or in addition to a representation of divinity.

This sacralization of the human (and their bodies) can be viewed multiply: as a reaction against theologies that condemn the body as sinful; as the Neo-Vedantic ideal that the individual Ātman (essence of self) is divine (tat tvam asi, the "great saying" [mahāvākya] of the Chandogya Upanisad); or in the celebration of human life itself as composed of sacred, energetic "stardust" made popular in the 1960s counterculture.31 In such a view, the self is an internal source of divinity, and not that which is to be denied or rejected. Heelas explains this fundamental reformulation of the self as an affirmation of "spiritualities of life." He writes, "Whether it be yoga in Chennai or yoga in San Francisco ... one will encounter the theme that what matters is delving within oneself to experience the primary source of the sacred, namely that which emanates from the 'meta-empirical' depths of life in the here-and-now."32 The mirror at the center of the altar

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29. Lucia, White Utopias, 42.
32. Heelas, Spiritualities of Life, 5.
provocatively invokes this revaluation of the self and challenges conventional understandings of precisely what should hold space of divinity. In asserting the divinity of the self, the altar encourages participants to interact with this alternative worldview as they view their reflections alongside found objects from nature on the altars.

Figure 2: Altar at Wanderlust, Squaw Valley, California, 2014 (note the mirror as the centerpiece).

Producers and participants at other transformational festivals were less explicit about the self-as-sacred philosophical intervention but instead invoked other commonplace themes of SBNR ontology and metaphysics: eclectic amalgamations of religious traditions, the veneration of nature, and the belief that the divine is immanent in all of existence. The altars at Lightning in a Bottle in 2014 used found objects from nature and statues and photographic images from a variety of religious traditions, particularly Indigenous and Indic religions and occasionally Catholicism (fig. 3). In contrast to Wanderlust, many of these altars honored some reference to Native American religiosity (dream catchers, feathers, and sage), statues of the Buddha, Quan Yin (aka Guan Yin/Kuan Yin), Hindu deities (mostly Ganesha, Kali, Shiva, and Vishnu), the Virgin Mary, female goddess figures, tarot cards, and prayer cards. They included geodes and crystals, driftwood, woodchips, and rocks. Some incorporated colorful items that might conventionally be regarded as trash (bottle caps, crushed cans, empty nitrous oxide canisters, and colorful food wrappers). Altars were often placed in beatific natural environments and were constructed according to a variety of patterns of sacred geometry (yantras and mandalas).

The inclusion of what conventionally is regarded as trash also makes an important theological point that challenges participants to question the boundaries of what is commonly considered to be beautiful and divine. Inherently, it rejects conventional religious assumptions that the sacred
is confined to specific religiously ordained objects or persons and asserts the immanence of
the divine. The eclecticism of the altar reflects the communal commitment to perennialism, the
notion that while there are differences between religious traditions, they are expressions of a
singular truth or essence.\textsuperscript{33} The inclusion of trash marks a radical democratization of the sacred
reimagined as an all-inclusive category, applicable to all of the creatures and components of the
natural world.


These altars not only were designed to be beautiful spaces but also functioned as interactive
art installations. In some cases, participants were invited to contribute by creating special things
(poetry, drawings, notes, and blessings) with supplied art materials or their own self-designated
sacred items (figurines, stones, and so on). Writing journals for collective use were placed around
their exterior parameters and often used for communal messages, meditations, reflections, or
drawings. The altars tended to be built in public spaces—on hilltops or under large trees—that
invited participants to congregate at the altar as a site of both creative expression and spiritual
reflection. As a result, they also became points of curiosity, wherein participants read messages
in the communal journals, viewed art, and witnessed the collaborative amalgamations of
communal spiritual expression.

Following a more traditional religious form, at Bhakti and Shakti Fests (both festivals that focus
on yoga and Hindu devotional practices [bhakti]), the altars populating the festival grounds
boasted images and figurines of Hindu gurus and deities. At the main interactive altar at the
front of the main stage, participants positioned photos of all of the most famous global gurus
of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Muktananda, Mata

Figure 3: Altar at Lightning in a Bottle, 2014 (note the decorative repurposing of "trash").
Amritanandamayi, A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, Neem Karoli Baba, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Swami Nithyananda, Shirdi Sai Baba, and Ramana Maharshi, among others. Presiding over all of this at the center was the Hindu deity Ganesha, known to be the remover of obstacles. Directly beneath him was a plate with all of the necessary accoutrements for pūjā (ritual worship): red vermillion, water, camphor, a brass bell, and incense. Scattered throughout the multilayered altar were small diyā (lamps), candles, flower petals, plants, water vessels, and peacock feathers (symbols of Krishna). There were also images and figurines of Hindu deities, including Radha, Krishna, Hanuman, and Saraswati; a small painted elephant; and a painted image of the Virgin Mary. While most of the photos placed on the altar were famous images of celebrity gurus and recognizable deities, there were some that were less so, perhaps pictures of local family gurus, parents, and loved ones.

The public altar at the main stage at Bhakti and Shakti Fests was often overshadowed by exuberant crowds, who twirled and swayed at the foot of the stage keeping time with the repeated mantras of the kīrtan musicians. But nevertheless, its presence invoked the teachings and spiritual power (śakti) of revered gurus, as well as their authority imagined as being grounded in ancient Indic lineages and traditions. The gurus on the altar were not present for the beautification of the event grounds or for a picturesque backdrop for a photo opportunity. Instead, they served as representatives of the devotional commitment of participants who had placed their images there with intention. Their visages reminded participants that the meditations, prayers, mantras, and devotional music were supplications offered to someone—not just projected into the nebulous ether or to a vague semblance of a divine force. For these altar creators and contributors, the images that they brought to the altar represented a family of spiritual exemplars, each in their own way, guiding seekers to higher planes of consciousness.

For Bhakti and Shakti Fest participants, constructing altars was a practice cultivated at home and then reproduced within the festival. For example, Hannah described the contents of her home altar similarly as containing “pictures of my [spiritual] teachers and Shiva, and a little bit of Buddhist stuff. It’s basically things that inspire me. Teachers that have inspired, whoever; it’s like my heart is on the altar. I have a picture of my kids on there. And a picture of the Himalayas—things that inspire me.” For some, their domestic altars occupy small corner nooks and window sills adorned with special objects. For others, particularly those who host satsangs (religious gatherings), yoga, or kīrtan in their homes, domestic altars can comprise entire rooms fully dedicated to pūjā, yoga, kīrtan, Neo-Tantric rituals, and meditation.

Personalized altars are a commonplace way for spiritual seekers to express their unique amalgamations of a variety of objects of devotional affection, and creating a personalized altar is often a first step to cultivating a spiritual practice in the home. For example, John, an older participant at Bhakti Fest told me that he was one of the few thousand who had ordered and received the countercultural American guru Baba Ram Dass’s original spiritual care package, From Bindu to Ojas, back in 1970. The famed book, which later became the countercultural classic, Be Here Now (1971), arrived in a box replete with a “cookbook for a sacred life,” an LP record of kīrtan, and all the accoutrements needed to construct your own altar: mandalas and photographs of gurus, gods, and goddesses.

Nearly fifty years later, during our interview, John told me about building his business and selling

34. Hannah [pseud.], interview by Jennifer Albrecht (author’s research assistant), Bhakti Fest, Joshua Tree, California, September 7, 2012.
altar boxes that people in his spiritual community fill with treasures of their own selection. He explained,

I got into building salvage ... and I saved moldings and wood and bleacher wood from old schools and years ago I started building these altars. They hang on the wall and they are sort of Moorish architecture and Indian architecture and temple architecture and sort of reduce it down to small—some of them weigh sixty or seventy pounds—but some of them are small, you know, like five pounds and they hang on the wall. You know, they are just a little focus, a center to focus, a reminder.36

For many, domestic and festival altars alike function as a visible reminder of divine presence. Notably, John sells his altar boxes empty, allowing for purchasers to design their sacred landscape by choosing personalized objects of veneration.

The practice of maintaining a domestic altar also translated into the festival space, wherein some participants created altars in the center of a cluster of tents and recreational vehicles (RVs) or in front of their personal living spaces. Some might contribute notes of affirmation or small gifts to these altars, but often they remained untouched by the public. Instead, they served as a means to decorate and sacralize participants’ temporary homes and to create the festival time and space as distinctively spiritual. For example, at Wanderlust, Squaw Valley, in 2014, tent camping was high at the top of the chairlift with a 360° view of the surrounding Sierras and Lake Tahoe. My neighbor, Chrissy, was a sprightly young blond yoga instructor who was a veteran of the festival circuit. After she set up her tent, she unpacked a square of brocaded cloth, a Buddha statue, and a string of LED lights, from which she made an altar outside of her tent entrance. When I admired it, she explained that she takes it with her to all of the yoga festivals she goes to and that it serves as an object for meditation each morning and a comforting way to recognize home after dark.37

In contrast to the collective public altars, which were interactive spaces for communal spiritual engagement, her individual altar invited opportunities for personal reflection, meditation, yoga practice, and the practicality of marking home.

Marking Sacred Space: The Yoga Mat

While public altars are spaces for interactive communal spiritual reflection, the yoga mat is a deeply personal intimate space carved out for personal spiritual introspection. For many practitioners, the yoga mat is not only a material object but also a physical space, a mental state, and a community of practitioners. Those who align in community through yoga practice recognize each other as members of a subgroup of spiritual seekers. As Jeremiah Silver, a breathwork and healing arts teacher, explained during his workshop at Shakti Fest in 2015, when participants see each other on the street or in the airport with their yoga mats strapped to their backs, there is an instant recognition, an inner knowing, that “we are of the same tribe.”38

The controversial term “tribe,” which I have discussed elsewhere, is used unapologetically by many throughout the yogic spiritual community to refer to fellow spiritual seekers and yoga practitioners.39 White kīrtan artists employ the term (for example, Larisa Stowe and the Shakti Tribe), transformational festivals use it in their marketing materials, and online yoga channels and yoga studios brand themselves with the term (for example, Om Yoga Tribe and Yoga Tribe). As the yogi Dana Damara reflected on her experiences at Wanderlust, Squaw Valley, on the popular platform Gaiam:


38. Jeremiah Silver [pseud.], breathwork workshop, audio recording, Shakti Fest, Joshua Tree, California, May 15, 2015, quoted in Lucia, White Utopias, 199.

My yoga tribe, on the other hand, remembers me. The knowing of tribe members is unexplainable and may show up as synchronicities or mystical encounters... When I arrive at Wanderlust every year I can’t help but feel like I’m with my family... We travel to each other and gather with a common interest and passion of making sustainable change with our various forms of art, music, dance and yoga. We know that, when we come together, the energy creates a vortex that is mystical and magical. We know that in one breath, big change can be made. We know that bringing other like-minded individuals into our tribe makes our vortex bigger and more powerful, so there is support and unconditional love... One love—one heart—one tribe.43

In festival spaces, it is on the yoga mat that these populations come together to commune and create and to collectively generate energetic "vortexes." The yoga mat becomes a portal to re-enchantment through spiritual introspection. The object itself cultivates belonging and recognition, a visible means of unifying the spiritual community through common practice.

During festival yoga classes, it was common for practitioners to somehow sacralize their yoga mats prior to the start of class. At the minimum, many set aside a notebook and pen for noting down poignant thoughts, inspirations, favored āsana sequences, and teaching advice that might arise during the forthcoming class. Some took off their prayer beads (mālās) and piled them neatly in a corner or centered across the top of their mats. At Shakti Fest in 2016, a young man laid down his yoga mat next to mine and then pulled out a long wooden ceremonial flute with strips of leather twined around the top and descending colored gems inlaid to invoke the seven chakras (an Indic improvisation on a Native American theme). Carefully, he laid the flute horizontally at the top of his yoga mat and then made a deep and reverent prostration. He then knelt and pressed his hands together in silent prayer or meditation while he waited for the class to begin.

While his behavior was particularly pious, a large majority of yoga practitioners in these festivals understand their yoga mats to be special, if not sacred, places. While most recognize that the yoga mat itself is merely rubber or vinyl and do not relate to the object itself as sacred, the space that it designates is. The rectangular boundaries of the yoga mat differentiate the practice as a space of introspection and spiritual solace. At Wanderlust, Oahu, the popular yoga teacher Katie Kurtz encouraged her students, saying, “Every part of our journey is sacred. One great soul journey we’re on and we’re coming to our mats as a way to remember the sacredness and the mystery of this journey.”41 It is a matter of routine that yoga teachers commend their students for “coming to their mats,” for “taking time on their mats,” and for “being present on their mats.” The yoga mat creates a designated time and space for yoga practice and meditation, and how one “comes to the mat” invokes a distinctive cosmological worldview and ethical values.42 Practitioners reward themselves for “showing up” and establishing their yoga practice as a reflective time and space separate from their daily lives (fig. 4).

Through habituated use, practitioners also develop conditioned responses, wherein their approach to the yoga mat itself invokes a sense of sacrality, introspection, and calm centeredness. The yoga mat “invites,” “centers,” “calms,” and “stills.” As Delilah, a yogi from Wanderlust, Squaw Valley, explained, “when I’m on it [my yoga mat], there’s an energy that calms me down.”43 Many yogis make similar associations, with the yoga mat cultivating a distinctively special energy. For Delilah, this reference is so strong that she has kept her same yoga mat for the past thirty years—refusing to replace it—because it is her personal “sacred space.” Such rules

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41. Katie Kurtz [pseud.], yoga class, audio recording, Wanderlust, Oahu, Hawaii, March 1, 2014.
42. For example, Jicama explained how she regulates her diet by avoiding “soda and food that has low vibration” so that she can come to her yoga mat “full of energy and life force.” Jicama [pseud.], interview by Jennifer Albrecht (author’s research assistant), Bhakti Fest, Joshua Tree, California, September 8, 2012.
follow anthropologist Mary Douglas’s theorization of a Durkheimian relationship between purity and sacraity. She writes, “For us sacred things are to be protected from defilement. Holiness and impurity are at opposite poles.”

For this reason, it is a social faux pas to step on someone’s yoga mat while wearing shoes and many yogis would not loan their mat to someone else. In nearly every yoga class and personal practice, the yoga designates sacred time and space for spiritual introspection and yogic practice.

Douglas contrasts “us” with those who practice “primitive religion” and “contemporary primitives,” though few would willingly identify within such a negatively defined category. Douglas, Purity and Danger (New York: Routledge, 1966), 9. See also Durkheim, Elementary Forms of Religious Life.

During one particularly crowded yoga class at Wanderlust, Squaw Valley, in 2014, famed yoga teacher Kaylie Moon invited everyone to roll up their yoga mats and set them aside to make more room. To convince reluctant yogis, she explained how the rectangle of the mat can confine us into routine and habituate us into stagnation. Her call to yogis to leave behind their yoga mats was a radical affront to some, and some practitioners left the class instead of practicing without a mat. Others experimented playfully with this temporary community to expand their yoga practice beyond the familiar confines of the mat. But this social transgression is an outlier that reveals the rule, that in nearly every yoga class the yoga mat itself possesses sacred space and time and, when used, deploys the intention of time dedicated to spiritual introspection and transformation.

It is important to remember then how the yoga mat, while many scholars tend to reduce it to a mere yoga commodity (or a representation of yogic capitalism), in fact, serves a religious function. It is not only a marker of communal identity (“yoga tribe”) but also a marker of yogic time and space as sacred. For example, in the following passage from Henry Stevenson’s (HS) yoga class at Bhakti Fest in 2013, the yoga mat—and yoga practice—also serves as a protector against “sin.” While inviting his yoga class to chant a mantra taught to him by Krishnamacharya, he explained as follows:

From the first cell of life that arrived when you arrived. Mother, father, one cell that now blooms as the whole body. Just rest your attention on that womb from the heart. For its own sake, you don’t have to realize anything. You’re not trying to make anything happen. You never have to make anything happen. Enjoy what is given. Rest
in the structure of the Padma Devī and the lotus. Now we give this vibration: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha, and the whole lotus shimmers. Please.

All: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha.

HS: Good, gentle throat inhale.

All: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha.

HS: Gentle inhale.

All: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha.

HS: Just pause for a moment. [flute plays a gentle melody for several minutes]

[flute pauses]

HS: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha. Please.

All: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha.

HS: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha.

All: Om shrīṃ śrī hai nāmaha.

[flute resumes with gentle melody] With the power of all the saints and sages and realizers, avatars of humanity, you are blessed. The power of reality itself that has appeared, that is arising as beautiful you, as extreme intelligence and function as you. [flute stops] So we bless you in this endeavor to stay in that continuity. You know, it’s the definition of not to sin is: stay on the mat, stay on the point, the point that you are reality itself. And we acknowledge your sincere interest and your sincere need for an actual yoga practice that is suitable for you, for your body type, your age, your health, that acknowledges your cultural background. We give that to you now, it’s a blessed day, an auspicious day.45

In Stevenson’s vision, the yoga mat is also protector against sin and a touchstone through which the yogic practitioner is able to “stay on point” and to recognize that the self is reality (the Upanisadic maxim that Ātman is Brahman).

**Conclusion**

The attention to creating and defining sacred space in transformative events—whether through altars or yoga mats—ultimately is an attempt to reinvent the material landscape to reflect and assert distinctive spiritual ontologies. These sacred spaces are formulated by their creators as an invitation into the particularistic understandings of spiritual ways of worlding, and they invite participants into communion, reflection, and engagement, at both communal and individual levels.

Overarchingly, there is a clear emphasis on collaborative creation and democratic participation. Many of the festival producers merely reserved space for altar creation: hilltops, grassy lawns,
draped platforms, or a designated corner (or center) of the yoga tent or music stage. Thereafter, particularly for high-visibility altars, a second tier of high-level organizers collaborated to ensure that something special would be placed there. For example, at Bhakti Fest, Kamala, a high-level organizer of the festival, loaned her extraordinarily beautiful and valuable **murti** (figurine) of Shiva Nataraja to the festival to be used on the main stage. At Wanderlust, Squaw Valley and Sunshine Coast, key organizers purchased the supplies for volunteers to create altars (and mandalas) throughout the festival grounds. Similarly, at Lightning in a Bottle, teams of designers worked on sections of the festival, crafting the foundations of a variety of interactive spaces to which participants would add their sacred objects.46 In each case, festival producers provided the canvases and the raw materials, and then a team of codesigners implemented the first level of creative processes. Then, in the course of the festival, participants engaged with the altars in unique and unpredictable ways. The results were collaborative fields of material expression that conveyed the distinctive spiritual and ontological values of the impromptu community.

At Bhakti and Shakti Fests, the main altar predominantly displayed Hindu deities and gurus and traditional objects used for ritual worship. While there was freedom to add items to the altars, participants tended to stay within the confines of the initial ontological direction, largely drawing from Hindu religiosity broadly construed. In contrast, altars at Wanderlust festivals reflected the enchanted secular ethos of the festivals, with reverence for nature and beauty but only minimal references to religion.47 At Lightning in a Bottle, altars embodied an eclectic amalgam of both of these theological impulses: they included eclectic religious figurines, natural materials, and also reconstituted trash.

In various ways, each of these altars reflect the fundamental values embraced among these spiritually diverse yogic communities. The rejection of religious hierarchy is a fundamental tenet, as is the valuation of all existence as divine. Each of these altars expressed theological ecumenism, without any demand for confinement to any singular deity or religious tradition. Even the Hindu-centric altars of Bhakti and Shakti Fests included Sikh gurus, images of the Virgin Mary, special stones, shells, flowers, trinkets, and drawings by the end of the festival. As discussed, Wanderlust altars provocatively asserted this metaphysical assertion of the self as divine by placing mirrors at the center of their altars in Squaw Valley in 2014. Lightning in a Bottle altars in 2016 repurposed trash, including colorful crushed cans, bottle caps, and empty nitrous oxide canisters, and placed them decoratively in the altar design alongside figurines of deities and humans and natural objects. Here, most provocatively, the altars invited participants to reconsider precisely what was being designated as sacred, invoked as special, and consecrated as divine. They called on participants to defy the conventional boundaries of the sacred and to conceive of divinity as immanently present in all things, including drug use and trash.

These altars are communal expressions, but they are also a catalyst for personal spiritual reflection. Underlying their creation is the widespread valuation of any means of opening oneself to introspective spiritual experience. It is for this reason that the yoga mat becomes much more than a square of rubber or vinyl but a marker of sacred space and time, and even a sacred object that can protect against sin and keep practitioners on the yogic path. The yoga mat also designates a vortex space wherein introspective, psycho-affective, and sometimes mystical experiences can occur. Expanding from the individual to society, sociologically, the yoga mat represents a communal identity, with yogis imagining themselves as family or as a “tribe.” This
is not only because of the somewhat simplistic reference to the fact that those carrying yoga mats “do yoga” but, more importantly, because those who “do yoga” value the daily practice of reserving time to cultivate spiritual experience. Altars and yoga mats are material objects that aim to re-enchant both the community and the individual through personal transformation. Making sacred spaces in festival events is a visible means by which to express and convey distinctive spiritual and ontological values, such as democracy, collaboration, co-creation, ecumenism, individualism, freedom, and an understanding of the self as divine and the divine as immanent. The material culture of these environs reveals the distinctive ontological values of “metaphysical” spirituality, all the while recreating the structures of the more conventional modes of religion.
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“Respect the Stick!”: Material Culture and Alternative Political Models at European Rainbow Gatherings

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ABSTRACT

Rainbow Gatherings are one of the earliest forerunners of transformative events, with a history spanning five decades. These noncommercial, cocreated, and inclusive meetings have a global spread, offering radical alternatives to social organization and political processes. This essay examines the alternative political model of Rainbow Gatherings through the lens of material culture studies. The analysis follows an object biography of the ritual artifact known as the Talking Stick, central to Rainbow’s political practices, and explores the meaning of the object in material, symbolic, and instrumental senses. Drawing on ethnographic field work at fourteen Rainbow Gatherings across Europe, the essay concludes that organizational models contribute to the transformational potential of events.
"Respect the Stick!": Material Culture and Alternative Political Models at European Rainbow Gatherings

Katri Ratia

The shadows are growing longer as a motley crew of people assemble around a fire pit in a forest. Some are carrying firewood, one hauls a blackened teapot, and another is carrying a wooden staff with ribbons and beads dangling off one end. We are at the 2016 European Rainbow Gathering at the border of Italy and Slovenia, and these twenty-some participants are preparing for a Talking Circle. The participants form a circle around the fire, hand in hand, and chant a drawn-out "Om" in unison. Then, in a fluttering of blankets and sheepskins, the group sits on the ground and quiets down. The staff is handed to a middle-aged woman who smiles, nods, and sets it across her lap. "Dear Family, thank you for coming. I was asked to explain the water situation in the camp, and I feel we have to do something." She goes on to express her concerns regarding the quality of the drinking water that is drawn from a spring nearby. When she finishes, she passes the staff to a man on her left, who holds it upright in front of him as he describes people coming to the Medicine Area with stomach problems.

The staff is passed around the circle and one by one the participants pitch in, presenting practical ideas, ideological considerations, critical questions, and personal experiences. A man questions if the water was tested at the beginning of the event and found safe. One woman speaks about the spiritual aspects of drinking natural water, while another, with a toddler squirming under her poncho, suggests buying bottled water for safety. Other reasons for the stomach bug are speculated, from physiological to "energetic" and "karmatic" explanations that borrow from metaphysical notions of spiritual energy and Asian religious understandings of karma. After many rounds of discussion, several suggestions are made, and some of them are agreed upon. The spring should be tested, and in the meantime, all drinking water at the Children's Kitchen and the Medicine Area will be boiled. A workshop teaching water-filter construction will be held. Volunteers for organizing the tasks and informing the rest of the camp are assigned. But no bottled water will be bought with the collective money, as many participants objected to the idea. Lastly, the participants stand up and chant another "Om" together.

Rainbow Family and Its Gatherings

In the peripheries of modern nation-states flourishes a radical grassroots movement devoted to ideas of sacred nature and transformation, defined here as a development of a particular kind of social and ecological awareness, to advance what this movement sees as the improvement of human societies. Known as the Rainbow Family of Living Light, its activity consists of organizing inclusive and noncommercial meetings in natural settings. These utopian events are called Rainbow Gatherings, and they aspire to operate without centralized forms of power or a market-type economy.

In this essay, I will examine the alternative political model of Rainbow communities through the lens of material culture studies. I will present an object biography of the ritual artifact known as the Talking Stick (the "staff" mentioned above), which is pivotal to Rainbow's political practices, exploring the meaning of the object in material, symbolic, and instrumental senses. The object

1. Field notes, Italy/Slovenia, 2016. Field excerpts and interviews are anonymized where informants have not agreed to being identified.
Rainbow Gatherings are a forerunner of contemporary “transformational festivals,” and in addition to the themes of individual change, the reform and revitalization of mainstream societies are implicit in Rainbow culture. Rainbow’s event tradition sprang up in the wake of the 1960s and early 1970s countercultural shift in the United States, launched by antiwar activists with an intent to bring together the various countercultural factions of the era in an autonomous and cooperative event. The first Gathering was in 1972, in Granby, Colorado, and after a decade of recurring Gathering events in the US, the tradition began migrating to other continents via international travelers. The first event in Europe was held at the border between Switzerland and Italy in 1983, organized by Swiss, French, and Italian participants self-described as “countercultural activists” and “members of the alternative press.” By 2019, Gatherings were held in every inhabited continent, and the total number of Rainbow events around the globe annually has been, on average, between seventy and eighty.

Each Gathering is constructed according to a five-decade-long tradition. The camp is ideally located on forested or pastoral land and at a distance from urban environments. Gatherers enter the area via an arrival center known as Welcome Home and hike into the Gathering. The camp consists of neighborhoods of participants’ tents, interspersed with designated sub-camps providing communal spaces, facilities, and services: the Main Kitchen and storage, the Temple, the Medicine Area, and so on. The epicenter of the camp is a sacralized area known as the Main Fire or Main Circle where a ceremonial fire burns throughout the event.

Rainbow Gatherings form an event-centered tradition nested in the overlapping networks of Western counterculture and alternative-holistic spirituality. Most Rainbow participants come from Western and middle-class backgrounds—a demographic that is typical of alternative-holistic or New Age religiosity in general—but they favor various forms of knowledge, practice, and aesthetics that divert from typical mainstream understandings. Most Gatherers identify with a number of related subcultures, such as Neopagans and those that scholars refer to as “New Age travelers” (Kevin Hetherington) and “new metaphysicals” (Courtney Bender). Many participants also belong to the social margins, such as people without formal education, wage labor, or permanent housing.

Rainbow Gatherings have been described as temporary intentional communities and autonomous zones, since they last for weeks at a time. The Gatherings are co-created (collectively organized, funded, and managed) and participatory, representing themselves as contemporary spiritual gatherings and counterculture utopias. They claim a culture of radical egalitarianism and sharing, shunning violence, commerce, and hierarchical leadership. The culture’s focus on what Gatherers see as ideal social forms and the staunch criticism of modern society manifest as an alternative temporary community modeled after their ideas of premodern “tribal” societies.
This essay is based on extensive ethnographic study of Rainbow Gatherings in Europe, informed by four years of fieldwork at fourteen Rainbow events of different sizes (from a handful of participants to a few thousand) in Switzerland, Italy, Portugal, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovenia, and Austria. The research took place over the years 2015–18 and includes participant observation, informal discussions, and thirty-three semi-directed interviews. The essay discusses a “migratory” form of Rainbow culture, as it manifests outside of the United States, and describes regional differences when they are relevant.

### The Transformative Potential of Events

Like many “alternative” phenomena today, Rainbow Gatherings seek to catalyze social transformation through individual experiences. This aspect of the Gatherings is rooted in three interrelated characteristics of transformative events. First, these events are “total social facts” spanning social dimensions which include religion, politics, economics, law, morality, aesthetics, and so on. Second, they form dynamic social systems that interact and collaborate, actively engaging participants. Third, they take a temporal and material form, requiring engagement in corporeal and tangible ways. In these ways, as with other contemporary events identifying as “transformational,” Rainbow Gatherings involve a conscious objective of producing and facilitating transformative experiences, a characteristic that amplifies the participants’ aims and expectations regarding the event.

Rainbow participants commonly describe their Gathering experiences as life-changing, and narratives of transformation are a part of typical Gathering lore. The scope, factors, and conditions of these experienced transformations are myriad, but they are all attributed to the event and its characteristics. One of the most important characteristics is the event’s role in opposition to the world outside the event’s bounds. As Graham St John has found, transformative events involve a marked contrast with mainstream culture, or more accurately, a multitude of contrasting views since event communities are not without internal contestation.

St John analyzes transformative events using the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia and notes that heterotopias are “experimental sites for ordering society” and characteristically reflexive in offering “socio-political alternatives.” In Rainbow Gatherings, this contrast is obvious and definitional, as the Gatherings are consciously presented as countercultural formations. The Gathering community explicitly addresses the idea of being an experienced social utopia and implements alternative practices, especially in the realms of politics, economics, and religion.

The “event-dimension” of Rainbow Gatherings can be best studied via the concrete and practical aspects of the culture and character of the event because the study of material culture examines the meaning of material forms in social processes, and how social reality is grounded in objects and environments. A central current in material culture studies examines what is known as “material symbolism”—the meanings activated by objects and environments. In addition to symbolic meaning, objects involve concrete aspects from the sensory to the instrumental, and hence the material realm has its own avenues of impact and interaction. Participating in an event like a Rainbow Gathering requires a physical experience of an immersive and immediate alternate reality. To create this immersive material reality, recurring event-cultures like Rainbow Gatherings...
develop their own traditions of presentation and practice: rituals, models of organization, forms of communication, material culture, and styles of attire, behavior, and expression—an entire subculture specific to the event, reflective of social bonds and relevant ideological concepts. These traditions are influential elements in processes of constructing identity, community, and culture—and hence, factors advancing the cultural work of the event. At Rainbow Gatherings, the Talking Stick is a prime example of an object that brings together the material, social, and symbolic worlds and contributes to the creation of an immersive transformational event experience.

**Talking, Circles, and Sticks**

The Talking Stick can be described properly only within the specific context of the Circle, which consists of Gatherers sitting in a circle and sharing a common focus. A Circle is an emic social institution in the culture of Rainbow Gatherings (I capitalize the word when referring to this Rainbow Gathering-specific institution). Gatherers form Circles for both practical and symbolic reasons. All kinds of collective processes and functions are performed while sitting or standing in a circle, including informal socializing, collective meals, focused workshops, and devotional practices. A circle of people is a typical motif in Rainbow materials like Gathering invitations and affiliated web pages, as the circle is highly symbolic in Rainbow culture. For the Gatherers, the circle signifies a peaceful, inclusive, and egalitarian community, as the following quotes from a Rainbow website illustrate: “we assemble in a circle and, holding hands we seek to treat each other and the earth with respect,” “At the Circle we become One,” and “We circle for our meals, and councils because we are all equal.”

For many Gatherers, a “tribal” identity represents an ideal. Typical conceptualizations of race, ethnicity, and tradition among the Gatherers are meant to challenge what they perceive to be dominant mainstream constructions, establishing alternative understandings. Such attitudes can be problematic and have drawn accusations of cultural appropriation, especially regarding Native American cultures. However, the Family is diverse, and all Gatherers are not involved in “playing Indian,” but Indigenous idioms remain influential on an ideological level. In general, premodern and Indigenous societies are seen as socially harmonious, environmentally sustainable, and spiritually advanced, and are placed in contrast with modern, Western ones. These sentiments are mostly present in an idealistic frame where these imaginaries of premodern societies stand for contemporary countercultural ideals. In Rainbow culture, references to “archaic” and “tribal” cultures and their ways function as general legitimating statements, often related to the concept of “natural” described below. At the very least, attributes like “archaic” or “ancient” suggest that the custom or cultural feature is very old and widely recognized. The Circle, like the Talking Stick, is often legitimated by reference to its “tribal” roots.

There are unspoken guidelines concerning Circles in any Rainbow Gathering. When a Circle is formed as a part of a ritual, it establishes a sacralized space. Unless specifically announced, a Circle is always open for everyone, and participants in the Circle are considered equals in the process, even if someone assumes a facilitating or organizing role. The Circle is a ritualistic formation that organizes space and guides attention, behavior, and social orientation. Circles...
at Rainbow Gatherings include Sister/Brother Circles (gender-specific peer support), Singing Circles, Drum Circles, Trading Circles (for bartering wares), Vision Councils that decide over the next Gathering event, and more. When there is a need for focused collective communication in a Rainbow Gathering, a Talking Circle is called. A Talking Circle signifies a specific type of ritualized collective discussion in a Circle, and its purpose can be related to a workshop, responding to a crisis, preparing for a collective task, organizing a themed conversation, or a specific consensual decision-making process. A Talking Circle consists of the participants sitting in a circle facing each other and passing a "focal object" (an object that helps maintain a collective focus) clockwise (sunwise). The tradition requires that the person holding the focal object, which in the migratory Rainbow tradition is typically a designated Talking Stick, has the right to speak uninterrupted. Those who break the rule are often reproached by demands to "Respect the Stick!" by other participants. At the 2016 European Rainbow Gathering described in the beginning, the Talking Stick was an unpeeled wooden staff of approximately one meter in length, decorated with colorful ribbons and trinkets.

Important decisions regarding the whole Family require a full consensus, which is achieved through a ritualized process. Typically, the person who called the Circle together explains the need for collective action, and the participants discuss the circumstances in a Talking Circle. When any participant, during their turn to speak, feels ready to formulate a proposition for the decision, they "call for consensus." This means that a defined proposal is stated, and the Talking Stick circulates to the left. The other participants pass the Stick in silence when they agree with the proposition or break the silence by expressing their concerns when they do not. If anyone breaks the silence, the discussion and reformulation of suggestions continues. When the Stick passes around the entire Circle in silence, consensus has been established, and the decision is confirmed. As media studies scholar Michael Niman emphasizes, consensus is a central aspect of Rainbow Gathering Circles, which is apparent in the following quote from a Rainbow website: "Consensus gives every person a chance to be heard and have their input weighed equally. The smallest minority has a chance to change the collective mind if their vision is keener. It is possible that Spirit has given them a message that is presently beyond the perception of the rest of the council." The process has its drawbacks. Despite the openness, typically only a small minority of Gatherers participate in the decision-making. Even then, Talking Circles can be time-consuming and disjointed, and the consensus process is vulnerable when participants remain obstinate. Creative ways have been devised to mitigate challenges arising from the requirements of inclusivity and unrestricted speech, such as those documented by Michael Niman among the US Rainbow Families: the Circle can appoint designated facilitators such as "gatekeepers" whose job is to update latecomers, and "vibeswatchers" who pause the discussion if it gets heated or disrespectful, recommending a moment of collective exercise, silence, or a group hug. Even with these challenges, most Rainbows believe that the Talking Stick promotes their ideals of a decentralized and direct form of radical democracy. A closer look at the "biography" of the Talking Stick reveals some of the ways that it promotes these ideals, as well as some of the tensions and contradictions involved with its use.
Cultural Biography of the Talking Stick

Object biographies are an analytical method of material culture studies, used by archaeologists, art historians, anthropologists, and others who study the relationships of people and objects. These biographies are also employed in material religion, or the study of religion through its material aspects. Religious studies scholar David Morgan has stated that the point of the material approach is to make the material reality “evidential” of religious aspects instead of merely illustrative of them. The method can be extended to cultural domains that are related and comparable to religion, like transformative events or vernacular models of governing and collective communication: “Any object or bodily practice that connects one to forces that protect, heal or nurture is at least on the verge of becoming religious, even if that force is the state, mother nature, human goodness or purpose-driven cosmic principle like ecological harmony.”

Following Morgan’s method, my analysis of the Talking Stick consists of three main themes: production, involving the object’s medium, design, and manufacture; classification, including the object’s function, comparison, and remediation (changes in the object’s medium); and circulation, which includes the object’s deployment, reception, and the ideology or cultural work it serves. Cultural work encompasses the topic of this essay—Rainbow’s political tradition—but it is not sufficient to focus directly on that. The object biography method deepens our understanding of cultural work by first analyzing various other features of the object and its interaction with humans, thus ensuring a comprehensive analysis of its role in Rainbow culture.

The Production of Talking Sticks as Designing with Nature

A volunteering Gatherer (or a group) makes the Talking Stick from dry, unworked, and untreated wood found within or close to the Gathering site. If the Stick is decorated, the decorations range from paint and other markings to attached objects and materials such as feathers, small bones, beads, crystals and semiprecious stones, strings, yarn, ribbons, wire, and small figurines. The material of the Stick carries specific meaning. The wood has been alive and growing in the Gathering location, making the object organic and essentially connected to the local site. It is a product of nature, often including its shape. The Stick can be called “natural” on this basis, but “nature” and “natural” are terms that have extensive cultural meanings going beyond the literal definition of “all the plants, animals and things that exist in the universe that are not made by people.”

Here, a short discussion about the concept “natural” and its meanings and connotations is in order—as it is central in Rainbow culture but often not explicitly defined. In the alternative-holistic world view (and the mainstream one to a lesser degree), the whole concept of “natural” should be taken as approaching a religious term. Not only is the term defined by supra-rational ideas and sentiments, but the concept is rarely discussed in any critical manner by the Gatherers. “Nature” and “natural” are accepted as cultural positives without questioning the meanings of these terms. “Nature” and “natural” are broadly used in this sense in Western and Westernized countries in general, and within the alternative-holistic spiritualities in particular, as shorthand for beneficial, positive, and ethical objects and practices across the board: diet and food production, healing arts, philosophy and religion, clothing and accessories, occupational and lifestyle choices, birthing and child rearing, education, and much more. As religious studies scholar Alan Levinovitz...
notes, this kind of use of the term is comparable to a theological term, where the “good” that nature represents clearly has moral, ethical, and transcendent properties. For Rainbow Gatherers, then, “nature” has a taken-for-granted quality rather than being seen as something they have constructed. Their attitudes towards the Talking Stick exemplify the construction of nature as an ideal good.

Rainbow Gatherers tend to explicitly contrast natural materials to unnatural materials, which they see in a negative light. A wooden stick could be seen as being of lower or more “primitive” status than a plastic item for example, but for Rainbow participants it is the opposite: these two materials represent completely different cultural meanings. One is of nature, but the other is artificial and synthetic, connoting not the ideas of human mastery over nature or “progress” that previous generations have seen in modern materials like plastics, but an “unnaturalness” that has negative ethical and moral tones. Items like glass beads or industrial metal wire are acceptable as decorations on the Stick—they appear natural when compared to newer materials such as plastics.

The Talking Sticks I have seen range from slender branches of thirty centimeters in length to large staffs of 1.5 meters and more, and they are typically decorated in a rustic and colorful manner. The decorations are concentrated on one end of the Stick, which becomes the top when the Stick is held upright. Often, the Stick’s natural features, such as a distinctive shape, bleaching from the sun, or damage from animals or water, are left visible. The Stick can even be chosen for showing prominent signs of such processes. Sometimes these natural shapes and markings are left to be the only conspicuous visual features of the Stick because “nature” requires no human improvements, but most often the Stick is trimmed to a desired length and shape and decorated. Decorations can be painted, carved, or scorched, with motifs such as animal heads, runes, and geometric shapes. Other typical adornments include wrapping parts of the stick with string or metal wire and attaching small objects, either affixed or suspended. The size and shape of the Talking Stick serve its use and purpose. It is meant to be held and passed from hand to hand. It is also meant to be seen by others in the Circle. It is elongated, fitting the hand, and not too inconspicuous, but not too heavy to be easily handled. Thus, the Talking Stick’s design is practical and, like its medium, markedly “natural,” drawing meaning from the emic understandings of this concept in Rainbow culture.

Any Rainbow participant can manufacture the Talking Stick. According to my field observations, the Talking Stick can be established as early as during the preparatory phase of the Gathering event known as the Seed Camp, to be used in the collective discussions during this period, but the Stick can also be remade later in the event. These choices are up to individual Gatherers, who might, for instance, decide to replace an existing Stick with another, more impressive or elaborate one. Most Gatherers expect that the Talking Stick is produced anew for each Gathering, but there are exceptions to the custom where a Stick from a previous Gathering has been kept by someone, brought back to a Rainbow event, and used again. Reusing a Stick can emphasize continuity, reinforce a nascent local Rainbow tradition, or link distinct Gathering events to each other. In these ways, production of the Stick is frequent, and despite the Talking Stick being an emblematic item with an important political function, the production does not require a special status, skills, or expense from its maker. Rather, it requires an investment of another kind: interest in contributing to the community and serving its needs.
According to Morgan’s approach, “an object’s design and manufacture need to be in harmony with its medium’s affordances for the sake of successful production.” In material culture studies, an affordance prompts us to think about the relation an object has to its setting. In the ways described above, the design and manufacture of the Talking Stick are intended to harmonize with its medium’s affordances for the purposes and requirements of the object—a functional focal object for collective communication that is easy to produce in the circumstances of the Gathering while adhering to the symbolic system relevant for the culture, such as the value given to nature and Indigenous cultural practices that the Stick is modeled on. Analyzing the Stick’s production offers important information about its characteristics and the social location of its makers, but the next section will examine Rainbow’s broader understanding of the Stick and other, similar objects that play a part in Rainbow’s material culture in order to fully understand its cultural significance.

**The Classification of Talking Sticks as “Tribal” Objects**

The purpose of “classification” in an object biography is to determine what the thing is understood to be. The Talking Stick’s classification demonstrates how it is conceived in Rainbow culture: what kinds of other objects it is related to and possible changes in its medium or format in different contexts. The Talking Stick’s most explicit function is to organize collective communication within a Talking Circle. It indicates the speaker in turn, who has the “floor” or the “say,” and that all others should listen quietly. As Gatherers see it, the Stick facilitates democratic discussion and decision-making by ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to speak, uninterrupted and unchallenged while they do so, and that all participants are equally represented in the decision, as the interview quote below illustrates. The Talking Stick has important instrumental functions in the context of a Talking Circle: holding the Stick marks the speaker, visually organizing the situation for all participants. The Stick’s movement in the Circle denotes roughly how much time each participant can expect to pass before their turn arrives. The guideline requiring others to listen in silence is intended to create an attentive environment that is supportive of all speakers and their style of expression.

In addition to its function, the comparative context for the Stick is important within Rainbow because it reveals a host of cultural meanings. David Morgan calls the comparison step in an object biography “setting the archive,” which he explains as follows: “An archive illuminates the genealogy of family resemblances, revealing important information about where a thing comes from and why it takes the shape it does.” A staff or a stick has general cultural meanings including instrumental and symbolic aspects, as staffs have been used universally as weapons and tools as well as ritual objects connoting power and status. In Gatherers’ understanding, the Talking Stick belongs to a class of similar ritual objects originating in premodern or even prehistoric cultures, which are made and used in roughly the same way. Rainbow participants might make broad attributions of the Talking Stick being an “ancient” or “tribal” custom, or point to actual examples among Amerindian, African, Oceanian, and European peoples. For the Gatherers, using the Talking Stick signifies following an ancient and Indigenous tradition and confers a sense of authenticity on the Gathering.

There is a narrative circulating among the US Rainbow participants that identifies the Talking Stick as “native” and provides an origin story for Rainbow’s use of focal objects. Such a story
raises some of the problematic ways in which Rainbow Gatherings claim authenticity through connections to Indigenous cultures. Feather Sherman, one of the “Earlies” (instead of “elders”) of the US Rainbow Family, explains it this way:

> In the [US] Rainbow Gathering of 1983, the Vision Council was full of dispute. The argument went on for 36 hours. The conflicts were making some people leave the Council. That’s when one of the Council participants, a Native brother called Clark Viper, said that he wants to share a tradition from his tribe that will help the Family. He was a grandson of Black Elk. The next day, this brother came to the Council meeting with a staff decorated with crystals and a big eagle feather. The feather was to be passed from hand to hand in the circle, and only the one holding it would have the right to speak, for as long as they needed. So, the Family got this as a gift.

Feather also described the specific ritual instructions for storing and caring for the eagle feather, including smudging it with sage and wrapping it in paper and red cloth. This story establishes an eagle feather as the focal object proper, and the Stick as an ancillary part.

This account of the Talking Stick coming to the Rainbow Family functions for Gatherers as an origin story, attributing the custom not only directly to the famous Lakota medicine man Black Elk, but also as a gift from a Native Rainbow participant to the Rainbow community. In addition to legitimizing the material form of the object, the story also legitimizes its use by the non-Native Rainbow Family, because it was a gift. This origin story is not commonly known among the European Rainbow Family, probably because it recounts an event specific to the US Gatherings and addresses themes that are more acute in the US, such as the relationship to North American Native Nations and accusations of cultural appropriation. European Gatherers might instead refer to speaker’s staff traditions on a general level, or historical European examples such as the Scandinavian *Tingstav*.39

The US Rainbow Family has commonly used feathers as focal objects, as Sherman’s account indicates.40 The object’s name and designation reflect this feature: the US Rainbow Family often calls any focal object “the Feather,” although the term Talking Stick is also known. But the object has undergone variations over the years and as Rainbow has migrated. Most if not all Gatherings outside of the US, meaning the majority of Rainbow events, use a wooden stick as the focal object proper. Names in other European languages are direct translations of “stick” or “staff”: *Bâton de parole*, *Redestab*, *bastone della parola*, et cetera. The material form of the Talking Stick thus changed as the tradition migrated outside of the US, but its function, meaning, and cultural work did not.

In addition to sticks and feathers, sometimes other items are used as the focal object in a Circle, serving the same purpose as the Stick. These variations are purposeful, creative changes that serve specific concerns. In his study of Rainbow Gatherings in the US, Michael Niman describes the US Rainbow Council’s ritual innovation regarding the choice of the focal object in this way:

> Although a feather, sometimes attached to a staff, is the traditional “focal object,” more and more Rainbow Councils are substituting randomly chosen objects so as to refocus attention on the speaker rather than the object itself. Arguments over whose feather to pass, and people’s possessiveness about their feathers, have caused problems in the past, inducing various Rainbow Councils to pass bowls, stones, or shoes instead. Bowls, which many Rainbows claim represent “female energy,” are often passed to balance the excessive “male energy” allegedly represented by staffs.41
This account, based on Niman’s fieldwork among the US Rainbow Family in the 1990s, portrays an intentional development which is now common in Gatherings around the world. It is an example of deliberate ritual creativity that changes the tradition of choosing a focal object and relates it to a novel symbolic universe. The creative changes express a fusion typical of alternative-holistic tradition-making: ideas of traditional beliefs and practices are supplemented with other sources, creating a mix catering to contemporary notions like “refocusing attention to the speaker” and “balancing the male and female energies.”[^12]

Here we have two distinct examples of what David Morgan calls remediation, meaning “reissuing of a product in a new medium or format.”[^43] The first example refers to the transformation of the focal object when it moves from US Rainbow events to events outside the US, where the Feather becomes the Stick. This process seems to be a migrating custom where practical and material elements are transmitted without the full context of history and meaning: the stick, “originally” meant to carry the actual focal object of the feather, gets installed as the focal object itself. Cultural practices within Rainbow are often transmitted without the full “original” context, giving space for variation and reinterpretation. I see this kind of transmission not as a regrettable omission or misunderstanding, but a site for creativity, offering an opportunity for purposeful adaptation to new concerns and circumstances.[^44] The feather tradition crafted among the US Rainbow Family, assumedly based on those Amerindian traditions that ascribe meaning to eagle feathers, migrated to Europe where the historical examples for focal objects were, namely, sticks and staffs.

In the second example illustrated by Niman’s account, the feather and the stick are purposefully diminished in significance by introducing an idea of multiple possible objects with suitable symbolic meanings, such as vessel-like items signifying “female energy.” Here, ritual improvisation is employed to broaden the symbolic expressivity of the focal object, to better suit the aims of the ritual actors. Rainbow’s crafted ritual tradition thus includes a version that refers to perceived historical examples, emphasizing ideas of continuity and adherence to “ancient” and “tribal” traditions. In addition, the crafted tradition includes a second version able to respond to the specific circumstances of the ritual event at hand, by involving a ritual object that carries a relevant symbolic meaning. The latter version allows for personalization and adaptation to the specific case or situation, and appeals to the traditions from which the relevant symbolism is drawn, such as Western esotericism and its sources.[^45] Creating distance from the initial cultural context of the Talking Stick might be necessary to effectively activate new interpretations, even when identifying the Talking Stick as “native” remains crucial. These aspects of the Talking Stick’s biography reveal its ritually constituted cultural meanings and symbolism in relationship to other focal objects.

**The Circulation of the Talking Stick: Driving Participatory Democracy**

The Talking Stick certainly “circulates” when it is used in Circles, but in object biographies, circulation refers to the entire social career of objects being exchanged, transported, and deployed in different arenas and social contexts. Deployment means all the uses that an object is put to and the purposes it serves during its existence, through activities such as trade, collecting, gifting, ritual, entertainment, devotion, and so on. Deployment involves commerce, remediation, and display, and it happens through exchange, as the object moves from makers...
Rainbow's Talking Sticks have a restricted range of deployment. They are manufactured or chosen by Rainbow participants and given to the Family to use collectively, but they are rarely exchanged beyond that. In some cases, Talking Sticks are kept by individual Gatherers as personal souvenirs after a Gathering is over, and they perhaps end up being displayed, exchanged, or used as ritual objects in non-Gathering contexts.

The Stick is part of a gift economy in the frame of the Gathering: it is produced by an individual or a group of Gatherers and given to the whole community. In this way, the Stick joins the Gathering's economy, consisting of voluntary but reciprocal contributions between the community and its members, producing not only the whole event and all the various things and services it involves (there is no commodity exchange), as well as the social bonds that create the community and the broader symbolic exchange included in the transmission of tradition and transformative ritual work. The Stick is understood to be collective property, and all claims of individual ownership or suggestions of commodification would be seen by Gatherers as preposterous.

The Talking Stick is mostly deployed as a focal object, not only in Talking Circles and Councils but in various other situations of collective communication, where it can be used in creative ways that divert from the absolute freedom of speech required in Talking Circles. The Stick can organize communication in the contexts of education, conflict resolution, therapeutic work, announcements, collaboration, and creative projects. The European Rainbow Family has developed other customs related to the Stick as well. The Talking Stick can be used as a visual signal for getting attention in group situations, usually by lifting the Stick high, as in the following field example:

The Food Circle is in full swing when a young man approaches the Sacred Fire at the centre, carrying the Talking Stick. He raises it up in the air, waiting for the group to quiet down and pay attention to him. Next to me, an older gentleman groans at the gesture. "We are still eating! Have some patience!" he calls out. The younger man lowers the Stick, sets it down and squats next to it, waiting for a better moment.

Typically, a Gathering has a singular Talking Stick linked to the most central location, the Main Fire, but camp locations where collective communication happens regularly might make their own. In addition, temporary versions of the Stick can be established as needed. I have seen Gatherers use objects such as a bamboo flute, a piece of firewood, and a soup ladle as impromptu Talking Sticks. Designated and decorated Talking Sticks are often displayed at central locations such as the Main Fire when they are not in use, for example, propped up against stones demarcating the sacralized fire pit, but temporary ones return directly to their normal roles after use.

An object's "reception," one of the steps of the "circulation" theme in Morgan's object biography, involves signs of the object's physical use, its private and local appropriations, and other aspects of how it is treated. In general, there are two kinds of responses to the Talking Stick: those that show veneration of the object and those that concentrate on the related ideas and principles, even to the detriment of the object itself. Although the Talking Stick is generally treated with reverence, there are examples of contrary trends where the Stick is downplayed as a treasured ritual object and presented as merely a tool for communication. In situations when an
immediate need for a Talking Circle arises, as in crisis and conflict situations, any stick or another object will be used as a makeshift focal object if there is no Talking Stick readily available. These situations show that communication itself in the expected form is more significant than the prepared and decorated object, as in Niman's account above of the various things that can become focal objects.

In some instances of a kind of anti-reception, the Stick is intentionally destroyed in the context of a Gathering, as a response to unwanted attitudes or its “disrespectful” use. These situations may involve someone throwing the Talking Stick into the Main Fire, as I describe below. The act of burning the Talking Stick makes full sense only in the framework of its intended function, symbolism, and status as a collectively meaningful item. When the principles of allowing the holder of the Stick to speak freely or recognizing them as a full member of the community are disregarded, destroying the Stick becomes much more than just an expression of anger or vandalism. Burning or breaking the Talking Stick in this situation is an iconoclastic protest aimed at the entire community.

The Family has convened for food, and it is customary to share information during this collective moment. A man speaks up, with a bare stick in his hands: “Dear Family, there was a conflict in the Talking Circle last night. There was no respect for the Talking Stick, (and the Stick got destroyed). Everyone is invited to help and bring things for decorating the Stick and we’ll make a new one, better and more beautiful.”

Other instances of destroying the Stick are related to concerns about unwanted cultural meanings. Gatherers see the practice of producing a new Talking Stick for each event as a meaningful custom, as it prevents the worship of an object. One such participant explained to me that he personally likes to burn the Talking Stick after a Gathering event has ended, to make sure that nobody takes the Stick and turns it into a “relic.” He explained this as “blocking the creation of religion.” This perspective criticizes typical features of institutionalized religion such as permanent, recognized sacred items, and reflects Rainbow culture’s general reproach of religious institutions and consumer culture.

In order to understand the kind of cultural work that objects perform in these examples, I turn to David Morgan’s phenomenological perspective that views the object as part of an assembly consisting of the item, its users, and the corporeal interface of the body. Thus, the bodily and cognitive aspects that are involved in the use of the object are parts of the experience, as are collectives of bodies. Objects and experiences related to their use, Morgan says, “help to organize the life-worlds in which people exist” in profound ways. From this kind of phenomenological perspective, political and ritual practices consist of embodied, learned behaviors that help to establish shared ways of feeling, experiencing, and thinking. They help to create social bonds—in this case directly, through the process of the Talking Circle—but also by reinforcing a collective culture. Morgan argues that these customary ways of acting often become unquestioned and habitual: “The techniques of the body that members of society learn become second nature—that is they are consonant with reality.” Material culture and practices instill cultural values in our experience of the world, anchoring truths, rights, and wrongs. Analyzing the cultural work performed by the Talking Stick requires looking at the combination formed by the Talking Stick, the Circle, and participants, as well as the interactions between the components.
The way that the Talking Stick looks and feels signifies ideas and concepts central to the worldview of the participants, not only through ascribed cultural meanings but also through the tactile and sensory input arising from the physical characteristics of the object. The Stick is, for example, observably organic and “natural,” shaping emotional perceptions of the object. The material form lends itself to techniques of visual and tactile engagement involved in the meaning making and in the organizing function of the Talking Circle practice. Through its symbolic meanings, the Stick communicates ideas, norms, and values central to the culture. Evoking emic connotations of concepts such as “tribal” and “natural,” the artifact represents (and enacts) ideas of egalitarianism, mutual respect, nonviolent communication, and communalism. In this way, the use of the Talking Stick reflects the core countercultural and “spiritual” values of the movement, and ritual practices involving the Stick express and reproduce cultural identity. In addition, the Talking Stick, together with the essential components of the Circle and the practice of circulating the Stick, instrumentally shape political participation and organize the decision-making process. The artifact and how it is used reflect and constitute Rainbow’s ideals: a politics that is open and inclusive, decentralized, nonrepresentational, and dependent on negotiation and compromise aiming at consensus.

Conclusion

From the Talking Stick’s production that shows its (collective, “tribal” and “natural”) ideological moorings, through its classification that describes the cultural context (the site of creativity), to its circulation that reveals the instrumental abilities the Stick has, the eight first steps of the object biography (medium, design, manufacture, function, comparison, remediation, deployment and reception) lay the groundwork for the last step regarding cultural work, especially the cultural work of ritual creativity around material objects.

The cultural work of the Stick—driving a radical form of consensual democracy—is accomplished by the symbolic and instrumental abilities that are based on its material and practical properties, and the features of the ritual practices when and where the Stick is used. These properties and features are the elements of ritual improvisation and creativity. Various scholars have posed that creativity requires a certain space or margin among relatively fixed elements of meaning and function, and the Stick exemplifies this: it is at the same time a specific artifact with a designated form and assigned significance, and an immaterial concept that can be employed by using any suitable object as a surrogate. Creative possibilities stem from this flexibility. For example, the choice of the focal object can refer to perceived historical links and their cultural value or a specific symbolic vector such as ideas of the feminine and the masculine. The Stick can be a recurring item that supports the consolidation of group identity, or it can be made anew each time to hinder the development of hierarchical structures or to avoid assigning power to the object itself. It can be circulated among everybody present, or among a chosen set of speakers to enable different foci and forms of representation.

Crafted ritual can establish a compelling method of social organization, at least in the temporary frame of a transformative event. Ritual practices like the use of the Talking Stick in Talking Circles can be functional and meaningful even without the ideological background, and even if for outsiders, they appear pretended, trite, or culturally appropriative. Organizational models contribute to the transformational potential of events, which is reflected in the considerable and
comprehensive cultural work performed by the Talking Stick. The Stick is relevant to Rainbow culture's questions of identity, values, and purpose, and essential to the practical functioning and lived experience of the Gathering events. These symbolic and instrumental aspects of the Talking Stick are potent factors in shaping and understanding the countercultural lifeworld of a Rainbow Gathering.
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PARTY TOURISM

Beyond Fun and Excess: The Social Dynamics of Party Tourism

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ABSTRACT

This essay provides a brief introduction to party tourism, that is travel (typically undertaken by people under 30) for the explicit purpose of indulgence in drinking, dancing, and other party behavior. Though the phenomenon (of which the US Spring Break is the most well-known example) has generated strong disapproval since its emergence in the 1950s, I argue that it is important for scholars to not reject the practice as simply vulgar, dangerous, and/or exploitative. Embracing it as the go-to solution to revitalizing or diversifying a city’s assets under the umbrella term of the night-time economy (NTE) is equally problematic. Staying away from both moral panic and festive-touristic enchantment, this essay thus strives to uncover the complexities of party tourism and presents it as an advantageous entry point to a variety of subjects, including the construction of masculinity, the evolution of urban space, the tourist gaze, and more generally, racial, economic and social inequalities.

KEYWORDS

Party Tourism
Spring Break
Moral panics
Night time economy
Tourist gaze
Beyond Fun and Excess: The Social Dynamics of Party Tourism

Alix Boirot

This section of issue 5 of the Journal of Festive Studies, which explores the concept of “party tourism,” is situated at the intersection of tourism studies and festive studies. These two fields have much in common, as notions of escape, time out, and liberation are projected onto both festivals and travel. The study of tourism allows for an exploration of many key concepts and themes: identity, culture, migration, globalization, ecology, etc. Tourism raises major geopolitical and cultural issues: sometimes instrumentalized for propaganda purposes by authoritarian regimes, it also contributes to the dynamism of cultural practices that it helps to preserve or to the standardization of the cultural landscape. Though there are certainly issues of greater consequence in the world—as historian Hasso Spode wrote in 2010, “going to war and going on vacation don’t have the same impact on a country’s destiny”—tourism practices nevertheless offer a valuable perspective on the social environment. In this case, the study of party tourism, a massified form of tourism, partakes of the academic goal of de-hierarchizing cultural practices. It aims to overcome the dominant values that lead us to despise (vulgar) tourism in favor of the (noble) practice of travel. As geographers Pau Obrador-Pons, Mike Crang, and Penny Travlou write:

Mass tourism offers a distinctive form of entertainment—more "vulgar" and "corporeal"—that clashes with the sophistication and detachment of middle-class forms of travel, the values of which underpin dominant conceptualizations of tourism. The significance of the banal in tourism has been systematically overlooked by dominant perspectives which have privileged the exotic and the spectacular. There has been little interest and respect for the banal practices and pleasures of ordinary tourists. In downplaying the banal, dominant perspectives have reproduced a social hierarchy of travellers and tourists, thus sanctioning a set of ideological and social distinctions that is as much a stake in class distinction as an actual description of tourist practices.

The following contributions aim to go beyond the trivial and banal appearance of the subject and to give due attention to this phenomenon of party tourism. What does festivity do to tourism and what does tourism do to festivity?

While many types of festivity—religious celebrations, film festivals, and traditional local festivals—have been turned into tourist events over the past 150 years, what is generally referred to as “party tourism” (i.e., travel whose main motivation is to party) is more specific. I use the term to refer to a type of party that is generally urban, commercial, and privatized, targeting a young clientele, focused on the massive consumption of psychoactive substances (alcoholic or otherwise), and giving rise to tourist travel.

Party tourism can, of course, be transgenerational (as is the case with many ferias in the south of France, for example). However, forming an “in-group” based on age is often crucial in these festivities. Indeed, marketing professionals see the development of party tourism as a means of attracting the younger customer segment. This generational segmentation is quite new. In many older festivals, the whole community participated, at least until a certain time of night. By focusing on the young (sixteen-to-thirty-year-olds), major nightlife entrepreneurs have reinforced the generation gap. Now, youth is hardly a uniform category. Different party destinations attract different types of clientele (in terms of gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, etc.).
Events targeting youth take place in distinct locations: “mass youth tourism” or “vacation clubbing” take place in seaside resorts; orientation parties for first-year business school students generally take place in privatized spaces; stag (bachelor) and hen (bachelorette) parties are commonly organized in city centers. In addition, tourist trips with a central festive motivation may be linked to a one-off event (such as a festival), to a seasonal fabric (think of certain European seaside resorts, for example), or to a permanent festive fabric (as is the case in certain cities like Berlin or New York or islands like Ibiza).

The type of music on offer can mark the boundaries between different types of party tourism. The divide between commercial and alternative music, even if it is—like any attempt at categorization—partly unsatisfactory, appears operative for understanding the different offerings of party tourism. The international geography of alternative festivities largely does not overlap with that of mainstream festivities. Indeed, the choice to attend the alternative Boom Festival in Portugal or to travel to mainstream Ibiza in Spain is a social marker.

Research on party tourism has largely focused on Anglo-Saxon tourists, though scholars have also studied Dutch tourists in eastern Europe and European tourists visiting the seaside resort of Lloret de Mar in Spain. In any case, party tourism and its analysis remain largely Western-centric. We hope that some of the contributions to this issue will spark fruitful dialogue and renewed interest in party tourism practices involving non-Western tourists. However, before presenting the section’s rich offerings, let us delineate the contours of party tourism in more detail.

The Birth and Rise of Party Tourism

Tourism is a recent practice, the massification of which dates back less than one hundred years, while festivity has existed for thousands of years. Nevertheless, the type of festivity discussed in this section responds to contemporary arrangements. Over the twentieth century, festivity slowly became a leisure activity more than a religious or memorial act. This change transformed festivals into commodities. Party tourism, which combines two recreational practices, is part of this dynamic.

Before developing the idea of party tourism more theoretically, I would like to discuss one of its best-known avatars: the US “Spring Break,” which generates billions of dollars annually. Indeed, youth global party tourism may be seen as an outgrowth of Spring Break culture. The term “spring break” refers to a spring vacation in North America for students. Since the 1950s, this intermission has been associated with intense festivity and tourism. Little by little, the custom has taken hold of going away for several days during this period to party more or less nonstop among young people, generally in an oceanfront location, with excess alcohol, and with the promise of occasional sexual relations. Contrary to what the inordinate media coverage may lead one to believe, for most young people, it is an opportunity to get away, to relax, and to return to their families. However, the touristic-festive phenomenon, a highlight of university life, has rapidly gained a mythical status in the Western world.

The festive Spring Break phenomenon as we know it today is based on preexisting practices: as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, some students used spring break to go to the


9. I use “Spring Break” to refer to the festive phenomenon and “spring break” to refer to the holiday’s temporality.

seaside with friends. Their numbers were limited and their destinations varied widely. It took a combination of factors, including an increase in student numbers, the postwar birth of a "youth culture," the massification of tourism and the media, and the political will to attract young visitors, to turn it into the massive cultural phenomenon that it is today.

Spring Break in its current form was born in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, after World War II. In the 1930s, Fort Lauderdale had been a small coastal town with a population of less than eighteen thousand. In 1935, it started hosting the Collegiate Aquatic Forum, an intercollegiate swimming competition, the innocent breeding ground for the future festive Spring Break. Several hundred competitors started flocking to Fort Lauderdale every spring from all over the United States. In addition to the competition, youngsters participated in concerts, enjoyed the beach and bars, and invited their non-swimming friends. Competitors and accompanying persons made up a student tourist population, boosting the local economy. In the early 1950s, the municipal team decided to broaden this market and launched a campaign to promote the resort to over five hundred higher education establishments. The campaign was successful: in the spring of 1954, Fort Lauderdale welcomed some ten thousand students, and several national magazines published reports on "the greatest college town in the country" (Holiday magazine 1954). The youthful excesses of the mid-twentieth century were on a par with those of the twenty-first century: the April 20, 1953, issue of Time magazine reported that a dead shark was moved into a pool by anonymous jokers and mentioned the arrest of naked swimmers and windows being broken. By the 1950s, the consumption of alcoholic beverages was at the heart of these vacations.

In addition to Florida's climate, the state's legislation made it a Spring Breaker paradise: from the 1930s until 1987, the legal drinking age in Florida was eighteen, compared with twenty-one in most American states. A 1959 Time article on Fort Lauderdale (nicknamed Fort Liquordale) was headlined "Beer and the Beach" and contained this facetious statement by a student: "It's not that we drink so much.... It's just that we drink all the time." Florida's student spring celebration was starting to make a splash. The article closed with this answer from a female student to the question of why she chose to vacation in Fort Lauderdale: "This is where the boys are." His curiosity piqued, literature professor Glendon Swarthout spent a week in Fort Lauderdale that same year. What he observed became the subject of a bestseller: Where the Boys Are, published in 1960. The book tells the story of four young girls who decide to spend their spring vacation in Fort Lauderdale to have fun and meet boys. The release of the book and, above all, its movie adaptation in 1960 established the tourist-festive practice as an American tradition.

By the 1960s, other Florida towns were hosting a few Spring Breakers, but Fort Lauderdale received most of the youngsters. Until the mid-1980s, it remained the destination for beachside Spring Break festivities. However, the subsequent increase in the number of participants (370,000 in 1986), the growing number of incidents, and pressure from certain residents prompted local authorities to change the city's tourism model. A series of dissuasive measures (restrictions on alcohol consumption, increased surveillance of nightclubs, etc.) and media statements by various local representatives was effective: attendance decreased to 20,000 young people in 1989. The party was over in Fort Lauderdale (although it has made a comeback in recent years), but Spring Break was on the move.

From the mid-1980s onward, the Spring Break market expanded and diversified. The
harmonization of drinking age legislation through the National Minimum Drinking Age Act in 1984 forced Florida to raise the minimum drinking age to twenty-one. This new legislation led Spring Breakers to cross the US border to party in Jamaica, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic, where the legal drinking age was eighteen. This time, it was not a film but a TV show that seized on the phenomenon and gave it international scope. In 1986, after being turned down by Fort Lauderdale, MTV decided to cover Spring Break from Daytona Beach, Florida, and to organize concerts and entertainment. From 1986 to 2014, the channel played a decisive role in the history of Spring Break, dictating the new trendy destinations (Panama City Beach in Florida, Cancun in Mexico, Negril in Jamaica) and encouraging many brands to take an interest in an event now broadcast nationally and internationally. It also introduced many countries to the images of over-the-top parties and drunken teenagers in swimsuits eager to undress that have become synonymous with Spring Break.

Today, the US Spring Break represents a significant market for brands targeting a young audience (alcoholic and energy drinks, tobacco, sportswear, etc.), for airlines and travel agencies, and for tourism stakeholders in the various host destinations. For example, in 2013, Spring Breakers spent 170 million dollars in Florida’s Panama City Beach alone (excluding transport and accommodation), that is, an average of 315 dollars per tourist, 615 million dollars, including flights and hotels.17 The practice has since spread unchanged to Canadian students.

Australia was the first country outside North America to offer an event directly inspired by the American Spring Break. In 1975, Geoff Lewis took over as manager of the Broadbeach International Hotel on the Queensland coast south of Brisbane, a modern, oversized hotel for the area at the time. The hotel had already changed hands several times since its construction. At the time, it was owned by a major beer brewing group, Queensland Brewery. Hoping to come up with ideas to alleviate the hotel’s problems, particularly its low occupancy rate in November and December, the group sent Lewis to a hoteliers’ convention in Chicago. At this convention, he heard about Spring Break and made the trip to Fort Lauderdale. Noting the event’s success, he decided to promote the idea of an end-of-school-year celebration to universities in Queensland. At first, the experiment was minimal, involving only the Broadbeach Hotel and attracting around five hundred people (unexpectedly, more high school students than university students).18

Nevertheless, the idea spread to other coastal hotels in the 1980s. Surfers Paradise became an important destination for weeklong end-of-school-year celebrations for high school students from Queensland, New South Wales, and Victoria. By the decade’s end, what became known as Schoolies Week had become an established student practice throughout Australia. Today, the Gold Coast remains the most popular destination, although Schoolies are celebrated elsewhere in the country (Airlie Beach in the Whitsundays in the northeast and Rottnest Island opposite Perth in the southwest) and even outside of the country (in Fiji and Vanuatu). Unlike the festive US Spring Break, Schoolies primarily involve high school students. However, young people who have already graduated or have yet to graduate from high school (known as toolies and foolies, respectively) also participate. Thus, the US Spring Break directly inspired the Schoolies, and tourism practices, imaginaries, and cases of conflicts with locals have been similar ever since. Nevertheless, this historical link with Spring Break is not particularly well known. For example, it is not highlighted on pages promoting the Schoolies, nor in most press articles (some mention the
American Spring Break but only as an element of comparison).

In Europe, the youth party travel industry took a long time to consolidate, starting in the 1990s and especially the 2000s with specialized tour operators (TOs) offering packages that added nightclub passes and open bar access to the classic transport and hotel packages. The United Kingdom was a pioneer in this field, with the creation of Club 18–30 in 1968. Travel agencies and TOs for young people now offer festive holidays from April to September. Destinations are presented as total party venues. Over the past thirty years, new party resorts targeting the under-twenty-fives have sprung up, and long-established seaside resorts have specialized in the young and festive clientele. All the specialist European TOs work with more or less the same resorts: places with an adapted local offer (numerous bars and discotheques in particular). Lloret de Mar and Magaluf are a must in Spain, as are Ibiza, Calella, and Salou (which appeal mainly to French customers). The most popular Greek destination is Hersonissos (called Chersonisos in Germany and in the Netherlands). The Mediterranean island of Malta is also associated with youth party tourism. Novalja in Croatia, on the island of Pag, is a more recent party destination but one with a fast-growing reputation. Two Bulgarian seaside resorts are also considered party capitals: Goldensands (Golden Sands) and Slantchev Briag, better known abroad as SunnyBeach (Sonnenstrand for Germans).

In Europe, Spring Break is mainly used as a marketing label rather than a seasonal designation. This word allows young tourism companies to benefit from a prior imaginary at no cost since “Spring Break” is not a registered trademark. The seasonal Spring Break phenomenon has not become an institution in Europe. Nevertheless, the US Spring Break has profoundly influenced the imagery and imagination of those involved in party tourism. While seaside resorts have long been associated with nightlife, the US Spring Break brought new elements and established itself as a benchmark for festive vacations. Partly because European springs are colder than Florida’s, it is the summer vacations that young Europeans favor for their party breaks.

Spring Break, Summer Break, Schoolies, and other festive trips: the young people who participate in these different events or the destinations that host them have much in common. Their ages and motivations are similar; they share a certain visual symbolism (taken from the US Spring Break), music (there is an annual Spring Break Miami-Ibiza-Cancun-Lloret de Mar compilation), and behaviors (notably excessive drinking and unbridled sexuality). What we have here is a transnational tourist-festive phenomenon. The TOs of party tourism for young people, some of modest size, others belonging to large groups, sell a marketed, secure, relatively reproducible, and segmented product.

This brief history of party tourism already suggests its rich analytical potential. Indeed, it is a transnational phenomenon that involves many players at different levels (TOs, residents, print and TV media, tourists, and governments). It has significant economic weight but also a potential for nuisance and land-use conflicts. It is, even more fundamentally, a youth, “in-group” phenomenon with a powerful and highly sexualized tourist imaginary. This deserves more comment.

21. Land-use conflicts are here defined as conflicts of interest arising among people using the same space.
**A Sexualized Imaginary**

“Bikinis and big booties—y all! That’s what life is about!” says Alien (James Franco) in the 2013 film *Spring Breakers.* In party tourism, posters and promotional clips evoke a holiday’s imaginary of freedom, mainly through the promise of unbridled sexuality, a freedom and a promise aimed at white heterosexual men. Inspired by the festive US Spring Break, these events have familiar and recognizable imagery: the beach, bikini-clad girls, alcohol, and the staging of its excessive consumption, complemented by swimming pools, palm trees, and colossal parties. The male gaze undeniably guides the imagery of party tourism, as is made clear by this report published in June 2007 in *FHM*, a famous French magazine aimed at heterosexual men, with a “humorous” tone and erotic content:

> After rock, France has imported another American leisure activity for young people: Spring Break. On the program: sea, sex & vomit. *FHM* took the bus to the fiesta. Sexier than a Ford Mustang GT 390 and more intoxicating than a can of Diet Coke, the best American invention of all time, Spring Break, is finally catching on in France. Until now, it had been an unattainable fantasy. A guy’s dream, a real one. Beautiful, topless, drunk, and single girls served up on a sandy beach in the sun, all to the accompaniment of music and a never-ending open bar. That should be the dictionary definition of “paradise.” In this case, it’s the American concept of Spring Break.23

Spring Break, “paradise,” “a guy’s dream, a real one”: why? Because, in a deeply sexist way of thinking, it is by definition made up of pretty, naked, drunk girls (meaning they are uninhibited, so they can express their sexual desires more easily, but they are also more vulnerable) who are single (meaning, again in a sexist way, they are looking for a partner). Furthermore, these young women are “served,” not on a platter, but on a sun-drenched beach, with unlimited music and alcohol. Promotional videos and iconographic elements on the websites of specialist agencies in Europe, Australia, and the US reveal the imagery of this vision of paradise, a paradise for heterosexual men populated by sexually available women-objects. Another example of this kind of association between Spring Break and sexual imagery is *Girls Gone Wild*, which began in 1997. The show’s crew attended parties, often at Spring Break destinations. They encouraged young women, almost always intoxicated, to expose their breasts or engage in sexual acts.

The young women who go on these trips are not always aware of this sexual imaginary. Some of them are quickly distressed by it. It is common for them to keep to themselves during their stay and return home from the parties quite early. Still, some women party tourists are conscious of and attracted to this sexualized imaginary. A party tourism vacation allows some young women to express a desirable self-image or unbridled sexuality. Sometimes they choose to go there trying to emancipate themselves from the injunctions to “be remarkable without being noticed, to be sexy without being vulgar,” which mainly target young working-class girls.24 Of course, it is an ambivalent liberation: it may be argued that they have merely internalized the male gaze. The theorist behind the concept, Laura Mulvey, explained that women in cinema are treated as icons rather than actual characters: they are used for male aesthetic pleasure. Female characters are, therefore, erotic objects for male characters and thus for viewers of all genders and sexual orientations, according to the principle of identification.25 In this way, women internalize the reified status they are given to see. However, presenting oneself as desirable and seeking sexual relations are neither emancipating nor coercive. Caution is needed in dealing with such issues.
In any case, most party tourists are men. The Mexican resort town of Cancun, a Spring Break mecca for young Americans, has earned the nickname “Mancun” for its preponderance of male tourists. There are several reasons for this. As we have seen, advertising tends to use the male gaze. Additionally, the practices promoted at these parties are generally gendered as masculine (excessive drinking and casual sex). The sexual imaginary remains largely fantastical: the desire of male tourists to multiply sexual acts is fraught with many pitfalls, and casual sexual relations are no more common on this type of vacation than elsewhere.

Moreover, the desire of young tourists to travel among boys only is a significant factor in the scarcity of women. My fieldwork has shown that party tourism is a homosocial practice. While young male tourists regularly lament the lack of women, many sideline women and emphasize male-male relationships through their practices and discourses. The evocation of women is instead a litany that distances them from the suspicion of homosexuality. The women who are present are subjected to stereotypical visions, the fruits of a sexual (and sometimes sexist) tourist imagination. Above all, they are a means of strengthening the bond between men.

### Studying Party Tourism

Before the 1990s, commercial urban festivities were mainly studied for the nuisances and land-use conflicts they spawned. Analysis of the economic aspects of the festive night began to be linked to the rise of marketing strategies highlighting the nightlife of postindustrial cities, such as Manchester and Berlin. What has come to be known as the NTE (Night Time Economy) is now seen as a way of revitalizing or diversifying a city’s assets. The NTE “refers to the rise of a vibrant nightlife within city centers, marked by the deregulation of the licensing system, the development of the alcohol industry, the falling cost of the product, and the focus of nighttime spaces on drinking.” Festive life is increasingly presented as an element of attraction and influence for cities. The idea that bars and nightclubs are just as much a part of a tourist city’s leisure offering as monuments and department stores is gaining ground: “the city that never sleeps,” “the 24/7 city.” Alongside the image of the night as a dangerous temporality, an image of a young and playful night is developing.

Along these economic and sociological studies of party tourism, researchers examine the protagonists’ practices, representations, and discourses. Indeed, while the festive framework proposed by tourism and party promoters aims to limit surprises—party organization leaves little room for improvisation—the perception may be different at the individual level, with the unexpected emerging from the loopholes of “specifications.” Guests play as important a role in the party as the organizers: the framework guides but only partially constrains. Like tourism, partying is a leisure activity. These two practices are complex, are disparate, and have different motivations, which is why we must avoid the twin pitfalls of festive-touristic enchantment and moral-social panic to analyze them.

Among the protagonists of party tourism around the world, many youths are still living with their parents, and this may be their first vacation with friends. A week away from home means they can dispense with many constraints. Young tourists take pleasure in time transgressions (going to bed at dawn, sleeping during the day), dietary transgressions (eating only fast food, drinking a lot of alcohol and smoking a lot of cannabis, even during the day), and sexual transgressions...
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(kissing many partners in the same evening). Significant quantity is not enough; excess is sought. This desire for excess, for intensity in pleasures, is a way of performing freedom. As philosopher Sebastian de Grazia noted in his book on leisure: “Fun and freedom often seem almost synonymous.” It is both the quantity (of partners, alcohol, etc.) and the frequency that make it a transgression. The cosmopolitan crowd adds to the effervescence. Rarely do these young people experience such crowded days and nights or such an international crowd in their everyday lives. As Obrador-Pons, Crang, and Travlou write after evoking the festive nights of Benidorm, Spain, “we need to take seriously the emotional productivity of the mass in mass tourism.” The crowds and their effervescence are an integral part of the pleasure of a tourist experience of this kind.

Nevertheless, while the actors (partygoers and party promoters) do indeed mobilize these representations of freedom and transgression, we need to remain measured about their practical application, particularly in the contemporary, commodified festivities that interest us. The tourist and/or festive contexts influence individuals but usually do not radically transform them. The ordinary catches up with the tourists and revelers, and despite the enchantment expressed, their social categories, such as class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and other attributes, may be transgressed but are not erased. The party is not the same for everyone. Anthropologist Suzanne Clisby, in her research on young English people staying in Brighton, shows how working-class women, because they are constantly referred to by their class and gender, do not experience the liberation put forward in holidaymakers’ discourses. The actors can think of party tourism holidays as spaces of freedom, but they need to be studied outside the frame of these conventional and enchanted representations too. We must not fall into the illusion of a hedonistic paradise that ignores the continuity of domination. Indeed, tourism management researcher Nuno Ribeiro, in his research on the US Spring Break, takes issue with studies concluding that it is a particularly transgressive practice, writing that “Spring Breakers’ behavior is but a continuation—albeit an exaggerated one—of practices they already engage in during the rest of the academic year.” Thus, festive pleasure is both transgressive and highly ritualized.

Indeed, the contemporary urban party, a veritable consumer product, tends to exacerbate spatial segregation and discrimination. Young people’s festive practices obey a “norm of sociability” rather than a desire to transgress. Gender norms, which determine a hierarchy between genders and sexualities, are not eliminated but often amplified. Not everyone can afford to fully appropriate the partying space. Social anthropologist Hazel Andrews, in her research on British tourists in Mallorca, and sociologist Mark Casey, in his study of a comedy series featuring British tourists in Benidorm, have noted this: despite the impression of a normative relaxation in the vacation context, gender norms are not suddenly erased and are even sometimes reinforced. Because this type of vacation attracts mostly men (at least as far as Spring Breaks and the like are concerned), these spaces can be seen as privileged sites for constructing masculinities. The festive and tourist enchantment that makes us see these spaces as out of the ordinary needs to be overcome, therefore, but without falling into another reductionist trap: that of deviance as a reality for all.

Leisure activities, particularly those for young people and the working class, are often considered worrying and deviant. Since the advent of working-class leisure activities and mass tourism after the Second World War, elites have worried about the depravity of “the lower sorts.” Party tourism, combining a double factor of relaxation (tourism and partying) and featuring youths,
a demographic historically generating moral panics, has often been the subject of harsh and negative judgments and of sensationalist articles in the press.40

Moreover, many studies focus on the risks taken by party tourists and suffer from a questionable moralistic orientation, particularly on issues of “sexual promiscuity.” Of course, the excesses of alcohol and outbursts associated with this type of holiday are undeniable. Excessive drug use has serious health consequences, and the behavior of partygoers creates serious land-use conflicts. Nevertheless, nuance is essential. Commentary on this type of partying often serves a disillusioned discourse about today’s youth. In addition, from the point of view of many young revelers, the risk lies not in excess but in boredom. For many, drinking excessively, smoking, or taking ecstasy is not “a challenge to life.”41 Far from this romantic vision, young people adopt a pragmatic one. They fear boredom at all costs; substances reduce this “risk.” As sociologist Lisa Wade points out, drawing on the work of gender studies professor Clare Hollowell, “having fun” is serious business for young people.42 The quest for pleasure requires an investment of time, possibly money, and technical management. Naturally, because these young tourists find themselves in an environment they consider designed for partying, they indulge in excess. This is what the researcher specialist in alcohol consumption Kevin Brain calls “calculated hedonism”: beyond the morally charged discourse on uncontrolled excess associated with the term “binge drinking,” in reality, young people carefully prepare and manage these moments of pleasure.43 Sociologist Sébastien Tutenges also recognizes this trend in his research on Danish party tourists on Sunny Beach in Bulgaria.44

It is easy to disqualify young people’s informal festive practices because we see no trace of sacredness in them and to dismiss them as vulgar practices of mass consumption, or to read them as a symptom of a society that no longer offers solid professional prospects to its youth. Parties would then appear as meaningless moments, nothing more than anomic due to the lack of hope in the future of idle individuals, with excess masking the futility of nights of alcoholic wandering. But it goes without saying that local festivals and dances have never been free of commercial exchange. Fairs and street vendors have always been part of public/civic festivities. The point is not to perpetuate a false opposition between small, “traditional,” local, supposedly noncommercial festivals and invented, exaggerated, artificial urban festivals. Festive traditions are constantly being reinvented and (re)born. Small-scale celebrations are not incompatible with the pursuit of profit, and urban festivals are not inherently soulless. Research should therefore extricate itself from moral judgments and eschew both condemnation and enchantment, in other words, stay “beyond good and evil.”45 An excellent way to do this is to look at these celebrations from the perspective of local communities, as some of the contributors to this issue do.

Contents of This Section

The combination of texts and images that follows covers different parts of the world, including destinations that are less traditionally associated with party tourism. In addition to research articles and an interview, the section comprises a documentary film and academic research presented in the form of a comic, thus reflecting the ambition of the Journal of Festive Studies to showcase a diversity of formats, methodologies, and perspectives associated with the study of festivity. In addition to improving our understanding of party tourism, these five contributions open up rich critical perspectives on the crucial matters of social class, race, and gender inequalities.
The section opens with an article by Hazel Andrews, a sociologist who conducted an ethnographic study of British youth tourism in the resort town of Magaluf on the Mediterranean island of Mallorca. Andrews explores the notion of the carnivalesque (placing it in the context of contemporary practices, especially artistic and political) and the myth of the Land of Cockaigne, linking them to party tourism. This comparison could lead to a reductive dichotomy between everyday and vacation time, with the latter as a total inversion of the former. Andrews avoids this pitfall by qualifying her argument, showing that the inversion does not work mechanically, for example, concerning gender: in Magaluf, inequalities between men and women persist, and the objectification of women can be extreme (although, as she writes, again with nuance, “Indeed, some [women] found Magaluf liberating”). Above all, this literary, historical, and ethnographic work is a stimulating look at the stigmatization of popular working-class festive practices such as party tourism in Magaluf. It places the festive practices of these young tourists, especially their perception by the middle and upper classes, in historical perspective.

The next contribution aims to enrich our understanding of these popular festive and tourist practices by creating new images far removed from the sensationalism often employed by the media. Anthropologist Annemarije Rus’s visual ethnography, titled “Lloret 18,” sensitively portrays the experiences of young Dutch tourists and seasonal workers in the seaside resort of Lloret de Mar, Spain. Without being angelic, Rus’s careful use of camera and music encourages viewers to better apprehend the motivations of these young people. Party tourists are no longer idiotic hordes of risk-takers but touching young individuals with feelings (love, joy, sadness) and flaws (they are capable of making the occasional racist or sexist comment). The film also illuminates the social construction of the party, with its preparation, norms, and rituals. Rus accompanies her work with an article designed to contextualize and analyze it. It offers a rich methodological and ethnographic reflection on party tourism and visual anthropology applied to festive and touristic objects. Her stimulating analytical description of her work allows one to better understand the benefits and difficulties of ethnographic filmmaking. The detailed presentation of the protagonists of the film, their social origins, and the way they approached the shooting is fascinating and perfectly complements the work.

Work on party tourism often focuses on the Global North, but sociologist Sitinga Kachipande’s analysis of the Lake of Stars (LOS) Festival broadens the scope of this research by shedding light on an annual musical and festive event in Malawi. The article looks at a different kind of party tourism temporality—not a holiday but an event—and explores the particularities of a festival characterized by its “party with a purpose” model. The author adopts a fairly balanced critical perspective by brilliantly presenting the complexities of a model that seems virtuous in many ways but not without contradictions. Kachipande illustrates how the LOS Festival, while promoting cultural awareness, tourism growth, and the empowerment of Malawians as active participants, simultaneously perpetuates the global inequalities inherent in tourism and development. The article examines the complex web of racialized, classed, and gendered power dynamics within the global tourism industry. When it comes to tourism issues, it is essential to take an interest in the agency of local people, to get away from the “impact perspective” (a negative effect that seems mechanical and that defenseless inhabitants have to endure). While showing the inequalities suffered by Malawians, the author presents them as subjects rather than passive victims of the tourism industry. This engaging article provides a deep insight into an original form of party tourism.
The fourth piece in this section also allows us to shift our perspective in many ways. While most of the contributions come from sociologists and anthropologists, this one is the result of a collaboration between R. Benedito Ferrão, assistant professor of English and Asian and Pacific American studies, illustrator and satirical cartoonist Angela Ferrão, and urban designer and artist Maria Vanessa de Sa. It looks at a category of tourism that is still understudied—domestic tourism (that is, tourists traveling in their own country)—while capturing the perspective of an area’s residents. More specifically, the original and pertinent form of the comic shows how Goa—which has a unique history in India, having experienced four centuries of Portuguese rule that ended only in 1961—has become a periphery of pleasure to both foreign and Indian tourists. This situation has led to significant challenges concerning the tranquility of local people, their culture, and the local environment. This comic presents these elements in a highly inventive way.

Finally, an interview with Thomas Thurnell-Read, who has been studying alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness from a sociological perspective for almost fifteen years, provides a comprehensive insight into his academic journey. By tracing his research trajectory from stag party tourism to a broader exploration of alcohol culture, the interview reflects on the notion of masculinity and its place in tourism and festive studies. In addition, Thurnell-Read subtly explores the social role of English pubs among different sections of the population. His nuanced approach to understanding the complexities of alcohol consumption through the prism of class and gender is a notable highlight, contributing significantly to a broader understanding of these multifaceted phenomena, free from moral bias.
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Alix Boirot is a postdoctoral researcher with the French Institute of Health and Medical Research (Inserm), based at Aix-Marseille University. She received a PhD in social anthropology from the School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS) in Paris. Her thesis focused on party tourism and masculinities, with a deep and long ethnography in the Spanish seaside resort of Lloret de Mar. She is now interested in bartenders and their relationship to alcohol, and is increasingly involved in public health research (health literacy, addictions, etc.).

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PARTY TOURISM

Tourists and the Carnivalesque: Partying in the Land of Cockaigne

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the idea of the carnivalesque to “think through” party tourism as practiced by British charter tourists in the resort of Magaluf on the Mediterranean island of Mallorca. In addition, it considers the related idea of the European medieval fantasy Land of Cockaigne. Both the carnivalesque and Land of Cockaigne invite reflection on symbolic inversions that productively illuminate party tourism practices that are often underlain by transgressive behavior. The article uses the symbolic inversions associated with the carnivalesque of the unruly woman, male-female inversion, and the discourse of the grotesque as a means to understand party tourism practices. The discussion is framed within the context of a deep-rooted discourse of social class–based understandings of tourism-related travel. The condemnation of party tourism in Magaluf, which often occurs in UK-based news media outlets, follows a lineage of a demonization of the working classes that began at the start of industrialization. With the changes brought by industrialization, a demarcation arose between the working classes and the bourgeoisie that was focused on how and where carnival was performed. Based on periods of participant observation in Magaluf, the article notes that contemporary party tourism appeals to an imagination of a life other than that experienced in the quotidian world and that this bears comparisons with medieval fantasies associated with the Land of Cockaigne.
Tourists and the Carnivalesque: Partying in the Land of Cockaigne
Hazel Andrews

Introduction

This article explores the idea of party tourism through the lens of the carnivalesque and the medieval fantasy world, the Land of Cockaigne. Both the carnivalesque and the Land of Cockaigne are associated with ideas of a world turned upside down in which norms of social behavior pertaining to manners, moral conduct, and hierarchical social structures are inverted or transgressed. I take this approach to think about party tourism because, although there is an evident connection between tourism and carnivals, studies of this relationship have largely focused on actual, officially sanctioned carnival events rather than on touristic practices pertaining to carnival and identified as carnivalesque.¹

A carnival is often a tourist attraction and studies about the relationship between tourism and carnival, as already noted, do exist. Less well rehearsed in the study of tourism is thinking with the idea of the carnivalesque (that is, behavior that is normally associated with carnival but takes place outside of officially sanctioned events) to illuminate or understand touristic practices involving certain forms of conduct that do not conform to general conceptions of what might be called “decent behavior” and that often go together with party tourism. In this respect, I am following Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin’s lead in his analysis of medieval carnival in which he too was less interested in formal, authorized carnivals and more in the world beyond offici Doming where carnival is performed. As he commented, “carnival is not a spectacle seen by people; they live in it.”² Carnival is practice, a way of doing, and a way of being.

Carnival can also be used as a “mode of understanding, a positivity, a cultural analytic.”³ This approach derives from the publication in 1965 (first published in English in 1968) of Bakhtin’s Rabelais and His World, which became both a popular and dominant work in cultural and literary studies.⁴ Bakhtin’s work is not without its critics. It is not my intention, however, to debate the merits or demerits of his work but rather to use the motifs of the carnivalesque to which he draws attention to capitalize on that “mode of understanding” in the context of what has been labeled “party tourism.”⁵

Carnivalesque Today

The idea of the carnivalesque in Bakhtin’s work is related to his interpretations of French Renaissance literature. His analysis relies on a binary opposition between ideas of high and low culture and speaks of a challenge to power. The sanctioning of transgressive behavior during carnival serves to mock, reject, and subjugate authority, which turns the social order upside down. At the same time, by drawing attention to “high” and “low” culture, carnivalesque behavior also acts as a reminder of the social order, thereby reinforcing it. This form of ritual inversion is characterized by a grotesque realism and associated degradations, which further serve to debase all that is high. Thus, there is emphasis on bodily functions and the sexualized body rather than the reasoning body of the head.

In his review of an exhibition on the carnivalesque in 2000 published in the Guardian newspaper,

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⁴ Stallybrass and White, Politics and Poetics of Transgression.

⁵ Others have already debated Bakhtin’s work. For example, Aurèle Godet notes the lack of historical evidence grounding some of Bakhtin’s arguments in Aurèle Godet, Review of Rituality and Social (Dis)Order. The

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art critic Jonathan Jones argues that “carnival is an aesthetic phenomenon manifesting in our need to look at the ugly as well as the beautiful.” For example, the discourse of the grotesque is found in woodcuts of carnival images by German Renaissance artist Hans Weiditz. His representations from 1521 of medieval carnival include a man so fat he must carry his stomach before him on a cart as vomit spews from his mouth and a woman whose breasts are so large and pendulous that they dangle below her knees. In another image, by artist Peter Flötner (circa 1530), titled A Human Sundial, a prone figure is shown with his anus exposed in front of which are dollops of excrement. Such images echo in more contemporary art, for example, in American artist Paul McCarthy’s Spaghetti Man (1993), which depicts a human body with a large eyeless rabbit's head and a penis made of several meters of flesh-colored hosing furled in front of him on the floor.

The carnivalesque does not only inhabit the world of art. Anthropologist Renbourn Chock, for example, argues that as a conceptual framework it can also be useful for understanding contemporary hip-hop music in the United States. He notes that the video for the song “This Is America,” by rapper Childish Gambino and director Hiro Murai, contains many elements associated with the carnivalesque, including inversion, challenges to social hierarchy, and use of the grotesque in dance moves that rebel against classical dance styles.

In another example, media scholars Anne Graefer, Allaina Kilby, and Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore look at the offensive humor used during the January 2018 Women’s March, a global event that supported, among other issues, women’s rights. The protest was mainly aimed at the then US president Donald Trump whose comments on a variety of matters have been widely interpreted as racist and sexist. Many of the images carried by the marchers, which also found their way into social media, mocked Trump's masculinity. Trump, for example, was shown as having tiny hands and a tiny penis. The significance of the tiny hands is that male hand size is often equated with penis size, and a large penis is, in turn, equated with "being a man." These images challenged Trump's image as a strong alpha male. In other images, Trump was presented as a pair of buttocks with a wide-open anus as his mouth. The link made between Trump and feces relates to his comments in January 2018 to members of the US Senate in which he referred to countries from which many immigrants to the United States originated as “shithole countries.” Associating Trump with excrement served to challenge the power hierarchy by applying the “low” (here equal to migrants), as associated with feces, to the “high” (here equal to the office of the president of the United States).

One way the carnivalesque has already been linked to tourism is found in the work of sociologist and cultural theorist Rob Shields. Using Brighton Beach, UK, as an example, he describes the beach as a liminal zone, since it is a space that is neither land nor sea. For Shields, this “in-betweenness” links the beach to the carnivalesque and gives rise to transgression of propriety and societal norms. My contention is that in the case of Magaluf, liminality is not just restricted to the beach, but the whole resort is a liminal space. I make this argument because the carnivalesque and its associated inversions and transgressions can be found in the built environment as much as on the beach.
At this juncture, it is worth noting that simply referring to holiday experiences as liminal and therefore as different from the quotidian world is also problematic. Anthropologist Victor Turner, who significantly developed the idea of “liminality” from its early twentieth-century use by ethnologist Arnold van Gennep, has argued that in postindustrial societies the concept is metaphorical and the meaning ascribed to it is different from that found in preindustrial societies. Indeed, he recommends the use of the term “liminoid.”12 Although there is not space here to discuss Turner’s reasoning in more depth, I draw attention to the difference he highlights, lest there is temptation to mistake what I discuss as simply a difference between ritual and the profane.

Similarly, what I draw attention to here is not a discussion of gazing at difference or authenticity in other people and places, as tourism has often been described.13 Elsewhere, I have argued that British tourists find Britishness, stick often to the routines of home, and actively seek the familiar. Many of the tourists I spoke to, however, saw their holiday as a reprieve from not having to worry about the bills, going to work, or dealing with domestic chores.14 At the same time, Magaluf is a different place from the one inhabited at home. For example, the weather is different, the time zone is different, and tourists feel their experience as different. It would be wrong, therefore, to dismiss entirely the notion of difference, but temper the use of the idea of difference with the caveat that it is not a simple dichotomy, and how that may or may not be understood, felt, and/or performed by individuals is worthy of attention. Indeed, folklorist Roger D. Abrahams and folklorist and anthropologist Richard Bauman argue that behavior during times of festival is not necessarily a strict antithesis of behavior at other times but rather that the inversion and license of festival should be understood in connection with “the general interrelationship between order and disorder in the moral and social universe of the communities” concerned and that at times of reversal “it is the antithesis of behavior called for by the ideal normative system.”15 So, while the case of Magaluf may not simply be a world reversed, the symbolic inversion that does occur is no less meaningful.

Folklorist Barbara A. Babcock argues that “symbolic inversion’ may be broadly defined as any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms.”16 In literature, symbolic inversion includes reversals and partial inversions of the social order as well as transgressions.17 In Magaluf, symbolic inversion takes the form of the figure of the unruly woman, male-female inversion, and a discourse of the grotesque. It occurs in practice rather than in print.

Examples of the carnivalesque found in contemporary art, music, and protest show not only that the word “carnivalesque” is useful in terms of a mode of understanding but also that it is still a form of practice.18 Elements of the behavior of the so-called party tourist can be understood through the lens of the carnivalesque and related symbolic inversions, but first we must journey to Cockaigne.

**The Land of Cockaigne**

Connected with the carnivalesque is the medieval Land of Cockaigne, a fantasy world that also, like carnival, is characterized by inversion and transgression. If the carnivalesque has been underused in the study of tourism, the Land of Cockaigne (in Middle English spelled “Cockayne”
and in Dutch called “Luilekkerland”) has been even less used. What makes Cockaigne so fascinating is its relationship to travel. Not only was it a world characterized by inversions of norms in which numerous desires could be satisfied, unlike other ideas of paradise, Cockaigne was believed to physically exist on earth. It was a utopian world that many early European travelers set out in search of and, in some instances, claimed to have found. Reports of such places informed the burgeoning travel literature of the sixteenth century and infused the imagination about other places and other people.19

The search for a better life that exists away from the quotidian inhabitation of the world characterized by work and at times deprivation is found in the trope of travel across cultures and through time. Religious beliefs are often the basis of ideas that the problems and toil of the everyday can be overcome by reaching another place—heaven, paradise. In the Middle Ages, there were many fantasies about worlds where the hardship of life did not exist. One such fantasy was about the Land of Cockaigne. Although belief that Cockaigne was a real place had subsided by the Middle Ages in Europe, stories of its existence continued. Alongside the multiple versions of this fantasy is the problem of pinning down the origins of the tales, since they are mainly derived from an oral tradition extending over decades.20

In his wide-ranging and detailed examination of medieval European literature, art, history, and folklore, Dutch literary historian Herman Pleij illuminates the characteristics and uses of the Land of Cockaigne in the Middle Ages in his book Land of Cockaigne. By drawing on his exegesis, it is possible to find resonance with fantasy worlds today, some of which inform not only how some places of tourism are imagined but also how they are practiced.

Pleij begins his book by describing Cockaigne as “a country, tucked away in some remote corner of the globe, where ideal living conditions prevailed... Work was forbidden, for one thing, and food and drink appeared spontaneously.”21 In some depictions of Cockaigne from the Middle Ages, not only did this readily available food and drink spring automatically into one’s mouth, but it was also possible to eat one’s surroundings. Cockaigne had many attractive sounding features: it was always spring, life was peaceful, there was plenty of opportunity for sex without commitment, everyone had beautiful clothes, there was a fountain of youth, and money could be earned during one’s sleep.

One of the key differences between the Land of Cockaigne and the paradises promised to the deserving found at death was that one did not have to wait to die to visit. It was believed that this paradise could be found in the world beyond Europe and that some had visited. In several of the documents Pleij explores, “the Land of Cockaigne is presented as a concrete place situated somewhere on earth. Texts L and B begin with a first-person narrator who announces that he has just been to a country previously unknown to him.” The text B to which Pleij refers concludes with: “by urging all good-for-nothings to betake themselves to ‘that rich land.’” In other texts, “earning while you sleep” is also one of the basic laws of Cockaigne... [and] these topsy-turvy precepts are extended to include the rules of decorum obtaining among the elite. Anyone who can break wind convincingly earns a half-crown, and by belching three times or letting a very loud fart one can even pocket a sovereign.”22 In addition, gambling is rewarded, debtors are absolved of their debts after one year of eating chicken and white bread, drinking alcohol commands pay,
and inebriation attracts more money. The characteristics of inversion from the norm found in Cockaigne are numerous. What I draw on here are the ideas that Cockaigne shares similarities with the carnivalesque world turned upside down, that it fulfills the dreams of a better life elsewhere, and that because of its existence on earth it is possible to journey to reach it while still alive.

The idea of a paradise on earth has roots in travelers’ tales from antiquity. For example, some stories of Alexander the Great recount his finding of paradise. The Middle Ages saw increased travel to places hitherto unknown or little known to Europeans. In the so-called Age of Discovery, both Florentine merchant, navigator, and explorer Amerigo Vespucci and his fellow Italian explorer and navigator Christopher Columbus were influenced by ideas of finding an earthly paradise. The thought that an ideal and idyllic world could be found on earth tainted the descriptions of observations by travelers certain they could find this paradise. Thus, places visited were described in terms of dreamworlds, a lost golden age, and so on, of which Cockaigne also featured. Indeed, many of the characteristics attributed to Cockaigne “are reported to be everyday occurrences in other parts of the world.” In addition, as Pleij contends, “any European living in preindustrial times would have been moved to remember Cockaigne or Luilekkerland when, traveling abroad, he suddenly felt a balmy breeze, or saw trees sagging under the weight of their fruit, or heard exotic birds singing, or detected the fragrance of spices, or tasted strange and delightful food for the first time. In many travel accounts Cockaigne appears to be a reality, though sometimes a rather far-fetched one.” It is the stories of the lives of other people and other places seen as different from the world inhabited by the traveler that informed ideas of this world free from want. Unlike other stories of paradise, these dreamworlds could be attached to a place that those with the means and ability to travel could also find. The burgeoning number of travel accounts became big business as more and more reports were printed. Original stories were “sexed up” to appeal to an ever-more lucrative market with an audience interested in reading descriptions of spectacular places and libidinous people. Part of the fantasy world recounted in often heavily edited versions of journeys were the stories of women as sexually available. For example, the early 1500s Dutch edition of a book based on the letters of Vespucci “dwells repeatedly on the unbridled lust of the natives” in which the locals never wear clothes and are openly promiscuous and “the women in particular were said to be overcome by uncontrollable sexual desires.” In addition, a close connection between Cockaigne and the writing of geography books, encyclopedias, and pilgrims’ guides developed. The texts were colored with the dreams of a better life elsewhere rooted in ideas about Cockaigne, and these held sway over the recording of “facts” about the places that had been visited. As a result, ideas of the lands and people “discovered” on the other side of the Atlantic at the start of European-based explorations were influenced by the imaginative world of Cockaigne.

The places that formed the basis of the fantasy lands of Cockaigne were often located in “the West,” even before the travels of Vespucci and Columbus. In Middle English literature, Cockaigne (discussed as Land of Cockayne) was the dreamworld located “farther away than the most western part of Europe, which was Spain.” At the time, Spain was believed to reach much farther west than it does, but because of this, albeit incorrect, geography, it too “was also privy to those wonders of the West and therefore must have had mysterious charms of its own.” In the northern European imagination of the fourteenth century, Spain had a fairy-tale image, and Pleij argues that there were “indications that an idyllic picture of Spain was etched in the collective
imagination.” In this fantasy Spain, “the sky was always clear, and the earth was fertile and rich in
gold, silver, precious stones, and metals.” In other accounts of travel, ideas of earthly paradises
were drawn from “discoveries” in the East of lands of plenty, peace, and promiscuity. With these
living conditions, the person fortunate enough to come across such a place could surely have
partied hard.

In writing about Cockaigne, Pleij argues that “dreamworlds say a lot about those who devise
them. Modern-day dreamworlds are the stock-in-trade of travel agencies: clever, custom-
made products for typical holidaymakers in search of the ideal climate, unspoiled nature,
cultural wonders, and forbidden sex.” What is offered today, he states, cannot compare to the
Cockaignes of the past, as the world that the contemporary holiday is designed to appeal to is
not characterized by want in the same way as it was during the Middle Ages. Rather, “modern-
day Europe represents in many respects the realization of Cockaigne: fast food is available at
all hours, as are climatic control, free sex, unemployment benefits, and plastic surgery that
seemingly prolongs youth.”

There is much to unpack from Pleij’s words, including the tinge of prejudice about the “typical
holidaymaker” and the rather simplistic notion that being unemployed equates to “doing nothing”
because the individual is not engaged in paid, productive employment. He is, of course, correct
in that the world today is very different from the world that spawned medieval fantasies of
Cockaigne. Yet people still travel in the hope of finding a world that offers a life better than the
one they came from. By using the example of the party tourist to Magaluf, I argue that the dream
of a Cockaigne-like world remains as much a feature of the European imagination as it was in the
Middle Ages.

Magaluf

Magaluf is a tourist resort located on Mallorca, the largest of the Balearic Islands. It is southwest
of the island’s capital, Palma, in the local municipality of Calvià. In the 1950s, Mallorca and, by
corollary, Magaluf were developed as tourist destinations by the Francisco Franco government to
earn foreign exchange and create employment and greater respectability for Spain on the world
stage. Mallorca had been attracting international visitors for leisure purposes since at least the
nineteenth century. Franco’s regime developed Magaluf and similar resorts (e.g., Palmanova and
S’Arenal) to appeal to a northern European population with increased disposable income, with
more “spare time,” and in search of relaxation in guaranteed sunshine.

Magaluf evolved in such a way that it attracted a particularly “British” clientele, as I have
discussed in depth elsewhere. Magaluf was increasingly populated by facilities offering British
food and drink (bread, sausages, bacon, pints of beer, etc.) in establishments often named as
if they were in the UK (The White Horse, The British Chippy, The Britannia, and so on). English
was the dominant language, the majority of tourists were on charter tourism trips organized by a
UK-based tourism company, and often whole hotels were exclusive to one tour operator working
only in the UK market. As I have previously also recognized, “Britishness” is a complex term and
its use is not to deny other forms of national descriptors but to note that there is an appeal to an
idea of Britishness in the resort and that this is performed by these tourists in the form of what I
have described as an “effervescent Britishness.”
I first went to Mallorca in the summer of 1997. This trip was for a project very different from the one I would conduct for my doctoral research. The main purpose of this first trip was to identify sustainable tourism policies. It allowed me to undertake a “recce” of where I was staying—Palmanova—and the adjoining resort of Magaluf and develop a set of foreshadowed problems that would inform my ethnographic inquiries in subsequent fieldwork visits. As anthropologist Judith Okely notes, “the anthropologist rarely commences research with an hypothesis to test. There are few pre-set, neatly honed questions, although there are multiple questions in the fieldworker’s head. There are theories, themes, ideas and ethnographic details to discover, examine or dismiss.”

I returned to Magaluf for much longer visits in 1998 and 1999 and, later, in 2009, 2015, and 2018. Since 1999, none of my trips afforded me much opportunity to do more than observe. Thus, most of my data was collected during the main stints of my fieldwork in the late 1990s. This consisted of participant observation in both Magaluf and Palmanova. The practice of participant observation in this context involved doing what tourists were doing, including sunbathing by pool or beach, going on island tours, attending various nighttime entertainment activities, joining pub crawls, and so on. At the same time, I spoke to local people, tourists, tour operator representatives, bar workers, and members of the expatriate community. Some people I spoke to once, others more than once.

Trying to study tourists is perhaps different from other fieldwork settings in terms of the “here today, gone tomorrow” nature of the package tour, which most tourists were part of. The conversations I had were not formal interviews around specific themes but rather developed organically. We spoke about holiday-making practices, life in the UK, and living and working with tourists. The obvious transient nature of tourism in this context worked against the idea of developing in-depth, long interviews. In addition, the nature of some of the field setting, specifically related to the aspect of party tourism, did not facilitate such conversations. As anthropologist Alessandro Testa explains about his work in the discos and clubs of Rome, “Un'indagine etnografica circoscritta nello spazio/tempo della discoteca non può, infatti, avvalersi del più comune mezzo di interazione etnografica: la comunicazione verbale. Il volume della musica e la calca dei corpi rendono di fatto inutilizzabile il maggiore espediente di raccolta di dati, o almeno così… L’osservazione relativamente passiva e solo a volte attivamente partecipe dei fatti si è risultata di conseguenza la sola strada metodologicamente praticabile.”

I am grateful to Claudia Melis from Liverpool John Moores University for her help with the translation into English.

At the time of my fieldwork, I was not specifically seeking answers about the carnivalesque or the Land of Cockaigne. Although I did touch on these ideas in earlier published material, I did not fully develop them in my theorizing of tourists. One of the strengths of anthropological, ethnographic inquiry is that the analysis of the data cannot be divorced from its collection. Rather, they are in an ongoing relationship. As Okely contends:

Both during the fieldwork and after, themes gradually emerge…. The anthropologist-writer draws also on the totality of the experience, parts of which may not, cannot, be cerebrally written down at the time. It is recorded in memory, body and all the senses. Ideas and themes have worked through the whole being throughout fieldwork. They have gestated in dreams and the subconscious in both sleep and in waking hours, away from
The resorts in physical terms are bounded entities; symbolically their lives, however, exist outside of this physical location. Both Palmanova and Magaluf, but especially the latter, live in guidebooks, tourism promotional material, travel writing, news reports, and various forms of social media. All of these are part of the tourism experience; all of these are worthy of attention and provide insight into the practice of tourism. They shape expectations, encouraging some to visit and others to stay away. They fuel the imagination, and because tourism does not operate in a vacuum but is part of wider sociocultural attitudes and processes, narratives about the resorts are important areas of consideration in this article.

Since the late 1990s, the presence of Magaluf on social media has become more noticeable. This was particularly the case in 2014 when an event, which I describe below, at a resort bar caused a media outcry. It is probably this event, more than any of my other experiences, that has made me focus on the nature of party tourism and to seek ways to understand some of the behavior that occurs in its name. As Okely notes, "years after my intensive fieldwork on Gypsies, and after follow-up research, there are still reverberations, there are still things to write about or to reinterpret." So, by reflecting on previous fieldwork and more recent activities, brought to my attention by various forms of media, I seek to develop my earlier dalliances with ideas of the carnivalesque and the Land of Cockaigne and explore them in more depth in relation to party tourism, especially in Magaluf.

Each of my trips to Magaluf confirmed that one of the main reasons to visit Magaluf was based on its provision of opportunities to party. Although party-style tourism is linked to those in early adulthood, this is not exclusively the case. I encountered people in older age groups looking to dance the night away, get drunk, and get laid. I met tourists in their eighteenth year visiting the island and others on their first visit. The tourists came from all over the UK but most notably from the North of England and Scotland.

In the late 1990s, most of the tourists I encountered were white and working class. The latter is defined as those engaged in unskilled or semi-skilled employment. The issue of class is one of importance to understanding tourism because tourism is a class-based activity. People of all classes go on holiday if they have the financial means, ability, and motivation. However, what type of holiday and what holiday behaviors and motivations for travel are acceptable are class bound. For example, I did meet a family who, based on their employment, would be described as middle class. Their attitude to Magaluf was markedly different from their fellow tourists. They were, for instance, disappointed by what they saw as a lack of Spanish ambience in the resort; they had been looking for an experience that was more akin to engaging with a cultural "other" than finding and expressing a sense of a home-based national identity with its trappings of flag waving, food from the UK, and the ubiquitous use of the English language.

The link between class and tourist motivations, expectations, and practices has been observed by social scientists Jean Maurice Thurot and Gaetane Thurot in their discussion of tourism advertising. They argue that ideas about leisure and tourism consumption are based "on the
classical aristocratic model," but are not reflective of the opening of travel for leisure and pleasure purposes to a much wider group of people post-Second World War. The result was those in the upper echelons of society found ways to distance themselves from consumption practices that once were their preserve, but now accessible to everyone else.35 Over the years, Magaluf has acquired a reputation as a party tourism destination, which does not fit the model of aristocratic tourism. I will return to this below, but first I will probe the issue of the "right reasons" for travel in more depth.

**Traveler Good, Tourist Bad**

The observation that the development of tourism since the 1950s is in part structured by class is an interesting one because it echoes sentiments expressed much earlier in the development of mass tourism. For example, as English businessman Thomas Cook expanded his organized tours across Europe in the 1860s, complaints were made about the presence of an increased number of travelers in places once enjoyed more exclusively. For example, Charles Lever, the British vice consul for Italy, writing in 1865, opined that organized tours were akin to a circus and involved "an 'invasion' bearing the unmistakable taint of inferior social class."36 Although Cook rebutted Lever's concerns, he did share with him that the purpose of travel was educational, albeit they disagreed about how and by whom that travel should be undertaken. As professor of British literature and culture James Buzard contends, this period saw the development of an "anti-tourism" sentiment based on "efforts—still discernible—to establish the purposes and behaviour that make for 'genuine' European travel, constructing the genuine on a foundation of denunciation, evasion, and putative transcendence of merely 'touristic' purposes and behaviour."37 This division remains, and there are many examples, including in the academic study of tourism, where the tourist is demonized. Two early texts include, for example, historian Daniel Boorstin’s *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America* and writers Louis Turner and John Ash’s *The Golden Hordes: International Tourism and the Pleasure Periphery*.38 For Boorstin, the traveler is "good" and the tourist "bad," and Turner and Ash argue that the advent of charter tourism "led to a whole new tribe—the Mass Tourists. The barbarians of our Age of Leisure."39

The distinction between traveler and tourist is one that is yet to be resolved. Activities associated with being a tourist still attract criticism. Indeed, for example, consider broadcaster Mishal Hussein’s interview on the BBC Radio 4 Today Program (September 4, 2018) with Simon Reeve, a broadcaster and writer who makes travel programs. Discussing with Hussein his then newest TV program, Reeve said that he thinks people should push themselves more, claiming "I think it’s as much about how you travel and one of the big things I believe in is about travelling with your eyes open and trying to have a richer, more rewarding experience as a result." His top tips for a "more rewarding experience" include: "Don’t just be lulled into lying by a swimming pool but get up, get out and take a few more chances because life is very short."40

Viewed thus, lying by the pool just does not cut it as a rewarding experience and is undertaken without any agency on behalf of the protagonists concerned. Such destinations as Magaluf, in which there is much lying by the pool and lying by, around, in or on other places—bed, beach, beach wall, street bench—will not be seen, by some, as providing rewarding experiences and are often at the forefront of descriptions of all that is bad about tourism and tourists. For example, in his introduction to Mallorca, writer David Hewson describes tourists as invaders and several...
resorts—including Magaluf—as “dreadful ersatz tourist towns... [to] be avoided at all costs.” In relation to Magaluf, in particular, he states, “only a sound thrashing with a division of bulldozers would cure most of [the] modern horrors.” In the Lonely Planet guide to Mallorca, the comment is less harsh than Hewson’s but, nevertheless, carries a similar sentiment. Linking Magaluf with its next-door neighbor Palmanova, the guide’s author says that “Palmanova and Magaluf have merged to form what is the epitome of the sea, sand, sangria and shagging (not necessarily in that order) holiday that has lent all of Mallorca an undeserved notoriety. The good news? Change is afoot.” Although these commenters do not make direct references to class, it is reasonable to suggest that, even if unwittingly, the attitudes expressed may have a basis in class. They echo earlier complaints against Cook’s tours in which the lack of a serious purpose and genuine interest behind travel was made by Cook’s critics.

This apparent demonization of the masses can be read as a demonization of the working class, as in a hierarchical class-based society it is the working classes that are associated with the masses and from which other class sensibilities try to distance themselves. The class-bound nature of travel and related class-based attitudes toward the purpose for travel expressed over one hundred years ago have not been left in the nineteenth century. Indeed, journalist Owen Jones first wrote on this subject in 2011 with reference to a term that had come into popular parlance at the time, that of “chav.” Used as a derogatory term, “chav” referred to a person from society’s lowest social order. In addition, it was being used in products aimed at tourists. Jones cites the example of the holiday firm Activities Abroad, which at the time of the publication of the first edition of his book in 2011 was offering holidays with a starting price of £2,000. In January 2009, the company sent a promotional message to twenty-four thousand people. It quoted a piece from the *Daily Mail* written in 2005 that claimed that “children with ‘middle-class’ names were eight times more likely to pass their GCSEs than those with names like ‘Wayne and Dwayne.’” According to the travel company, names like Wayne and Dwayne would not be found on their client list. They came up with two lists: the first list included “the names you were ‘likely to encounter’ on one of their holidays” and the second list was of names that would not be encountered. As a result, “Activities Abroad excursions were a Britney, Chantelle and Dazza-free zone. They concluded that they could legitimately promise ‘Chav-Free Activity Holidays.’” Jones contacted the company’s founder and managing director, who responded, “it is time the middle classes stood up for themselves” and “regardless of whether it’s class warfare or not, I make no apology for proclaiming myself to be middle class.” Of eighteenth-century England, English professors Peter Stallybrass and Allon White note that “street culture ... is a source of fascination and fear on the part of a bourgeois culture which must risk contamination by the low-Other, dirt, and danger whenever it steps down into the street.” The type of holiday on offer by Activities Abroad seems to be the very antithesis of the party tourism found in Magaluf, and with the company’s apparent vetting process of its clientele through nomenclature, the fear of contamination from the low “other” more likely to holiday in Magaluf is removed.

This attitude to working-class people follows in the footsteps of a way of thinking that has connections with carnival. As an arena for popular cultural expression, carnival, like any aspect of culture, has not remained static. Changes to carnival in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were underwritten by shifts in power and monetary concerns. In effect, with the rise of the bourgeoisie, there was a reordering of the spatial logic of behavior through a process of gentrification in which “new sites of assembly appeared regulated according to manners and
norms significantly different from those of the places they were displacing \[and\] traditional places ... were subjected once again to the onslaught of ‘the civilizing process.’

Magaluf as a party destination has received a certain amount of notoriety based on a party style of tourism that would not find its way onto the list of holidays offered by Activities Abroad. The behavior of tourists in Magaluf has often led to it being in the media spotlight. At the same time, however, there has been a desire by local authorities to reposition Magaluf, to move away from its party image, and to attract a different type of clientele. Nevertheless, Magaluf remains on the list of party tourism destinations and still carries the nickname Shagaluf.

**Magaluf as Shagaluf**

The resort of Magaluf has long held a reputation as a party destination with packages aimed at young adults looking for "a good time." In the late 1990s, although the young adults this type of holiday attracted were typically in the eighteen-to-thirty age range (hence the holiday company Club 18–30), many adult tourists outside this age bracket equally enjoyed the party elements of Magaluf. The partying for which Magaluf has been associated with relates to the drink-fueled exploits of young tourists often on their first holiday without their parents and often involved engaging in casual sexual activity. Such was Magaluf's notoriety that it earned the nickname Shagaluf (an amalgamation of the slang "shag"—a term for sex—and "luf," the last three letters of the resort's name). Although in more recent times (especially since 2015) measures to curb what was by many considered to be the more insalubrious behavior of tourists have been enacted by the local municipality of Calvià, Magaluf remains a destination of choice for many seeking a party holiday experience and packages that cater to this type of holiday still exist.

In 2014, Magaluf achieved an increased amount of attention due to media coverage of an occurrence of "mamading" in one of the resort’s bars, which was organized by the events company Carnage Magaluff. The reporting referred to the videoing and posting on Facebook of a young inebriated woman in her late teens, or early twenties, who was in effect coerced into fellatio with what was reported to be twenty-four different men in the belief that she would win a “free holiday.” Sensationalist reporting, such as that by UK newspaper the *Mirror,* claimed that “the girl’s underwear is around her ankles as one man appears to have sex with her from behind and she has oral sex with another reveller standing in front of her.” The paper goes on to report that when the woman “appears to stop, the DJ—who has a Geordie accent—shouts, ‘you little slag, stop f***** about. She’s got stage fright, you need to **** his ****, I said’ ... ‘This is Carnage and this is what we do. We need to see someone get b***d here don’t we? Who wants to see someone get s*****d?’” Following these revelations, other stories about lascivious behavior by British tourists in Magaluf were highlighted across the British press, including, for example, the *Daily Record*’s assertion that “new Magaluf nightclub sex shame as girls are stripped on stage at ‘paint parties.”

The videoing and sharing of the incident by one of the bar’s workers was without the woman’s consent. The accompanying attention and negative press about Magaluf helped to spur the introduction of bylaws to curb the drink-fueled activities—like that of the mamading case—for which Magaluf had become known. Nevertheless, Magaluf remained a popular place to visit.
for party tourists and, in 2018 signs proclaiming that “stag” and “hen” groups were welcome were displayed in bar and nightclub windows.

In 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic brought most of the world’s tourism activity to a halt. The measures introduced to try to keep people safe from the virus, including social distancing and the wearing of face coverings, prohibited the type of activity that relied on close personal contact required of fellatio. Indeed, of Magaluf, the British newspaper the Daily Mirror reported in May 2020 that the resort’s main street, Punta Ballena, normally the focus of the party tourist, was deserted. The pandemic also gave an opportunity for efforts to change tourist activity in Magaluf. The Calvià director general of tourism claimed that “Magaluf is going to be a very different place this year…. It was always going to be more difficult for British holidaymakers to come here this summer and commit the sort of excesses we’ve seen all too often in the past because of by-law modifications and the new regional government drunken tourism decree. I truly believe COVID-19 could deal a mortal blow to the type of tourism we have seen in Magaluf and especially Punta Ballena.”

However, a YouTube video showed rowdy drunk tourists jumping on cars and flouting local coronavirus regulations. Two years later, the problem of antisocial behavior remains. Eleven restaurants on the island, mainly on Playa de Palma, have introduced a dress code in an attempt to curb antisocial behavior, because, according to one hotelier, the measures introduced in 2020 were not working. Reports carried in UK media outlets in June 2022 pointed to the introduction of a number of armed police deployed to counter what has been described in Mallorca as “tourism of excesses.” The overall point here is that attempts to manage tourist behavior have met with limited success. Furthermore, not all agree with recent regional government proposals to aim for higher-spending tourists and reduce the overall number of visitors to the Balearics with a view to improve quality. Ashifa Kassam, writing for the Guardian newspaper, quotes one hotel owner as saying, “we’re up against a classist government that doesn’t want a British tourist who works as a waitress to come to Mallorca on vacation.” The hotel owner further claims that “they might not spend as much money but they don’t consume as many resources either. They are not going to a five-star hotel with ten Jacuzzis, four golf courses and six buffets. They’re not arriving in a private jet.”

Magaluf as Shagaluf speaks to the idea of a topsy-turvy world, as the public displays of sexual activity do not conform to what could be described as normative moral codes and/or the, albeit stereotypical, notion that sexual intercourse and relations are conducted between people based on feelings of love and well-established relationships. In effect, the mamading incident is an example of an inversion or at least an attempt at an inversion of the social moral order.

Another aspect of the carnivalesque that needs consideration pertains directly to women. In the mamading incident and other similar activities, such as that found in the nighttime entertainment of Pirates Adventure, where women are cajoled into “getting [their] tits out for the boys” and other party “games,” women as sexual beings are the central focus. In addition, recalling anthropologist Mary Douglas’s discussions of purity and danger associated with bodily orifices as marginal areas, there is a ritualized debasing of women as the audience is reminded of women’s “leaky” and thus potentially polluting bodies. The objectification and berating of women makes them the objects of what Stallybrass and White refer to as “displaced abjection,”
“the process whereby ‘low’ social groups turn their figurative and actual power, not against those in authority, but against those who are even ‘lower’ (women, Jews, animals).” As a result, carnivals were not “simply the antithetical sites to the Church and the State,” in which one might expect the socially marginalized and persecuted Jewish person, for example, to rise in social ranking, but rather were opportunities to further disparage “the other.”

In an inverted world, one would expect that the dominant social order would be overturned. In the UK, the dominant social order remains largely based in patriarchy with women on an unequal footing with men in many spheres of life. Thus, one would expect that in a world turned upside down women would be in the ascendant. However, the game playing objectifies women as sexual beings, turns them in effect into unpaid sex workers, and publicly berates them for not performing or underperforming. This is evident in the mamading game where the young woman is called a “little slag.” It was also evident in one night’s audience participation game during Pirates Adventure I witnessed in July 1998, when a woman who refused to go topless was admonished for not doing so and the men in the audience were told by the game’s compère: “Don’t worry lads, it wouldn’t be worth it.” The use and portrayal of women in Magaluf cannot then be described as antithetical to the home world. The inversion is more prominent in the overtly public displays of acts associated with the private sphere. Social theorist Levent Soysal makes the point that in the digital age and the rise of social media there is an increased willingness of people to publicly share that which was once only private, but it is, nevertheless, still the case that performances of sex acts, such as mamading, are not acceptable forms of public behavior.

In Magaluf, it is as if the normally regulated body of the home world, held in check by social niceties and expected codes of dress and behavior, is unfettered. The tourist is encouraged to get out of control, to focus on the body’s orifices, and to pay attention to both what goes in and what comes out. Overindulgence in both food and alcohol (but particularly the latter) is encouraged and rewarded; vomiting is a regular occurrence and often a source of amusement. It is not unusual, for example, to see inebriated people badgered by their amused companions to the point of emesis. Transgressing bodily boundaries and public displays of sexual activity speak to a letting go of the body that is also evident in how the unclothed body can be seen to reveal flesh and areas of the body more usually covered. In the resort, an emphasis on “fat” bodies has resonance with a discourse of grotesque realism discussed as a motif of the carnivalesque.

The Discourse of the Grotesque in Magaluf

In his discussion of the carnivalesque, Bakhtin argues that the depiction of the body in exaggerated form, as in the examples of Weiditz’s fat man and grotesque woman described above, formed part of a grotesque realism of which an “essential principle” is “degradation, that is the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract.” Emphasis is often on the body parts that are open to the world with an accent on sexualized aspects of the body. This openness to the world and stress placed on sexual activity contrasts with the classical Renaissance body with its closed orifices and hidden bodily functions related to conception, childbirth, pregnancy, and death. The concept of the grotesque body is, according to Bakhtin, “the basis of abuses, oaths, and curses.” A discourse of grotesque bodies and attendant abuse are evident in Magaluf. An idealized body is not one that has layers of fat. In terms of the social body, fatness is a social
category, and attitudes toward and definitions of fat bodies have varied throughout history. According to sociologist Bryan S. Turner, a slender body became associated with control and morality in Britain from the mid-1800s. Fat bodies came to be linked with being out of control in terms of, for example, not being able to curb excessive eating. Even before the 1800s, interpretations of body appearance were linked to characteristics of the person. For example, in playwright William Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, Caesar draws a distinction between those he perceives as a threat and those he does not when he proclaims, “let me have men about me that are fat.” By contrast, he does not trust Cassius who has a “lean and hungry look” and “thinks too much.” Cassius is equated, unlike his fellow “fat men,” with danger.

On holiday, the “beach body,” a popular motif in tourism marketing materials, is healthy, toned, muscular, and young. Even images aimed at older audiences, while they may depict older faces, tend not to show older bodies with wrinkled, sun-spotted skin. In addition, bodies that might be described as fat are generally absent from promotional information. However, fat bodies are evident in Magaluf in the images available to tourists in the form of postcards and in some of the performances aimed at entertaining tourists. One postcard depicts an excessively fat, smiling, naked woman lying stretched out along a tree trunk beneath the caption “Mallorca Happy Island.” In another postcard, two tourists, one male, one female, with large stomachs are viewed as if through a pair of binoculars, standing in the sea with the caption “You are a weight-watcher…’Isla de Mallorca.”

The images of people who are excessively overweight invert the idea of the “beach body” as fit, slim, and well honed. At the same time, tourists are aware of their body size and the implications of overindulgence of both food and alcohol. The uncontrolled availability of food and alcohol is a mark of some activities in the resort. For example, tour operator representatives usually sold tickets to Pirates Adventure with the promise of limitless “free” sangria. The idea that drinking large amounts of alcohol was to be rewarded came to the fore in some games played with tourists on bar crawls. In one game, for example, the ability to down in quick succession three potent cocktails earned the drinker the title of “hero” and “legend.” In the Land of Cockaigne, drinking was well paid and getting drunk paid even more. Although there is no financial remuneration for being drunk, the reward for the drinkers comes in the admiration by others and the elevation of status to that of a hero. In Cockaigne, money could also be earned by sleeping and being lazy. Again, not rewarded directly with financial compensation, the opportunities provided to tourists to sleep more than usual and not undertake work is, for those in paid employment, indirectly renumerated because they are still being paid, even though they are not actively engaged with their employment. Cockaigne as “gastronomic paradise” also finds parallels with tourism in Magaluf. Tourists acknowledged that they had eaten more than usual and were putting on weight; as one man proclaimed following a trip out, “I made a bit of a pig of me-self really.”

In the late 1990s, pigs occurred time and again in the symbolic landscape of Magaluf along with the fry-up—a breakfast meal consisting of fried bacon and sausages—which was available all day and every day. The social meanings attached to pigs are accompanied by ambiguity and vary across time and cultural setting. The pig has, however, been long associated with negative connotations of greed, laziness, and dirt and is frequently used as a term of abuse. Stallybrass and White note, “pigs seem to have borne the brunt of our rage, fear, affection and desire for the...
"low" and pigs were a "carnivalesque icon." Although in medieval carnival "the pleasures of food were represented in the sausage," the pig nevertheless occupied a similar position to women with respect to displaced abjection. On the one hand, in Magaluf, pigs and piggy-type qualities are celebrated, and the connection with self-indulgence and overeating serves to lower the pigs' status. In Magaluf, one souvenir, the "Fun Badge," depicts a pig on hind legs wearing an apron under the title "FLUB," which stands for Fat Lazy Useless Bastard. The ubiquitous presence of the pig in Magaluf marks the resort as a site of the carnivalesque.

The carnivalesque draws attention to the grotesque body by exaggeration through the depiction of fat bodies. Being fat, useless, and lazy are things to be celebrated and rewarded in the Land of Cockaigne. In the context of Magaluf, being a bastard can be added to that list. Although being illegitimate no longer carries the social stigma it once did, "bastard" remains a term of abuse. Associated with inferior quality, it is used to debase people. In FLUB, the pig is not only fat, lazy, and useless but also a bastard.

In a different setting, being fat and a bastard becomes a motif of resistance. During a visit to a nightclub in Magaluf as part of an organized bar crawl, attendees listening to the British DJ's banter were told, "I'm a big fat bastard." He exhibited a "couldn't care less what you think about me" attitude as he acknowledged his humor as offensive when he told a "joke" describing how he was going to "shag my 82-year-old mother" and stated, "yes I'm offensive, I'm a big fat bastard." He encouraged the audience to respond to him by shouting "you fat bastard." They were also afforded the opportunity to buy souvenir T-shirts with the caption "You Fat Bastard" emblazoned on them. The DJ linked his self-acknowledged offensiveness with his body size providing a symbolic expression of being objectionable while at the same time embodying this element of his character by being fat. The reference to incest and the related ageism acts as a form of inversion, but, as in the mamading incident, it too becomes a form of displaced abjection as it makes those already low in the social order even lower. It is not just that a son could debase his mother in acts of incest that revolts; it is also the reference to her age.

The attempt at humor at the expense of women in both examples (mamading and sex with mother) fits with the vulgarities associated with carnival identified by Bakhtin. These vulgarities are linked to bodily functions, which in Magaluf find purchase in relation to women's bodies. The next example took place in a hotel located in Magaluf's adjoining resort of Palmanova, although it was doubtless repeated as part of the evening entertainment offered by hotels in Magaluf and elsewhere on Mallorca. In this event, a drag artist gave an impersonation of the opera singer Montserrat Caballé. A world acclaimed artist, Caballé came to popular attention with the song "Barcelona," a duet sung with Freddie Mercury, which became the anthem for the Olympic Games held in Barcelona in 1992. Pictures of Caballé show her as a lady with what might be described as a portly stature. In the drag performance, the opera diva, dressed in a blue glittery dress, was depicted as fat, with hugely exaggerated breasts. She came on stage mouthing the words of the song "Barcelona." As the song approached its climax, the performer reached beneath the dress and pulled out a large pair of bloomer-style knickers, which she revealed to the audience as being blood stained on one side. As the song continued to its rousing end, she once again reached beneath the dress to bring into view an enormous blood-stained tampon, much to the amusement of the audience.
The ritual humiliation of women’s bodies, particularly in relation to reproduction (the mamading incident as symbolic of copulation, the display of menstrual blood in the example of Caballé), finds further mocking in childbirth. As part of one hotel’s evening entertainment, a magician hypnotized a man from the audience into believing he was in labor and giving birth. The participant’s performance with legs akimbo, accompanying groaning and advice from the hypnotist to push was greeted with laughter. The image of a man giving birth fits well into the idea of the carnivalesque world turned upside down with a reversal of biological functions.

Unruly Women

In the incidents of mamading, menstrual blood, and childbirth, women and their bodily functions are the focus of attention. The aftermath that followed the mamading incident focused less on the fact that several men were willing to expose themselves in public and have their genitalia stimulated by a mouth that had just been around someone else’s penis.

These portrayals of women in Magaluf correlate with art historian David Kunzle’s observations of literature he studied that spanned three hundred years and seven European countries. The most common inversion he identified was that of male-female, which, he argues “testifies to the widespread sense that patriarchy is the bedrock of society.” The literature, he attests, shows the “misogyny of the medieval and Renaissance periods.” Treatment of women during these times was in part due to their “sexual temperament,” which was based, in part, on the idea that women could not adequately keep their bodies and senses in check. In the carnivalesque, sexual inversions in the form of the "unruly woman" were widespread. These were mainly initiated by men, as women had limited opportunities to enact their own rites of inversion. The unruly woman, however, was an ambiguous figure: she “was shameful, outrageous; she was also vigorous and in command.”

The way I have described the treatment of women in Magaluf is akin to the idea of the unruly woman as shameful and outrageous. In some circumstances, however, there was evidence of women having the “upper hand.” A woman might, for example, control the room as the gaze of men followed her. The women I spoke to in the late 1990s neither condoned nor condemned how they were represented. Indeed, some found Magaluf liberating.

This attitude has parallels with the medieval and Renaissance unruly woman. As historian and anthropologist Natalie Zemon Davis states, “even the most searching feminist critics did not challenge the sovereign authority of the father.” Rather, the carnivalesque symbolic inversions mainly strengthened the existing hierarchy. At the same time, however, they promoted resistance to the prevailing system. Indeed, according to Davis, the “image of the disorderly woman … could operate to widen behavioral options of women.”

In the context of Magaluf, there is evident enjoyment from the tourists of the various bodily performances. The inversions and exaggerations act as reminders of who we are and who we are not: men neither give birth nor menstruate. The resort has acquired a reputation for rowdy behavior that has drawn criticism not only in Mallorca but also in the UK, with frequent reports of tourists’ more salacious behavior. Such reports find popular currency in British newspaper media and are often accompanied by sensationalist headlines and expressions of outrage and disgust.
This is a demonizing of the working class by a bourgeois establishment that cannot help but look, captivated and revolted in equal measure. According to Stallybrass and White, carnival with its feasting, spectacles, and grotesque bodies was everything the bourgeois middle class was not. The working-class, mass party tourist is everything the middle-class traveler is not, yet the vulgarity of the former remains a source of fascination.

Conclusion

The party tourist in Magaluf faces an uncertain future with moves to attract a different type of clientele to the resort. The desire to change the tourist profile is understandable, since there are negative associations arising from the party excesses of the resort. These are related to the abjection and exploitation of young women; the risk to health from sexually transmitted infections; and, most tragic of all, the deaths resulting from the practice of balconing, whereby young people (invariably men) fall to their deaths as they attempt to cross, in a drunken state, between hotel or apartment balconies or balance on balcony rails. It is not my intention to condone practices that lead to any death or injury—physical, emotional, reputational. Rather my thinking with the carnivalesque is not only to understand its place in the contemporary world of tourism and therefore think of tourism, and in this case party tourism, as carnivalesque practice but also to bring insight to the practice of party tourism as part of a lineage of activities in the European world that has been pushed to the margins and been used to demonize a certain sector of society. The licensing of unlicensed behavior that becomes possible through the carnivalesque partying as exhibited in some behavior in Magaluf pertains to the lower echelons of society. It is a source of both abhorrence and delight.

In writing about the impacts of lockdown restrictions in Europe due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Testa argues, “Europeans find themselves craving to re-establish that ‘collective effervescence’ (Durkheim 1912) that thrills and fulfills the masses, shaping them into local communities, vicinities and groups.” Among my discussions about British tourists in Magaluf has always been that the practice of being there gives a sense of belonging and affirmation of life that feeds into an “effervescent Britishness.” Since my writing about effervescent Britishness in Magaluf and Palmanova, the sociopolitical landscape of the UK has changed, and Britishness, always an unstable ethnic descriptor, is now even more subject to question. What does remain, however, is the desire to escape, to reach a place other than the one already inhabited. The global pandemic showed this more than ever as people crowded onto beaches in the UK once lockdown restrictions were lifted. Once holidaying overseas again became possible, people were shown in images crowded together on the streets of Magaluf. The world has changed since the Middle Ages, but the fantasies associated with a life elsewhere remain. Although Pleij is doubtless correct in his assertion that the deprivation of the European world during the Middle Ages is far greater than that experienced in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as the cost-of-living crisis deepens, the desire to seek reprieve from “everyday” worries will remain and the tourist will still, either in imagination or practice, be in search of a version of the Land of Cockaigne.

Postscript

In April 2023 I returned to Magaluf for one week and visited the infamous Punta Ballena. The season had only just started, and it was evident that the resort was still preparing for the high-
season summer months. Many bars and nightclubs were closed. In those that were open, the drinking culture was still a feature, and there were numerous stag and hen groups making use of the offers of free shots of alcohol available in some bars. Change, however, is afoot. A process of gentrification is now underway in the resort leading to higher hotel prices. This along with restrictions on drinking (for example, no happy hours when alcohol can be bought more cheaply) and activities that sexually exploit women (as in the mamading incident) will probably, over time, change the character of Magaluf as it becomes unaffordable to its traditional target market.79 The carnivalesque as it has been practiced in the resort will most likely have to move on.

79. I am grateful to Macià Blázquez Salom, University of the Balearics, Mallorca, for these insights about the changes in the political economy of tourism in Magaluf and the new measures introduced to restrict what is seen as undesirable behavior.
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PARTY TOURISM

What Happens Stays: Reflections on Doing Camera-based Research in Lloret de Mar

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ABSTRACT

Although celebration is a classic anthropological subject, little research has been done on party holidays. After high school graduation, Dutch youth head to Lloret de Mar in Spain for a party holiday to losgaan, or get loose. This term implies the breaking of boundaries, a sense of liberation and freedom. But to get loose, you need to hold on: to friends, a holiday lover, gender and nationality identifications, and to your phone. The visual ethnographic film titled Lloret ’18 invites you to question the freedom implied in nightlife, tag along with Dutch youth on their adventures and reflections, and consider the ways social media shapes our realities. This article considers the value of ethnographic filming in a party setting as well as the ethical issues that its practice raises.

Fig. 1. https://vimeo.com/381060571/b988bad5f5

KEYWORDS

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What Happens Stays: Reflections on Doing Camera-based Research in Lloret de Mar
Annemarije Rus

Social Sciences and the Party Holiday

When telling others about doing anthropological research on party holidays, I am often met with laughter. Although celebration is a classic anthropological subject, party holidays only recently became part of the festive landscape and are often seen as involving morally questionable youth in search of fickle relationships.1 Though party holidays are considered banal and lowbrow, one might hypothesize that youngsters there look for and achieve forms of effervescence that are mind-expanding2 at the dawn of adulthood, playing a fundamental role in shaping contemporary life biographies.3 As visual anthropologist Mattijs Van de Port suggests, maybe we ought to take seriously the kitsch, the bad taste, and the hoggish as new sacral experiences.4 He stresses how people attempt to meet up with the extraordinary through bodily practices and seek to grapple these experiences into sensible stories.

What constitutes a party holiday? In her analysis of the spring break phenomenon, social anthropologist Alix Boirot delineates it as a set of Western practices occurring as early as the 1950s in the United States, a custom in which young people visit a seaside destination for a few days, celebrating more or less uninterruptedly with excess alcohol and casual sex.5 Specifically in a Dutch context, party holidays gained fame through the movie Costa! (2001) as well as the reality television series Oh Oh Cherso (2010) and Zon Zuijen Ziekenhuis (2012), literally translated as “sun boozing hospital.” Several seaside towns around the Mediterranean Sea have gained reputations as party holiday destinations, including Albufeira, Portugal; Chersonnissos, Greece; and Lloret de Mar, Spain. These seaside destinations have been highly commercialized by holiday companies and the nighttime economy (NTE). In Lloret de Mar there are several clubs, cafés, and cafeterias catering specifically to Dutch customers by advertising in Dutch, selling typically Dutch fast food, playing Dutch music, hiring Dutch artists, and employing Dutch-speaking personnel.

Boirot as well as Daniel Briggs et al. point out that most research on the topic of youth on party holidays is problem-focused.6 In other words, most of the existing literature focuses on risk-taking in sexual behavior and substance use, assessed through quantitative7 or qualitative methods.8 In their ethnography on young British tourists in Ibiza, Briggs et al. state that the tourists “seem to be free to be whoever they want to be and do whatever they want to do.”9 However, the party holiday context demarcates a limited range of possibilities under the banner of freedom. Being “free” seems to translate into “risky and transgressive behavior.” In opposition to this risk-oriented discourse, earlier anthropological research considered tourism, “even the recreational sort of sea, sex, and sport [...] a ritual expression of deeply held values about health, freedom, nature and self-improvement, a re-creation ritual which parallels pilgrimages.”10 However, Malcolm Crick points out the danger of approaching the tourist endeavor as a sacred quest that might rather represent the anthropologist’s zest for meaning.11

The concept of liminality is often employed in studies of tourism and seaside holiday destinations.12 Anthropologist Suzanne Clisby describes the seaside as having “a long tradition

as a site of hedonism, pleasure, illicit and even transgressive desire: it is a liminal site not only geographically, as the edge of the land, but also socioculturally, in that it provides a place away from daily life. Tourism is often deemed a liminal phenomenon, being temporarily constrained and a socially acceptable space to center pleasures including sexuality. The NTE is also associated with liminality. Dick Hobbs et al. describe it as a space where the routinization of liminal practices takes place. They describe “the strip,” a street filled with bars and clubs functioning as a zone of liminality that creates the impression of being set aside and secluded from the principal arenas of normative, nonliminal social life. The NTE poses as a zone of infinite possibilities, providing a sense of communitas and flaunting a repertoire of liminal symbols including imagery relating to overt sexuality, inebriation, and egoism.

Anthropologist Victor Turner describes communitas as a moment occurring during liminality when symbols of rank and status may be shed and people experience a profound connection to one another. Various techniques are employed to achieve a sense of communitas among tourists including body techniques, speech and sound effects, crowd effects, and alcohol.17 Hobbs et al. deem this a pragmatic approach to marketing the liminoid. Studies on British youth on party holidays in Ibiza suggest that the marketing strategy is productive: these youth spend a lot of money to gain the party experience used in the construction of life biographies, creating an interdependence between the party holiday destination and its consumers.18 These conceptions of liminality and the liminoid inform how to consider Dutch youth enacting losgaan specifically in the setting of a party holiday destination. They allow us to understand why youth behave differently in this setting and to look out for typical liminal behaviors like rituals and experiences of communitas.

To make sense of these holidays, it is important to center on youth experiences. This could broaden the understanding of youth on holiday by not taking a problem-focused approach. Qualitative methods like in-depth interviews and participant observation can provide a deeper understanding of youngsters’ moral compass by considering it to be embedded in their socio-material reality. Moving away from the lenses of health and social normativity creates room for other experiential perspectives to arise, permitting considerations of reality as multiplex, continuously made and remade through interactive practices and relations between various actors. Different terms have been employed to point out the (inter)active making of reality, including “construction,” “performativity,” and “enactment.” Enactment, according to philosopher Annemarie Mol, points toward activities rather than actors, allowing us to find out what different knowledges do in practice.

Much research has been done on British youth, but little ethnographic research exists about Dutch youth on holiday. In Dutch, the party holiday is commonly described as a moment where you can losgaan: let loose, go crazy, get detached, or be unconstrained. Let loose of what? Considered through an anthropological lens, the party holiday is a compressed time-space where youngsters experience a detachment from home and its sociocultural norms in the postgraduation phase, during which transgressive behavior is allowed, providing new experiential possibilities. Sociologist Don Weenink stresses the excitement and intense social cohesion Dutch youth experience during “recreational” youth violence. He proclaims these moments “moral holidays,” a temporal disregard of daily moralities, and extends this to party vacations.
Although there may be different moral registers present in the time-space of Lloret de Mar, morality is not something easily left at home. Boirot states that despite notions of liberation, age standards and gender inequalities are reinforced on party holidays. To foreground enactments of losgaan is to foreground a discursive term that can shelter a whole array of practices under its umbrella. Using a material-semiotic approach allows for embracing the multiplicity of the term instead of solidifying it. The word losgaan is ambiguous. It suggests boundaries and limitations and rebelling against them. Observing the ways Dutch youth enact losgaan exposes how the implications of freedom differ among differently categorized people. Enactment allows for an intersectional approach without being limited to the evident axes of difference like gender, race, and class. Other themes like friendship, education, and social media have proved fruitful in anthropologist Willemijn Krebbekx’s research amongst Dutch teenagers. Employing the concept of enactment helps to focus on the empirical practices and relations that constitute losgaan in the specific setting of the party holiday.

How do these youngsters achieve the extraordinary through their transgressive behaviors and how they reflect on them? The film Lloret ‘18 explores party holidays as a time-compressed liminoid space through a visual ethnography of Dutch youth experiences taking place in the particular setting of the seaside holiday economy. It illustrates normative and ritualized practices in a social environment that is portrayed and perceived as a rule-free space, asking: How do Dutch youngsters enact letting loose in Lloret de Mar? This article focuses on filming as a method for research on festive events. It discusses the relevance and role of the camera in this research framework.

**Methodology**

To understand how Dutch youngsters let loose during a party holiday, fieldwork was conducted in Lloret de Mar, Spain, from June 6 to September 2, 2018. Methods that were applied aimed for audiovisual output through film recording, as well as (participant) observation and semi-structured interviews conducted on- and off-camera. Ethnographic field notes were taken on the phone and elaborated on in a fieldwork diary. As the partying occurred every day of the week, research took place on approximately three nights per week, supplemented with daytime hangouts, interviews, and observations. Fifteen semi-structured interviews were held with various stakeholders in Lloret de Mar to consider party holidays from the various perspectives of a local resident, several guides working for the Flemish travel agency Jongerentravel.be, Dutch cafeteria owner Hoite, and Dutch youth (tourists as well as seasonal workers). The main informants, Ellen and Thomas, were interviewed multiple times over the summer. Many informal interviews were held with Dutch tourists. Film recordings were coded in the editing program Final Cut Pro.

Most young Dutch people encountered in Lloret de Mar, both tourists and work staff, were from rural provinces of the Netherlands. The film features people from Flevoland, Drenthe, Friesland, Groningen, and Brabant, ranging between eighteen and twenty-three years old and mostly white. The Dutch youngsters in Lloret often come from a working-class background and have gone through practice-oriented education. In Lloret, they seek a low-cost holiday or employment in the NTE. For some, it was the first time they had been on holiday so far from home. This fact contributed to the impressiveness of Lloret de Mar. For many, it was their first time visiting...
clubs as big as Tropic’s. For Brian, it was his first journey by airplane. In the film we hear him complaining to Ellen that he became very nauseated on the plane home. The friend group from Drenthe also mentioned this experience. After their holiday, they would return to working full-time jobs at eighteen years old.

Tourists had not yet arrived in large numbers at the start of research in early June. This gave me time to develop relationships with Dutch youngsters who came to Lloret de Mar to work during the holiday season. Some had arrived earlier, at the beginning of May; others arrived at the beginning of June, like Ellen. This straight white woman, age nineteen and turning twenty over the summer, was from Groningen and worked as a bartender at the Dutch party café De Peetvader. Working in a highly social environment introduced her to many young Dutch tourists, so that she became an informant as well as a sponsor. Before coming to Lloret, she was studying to be a security guard, but after failing one exam multiple times she lost her motivation. She found De Peetvader’s job offer online and applied. Ellen described working in Lloret as an amazing opportunity to gain work experience. She had not bartended much before and Leo, her boss at De Peetvader, did not demand an extensive résumé. Ellen considered the Netherlands a place full of rules and regulations and saw Spain as open and relaxed in comparison. Both she and Thomas mentioned not excelling at school and longing for freedom.

Thomas, a straight white man working at Dutch cafeteria De Koe (The Cow), also turned twenty over the summer. He expressed a similar opinion on the Netherlands, saying he felt ill at ease there with all the rules and regulations. "I’m from De Achterhoek [a rural area in the northeast of the Netherlands], and it’s so small. It’s all about who you know there. If you are rich, you are good, if you aren’t then, well. . . . You are outside a bit. I have no friends there." He also mentioned being dyslexic and only learning English when he was abroad for the first time in Panama. After traveling there in 2017 he felt a bit lost and isolated after returning to the Netherlands and decided to come to Lloret de Mar to work and feel like he was on holiday, even though he worked daily shifts from 5 p.m. until 3 in the morning.

Thomas and Ellen both said Lloret is "work hard, play hard"; they worked seven days a week for at least eight hours a day, and often went out afterward. They became more exhausted as the season progressed and found themselves entangled in job-related dilemmas. Ellen’s boss, girlfriend, and coworkers started to criticize her, from which a negative work atmosphere arose that drove her to return home halfway through August, sooner than planned. Thomas was living with his colleagues. He confided that one of them snitched to their boss that he smoked marijuana regularly. Although consuming alcohol daily was commonplace, getting stoned was considered unproductive and unprofessional. This confrontation alienated Thomas from his colleagues and roommates, leading him to befriend the workers from the discotheque Bumper’s, who lived next door. Whereas Ellen gladly invited company along on her adventures, Thomas preferred to spend time one-on-one. He did not want to share his hangouts with the Bumper’s crew and downplayed their connection when they asked to tag along.

Although many observations and informal interviews took place in Lloret, most tourists were filmed only once. It was difficult to encounter them before they were halfway through their one-week holidays, and I often only gained their trust by the last day. Sometimes it was hard
to schedule a filming session, as they planned to visit clubs where filming was not allowed, or they considered filming a nuisance during their holiday. It was part of the nature of the holiday destination, where people coming and going is commonplace.

**Gaining Access and Permission to Film**

Lloret is a highly sociable environment where the Dutch working in the tourist industry form a community of their own. Ellen’s contacts in the NTE helped me to get in touch with various research locations and gatekeepers. With several places like Dutch/Flemish party cafés Boozers and De Peetvader, a deal was made to create short promotional clips in exchange for permission to film there. De Peetvader became a central place in my research for meeting and interacting with people. The setting was less oriented toward dancing and more toward conversation or banter, with music playing in the background. This is where Ellen worked, where her boyfriend, Brian, visited, and where the friend group from Friesland first came into view. Boozers was also a highly sociable environment that many Dutch-speaking people working in the nightlife frequented. This was the case with Nicole, a party manager at Belgian travel organization Jongerentravel.be, who became a sponsor by permitting observations at the outings she organized, as well as interviews with two of her employees. At Bumper’s, another Dutch club, the manager permitted filming as long as no compromising footage would be shot. Bumper’s was visited around ten times to film and get in touch with new interlocutors.

Another space where participants were found was the Facebook group “Lloret de Mar 2018, ik ben er deze zomer bij [I’m there this summer]!” People who posted questions there were sent private messages. As a female researcher I found it easier in the club setting to approach men, whereas Facebook made it more comfortable to approach women. This was in line with the social script of the parties in Lloret’s clubs and bars catering to tourists: the heteronormative atmosphere facilitated contact between men and women. Online was a less invasive tactic for women as they could choose to reply (or not to) in their own time. Some people explicitly said immediately they had no interest in being filmed, while others gave enthusiastic consent.

Several clubs denied authorization to film, with one citing the privacy of their employees as a reason. It may also have had something to do with them not properly checking the age of their clientele. Although the club displayed a multitude of signs prohibiting people under eighteen from consuming alcohol, people working in the NTE said these should be considered idle decorations mandated by law. When I ventured out during the night to interview people, the police prohibited continuation of filming without a permit. Getting a permit took a long time and explicitly prohibited the portrayal of Lloret de Mar in another way than “the reality of the city as a family tourist destination” (see image 2). Lloret exists not only as a geographic location but also as an image in people’s minds and on television screens. Newspaper articles routinely depict Lloret as a Sodom and Gomorra for Dutch youngsters. While holiday travel agencies employ this boisterous image to their advantage, the city council has initiated several campaigns to promote Lloret to a different tourist audience, as well as extensive street campaigns demanding peace and quiet. Also, because Spanish law prohibits filming the police it was not possible to capture the violence toward crowding youth during the night, which was at times abundant and excessive.

Various considerations guided the visual research in the field and the way the camera was used. At first it was strange to be alone in such a highly sociable setting, with the camera providing a pleasant raison d’être. Yet at times the camera felt like an encumbrance. Its immortalizing mechanical eye was in sharp contrast with Lloret de Mar’s fleetingness. It seemed that the very nature of the camera as a recording device denounced the magic of holiday encounters. The camera was often a disruptor of the flow of the moment. This became more apparent in the nightlife context that stimulates being in the here and now, which motivates inebriation that makes you forget, while a camera is there to remember. Cameras were employed, but on smartphones, on the youth’s own authority, often via Snapchat, a social media platform on which content disappears twenty-four hours after posting. Its fleeting nature allowed for the sharing of holiday experiences usually considered to be meant to stay within the confines of the city, often expressed as “what happens in Lloret, stays in Lloret.” This catchphrase is in opposition to the purpose of audiovisual research, as the footage would last to be edited after the summer.

By employing a recording device, the relationship between researcher and interlocutor becomes very explicit, something that can be pleasantly straightforward yet also disturbing to the atmosphere. Training a camera on participants communicates that information about them is being taken in. Essayist Susan Sontag describes the act of taking a photo as “to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge and, therefore, like power.” This is also true of filming, and, to reclaim power, interlocutors often put on a performance for the camera. This became very obvious in the nighttime but was subtly present in other situations as well. For instance, in the film Marte from Urk initiates the conversation about religion on the balcony. Throughout the day and night, she remained aware of the camera and chose to position herself in front of it in a certain way, enjoying its gaze. Others experienced being documented as a status symbol, putting “their camera crew” on their Snapchat story. As the participants also filmed themselves regularly to
share with their friends on social media, they demonstrated awareness of how film registers. For instance, Aron did not want to be filmed in the evening while he and his friends became more drunk. He expressed concern about the impact of this kind of footage on his future career. In another case, a girl asked me to delete footage that had been shot the previous night while she was drunk. Ellen directed as well, asking not to be filmed when she wasn’t confident about her appearance. This film awareness was reassuring in the employment of the “appropriating device.”

When discussing the camera in the field, it is important to point out who was holding it: a white Dutch woman in her late twenties. Being relatively young made young people open up to me quite easily, although after revealing my age (twenty-eight) I was often deemed “too old for Lloret.” Being a woman was an advantage in gaining access to the nightlife and establishing contact with men, or having emotionally open conversations. As people often did not know what the term meant, introducing myself as a “cultural anthropologist” quickly shifted to saying, “I’m making a film about young Dutch people in Lloret de Mar for my studies” because it was a more comprehensive and straightforward answer to the question.

Several methods of employing the camera were tried out. Formal interviews rarely proved productive. They remained shallow as people were too aware of the camera. They did not understand why interviews should be conducted multiple times, saying, “But we already did this, right?” With and without the camera all kinds of performativity occurred. Nightlife triggers performative behavior, and its young actors are not well rehearsed in these performances. They were very occupied with their social circle, adopting a “cool” attitude. When interviewing young people on the street at night a social script arose concerning “how to behave when drunk at night and a camera appears.” People walk up to the camera, shout cursing words or sexually explicit sentences, wave their middle fingers, all in good nature, and then jump out of the shot laughing. When interviewing them at night youngsters indicated that the pace of questioning was too slow, saying “Next question!” when a moment of silence was drawn out. They had places to go and therefore the interviewer should speed up. Deep “hanging out” proved more productive. The most authentic recordings took place when out with people who had become familiar with the research. They had grown more comfortable with the presence of the camera. Their initial hyperawareness wore off so that the camera’s registration disappeared into the background. Often this happened while they became more inebriated, which raised ethical considerations.

Ethically conducting visual research was challenging, for instance in the warranting of anonymity when requested, specifically among young people in precarious situations in which alcohol consumption was abundant. Several ethical stances were taken. First, people were approached in public spaces, informed about the purpose of the filming, and assured that nothing would be made public without their consent. It was stressed the popular media imagery of drunken youngsters was not the imagery that was sought after. During filming they were reminded that they had authority over the recording and that they could stop it whenever they pleased. Consent to film was always sought when they were sober, as well as multiple times throughout the recordings. Staying in touch with participants afterward allowed for the possibility of a change of heart. In this way the influence of intoxication on consent was taken into account.
Choices in Filming and Editing

The film aims to give ethnographic insight into how Dutch youngsters enact losgaan in Lloret de Mar. Camera-based research on the practices of youth on holiday allows for the messiness of such an intense experience to be captured in the editing of a film. Van de Port points out the discrepancy between the messiness of reality and (type)written text, which always produces an ordered visual experience.28 The enactment of losgaan involves many multisensory inputs: the parties are typically fast-paced and feature loud music, flashing colored lights, and bodies bumping into one another. These physically invasive stimuli and their allure are not easily translated through writing. Even thick description of such an encounter can hardly convey the phenomenological experience, being expressed in neatly arranged black-on-white text. Audiovisual methods can capture the appeal of such experiences as the medium itself addresses the viewer’s senses directly. Cinema and media theorist Vivian Sobchack describes the effect of film as our bodies’ physical understanding of the sensuous stimuli on display. This “complex reciprocity of body and representation” is hard to grasp in words, yet instantly familiar from cinematic experiences.29 It affects the body, which, for instance, starts moving along with a song intuitively.

The film was mainly shot with a handheld camera, using a stabilizer. This provides footage with smoothness in the movements and makes the viewer feel close to the people filmed. The aim was to contribute a certain reflexivity to the image of the partygoer. In terms of media awareness, the laughter that this research topic triggered among anthropologists and nonanthropologists alike indicates that the concept of a “party holiday visitor” is a familiar part of Western discourse.30 The image of Lloret de Mar as a party town is considered lowbrow, its visitors superficial people behaving foolishly while consuming excessive amounts of alcohol. Perhaps it is also the lack of rational or long-term decision-making that comes into play during the party holiday, in getting drunk or making lasting choices like getting a tattoo. Pierre Bourdieu considered class as interwoven with taste.31 In the film, Aron offers an important comment in that respect, saying how he likes his party holiday, and while others might not think of it that way, he and his friends experience affinity in Lloret because of a shared interest. This provides the film with a contextualization of their choices and appeals to a broader notion of how humans connect. The film also portrays partygoers’ reflexivity, as when Marte speaks about religion, Ellen offers thoughts on her work experience, Brian talks about being in love, and Stijn expresses ambivalence about getting a tattoo. Joey, Aron, and Carlos give their views on Lloret and Snapchat, and Thomas shares his nocturnal philosophizing on Dutch national identity and youth.

The main threads interwoven throughout the film are the city of Lloret de Mar, which both facilitates and restricts celebrating tourists, and interlocutors’ reflexivity as well as their balancing act of getting loose and holding on: to their Dutch nationality; to notions of race, gender, and sexuality; to old friendships balanced with newfound love; and to their phones. Following the daily and nightly rhythms of the city, the film reflects the experience of time by youth—seeing the sunrise after spending the night awake, sleeping until midday. It is also visible in the disenchanting image of a discotheque in broad daylight and the transformation of the city after the sun sets and the neon lights gain luminescence.

Youngsters’ phone use was included in the film without attributing to it a negative moral value.

Wide-ranging condemnations of new media, as currently happening with the smartphone, follow a course similar to outrages about the depravity of youth: with every new generation (or medium), a new outrage commences.\textsuperscript{32} Susan Sontag specifically addresses the employment of the camera "to take possession of space in which they are insecure . . . documenting sequences of consumption carried on outside the view of family and friends . . . the device makes real . . . what one is experiencing."\textsuperscript{33} The film shows youths’ extensive use of the phone, sometimes the way Sontag describes it, as a mediator between its user and the world or as a power tool in an unfamiliar setting. In Lloret youngsters also employ the camera on their cell phones to document their experiences and directly report them to the folks back home via social media. As Aron points out in the film, Snapchat documenting is similar to people making photo albums. However, it does not dominate their holiday experience. The people in the film employ their phones to take pictures together, to share their experiences with their friends and family, to play party games, or to share songs. In these cases phone use promotes sociability. The display of Snapchat and its various functions allows insights into youths’ digital lifeworlds, as well as what the researcher’s camera was not allowed to film, like the riots at night and the police’s violent response.

**Representing Losgaan through Visual Narrative**

The film *Lloret ’18* seeks to present an ethnographic account of Dutch youth on party holiday. The selection of film material was guided by the aim of representing key elements in losgaan, and making meaning through a juxtaposition of the fragments. To contextualize the substantive choices made in the film it is important to have an understanding of the discourses and practices around losgaan.

Throughout the film we do not hear people use losgaan as an active verb: nobody says, “We are doing losgaan!” To comprehend losgaan is to understand how groups of Dutch youngsters render losgaan from a discursive and imagery term into specific practices. In the film, Marte analyzes the inclination to get drunk and losgaan as liberating behavior that is considered taboo in her conservative hometown, the strictly Protestant village of Urk. Marte says she is rejected by her Protestant parents because she is free-spirited. By saying so she suggests being outside the grip of restrictive religious powers, while she ties her practice of rebellion, losgaan, to her identity by saying she is a free spirit. By disconnecting herself from her Protestant background by identifying as free-spirited, she commits to enactments of freedom that she determines to be taboo, like losgaan.

As pointed out in the theoretical framework, most scientific research on party holidays is risk-oriented and morally judgmental, mainly considering health detriment. In this way scientific research contributes to the discourse by condemning transgression, appealing to rationality, and hence creating norms of moderation. In *The History of Sexuality* Michel Foucault depicts a speaker’s motivation to describe sex and power in terms of repression: if sex is repressed and silenced, then speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression, placing the orator to a certain extent beyond the reach of power.\textsuperscript{34} But according to him, no one can escape power. This rhetoric is just an illusion. Extending Foucault’s analogy of repression, we can consider the imaginatively liberating enactment of losgaan not as a norm-free practice but as regulated through various discourses entangling it in normativity and morality, especially those surrounding gender and sexuality.
When Don is asked what losgaan entails, he responds, "Well, first you drink, you get drunk a bit, you hang out, listen to music. Then, you go to the club, you bring on the hard stuff, the strong liquor, tequila shots, that kind, and then we get loose, we dance, and we hook up. Hook up! We get the girls! Kevin, if you bring home a girl, does she get to spend the night, or is she out the door when you're done?" Scoring or hooking up, having casual sex, is part of the discourse of losgaan. Scoring indicates a quantitative measure: it is not inherently about the sexual act and what that entails, but more about adding to your number of sexual partners. As Lloret is a place where youngsters meet others from outside their home sphere and its social control, people expect a different sexual normativity: girls are supposed to be “easier,” to give in to having sex more quickly and more willingly than they do back home. Boirot points out that this is not necessarily the case, much to the disappointment of male tourists.35

For men, scoring is viewed positively, while women are condemned for having a high number. This difference between men and women, but also between tourists and seasonal workers, was visible in Lloret. Tourists had limited time without daily obligations. Therefore, relationships developed quickly and the experience was intensified, as in the connection between Brian and Ellen. They both felt infatuated and were genuine in their trust, with Ellen aiming to move to Brian’s hometown of Breda upon returning to the Netherlands. Whereas Brian felt challenged by the short time frame of his vacation, having precious little time to divide between his newfound love and his friends, Ellen experienced it differently. Her time in Lloret was plentiful and she took into account the other people she would meet and had met before him. The different experiences of time created friction. However, she still regarded her sexuality in normative terms: as her “number” (of sexual partners) would last far beyond this summer, she was concerned not to add too many people to it, but doing “things” did not count. This echoes Suzanne Clisby’s observations of Brighton’s seaside, where working-class women are reified to their class and gender and therefore do not experience the carnivalesque context as liberating.36

Thus, while losgaan is shrouded in notions of freedom, rebellion, and liberation, normative expectations for intersecting social identifications come into play in its course. In the film the progressive process of losgaan that Don describes above is visible in the various friend groups.

**Depicting the Process of Losgaan**

Friendship was a category of identification emphasized in enacting losgaan. Girls often adjusted their appearance before losgaan by applying make-up and changing clothes. In the film we see the girls from Urk doing each other’s hair and make-up, consulting each other on their choices. Through this a social agreement is made: Am I pretty? Do I look good like this? It also prevents transgression: Is this too much mascara? Don’t I look too girly, or too sexy? This physical preparation is a gendered practice, enacted by girls in a collective manner, but men also took care of their looks before a night out. It had to be done casually, as this grooming was considered a feminine practice: “that’s gay” can be heard in the film, even when it concerns using a pink toothbrush.

The transition to “get loose” involved a change of mentality by “pregaming” or, in Dutch, *indrinken* (lit., drinking in). Youngsters would gather to drink alcohol while mingling and chatting with a small group of friends and acquaintances, reinforcing bonds between the group members.
before they go out into the public sphere, to the clubs to dance and socialize. The film displays the various playful ways that groups of friends collectively consume alcohol to get to a similar level of intoxication. The Frysian friend group in the villa has a big bucket of booze sitting on the table with multiple straws. In this way, they all ingest the same drink with the same percentage of alcohol. The girls from Urk play a card game in their apartment that involves taking shots when they lose, whereas Joey, Aron, and Carlos employ an app on their phone to play the drinking game “Piccolo.” This game in particular is interesting as it involves binary questions, with the answer tied to taking several sips from a drink. In the film we see the questions “If you had to redo a year at school, take two sips” and “If you lived in more than three cities, take one sip.” The physical act of the sip indicates your answer and simultaneously reveals connections to other people within the group, echoing a confessional nature. As they are getting to know one another better, the game fortifies social connections between participants of the game.

After pregaming, the youngsters venture out into the public sphere of Lloret. In the Spanish town, many rural youngsters encounter larger discotheques than they have experienced in their hometown. Tropics, the biggest club in Lloret, had a two-sided reputation: as it was the biggest club, it was the most impressive too, and many famous Dutch artists performed on its stage. But it was often very crowded. Dutch boys often said they disliked all the men brushing up next to them. Their perception of heterosexual masculinity was threatened by that, and they proclaimed this crowding to be “gay,” becoming aggressive as a defense mechanism. Then, as Carlos says in the film, “We first went to Tropics, but then we found Bumper’s.” Bumper’s is a smaller club and dons a Dutch image: they employ Dutch street promoters, play a lot of Dutch artists, and both bar personnel and visitors are Dutch-speakers. Similarly, the girls from Urk prefer the party café Boozers, “not only because they’re Dutch, but also because they [the bar personnel] don’t give a shit.” Knowing to speak the same language as your fellow club visitors, being familiar with the music, being around others not afraid to transgress: this counters some of the unpredictability that comes with entering the nighttime economy of Lloret. Clubs played into this insecurity, employing street promoters (proppers) of a specific nationality. Dutch proppers would wear a blue, white, and red striped elastic band around their upper arm; by wearing the Dutch flag they indicated they could be addressed in Dutch.

Aron, Carlos, and Joey explicitly identifying as Dutch disrupts the stereotypical image of white Dutchness otherwise visible in the film. It was important to include them in the film to show, through an intersectional lens, how various intersecting social and political identifications created specific modes of discrimination among Dutch people in Lloret. 37 Ellen regularly used Dutch racist slurs when commenting on Black people on the street, assuming they weren’t Dutch and therefore wouldn’t understand her language. Often derogatory terms were combined, as in the film when a group of rowdy youngsters mix antisemitism and homophobia, yelling “Alle Joden zijn homo [all Jews are gay].” A chant frequently heard echoing through Dutch soccer stadiums now bounced off the walls of a Spanish alleyway.

Thus, to enact losgaan Dutch youngsters would prepare by engaging in ritualized practices, preparing their bodily appearance and their state of mind. To open themselves up to the possible adventure of losgaan in Lloret Dutch youth would often connect with their friends by playing drinking games, warranting a similar level of intoxication. In Lloret, the suggested liberation of losgaan is continuously constrained through ritualized practices reinforcing normative notions
of gender and sexuality. Masculinity means to exclude all notions of anything vaguely feminine. To enact proper femininity means to be appealing to heterosexual men, but not in an overt way. In losgaan in Lloret I witnessed no liberty to explore sexuality beyond the heterosexual norm. It is not even included within discourse on sex, yet discriminatory phrases are not held back. Considering these gendered enactments and corrections it becomes evident that within the confines of the “free-spirited” losgaan normative ideas on gender and sexuality are reinforced. In the film this is evident in the interaction with Ellen and her boss at the start of the movie, to establish how women’s sexuality is policed. To balance the unpredictability that came with losgaan in Lloret, Dutch youngsters looked for familiarity. This was provided by the commercial actors promoting Dutchness as an attribute of their party. This Dutchness was often perceived as exclusively white, an image disrupted by the presence of Aron, Carlos, and Joey.

But what exactly did Dutch youth let loose of when pursuing losgaan? A core aim in losgaan appeared to be losing awareness or consciousness of what people were doing: a lack of control seemed the goal and was achieved. During intoxication people embraced transgressive behavior that was also a bonding experience, providing a sense of adventure and experiences that they documented through Snapchat and reminisced about afterward. It often involved behaviors deemed “silly” or “funny,” like stealing a road sign or getting lost. Sometimes youngsters would transgress their physical capacities by consuming alcohol in amounts their bodies could not handle and they would throw up. The embarrassment that this behavior aroused was soothed with an explanation of the level of intoxication. Responsibility for the behavior was attributed to alcohol, an agent that accounts for recklessness and irrationality. To ingest this agent is to surrender oneself to unpredictability and the possibility of adventure.

These adventures are collectively recounted within friend groups long after the party holiday is over, according with research that considers the party holiday as a part of the construction of life biographies. In the film, Brian and his friends inscribe the memory on their body with a tattoo saying, “Good times, Lloret ’18.” They did not attribute much to the image, two skeleton hands toasting beer bottles. They had found it on Google and thought it was cool. Immortalizing this holiday on their body indicates the importance of such a communal story, warranting a bond now made forever visible on their body.

These enactments of losgaan are not exclusive to the context of Lloret de Mar, or Dutch youth. For many young tourists, being in Lloret de Mar evoked a multitude of behaviors that tormented the city: peeing on the street, littering, shouting loudly, screaming slurs, ringing strangers’ doorbells at 4 a.m., and leaving the beach strewn with empty bottles. These are pungent images that only reinforce the image of partygoers that already exists. Editing the film meant balancing the blasé and the profound, the aggressive and the vulnerable, or as heard in Lloret at night, “we’re just here to get wasted and get fucked up” but also, “I don’t have anyone to talk about my feelings with.” In the end the film oscillates between both, but the profound has the final say. This imitates the process of getting to know people in Lloret. Men especially would come off as steely at first, taking on a cool persona with a “don’t care, just drink” attitude. People often became more relaxed as the night progressed and less concerned with the attitude they were giving off. One-on-one, they would sometimes drop their guard and broach sensitive topics. These moments became valuable because they presented such a stark contrast to the common image of the party tourist and the way they initially presented themselves. That emotional depth momentarily

arising seemed like a discovery, something rare and precious, and I felt it should therefore have the final say. That is why the film ends with Thomas’s thoughts on the Netherlands.

Concluding Notes on Filming as an Ethnographic Method in a Party Setting

Scholarly discourse on party holidays is often risk-focused and morally judgmental. Doing camera-based research on party holidays in Lloret de Mar allowed for a more holistic approach, focusing on the rituals and normative practices surrounding losgaan, while considering the morality surrounding sexuality and gender that youth themselves enact.

Although employing the camera sometimes seemed to be contrary to the nature of the party holiday, it had multiple benefits. Not only did the camera provide a motive to be alone in a highly sociable setting, but it also made the relation between the researcher and the interlocutors pleasantly explicit. Filming motivated a thorough understanding of continuous consent as well as explicit ethical stances. The young interlocutors showed awareness of the registering mechanical eye by directing the researcher. Combining filming with other anthropological methods like deep hanging out fostered relations of trust with the interlocutors that permitted a more vulnerable portrayal of them.

Employing audiovisual methods also helps to transmit the appeal of these party holidays. Through film spectators quickly become emotionally involved with the people portrayed, bonding with them by witnessing intimate moments. The music contributes to the sensorial perception of film, as described by Sobchack. The enchantment in Lloret’s liminoid nighttime is found in the moments when all the categorizations that are stressed in losgaan are bypassed for the duration of one song, with lyrics you don’t understand but that strike a chord within, like “Con te Partiro.” It is a moment that can give you goosebumps, an emotional and physical way of knowing rather than having to do with rationality. In communitas the constant enactments of social expectations enveloped in losgaan make way for the experience of a connection with the people that surround you, friends and strangers alike. Communitas can be described as an effect of the here and now, and therefore experienced as something very real. Communitas is the foundation for stories to be told in the future, and perhaps it lingered in the stories that Dutch youngsters heard from Lloret veterans, making them choose Lloret de Mar as a party holiday destination. Experiencing communitas as a viewer together with the depicted partygoers can be a way of bonding and expand the viewers’ understanding of their motives.

Creating an ethnographic film also permitted me to focus critical attention on forms of blatant racism, by splicing together an antisemitic yell and a cleaning trolley sweeping the alleyway through which it resounded. At the same time this film aspires to nuance the simplistic but pungent portrayal of partygoers as hedonistic tourists. Dutch young people in Lloret de Mar often come from the rural provinces and a working-class background, and have rarely had the privilege of taking a vacation abroad by plane. Partaking in their casual conversations allowed these aspects of their lives to come to the forefront. Through film, subtle vulnerabilities arose. In depicting common human experiences, ethnographic film on “lowbrow” topics can thus help counter the stereotypes that plague certain demographics.
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“Partying with a Purpose” at Malawi’s Lake of Stars Festival: Tourism and the Global Political Economy

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ABSTRACT

Founded in 2003, the Lake of Stars Festival (LOS) has grown to become the largest annual beach party in Malawi, and one of the largest on the African continent. The festival has received acclaim from media outlets for not only organizing an enthralling party, but also being sensitive to the destination’s people and culture. Modeled after other large festivals such as Glastonbury and Live Aid, the festival invites attendees to the beaches of Lake Malawi to party—but with culture, development, and aid in mind. This article examines the “party with a purpose” model by analyzing the case of LOS through the perspective of political economy scholarship. It pays particular attention to the raced, classed, and gendered power dynamics within the global tourism industry and the aid-based development sector. While analyzing the ways LOS benefits Malawi and allows Malawians space to be active agents, the article also focuses on the ways LOS contributes to the inequalities in the global tourism sector. It concludes that LOS benefits Malawi by advancing mass tourism, cultural awareness, and tourism development, and allowing Malawians an opportunity to be active agents within the constraints of the tourism industry. However, the festival simultaneously reproduces and reinforces global inequality due to its development and aid goals as well as the structure of global tourism, development, and international aid industries.
“Partying with a Purpose” at Malawi’s Lake of Stars Festival: Tourism and the Global Political Economy

Sitinga Kachipande

Introduction

Founded in 2003, the Lake of Stars Festival (LOS) has grown to become one of the largest annual beach parties in Malawi, and one of the largest on the African continent. It is an award-winning festival that has received acclaim from media outlets such as Everfest, the BBC, CNN, and the Guardian for not only organizing an entertaining party that appeals to party tourists, but also being sensitive to the destination’s people and culture. Modeled after other large festivals such as Glastonbury and Live Aid, the festival invites tourists to the beaches of Lake Malawi to party—but with culture, development, and aid in mind.¹ Festivals with charitable missions raise awareness of destinations, cultures, and philanthropic causes. For example, Live Aid and Live 8 managed to raise awareness among Global North audiences about poverty in the Horn of Africa; they also facilitated changes to Global North government policies toward the region, resulting in the partial cancellation of Africa’s debt.² Although such concerts have the potential to benefit Global South countries and their citizens, due to their peripheral location in the global political economy, such festivals can also marginalize them. Therefore, it is important to understand the global sociopolitical and economic contexts in which festivals occur.

David Picard and Mike Robinson broadly define festivals as “celebratory events” organized for a variety of purposes such as displaying wealth, military might, royal authority, or cultural heritage.³ Over the past twenty years, the number of festivals in Malawi organized by cultural or ethnic heritage associations aiming to preserve culture, advance popular music, display art or fashion, and promote government events has increased substantially.⁴ In part, this growth sprang from efforts at promoting local cultures, from maneuvering by political elites, and from Malawi’s ratification of the 2003 UNESCO convention directing the government to increase cultural conservation efforts. As one of the first festivals initiated during the period of renewed interest in preserving culture, LOS has played a significant role in promoting the country’s creative and tourism sectors, particularly through conducting event management workshops. Malawi now hosts a plethora of festivals centered on music such as the Sand Music Festival, Ufulu Festival, and Tumaini Festival. Importantly, LOS is Malawi’s largest international art event and one of the few music festivals that successfully draws domestic and international tourists, many of whom are considered party tourists.⁵ Therefore, LOS is often touted as beneficial to Malawi and Malawians by LOS representatives, travel writers, bloggers, and journalists, Malawi government officials, and other proponents of tourism.

This article examines the “party with a purpose” model by analyzing the case of LOS in Malawi. It explores the ways the festival challenges what commonly constitutes party tourism by highlighting LOS’s successes in creating mass tourism enclaves, raising cultural awareness, and providing entertainment while fulfilling diverse charitable objectives. It also focuses on the ways in which LOS’s approach reproduces and reinforces global inequality, paying particular attention to the power dynamics within the global tourism industry and the development and aid sectors. It argues that although LOS’s seemingly inclusive “party with a purpose” model serves to challenge
inequalities in the global tourism industry with respect to Malawi and Malawians, LOS is equally a part of a global capitalist effort that contributes to and reinforces existing unequal power relations that serve to marginalizes Malawi and Malawians. Importantly, it highlights how this festival both challenges and reinforces inequalities in the global tourism sector.

The Political Economy and the Promise of Tourism

Due to its touted benefits, Malawi has been paying greater attention to tourism than it did in the past. Formerly known as Nyasaland, Malawi is located in southeastern Africa. Under colonial rule, the country was a part of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, which amalgamated three territories—Northern Rhodesia (Zambia), Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and Nyasaland (Malawi)—into one federal state. The colonial administration concentrated their “development” efforts on building large farms and infrastructure in Malawi’s neighboring countries. Malawi’s primarily role was as a source of labor for Zambia and Zimbabwe, resulting in Nyasaland’s underdevelopment. Therefore, tourism to Nyasaland during these times was minimal, primarily consisting of White tourists from Northern and Southern Rhodesia or from the Republic of South Africa (SA), which had larger numbers of White settlers.

The country emerged from colonialism with a cash-crop economy supported by tobacco. Dr. Kamuzu Hastings Banda quickly consolidated his power after independence in 1964, ruling Malawi as a one-party dictatorship until 1994. Tourism development was not a core part of Banda’s development strategy, owing to a desire to maintain an agriculturally based economy. Banda’s tourism policy aimed at attracting regional White tourists from Zambia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and SA. Accordingly, there was little financing for tourism development other than modest investments in small-scale tourism infrastructure projects such as government-run hotels. Banda also set up a tourism board and other industry boards to manage tourism activity. These efforts resulted in tourism arrivals increasing from 6,494 international arrivals in 1967 to 50,098 in 1974. Part of this growth is attributed to a global surge in young Global North backpackers, overlanders, and other budget travelers worldwide, some who made their way to Malawi. During that era, tourists came to know Malawi as “The Warm Heart of Africa.” This endearing tagline (coined by Banda’s Irish tourism officer Frank Johnston) was meant to brand the country as a tourism-friendly destination and remains the country’s tourism moniker today.

During the 1980s to early 1990s Banda continued his policy of making modest but strategic investments into tourism infrastructure, including building Kamuzu International Airport in 1984. Generally, tourism development remained a low priority for him due to several competing factors. Politically, he was facing growing opposition due to human rights abuses and intolerance toward political opposition. Economically, Malawi had joined the ranks of the poorest nations in the world due to the failure of Banda’s strategy aimed at diversifying the economy. After a period of instability, Banda staunchly followed the World Bank’s structural adjustment programs (SAPs) advocating deregulation, privatization, and open competition. These policies weakened the agriculture sector, which was central to Malawi’s economic agenda; for example, the cotton industry was decimated.

Banda leaned closer to SA’s apartheid government for economic stability, thereby alienating anti-apartheid advocates. Nevertheless, in collaboration with SA, Malawi was heavily promoted as a neutral and welcoming place for White tourists whose travel
Despite existing infrastructure challenges, contemporary Malawi can still be considered a quintessential tourism destination for leisure tourism to Africa due to offering “sun, sea, sand, and safaris,” which are important for competing in Africa’s tourism space. At the core of the country’s marketing strategy is Lake Malawi, which covers 20 percent of the country’s landmass and has natural beach areas. The strategy also emphasizes Malawi’s wildlife, archaeological sites, rock paintings, and traditional dances such as Gule Wamkulu as points of product differentiation. However, Malawi competes with neighboring countries in its nature and cultural tourism sectors and is often dwarfed by its larger, better-known neighbors. It is within this competitive tourism
landscape that the LOS festival was welcomed by Malawi's government. While the festival has received largely positive media attention both inside and outside Malawi as well as in non-academic literature, tourism development in Africa has not been as auspicious as promised; moreover, critics contend that tourism perpetuates unequal power relationships and uneven development. Therefore, perspectives offering critiques of tourist-attracting festivals in Africa such as LOS merit greater attention.

Critical Tourism Literature

As defined by tourism scholar Richard Sharpley, tourism is the "social phenomenon which involves the movement of people to various destinations and their (temporary) stay there."19 Despite the growing recognition of tourism by African governments, businesses, and nonprofits, there is little academic writing about tourism on the continent. Most research on tourism in Africa centers around the touted benefits of tourism, with only a minority of scholars bemoaning its negative impact. Notable among the latter is tourism scholar Peter U. C. Dieke, who contends that tourism in Africa has led to the "destruction of social patterns, neo-colonialist relationships of exploitation and dependence, [and] inflationary pressure."20 Although Dieke accurately points out Africa's marginalization in tourist exchanges and the overrepresentation of foreign companies in the industry, his analysis does not adequately engage with the race, class, and gender dimensions of power.

Similar patterns have been observed in the recent scholarship regarding tourism in Malawi. Felix Bello, Brent Lovelock, and Neil Carr have argued that local communities have been alienated from the tourism planning process.21 Additionally, a study by Elmot Chauma and Cecelia Ngwira found that interactions between guests and hosts were limited, with residents reporting being alienated from tourism and not seeing much benefit from investments in tourism infrastructure.22 Studies by Grace Kamanga and Felix Bello, which considered the impact of corporate social responsibility programs on communities, concluded that tourism companies in Malawi did not reinvest in the local community. Although important for illuminating power relationships in the industry, such studies also ignore the lingering race, gender, and class power relations in the industry that are part of the colonial legacy. In fact, Bello, Lovelock, and Carr present such critiques as fringe: "one extreme perception of tourism development and its effects is the view that it is a form of colonialism and imperialism."23

Far from extreme, postcolonial theories that intersect with political economy approaches provide a space for critical historical-global analysis, critical politics, and perspectives suspicious of Western liberal modernity in tourism studies. Influenced by Samir Amin and Andre Gunder Frank, dependency theorists such as Jan Mosedale, Polly Pattullo, Raoul Bianchi, and Stephen Britton have influenced critical tourism research using political economy approaches. Dependency theories suggest that the world is divided into a core and a periphery.24 The core consists of rich, powerful countries that are perceived as "developed," for example the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. The periphery consists of poor countries with less power that are regarded as "undeveloped" or "underdeveloped," for example Kenya, Egypt, Mauritius, and Zambia. Notably, Britton uses this core-periphery framework to argue that tourism is the latest form of colonialism. He contends that colonialism and capitalism inform the global
tourism sector and maintain uneven colonial power relationships. Therefore, production, social organization, and trading relationships benefit the Global North. He argues that the commercial and entrepreneurial power of Global North countries enables them to dominate the Global South, because of the Global South’s dependency on the Global North for tourists and capital. Britton further contends that this structure allows core countries to exploit peripheral countries in the tourism industry, resulting in their active underdevelopment. His application of the core-periphery framework to tourism is useful for understanding power relationships in the global tourism industry.

Political economy and postcolonial perspectives regard tourism development as modernity projects. They are suspicious of tourism projects because, they argue, they produce inequality and dependence, benefiting the Global North. Britton argues that in host destinations, businesses are primarily foreign-owned and money from airlines, hoteliers, tour operators, and travel agents is largely managed or reinvested overseas. Such leakages result in little tourism money circulating in host countries. Additionally, scholars such as Patullo criticize the preference for imported goods over local goods used to cater to tourists; they also criticize the privileging of foreign personnel in upper management while low-wage service jobs are reserved for local employees. Such critiques of tourism development posit that the global tourism industry has a mostly adverse impact on the Global South and that it embodies what Ghanaian president and postcolonial scholar Kwame Nkrumah defined as “neo-colonialism.” That is, tourism development subtly allows former colonial rulers to reinforce neoliberal capitalist expansion and the cultural subjugation of former colonies.

Dependency theorists such as Britton argue that poor Global South nations that are located at the periphery of the global economy do not control the tourism industry. Global South citizens typically do not have access to copious amounts of capital and many do not have the disposable income that affords them the privilege to travel. Therefore, they are junior partners in North-South tourist exchanges and cannot compete on a level playing field. Sociologist John Urry’s analysis of the tourist gaze provides us with a framework for understanding raced, classed, and gendered tourist-host relationships. He argues that White Global North male tourists wield more economic and social power than their Global South hosts. This means countries like Malawi and its predominantly Black citizenry do not control the industry and occupy a marginal status in the industry.

Studies using business and tourism management perspectives tend to be positivist, technical, and generally focused on cost-benefit analysis. They tend to simplify complex raced, classed, and gendered power relationships and concentrate on incorporating the Global South within the neoliberal modernization framework. Therefore, they are inclined to suggest “sustainable” or “alternative” methods such as volunteer tourism (voluntourism). Such approaches address the ways African countries can attract, increase, and manage tourism within the confines of current global capitalist accumulation rather than challenge the uneven structure of the industry. Since the tourism industry is informed by a neoliberal global economy—which is characterized by the uneven and unequal free flow of capital, goods, and people across borders—such approaches entrench Global South countries further in a position of dependency.

Importantly, tourism scholars such as Samantha Chaperon and Bill Bramwell argue that the
Application of dependency theories to tourism tends to imply that the economy is overarching and deterministic, oversimplifying it in a way that leaves little room for Global South actors’ agency. Therefore, they advocate a more nuanced analysis of tourism that acknowledges the potential for periphery countries and their citizens to retain benefits and make strategic choices even if their ability to be active agents is constrained by external global forces. Considering calls for scholarship in the political economy of tourism that is inclusive of its complexities, this article first examines the ways that LOS challenges global inequalities. Then it explores the extent to which LOS reproduces and reinforces global inequalities.

Case Study: The Lake of Stars Festival

LOS is an international event that invites attendees to a three-day beach party along the shores of Lake Malawi, headlined by international DJs and musicians. The festival was launched in 2003 by British citizen William Jameson after a visit to Malawi where he worked as a voluntourist for the Wildlife Society. His trip encouraged him to start hosting electronic music nights with college friends in Liverpool’s clubs. Named after a popular sorghum-based beverage mimicking a traditional homemade beer popular throughout southern Africa, the “Chibuku Shake Shake” club nights grew popular and were subsequently hosted in places such as Ibiza, a popular party tourism destination in Spain. At times, the DJs included Malawian music in their line-up, which the crowd responded well to. Encouraged, Jameson used the contacts gained from the European nightlife network to start a similar party in Malawi, giving rise to LOS.

Aiming to create an event impacting the economy, highlighting art, and promoting Malawi as a tourism destination, the annual festival started out with seven hundred attendees. Its blend of local and international talent—it managed to feature acclaimed musicians such as Lucius Banda, Mafikizolo, Oliver Mtukudzi, Young Fathers, Freshly Ground, and Sauti Sol—made it more popular in subsequent years. Prior to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the festival was amassing an average of four thousand domestic and international attendees annually. Today, travelers from across the world, representing thirty countries, descend on the chosen location every year to attend the festival. This includes tourists from the United Kingdom, China, Norway, Germany, Australia, and the United States; it also includes expatriates living in Malawi and across southern Africa. The festival has become one of the largest tourism events in the country, injecting an estimated $1.7 million into the Malawian economy each year. Earning an award from Fest300 as one of the top festivals in the world, LOS is now recognized by festival industry site Everfest as a formidable international festival.

Similar to festivals like Glastonbury Festival, Coachella Music Festival, and World of Music, Arts, and Dance (WOMAD), LOS centers around music, dancing, and an overall festive atmosphere. According to Portobello Tents, a festival services site, “there is a fantastic party vibe and you’ll be sure to spend long, hot days by the lake, boogying your flipflops off.” Partnerships with industry actors support the festival by providing facilities, campsites, alcohol, or music needed to create a celebratory atmosphere. Therefore, LOS largely seeks to attract tourists whose primary motivation for visiting the country is to attend the festival and accompanying parties in a warm climate on the sandy beaches of Lake Malawi. As Lonely Planet travel writer Nick Ray highlights, “It’s WOMAD without the wellies [rainboots], Glastonbury on the sand, with sunshine almost guaranteed.”
LOS’s ability to offer the four S’s of mass tourism—sun, sea, sand, and sex—in Malawi helps keep the festival competitive; additionally, the festival offers many elements that specifically attract party tourists.41 The entertainment and parties typically last late into the night, featuring a host of popular international DJs. Past line-ups have included well-known names such as British duo My Nu Leng (Tommy Jackson and Jammo Irving), Andy Cato (from the group Groove Armada), and DJ Goldierocks (Sam Hall), who has played at festivals such as Glastonbury and Ibiza Rocks.42 Therefore, as evidenced by its ability to attract popular international acts, local artists, large crowds, and industry awards, LOS has earned a solid global reputation as a party destination.

Party in Paradise: LOS as Party Tourism

Celebratory festivals as defined by Samuel Kim et al. are characterized by their annual occurrence, short duration, and location in a confined space.43 Given these boundaries, LOS can be considered a festival since it takes place annually over three days in different exclusive tourist enclaves in Malawi. Picard and Robinson argue that festivals inherently attract tourists and thereby constitute tourism. They describe the term “festival tourism” as an elusive one describing the “general pattern of tourism development in the developed world over the last 50 years or so [that] intersects at numerous points with occasions of festivity, carnival and performance rituals.”44 Since LOS is a festival that attracts tourists, it falls under the purview of festival tourism as well. However, because LOS is also a festival attracting young tourists from around the world to party at—and ancillary to—the main event, it constitutes both festival and party tourism.45 Since LOS is inextricably linked to the accompanying parties at hotels, bars, campsites, and clubs, this paper examines this festival as a party tourism event.

Party tourism as defined by Sheena Carlisle and Caroline Ritchie involves similar elements as mass tourism, including “sunny coastal destinations, easy transport infrastructure, purpose-built accommodation facilities, a good image and presence via media and tour operators” but adds “invitations to participate in group-drinking activities such as pub and bar crawls, boat parties and nightclubbing.”46 Although these characteristics are applicable to the Malawian context, Malawian spaces also have unique characteristics that distinguish them from party tourist locations in Global North countries such as Spain. For example, they typically have less restrictive zoning requirements, attract relatively fewer global visitors than destinations such as Cancun or Ibiza, and occur in gated shopping centers or resorts; thereby, venues are generally more spread out—which presents challenges for “crawling.” Therefore, this paper broadly defines party tourism as travel to a destination for a temporary stay involving party attendance, whether the party is planned or incidental and regardless of whether party attendance was the primary or partial reason for the trip.

Party tourism is inseparably related to the alcotourism (alcohol tourism) and recreational drug tourism subsectors. Many LOS attendees stay at nearby hotels or on location at nearby campsites erected around the beach for the festival where alcohol and other recreational drugs are accessible. Alcohol consumption and drug use are also integral to the LOS experience, especially for backpacking attendees.47 Research on backpackers in Australia by Jayne et al. has highlighted that alcohol consumption and drunkenness is key to backpacking holidays. Carlisle and Ritchie have also shown that alcohol is regarded as essential to the party tourism experience. Excessive alcohol consumption is common among young party tourists, who...
are in part motivated to attend festivals for alcotourism. Therefore, it is unsurprising that accommodation venues like the Funky Cichlid, which caters to backpackers, often hosts festival after-parties with music, beer, and cocktails. Some attendees also participate in planned or incidental recreational drug use during LOS. Malawi is home to a popular strain of marijuana called Malawi Gold (Chamba), which has given rise to a small, illicit, underground marijuana tourism industry.

Alcohol- and drug-influenced behavior has earned party tourists the reputation of being problematic for residents in established party tourism destinations. A typical party tourism experience involves engaging in noisemaking, rowdiness, excessively drinking, risky sexual activities, or other transgressive behaviors. Therefore, some party tourists are often perceived as menaces in host destinations such as Mallorca (Spain), Cracow (Poland), and Budapest (Hungary). For example, Budapest gained notoriety as a hotspot for young party tourists, which resulted in resident complaints about noise, late hours, drunkards, garbage, urine stench, and drug dealers. Therefore, the city’s mayor is trying to encourage partygoers to take interest in cultural tourism, which he contends party tourists disregard. One of his motivations may be that, as scholar Hung Yu Park has noted, tourists interested in the destination’s culture and nature tend to spend more money.

In Malawi, Kamuzu Banda infamously initiated a strict dress code in Malawi, banning bell-bottom pants (women were not allowed to wear pants altogether), large afros, and long hair for men. These laws in part targeted the wave of hippies entering the country in the 1970s. The draw of Malawi Gold made Malawi a popular destination for low-budget travelers pushing the boundaries of the “hippie trail” beyond Asian borders. However, many of them were considered undesirable owing to their association with drugs and behavior considered incompatible with Malawian culture. Given the lingering conservative nature of Malawi’s political class, LOS’s efforts to fuse party tourism with a cultural component would be met with less resistance.

A Purpose-Driven Party: LOS’s Charitable Mission

Cognizant of the negative perceptions of party tourists, LOS’s founder quickly encouraged attendees to take part in an immersive experience incorporating a variety of activities. The festival line-up was deliberate in selecting Malawian musicians—both newcomers and established—seeking national and international exposure. It also intentionally brought awareness to minority groups living in the country. Notably, it provided a platform for Amahoro drummers from Burundi living in Dzaleka refugee camp to perform, which drew attention to their struggles as displaced people and allowed them space to represent themselves as active agents. The potential for marginalized musicians to retain agency and realize benefits from festivals has been explored in the Malawian context by Catherine Makhumula, who has argued that despite institutionalized constraints, refugee artists at the Tumaini Festival in Malawi can exhibit some form of agency. This is important in providing a contrast to humanitarian festivals such as Glastonbury, which sometimes exoticize host countries by presenting them as little more than aid recipients.

Attendees also experience related cultural artforms which the organizing team coordinates, including poetry readings, traditional Malawian dances, sports, theatrical performances, film
screenings, TEDx-style talks, and volunteer opportunities. They are further encouraged to participate in tourist activities at the festival or nearby venue such as swimming, snorkeling, kayaking, hiking, and other activities available at venues catering to LOS tourists. This more holistic approach to party tourism helps attendees move beyond the archetype of the drunk, menacing party tourist insensitive to a destination’s residents and culture. LOS attendees have in fact received the support of local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), Malawians, and the government. In 2016, the then-minister of tourism, Ken Lipenga, even skydived into the festival during its opening ceremony to promote tourism activities outside of the party. As Jameson explains, “it’s not just about throwing a big party. It’s also about building something [an event] that can inspire people.”

When traveling abroad, party tourists typically expect to relax and abandon everyday responsibilities that they would otherwise deal with at home. Essentially, being on vacation in the festive enclave affords them an opportunity to unwind and revert to irresponsible—and even childlike—behavior. Tourism scholar Hazel Andrews’s research on British tourists on vacation has highlighted that such permissions are facilitated or reaffirmed in mass tourism party enclaves by industry players such as holiday package organizers. However, following the example of festivals such as Glastonbury, WOMAD, and Live Aid, LOS organizers encourage participants to act responsibly. In other words, attendees are encouraged to contribute to the economy and development of Malawi actively as a core element of their festival experience—that is, to party with a purpose.

According to Jamerson, LOS’s official mission is “to work in the fields of the arts, tourism and development to provide entertainment whilst developing people and places.” Importantly, LOS is a for-profit organization that promotes and generates revenue from Malawian arts and tourism sectors. Its contribution to Malawi’s socioeconomic development is its business model and corporate social responsibility program, which often overshadows its for-profit roots. Nonetheless, LOS relies on volunteer labor from both attendees and participants. This includes international artists and DJs who perform for free. LOS’s direct contribution includes donating part of its ticket sales to charitable organizations operating in Malawi. They also donate items such as bedsheets and mattresses to Kamuzu Central Hospital. Furthermore, recycled wood used at LOS is often converted into school desks or benches and donated. The festival organizers partner with nonprofits working in Malawi such as the United Nations Population Fund, Girl Effect, Save the Children, and the Jacaranda Foundation to realize their charitable agenda.

Through its charitable endeavors, LOS organizers take deliberate action to meet their development-focused mission and goals. Notably, many of their activities are compatible with pro-poor growth strategies embedded in Malawi’s development agenda. Key elements of PPT involve integrating the poor into global markets by increasing job and entrepreneurial opportunities, relying on the private sector (with the cooperation of local and national government), acknowledging that the wealthy will disproportionately benefit, and focusing on development (education, water, health, etc.). However, the extent to which the organization behind LOS actually challenges inequality in tourism industry begs further investigation.
Challenging Global Inequalities?

One of the most visible contributions of LOS is its economic impact. Since its inception, it has generated an estimated over $4.7 million for Malawi’s tourism industry. LOS operates in a multimillion-dollar global tourism industry with potential for large profits for the Global South. According to scholar Landry Signé, approximately one billion people travel internationally. Due to technological advances, rapid globalization, and greater disposable income, more people have been traveling internationally since the 1960s, giving rise to mass tourism. The Global South has become increasingly attractive for tourists seeking to “discover” new, “unspoiled” destinations. Consequently, Global South destinations have expanded their services to meet their demands. Today, tourism has grown to become one of the largest global industries. Although this growth slowed because of the 2020 COVID-19 travel bans, as the tourism industry recovers, there still is a potential for enormous profits. Therefore, the industry remains attractive to African countries due to opportunities for economic diversification, poverty alleviation, and socioeconomic development.

Promises, Profits and Global Prominence

African nations have been competing for tourism revenue since the 1960s, when the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other multilateral organizations began touting tourism as an engine of growth for the Global South. Encouraged by tourism potential and the relative willingness of multilateral organizations to provide funding for tourism projects, African countries leaned toward tourism development over the years. By the early 2000s, the industry had gained prominence as a potential foreign-exchange earner, job creator, and income generator for Africa. Additionally, during the post-Banda era the environment in Malawi was more conducive to tourism investments, owing to the government trying to preserve Malawian cultures and prioritizing tourism.

Increasing numbers of tourists were visiting Africa in the years immediately preceding the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly 37.4 million tourists were visiting sub-Saharan Africa annually by 2018. Southern Africa in general accounted for 49 percent of all international travel arrivals to Africa, compared to 28 percent for eastern Africa and 23 percent for western Africa. According to the World Bank, Malawi received 871,000 tourist visits in 2018, a number that was still relatively low in comparison to Mozambique’s 2,870,000 visitors, Zambia’s 1,072,000 visitors, Tanzania’s 1,506,000 visitors, and Zimbabwe’s 2,580,000 visitors that same year, but was a huge increase from the 424,000 visitors that Malawi received in LOS’s initial year (2003).

Given these numbers, tourism has indubitably brought revenue to African nations. The International Finance Corporation (IFC) reports that tourism was accounting for approximately 7 percent of Africa’s overall GDP by 2019, thereby injecting $169 billion into the continent’s economy. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), in 2019, international (non-African) tourism inbound receipts in Africa amounted to a total of $24.7 billion. Tourism receipts from African tourists the same year accounted for 55 percent of the continent’s tourism and travel spending. The tourism sector’s contribution to Malawi’s GDP was 7.3 percent in 2019, generating $622.2 million. With ticket prices averaging around $38, Jamerson reported in 2022...
that LOS was responsible for contributing approximately $1.6 million toward the tourism sector annually.\textsuperscript{72} In itself, this should be considered a significant achievement.

LOS is also an important vehicle for marketing Malawi’s people and places. The festival contributes to increasing Malawi’s international exposure as a tourism destination to people who may have otherwise not known about the country. As Britton argues, Global North tourist organizations have the advantage of being in direct contact with international tourists, who may not always know where they want to travel. Therefore, they serve as intermediaries by packaging the tourism product for Global North markets. According to Signé, beach and safari trips are the most popular subsets for international tourists to Africa. Therefore, LOS promotes Malawi’s beaches, landscape, and wildlife. However, its larger neighbors Mozambique and Zambia also offer the same products, which presents challenges for Malawi’s visibility. As Britton highlights, the desirability of a destination is influenced by unique attractions for consumption. Accordingly, after traveling to neighboring countries, Jamerson sought to differentiate Malawi through a tourist-focused festival attracting audiences that may have not initially chosen Malawi, nor even Africa.\textsuperscript{73}

When Global North tourists started seeking “exotic,” “unspoiled” destinations, the Caribbean became a prime market due to its beaches. Subsequently, the Caribbean islands grew to receive disproportionate volumes of tourism relative to their size. When Global North tourists started to progressively look for new destinations, they increasingly thought of Africa’s coastline. Therefore, LOS attracted beach-seeking tourists by marketing the festival in Malawi as a big beach party reminiscent of those in the Caribbean.\textsuperscript{74} As Lonely Planet travel writer Nick Ray observed in an article about LOS, “Pinch yourself, this is not the Caribbean, but Malawi, one of the lesser-known gems of this incredible continent, boasting beautiful beaches that defy its landlocked location.”\textsuperscript{75} As such, LOS has been beneficial in bringing attention to Malawi as a tourist destination.

The Politics of Participation and Culture

On the ground, however, interactions between Global North tourists and Africans are often limited and staged. Critics argue that residents are rendered invisible, appearing only as props for tourist experiences. For example, research by Chauma and Ngwira on Malawian attitudes toward tourism showed that residents near the Chongoni Rock site felt disconnected from the tourism development: “We only interact with tourists when they want us to perform the Gule wa Mkulu dance for them. Otherwise, they just come and visit the painting with no interactions whatsoever with the local people.”\textsuperscript{76} This is a pattern throughout the continent, where African people are typically not visible in tourist exchanges unless they are there to serve or entertain. Tourists typically expect to observe Africans singing and dancing in traditional clothes as a marker of authenticity. Thus a common criticism about Global North to Global South tourism is that residents are reduced to being one-dimensional and tourists are disconnected from their lived experiences. Residents also complain of not having genuine interactions with tourists. This is consistent with Pattullo’s argument that affluent tourists are often segregated from impoverished locals in typical interactions between Global North and Global South tourists.\textsuperscript{77}

Sensitive to such sentiments, LOS festival organizers are intentional in including Malawians in all facets of the festival experience in tangible ways. Malawians participate as attendees,
everfest, “lake of stars 2022”; pattullo, expounded from her travel experiences that clubbing in africa is often characterized by “white tourists and NGO types going to certain clubs, and locals sticking to others.” mccool, “it’s not problematic.”


80. In 2019 alone, the tourism industry was responsible for creating 586,500 jobs, or 7.7 percent of total jobs in Malawi. World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), Malawi, 2022 Research Highlights; Sangala, “Salima Hosts LOS”; Jim Evans, “Midas PRO2C Is Star on Lake Malawi,” LSI Online, October 20, 2011.

81. Macfarlane, “Party with Purpose.”


LOS’s management team contributes to creating jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities that are inclusive of Malawians too. They typically provide vendors and businesses stalls—for a fee—where they can sell their products and make a profit. Entrepreneurs linked to the festival report experiencing significant increases in sales during the festival. LOS also leads to job creation, with the festival contributing roughly one hundred jobs to the nearly six hundred thousand jobs created in the tourism industry.80 In addition to paid labor, LOS relies on both international and local voluntourists. Local volunteers (primarily from the urban areas such as Blantyre and Lilongwe) volunteer in exchange for tickets. Their volunteer work includes building stage sets, bartending, and other activities, which provides them the opportunity to build different skill sets and gain work experience.81 Volunteering also provides Malawians the opportunity to appear as benefactors for local charitable initiatives in a development space where they are predominantly featured as recipients of aid. By including Malawians as volunteers, LOS challenges racialized labor practices in the development industry, in which the dominant face of a voluntourist is a citizen of the Global North.

The structure of LOS’s management team also helps to mitigate racialized and gendered hiring practices in the industry. LOS is managed by Jameson and his Malawi-based team, with the support of a UK-based one. A common criticism about the tourism industry by critics such as Pattullo is that the best and highest-paying jobs are reserved for foreigners while locals perform low-paying jobs centered on servitude. Furthermore, tourism scholar Heretsebe Manwa argues that the tourism industry in Malawi has historically been male-dominated, with hosts typically being men.82 However, rather than relying on foreigners and men to be the “spokespeople” of the festival, LOS has made efforts to hire Malawian women professionals experienced in the tourism or cultural sectors in Malawi. As an example, their head of media, Zilane Gondwe, is a recognized name in Malawi’s tourism and culture sector, having initiated cultural, artistic, and nonprofit events challenging gender inequality. Likewise, project manager Sharmila Elias is experienced in the region’s travel and hospitality industry. She is at the forefront of initiatives helping to mitigate damage to the environment. Therefore, rather than hiring Global North “expatriates” in these roles, the organization includes racial minorities and women within their management ranks. Additionally, LOS festival organizers have also partnered with other organizations to promote the role of women in the arts, which creates spaces for women’s participation.83

The festival is also inclusive of local communities who live in the vicinity of the festival locations.
Residents living near the festival participate in artistic activities and workshops organized by the festival. For example, a pre-festival concert was held for residents so that they could experience the entertainment. Additionally, an “ideas” festival was held for secondary school pupils to encourage them to exchange ideas about development. The festival has grown into a space for musical expression and serves as a springboard for other artistic and cultural events across diverse groups. Inclusion of all resident cultural groups is important because, while festivals foster a sense of community for dominant groups, such events can exclude minority groups like refugees.84 LOS actually includes Amahoro drum performances from Burundian refugees in their line-up, rather than excluding them for not being representative of Malawian culture. In 2016, Jameson collaborated with Congolese musician Menes La Plume, a refugee living at the Dzaleka camp near Lilongwe, to initiate the Tumaini Festival. The camp, which is located on the outskirts of Lilongwe, is home to over 52,000 refugees.85 LOS’s efforts at inclusivity cannot be overstated because it demonstrates their commitment to redressing exclusion by flattening social hierarchies.

As demonstrated above, LOS makes efforts to benefit Malawi and Malawians by allowing space for Malawians to retain agency, albeit within the constraints of the structure of the tourism industry. Through their “party with a purpose” approach—which embodies PPT strategies—they work toward challenging inequalities in the global tourism industry. However, festivals like LOS do not operate in a vacuum. LOS’s ability to challenge inequality or affect change is informed by the global political economy and actors in the global tourism industry. Therefore, it is important to examine the ways LOS’s approach may also reinforce and contribute to inequality in this sector.

The Problem with Party Tourism: Reinforcing and Reproducing Inequalities

Although LOS makes efforts to provide benefits, it is important to recognize that embedded in the planning and management of all festivals oriented toward tourism are neoliberal, capitalist ideologies, contexts, or roots that need unpacking.86 Tourism scholar David Harrison argues that strategies like PPT are formulated to “incorporate the poor into capitalist markets by increasing the employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, and more collective benefits, available to them [and notably rely] on and must be integrated into, wider tourism systems.”87 Therefore, it is important to examine LOS’s tourism model with consideration of the structure of the political economy and the dominant economic ideologies that inform Africa’s tourism industry.

Power, Dependency, and Global Tourism

LOS operates in the context of a global tourism industry characterized by unequal and uneven power relationships. Due to neoliberal capitalist developments, African nations have been encouraged by development organizations, governments, and policymakers to follow the same path to “development” as the West and to “modernize” their tourism infrastructure. As Harrison notes, modernization is, around the world, the default mode of thinking deployed for tourism development. Using variations of world systems, underdevelopment, and dependency theories from political economy, critics of tourism development argue that external economic, political, institutional, and social structures actively cause underdevelopment for poorer nations while simultaneously enriching wealthy ones.88 As Chaperon and Bramwell explain, this occurs because of the foreign ownership and control of profitable tourism businesses that facilitate

87. Harrison, “Pro-Poor Tourism,” 855.
expatriation of wealth. In essence, dependency theorists argue that former colonies are not underdeveloped because of internal factors such as a failure to progress through the series of stages dictated by modernization approaches. Rather, they point to imperial capitalist expansion, which makes countries poor in part by rendering them dependent on Global North for development.89

According to Britton, the tourism industry is structured in a way that makes developing countries subordinate and unequal partners in tourist exchanges. The subordination of African countries in the tourism industry is attributed to the power relationships between rich and poor nations, which informs their ability to negotiate travel or trade policies. Power relationships also determine one's probability of becoming a tourist. For example, citizens of wealthy countries are more likely to have disposable income, and hence to become tourists. Poor countries therefore become reliant on rich countries for tourism income. This traps poor nations like Malawi in a dependent relationship with Global North countries due to the poor nation's marginal position in a global political economy that the Global North controls.90 For example, when Caribbean island nations oriented their economies toward tourism development, they became heavily dependent on tourism.91

Increasing reliance on tourism is problematic for African nations because their integration in global tourism is structured to keep them dependent. As sociologist James Ferguson argues, the current global economy has left little space for Africa outside its role as provider of raw materials. The location that a country occupies in the global political economic system determines whether a country is privileged or disadvantaged from capitalist production. Africa’s marginal location in the global economy means that countries such as Malawi are disadvantaged. Dependency theorists such as Amin contend that the current global world order divides countries into two primary regions, a core and periphery in which the core is dominant and exploits African countries in the periphery for raw materials.91 World systems theory—an extension of dependency theory—makes similar arguments but includes a “semi-periphery” region to make space for wealthier countries in the periphery such as South Africa, Jamaica, Brazil, or India. Importantly, the country’s location in this global economic system determines the country’s level of power and influence; upward mobility is rarely attainable. Since Malawi is considered a periphery nation in this model, it is marginalized and disadvantaged in tourism exchanges.93

A central contention of dependency and world systems theories is that poor states are impoverished, and rich ones enriched, based on how well they are integrated in the global system. In these models, resources such as raw materials and labor flow to the core for industrial production and manufactured consumer goods to flow back to the periphery. The periphery becomes reliant on the core to purchase their raw materials and supply manufactured goods to them. This relationship creates development within the core and underdevelopment in the periphery; that is, it stunts growth in African nations.94 In the case of tourism to Malawi, the Global North or “core” supplies tourists (and their economic, commercial, and political interests), while Malawi, as a “periphery” nation, supplies resources like land (beaches, mountains, forest, lake, etc.), culture (music, dances, singing, etc.), and labor for tourist consumption. Critics contend that Global North tourists and corporations yield such great influence under this system that the countries of the Global South are rendered “playing fields” or “amusement parks” catering to their dreams.95 Since Malawi is in the periphery, it leaves Malawians attending or working with
LOS vulnerable to exploitation by LOS, LOS's partners, and Global North tourists.

The influence of foreign tourists and corporations is evidenced by the dominance of foreign players such as transnational corporations, tour operators, and hoteliers that minimize the profits of local players in local tourism industries. Critics like Patullo and Britton argue that foreign players drain wealth from tourism profits by sending money back to their home country, importing foreign goods and materials, and hiring foreign employees for top management jobs. In these respects, tourism endangers livelihoods and further marginalizes those relying on tourism for survival who are typically hired for low-wage labor and work in poor conditions. This is the case in Malawi too where the tourism industry that LOS operates in is foreign-dominated and tourism policy caters to the interests of foreign investors, transnational organizations, and Malawi's elite.96 As Britton contends, the tourist economy in peripheral states is owned by foreign interests and members of the elite. Development researcher Samantha Page defines Malawi's elite as comprising high school- or college-educated English-speaking Christians who work for government, NGOs, or private companies.97 Although Malawi's elite do benefit somewhat, most of LOS's partner hoteliers, restaurants, and tourism operators are foreign-owned, which leaves spaces for leakages. Critics further contend that foreign domination in tourism does not protect the interests of citizens and has been detrimental to peripheral-country citizens who have lost access to land, property, or resources—and even their lives.

Citizens in peripheral nations have lost control over their own bodies (and lives) through sex tourism and human trafficking. The presence of sex tourism is likely to occur at tourism enclaves such as LOS because sex workers support the tourism industry. According to demographer Thomas Bisika, Malawians working and interacting with the tourism sector are likely to engage in commercial sex with tourists or sex tourism. This may leave them vulnerable to human trafficking. For example, Malawians have become victims of human trafficking by sex tourists and are trafficked to European cities such as the Netherlands, Germany, and Italy. The victims, including children, are sourced from areas such as Mangochi and Salima, which are popular beach destinations and former LOS host destinations.98

Deaths have occurred due to tourism development projects as well. A series of deadly incidents has been occurring in Malawi due to translocating elephants for conservation and tourism. As recently as 2022, elephants being moved to Kasungu National Park by Malawi Park Services with their NGO partners (African Parks and International Fund for Animal Welfare) rampaged through villages, killing Malawians. According to a village association spokesperson, Malidadi Langa, the charities failed to complete a fence meant to protect villagers, some of whom were trampled by loose elephants.99 He noted that such incidents show that “conservation agencies care more about animals than people.”100 To promote conservation and tourism, Malawi’s political elite debated enacting shoot-to-kill policies in Parliament as recently as 2016. Such anti-poaching legislation authorize rangers to kill poachers to protect wildlife. Although this was rejected, such policies occur de facto because private security firms and conservation management organizations such as African Parks protect endangered species and have considerable leeway in enforcing anti-poaching efforts. Such efforts dehumanize Malawian people while simultaneously humanizing species like elephants and rhinos that are treated as part of the country's national identity.101


100. Greenfield and Abdi, "Elephants Kill Three."

Naturally, LOS was not directly culpable for the above incidents. However, it does not have a fixed location and thereby relies on partnerships with hoteliers, airlines, national parks, and other players in the industry that contribute to the malaise in the industry. For example, LOS partners with African Parks and other conservation nonprofits in the tourism industry. LOS’s website also promotes tourism to Liwonde and Majete National Parks, which are managed by African Parks, and promotes involvement in volunteer conservation projects. They do not seem to be making any ethical demands from their partners to take accountability or redress structural inequalities.

Neoliberalism, Globalization, and LOS

The tourism industry is inextricably linked to pervasive neoliberal ideologies embedded in the current global political economy. According to scholar David Harvey, at its core, neoliberalism advances the idea that individual autonomy, abilities, and entrepreneurial freedom will best advance societies. That is, “the market” should direct the destiny of human beings, with few restrictions. Essentially, it involves the promotion of unregulated markets as the optimal strategy for economic development and growth coupled with a reduction of state involvement. It is characterized by a push for individual property rights, free markets, free trade, and free flow of people across borders.102 Neoliberal policies were promoted worldwide in the aftermath of WWII by global financial institutions (World Bank, IMF). Structural adjustment policies enshrined neoliberal policies in Malawi and the rest of Africa in the 1980s. However, coupled with globalization, they led to a plethora of harmful socioeconomic consequences. According to Ferguson they were “dangerous” and “destructive”; instead of alleviating poverty, these policies created mass poverty, unemployment, poor work conditions, unmanageable debt, uneven income distribution, and uneven economic growth and development.103

Neoliberal policies in the tourism industry may also have weakened African governments’ ability to protect local businesses, citizens, and resources. According to Mosedale, neoliberal policies have led to a “rollback” of government. In practice, deregulation, privatization, and the free flow of goods are detrimental for the Global South because they prevent countries of the latter from being able to negotiate fair agreements or leverage resources for their advantage. Open competition creates unhealthy rivalries between countries that vie to provide the cheapest labor and highest incentives in what is known as a “race to the bottom.”104 Such heavy competition has influenced Malawi to lower entry barriers in tourism too. In 2022, President Lazarus Chakwera thus announced his delight at being able to offer “free import duty, free import excise, VAT-free importation on selected goods such as furniture and furnishings, catering equipment, and off-road game vehicles” as an incentive for corporations contributing to tourism development.105 Although LOS did not directly influence this decision, the organization clearly stands to benefit from it because it lowers the cost of bringing equipment and goods. Tax incentives also reduce government profits needed for funding education, health, and other social services, which ironically, LOS supports as part of its development agenda. Since neoliberal policies discourage social services, governments become more dependent on festivals like LOS and other foreign entities to fulfill these services as development aid.106

Visa issuance politics clearly demonstrate the interplay of political power, neoliberal economics, and dependency in tourism. To allow the free flow of tourists across their borders, African countries are encouraged to lower visa fees, thereby reducing direct tourism revenue for
governments. However, Malawians are burdened with high visa fees as tourists to Global North countries. Malawi only instituted reciprocal visa fees to Global North countries in 2015; therefore, tourists attending LOS were not required to pay visa fees until that year.107 Notably, in the wake of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, Global North countries instituted multiple travel restrictions—both discriminatory and indiscriminate—targeting Africa. This slowed down tourism to Malawi, which consequently dropped by 80 percent. Accordingly, international events such as LOS were cancelled for three years, further impacting revenue. However, to encourage tourism, by 2022 visa fees for Global North countries such as the United States and United Kingdom were waived. Such external factors (including years when LOS was cancelled because organizers decided to focus on other projects) demonstrate the extent to which tourism is reliant on external events—and whims—of the Global North.108 One may even argue, with Michelle Duffy and Judith Mair, that events like the recent pandemic expose the extent to which tourism supports neoliberal exploitation and injustices.109

The Tourist Gaze at LOS

In addition to the structure of the wider tourism industry, power and inequality are also reinforced through tourist-host interactions at LOS in raced, classed, and gendered ways. Urry argues that tourists are taught how to look at—or experience—host destinations. Urry calls this systematic way of “seeing” host destinations the “tourist gaze.” The gaze is filtered through one’s sociocultural environment and exposure to literature, art, music, photographs, fashion, and other mass media that guide tourist expectations during travel. The Global North’s tourist gaze objectifies Global South countries as “exotic” and their citizens as “Others.”110 In these interactions, Global North gazers (tourists) who can afford to travel are in positions of power over those being gazed at; therefore, the Global South objects of the gaze (the hosts) are subordinated. This power structure creates class distinctions between Global North tourists (and the country’s elite) with their Global South hosts. Therefore, interactions between Global North LOS attendees and Malawians are ultimately uneven.

Globally, the archetype tourist is a wealthy White European/American male, whereas the typical host and worker is a poor Black woman. Therefore, in most of southern Africa, women are vulnerable to exploitation by Global North and local tourists. The raced, gendered, and classed division of labor in the tourism industry marginalizes Malawian women in tourist spaces. As noted by Manwa, the tourism industry is male-dominated in Malawi, with men typically working as servers, hotel workers, and other service-related jobs. This leaves Malawian women vulnerable to exploitation by both Global North tourists and their male counterparts. Due to the dominance of the White male gaze, all tourist experiences are oriented toward this gaze—this orientation is evident even when women or men from other racial groups participate as attendees.111 This can be seen through the deployment of Western notions of Africa as either a rugged wilderness or a romanticized Eden to promote the festival. Such imagery often evokes colonial imagery, suggesting that Africa’s wilderness needs to be explored or tamed by Global North—often White and male—citizens. Travel writers, travel bloggers, and LOS’s website often set expectations by deploying imagery about Africa’s flora and fauna in their promotion of the event to attract this gaze.112 They juxtapose party imagery with the imagery of wilderness, exploration, adventure, or Eden. Cognizant of how compelling the idea of Africa as a wilderness is in tourists’ imagination, Malawi’s national parks have resorted to importing lions, cheetahs, elephants, rhinos, and other
animals. Therefore, the landscape is staged for tourist consumption, which demonstrates that the tourist gaze informs the experiences for both hosts and guests.113

Although primarily geared toward popular music, LOS contributes to the commodification of ethnic groups in Malawi by deploying imagery of Ngoni Gule Wamkulu dancers and Burundian Amahoro drummers prominently on their website and through advertising. The line-up of past festivals and videos on their website also include performances by traditional masked dancers and Amahoro drummers; such performances are often commodified for the tourists’ gaze. This constitutes what Dean MacCannell refers to as “staged authenticity,”114 meaning tourism experiences (settings, events, and interactions) that are unnatural in the destination but are designed to represent those experiences as realistically as possible for the tourist’s desire. Such experiences tend to alter the behavior of residents and, ultimately, traditional cultural practices.

In a study conducted by Bello, Lovelock, and Carr in Mangochi, a tourist city where LOS has held the festival, residents complain that the Gule Wamkule dance has become commercialized for tourism in ways that are eroding authentic traditional experiences. Residents explain that the dance is now often performed void of its meaning or context, including by some who are not meant to perform the dance.115 This is consistent with findings by Chauma and Ngwira in other tourist areas like near the Chongoni Rock Center where boys are being initiated in large numbers by the Chewa to accommodate tourist expectations. Residents report feeling compelled to perform dances for tourists because community members and government officials advise them that tourism will benefit their community.116

According to folklorist Lisa Gilman, presenting such performances without context for tourist consumption conforms to ideas about Africa as primitive and the Global North as modern, and may reinforce stereotypes about Africa rather than promote cross-cultural understanding. Sociologist Trevor Jamerson explains that cultural and racial differences in tourism tend to be equated with value and are considered a marketable asset because the industry values experiencing cultures that are different. Therefore, rather than being denigrated, the racialized Others are embraced and arranged for consumption, thereby concealing the realities of institutionalized racism and objectification that occur in the tourism industry beyond rhetoric by organizers focusing on issues of cultural uniqueness and symbiotic relationships. This provides festival organizers considerable power to highlight or shape the parts of Malawi’s culture they consider valuable for consumption by the partygoer. Consequently, although aiming to be inclusive, certain cultures still end up being excluded, depending on which cultures are considered marketable.

Therefore, the tourism LOS attracts has not been mutually beneficial economically or culturally. Tourism has not led to the touted benefits and profits for many communities interacting with LOS. Since most Malawians earn an average of $20 per month, the $38 cost of tickets is still prohibitive for many who argue that the high entrance fee makes attendance exclusive. When coupled with costs of transportation and accommodation, access to LOS becomes unaffordable for the vast majority without sufficient financial resources. Consequently, most Malawian attendees are part of the elite. In contrast, residents at Chongoni Rock were upset because they needed funding for community projects but observed tourists not paying fees to visit the area. Malawian residents have also lamented LOS’s use of volunteers, arguing that LOS should instead pay Malawian volunteers due to global inequalities.117
Malawi’s predominantly Black political elite have limited access to tourism establishments, which are often owned by foreign companies. Therefore, White foreign owners of hotels and restaurants are the largest beneficiaries of LOSs tourism revenues. Malawians, on the other hand, report low wages, poor working conditions, unfair dismissals, and discriminatory hiring practices. For example, in the Bello, Lovelock, and Carr study, residents reported being targets of racial discrimination and being subjected to racial slurs by White foreign owners and managers of tourism establishments. These racialized interactions that privilege White Global North citizens over Black citizens are consistent with other studies of places in Africa where colonial-era racial hierarchies continue to inform relationships and power dynamics in the tourism sector.\textsuperscript{118}

Therefore, neoliberal capitalist tourism expansion allows citizens from former colonial rulers to reinforce cultural, economic, and political subjugation in the former colonies.

The Problem with Purpose: Modernity, Development, and Colonialism

Colonialism spread ideas about Global North superiority and the benefits of colonial interventions. That is, the Global North was destined to aid Africans to improve their own socioeconomic development. Although they have evolved, such sentiments are enduring and continue to disempower countries in Africa through events like LOS. They perpetuate the notion that Africans are incapable of forging a prosperous future without the Global North’s assistance in the form of foreign aid.\textsuperscript{119} As arts scholar Julie Grant highlights, Band Aid used songs and events (Live Aid/8) to portray Africans as helpless victims who could not help themselves due to their lack of education and primitiveness. Organizations such as LOS play a similar role by coming to Malawi to help Malawians “save themselves” through tourism events. Such approaches are informed by the Global North’s ideas regarding their own superiority, which are rooted in the colonial project.

The phrase “Lake of Stars” whence the festival’s name comes, was coined by Scottish explorer David Livingstone in the 1870s. Livingstone was the first European explorer to visit and map out Lake Malawi, thereby ushering in British colonial rule, characterized by socioeconomic and political inequality. Livingstone’s travel writing and his descriptions of the area’s flora, fauna, and inhabitants informed British public perceptions about Nyasaland. Nyasaland became a British “protectorate” for the purported reason of improving Nyasaland for its own peoples’ benefit. For Livingstone, it also became an area to spread his missionary work and antislavery campaign.\textsuperscript{120} LOS’s adoption of a phrase coined by Livingstone both evokes and perpetuates what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo terms “imperialist nostalgia,” a longing for a lost imperial era that ignores the violence of colonialism.\textsuperscript{121} It provides insight on how power is embedded in the language used in tourism, which postcolonial scholars argue is not neutral. Livingstone’s legacy lives on in global popular culture, having been the subject of numerous movies, books, and artwork. Therefore, LOS perpetuates the problematic history of travel from the UK to Malawi, which is inextricably linked to ideas about the “White man’s burden” to intervene by modernizing Nyasaland.\textsuperscript{122}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{118} Bello, Lovelock, and Carr, “Enhancing Community Participation”, Cleveland, Tourism in Africa.
\bibitem{119} Grant, “Live Aid/8.”
\bibitem{120} Magombo and Rogerson, “Evolution of Tourism”; EverFest, “Lake of Stars 2022”; Bianchi, “Global Tourism Revisited.”
\bibitem{122} Rosaldo, Grant, “Live Aid/8”, Cleveland, Tourism in Africa.
\end{thebibliography}
The term “development” is a contested term with several meanings that have been reimagined over time. Early ideas about development were rooted in colonial resource management practice and theories that focused on exploiting European commercial interests and trying to “civilize” or “modernize” Africa, which was viewed as “primitive.” According to Grant, development was premised on similar ideas in which Africa was the object of European linear growth models and modernization projects meant to mimic the West. Therefore, “development” was essentially a continuation of colonial modernity ideology and practice that ultimately benefited the Global North. Likewise, tourism development is perceived by its detractors as just another modernization project. Ideas about modernizing “traditional” Africa are contentious, yet still thrive in the development sector. Thus the focus on development by LOS and their NGO partners is problematic because it is linked to ideas about “primitive” Africa as the object of Global North modernization projects.

A core feature of development is the obligation of providing foreign assistance to support development efforts or provide humanitarian relief. Economist Dambisa Moyo argues that apart from emergency relief aid, the billions of dollars sent in aid to Africa to reduce poverty and increase growth are not working. She argues that the development aid industry is actually detrimental to Africa’s growth and development because the aid industry is characterized by paternalism in which Africa and Africans are patronizingly treated as children and objects of development. Like development, foreign aid is presented in the context of being an altruistic, moral obligation to help countries “develop”; however, it enriches the Global North, which compels recipients to use Global North goods and services, providing them political influence. Foreign aid provides benefits in some areas; however, its overall impact in Africa has not achieved its intended goals and is controversial. For example, Malawi is reliant on foreign aid for 40 percent of its budget, with some of that support earmarked for tourism development, wildlife, and culture. However, this also impacts its ability to control the quality of its institutions, spending, finances, and rent-seeking behavior. Incidentally, in 2013 the tourism ministry was the center of “cash-gate”—a financial scandal involving government employees funneling looted funds in a government-wide high-level corruption scheme. Key players included the country’s budget director and underpaid civil servants in the Ministry of Tourism. Reliance on foreign aid therefore creates a space for bypassing the government, financial shenanigans, social hierarchies, and continual dependence on aid, thereby maintaining Global North influence. LOS’s participation and partnerships in the aid system is therefore linked to paternalism, dependency, and an industry that ultimately entrenches global inequalities.

Conclusion

Although LOS has good intentions through its “Party with a Purpose” model, and allows Malawi and Malawians some agency, it operates in an industry that is entwined with global inequalities. This impacts its ability to meet its own objectives in a meaningful way. For LOS to effect change in the lived experiences of everyday Malawians, it ultimately needs to reject its own practice and ideology of “aid” and “development” and reflect on its own position in Malawi. To be clear, LOS has made efforts to benefit Malawi as well as provide Malawians a space to be active agents in the creative and tourism sectors. However, many of its strategies are aimed at integrating Malawians into the global economic system rather than addressing inequalities embedded in the tourism industry. Therefore, LOS also contributes to and reinforces inequality. For LOS to
truly contribute to the country, LOS needs to target the bigger project of structural and global inequalities that inform their work in the tourism, development, and international aid industries.
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The Uninvited Host: Goa and the Parties not Meant for its People

ABSTRACT

Despite its history as a favored destination for hippies from the West in the 1960s and 1970s, present-day party tourism in Goa largely attracts Indian travelers. This is a product of the post-1990s liberalization of the Indian economy, coupled with the exoticization of Goa, which has rendered it a pleasure periphery to the subcontinent. Such difference, and attraction, occurs because, unlike most of the rest of the India that annexed Goa, the region was a Portuguese colony until 1961. Goa’s Lusitanization suggests a more liberal milieu, social gatherings with music and dancing being commonplace culturally, for example. While tourism has become an economic mainstay in Goa, the party economy pays little heed to Goans and their culture, treating the land as a place where fun is paramount and local concerns, including environmental ones, are sidelined.


The Party in Our Backyard (The One We Weren’t Invited to…)
R. Benedito Ferrão, Angela Ferrão, and Maria Vanessa de Sa

While the title of our comic may suggest that the situation could be remedied by Goans being invited to the party in their homeland, we hasten to clarify otherwise. The very notion that Goans would need to be included in events in Goa already demonstrates the exclusionary nature of these occasions. Besides, a local culture of festivity has long been part of the region’s custom, a tradition varying from the party scene inculcated by mass tourism of the post-liberalization period. Party tourism, as our comic illustrates, is a problem in Goa not only because it is contrary to local interests, but also due to the “afterparty” effects: the anguish caused to residents and damage to the environment. Long after the music fades and the revelry dies down, it is Goans who are left to pick up the pieces. It is such local disquiet that we aim to apprehend in our offering here, one that brings together artistic and academic efforts in a critical vein to reflect upon the specificity of party tourism in one of South Asia’s most desired holiday destinations.

Centering a local Goan perspective places the concerns of these communities at the forefront. These include distress about noise pollution and environmental degradation, anxieties that run alongside how residents experience the effects of mass tourism as infrastructural failure. The common thread informing these troubles is the issue of how tourism has contributed to the ongoing colonial relationship between India and Goa. Since the 1961 annexation of the formerly Portuguese territory, when India circumvented Goan self-determination, tourism appears to have become another form of occupation.

Accordingly, one of the key concepts we employ is that of the “pleasure periphery.” Coined in the era of neoliberalism, this is a term that encompasses tourism destinations in the developing world that cater to travelers from more affluent parts of the globe, as well as holiday sites created to be segregated from, and assuage the cares of, the quotidian.1 Similarly, and as our comic indicates, Goa’s role as a contemporary pleasure periphery is one in service to India, primarily because of Goa’s Portuguese colonial heritage and coastal setting, thus making it productively other, or exotic, to the rest of India.2

Even as we rely on scholarly research about tourism generally and Goa more particularly, we have additionally looked to articles from the regional and Indian press to incorporate news of present goings-on, local voices, information about contemporary laws, and travel and tourism data of the current moment. Because we bear testament to matters faced by local communities, we seek to make this information available in an accessible medium, one that does not simply take community concerns and then serve them up for delimited perusal.

Our use of the visual-verbal format of a comic attempts to encourage a varied readership across the divide of academic and public audiences. Graphic novels and comics have lately been deliberated upon in their pedagogical ability, and especially in foregrounding voices from the margins.3 Writing on the subject, Pramod K. Nayar deciphers how such textual forms “[mix] and [match] multiple strategies… [T]he visual adds a layer to the [verbal] social commentary…, [creating a] freedom of representation … [and] opening up an array of story-telling strategies.”4

We endeavor to do as much here in bringing the uninvited to the party.
The Uninvited Host: Goa and the Parties not Meant for its People
R. Benedito Ferrão, Angela Ferrão, and Maria Vanessa de Sa

R. Benedito Ferrão
Text

Angela Ferrão
Illustrations

Maria Vanessa De Sa
Graphic Design
In late November 2022, a court ruling declared that no loud music could be played after 10 p.m. in Goa.\(^5\) A constant complaint by residents has been the level of noise in their communities, especially in the months of November and December when the party scene in Goa is at its height.\(^6\)


\(^6\) Ibid.
What becomes apparent from such grievances by Goan people is that party events occur without consultation with local communities and without deference to their concerns.

Further, such events are not meant to attract a local audience, geared as they are toward a largely Indian clientele. These partygoers descend upon the coastal state of Goa from New Delhi, Mumbai, and elsewhere. Goa thus becomes a site for the purpose of the entertainment of others.


However, even as the High Court’s ruling appears to protect the interests of Goan people, it must be pointed out that the ban on late night music is not absolute. Rather, the restriction only extends to events that occur without the permission of the authorities. This loophole makes it so that legally permitted parties may still be held with loud music playing after 10 p.m.

This is no surprise as the mainstay of the Goan economy is tourism, which, by an estimate in 2022, adds 16.43 percent to the gross domestic product (GDP) and employs approximately 35 percent of the state’s populace.


The tourism season is at its height at year’s end and is characterized by large parties that are often held at beach sites, such as Candolim and Anjuna, among others.

The tussle this creates is between the employment possibilities that arise out of tourism (precarious as these are given the whims of the economy and, recently, the COVID-19 pandemic) and the detriment to the well-being of Goan people and the environment of their coastal land.11

Consider, as well, that in a small place like Goa (approximately 3,700 kms), its infrastructure is overwhelmed by the mass influx of tourists. Between 2018 and 2019, it is estimated that thirteen to fifteen million people visited the holiday destination. Compare this to the state’s population of just under two million residents as per the last national census of 2011.

Road traffic chokes up local highways and roadways in the month of December, an already busy time in a state where Christmas is celebrated across communities. This cultural nuance is due to the presence of a large Catholic minority in Goa. Catholicism came to the region with the Portuguese, who colonized Goa between 1510 and 1961.
Mass tourism as Goa witnesses it now is vastly different from the humble roots of the industry in the 1960s when Kharvis, a tribal community of Catholic fisherfolk, first rented out rooms in their seaside homes to European and American hippies who had traveled to Asia to escape their growing disenchantment with the West.¹³

The success of these modest indigenous businesses did not go unnoticed. The Indian government, and corporate investors, became involved in developing Goan tourism, which was now seen as a viable, national economic opportunity.¹⁴
By the 1970s, Goa was famed for its moonlit hippy parties, characterized by drugs and nudity. It is these legendary events, the lore replete with the notion of a land that permits licentiousness, that have drawn Indian tourists to party in Goa with the belief that it allows an escape from the repression of their own societies.
It is noteworthy that tourists who come to Goa from various parts of India find the cost of alcohol lower in comparison to their home states; it would appear that parties and the bar scene are thereupon even more of a draw than Goa’s beaches or its local culture.17

The development of tourism in Goa since the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 has dramatically changed the industry; more Indians take holidays in Goa, which serves as a pleasure periphery to the rest of the country.18


Such a relationship suggests coloniality and is in keeping with the militarized annexation of Goa by India in 1961 that ended 451 years of Portuguese colonialism. Nevertheless, Goa went from being a Portuguese colony to an Indian one, because Goan political self-determination was curtailed. Essentially, Goa became a colony of the postcolony of India, which was itself under British rule until 1947.
19. See Mora, "Where the River Meets the Sea.”

Because of its historical difference from the rest of India, Goa represents the opportunity for Indian tourists to transcend or escape India while still being within it. Partying in Goa, especially given its liminal location geographically and culturally, provides Indians with the chance to experience a temporary otherness.¹⁹

Just as the hippies of the previous century looked to India for an alternative to the West, Indians look to Goa as a reprieve from the ostensible strictures of tradition and even contemporary life in congested Indian metros. Goan tourism caters to this clientele within the conjoined purview of the globalized economy and being a pleasure periphery to India.
In the meanwhile, the “hosts” who made the culture of their homeland possible find themselves the bystanders at the parties in their backyards, events their presence is not sought at.

Evidence of the parties persists even after the curtain comes down on them: debris on the beach, as well as an influx of settler-colonial Indians who have made second homes in Goa. The fun over, Goans have to contend with the aftermath, and that is no party.


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R. Benedito Ferrão is an Assistant Professor of English and Asian & Pacific Islander American Studies at William & Mary. He has been the recipient of fellowships from the Fulbright, Mellon, Endeavour, and Rotary programs, the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies, and the American Institute of Indian Studies. Curator of the 2017-18 exhibition Goa, Portugal, Mozambique: The Many Lives of Vamona Navelcar, he edited a book of the same title (2017) to accompany this retrospective of the artist’s work. His scholarly articles appear in Research in African Literatures, Verge: Studies in Global Asias, and Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication among other journals.

Angela Ferrão is an illustrator and satirical cartoonist. She has published a book for children titled Fuloos Plays with the Sun (2013), illustrated a book of Goan stories for children, and been part of an anthology of gender-based stories, where her narrative deals with women’s employment. She has worked in different media, from animation to instructional design. Her main interest is humor, through which she attempts to show the irony of social and political life in her home state of Goa and the world. Her work appears in several publications, including Countercurrents.org, Tehelka, eTropic, and others.

Maria Vanessa de Sa is an architect, urban designer, and artist. Her art explores stories from the everyday world, on being a woman, a mother, and a Catholic in Goa. She is conversant in multiple media and has also collaborated with other artists and writers. Most recently, she provided art direction for the graphic novel The Destination Is the Journey, which features the artwork of Vamona Navelcar and a story by R. Benedito Ferrão, and was published in Goa/Portugal/Mozambique: The Many Lives of Vamona Navelcar (2017). She also collaborated with Fernando Velho on the art direction of Song Sung Blue (2019), a hybrid illustrated novel by Savia Viegas.

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PARTY TOURISM

From Stag Party Tourism to Alcohol Cultures: An Interview with Thomas Thurnell-Read

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ABSTRACT

In 2022 Alix Boirot, a social anthropologist with expertise in masculinities, party tourism, and addiction, conducted a lengthy interview with Thomas Thurnell Read, Senior Lecturer at Loughborough University and an internationally recognized scholar specializing in sociological approaches to alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness. Thurnell Read’s influential contributions include editing the book *Drinking Dilemmas: Space, Culture and Identity* (2015) and his founding role in the British Sociological Association’s Alcohol Study Group.

The interview takes both a biographical and thematic approach. It provides the reader with a comprehensive insight into Thurnell Read’s academic journey, tracing his research trajectory from stag party tourism to a broader exploration of alcohol culture. An integral aspect of his work is his exploration of masculinities, which has played a pivotal role in shaping his studies of alcohol consumption. His nuanced approach to understanding the complexities of masculinities and alcohol consumption is a notable highlight, contributing significantly to a broader understanding of these multifaceted phenomena, free from moral bias.

The interview also explores the ethical considerations of researching people who are partying and may be under the influence of alcohol or other psychoactive substances. Thomas shares his insights into navigating these complexities while maintaining objectivity and sensitivity in the research process. The dialogue offers valuable insights into the multiple dimensions of alcohol-related research, highlighting the complexities of sociological approaches to alcohol, the evolving craft beer scene, and the critical role of pubs in fostering social connections in the UK. Their engaging conversation provides a rich source of knowledge for those interested in alcohol culture, gender studies, and the multifaceted dynamics of celebratory practices in modern societies.
Alix Boirot (AB): Tom, thank you for accepting this interview. It is meant for issue no. 5 of the Journal of Festive Studies, which will include a thematic section on party tourism, understood as travel for which the main motivation is partying. You are a leading scholar of sociological approaches to the study of alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness. You are also the editor of Drinking Dilemmas: Space, Culture and Identity (2015) and a founding member of the British Sociological Association’s Alcohol Study Group. I very much appreciate your comprehensive approach to the subject, which is too often polluted by overbearing moral judgments. It was therefore essential for me to be able to include your words and thoughts in this issue. Especially because your first research was about stag parties, the British going to Poland for stag parties, and now you are at another point of the chain, since you are more interested in the production of alcohol via the study of brewers and distillers. But we are still in the commercial, organized, and professionalized kind of festivities that are part of urban and globalized modernity.

During this interview, we will take a biographical approach to identify how you got into these academic interests—first stag parties and then alcohol more generally—but also a thematic one, concerning how you situate this question of party tourism in relation to your current research.

One aspect that particularly interested me in your work is the question of masculinity. If I’m not mistaken, this angle led you to the study of alcohol consumption, which has become your favorite field of research. Is that right?

Thomas Thurnell-Read (TTR): That’s right. As an undergraduate student I had enrolled in a module called “the social construction of masculinity.” And at the same time we had a qualitative research methods training module, and as part of that had to undertake a mini project of ethnographic fieldwork. Putting those two things together at that time—this is as a second-year undergraduate—I studied a local fire station and looked at how masculinity was performed by firefighters through their work. I guess because it was a small-scale project, I did a lot of looking closely at how they speak and behave, and particularly how men in their daily interactions work with each other to sustain an idea of masculinity and manhood.

Several years later, when it came to doctoral-level study, I developed another interest, in tourism, after traveling around eastern Europe as a young backpacker and going to cities like Prague and Krakow. I was aware of this phenomenon of stag tourists on the streets of those cities and I think that was the inspiration. I was seeing these groups of men together, sharing that space a little bit like the fire station, a particular sort of closely bonded group, which gave me the initial idea. I thought, well, has this been studied, is it possible to make a study of this? And that’s the starting point, I think.

Moving forward from that, the literature that underpinned my doctoral thesis was really a nice mix of 50 percent toward a sociology of tourism and 50 percent toward a sociology of masculinity. And in part I was trying to join those two fields together. Until that point, I felt that a lot of tourism studies were dealing very generically with the concept of tourists. A lot of it was framed in
relation to theorists like John Urry talking about the tourist gaze, and it felt like quite a narrow conception of tourism as very gentle, middle-class people going and looking at a nice building or a work of art. It was all about looking at nice things while you’re on holiday. And of course, putting that next to the reality of people going abroad to drink and dance and party and cut loose in a very embodied experience, very sensory experience. Although I wanted to engage with the tourism literature, I felt there wasn’t so much in the classical sociological perspectives on tourism which I could necessarily use and relate to the topic of the stag tourist in eastern Europe. At the same time, there was the beginning of a turn towards space, embodiment, the sensory, atmospheres, and affect, and I think that’s something I’ve run with to this day. I’ve always been drawn to that literature that looks more at the lived experiences of tourist practice.

In terms of the masculinity stuff, then I think that was something where the thesis allowed me to explore that literature in more detail. Certainly, as I said, the focus on male bonding rituals and then Raewyn Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity informed what I did with that research and was vital to that project. It was a case of making an argument that this phenomenon is deeply gendered; that the enactment of masculinity is central to understanding that phenomenon. It’s part of the motivations, it’s part of the common-sense explanation and that’s certainly something I found during the data collection, speaking to these tourists. If you were probing them, asking them, Why are you doing this? What does this mean to you? There was a very clear signal that it was expected, it was part of the script of what a man at that certain age should be doing. It was, in a way, what also led me back into this ritualistic side of it and drawing on Victor Turner and others’ ideas of rites of passage and things like this, that through this sort of symbolically very rich activity a change of status was being marked from being a younger single man to a married man. The association with shifting responsibilities that come with that played into what we’d call a social function of the stag party.

Coming from that I began to see that what looks very disordered is actually very rule-bound. There is a script to follow in how men behave together, but particularly the stag weekend. It’s a very structured, highly anticipated planned event, even though at the moment it feels very spontaneous and very disordered. I wanted to move beyond a frame that just sees it as something that is unorganized and destructive, to seeing it instead as possibly something that is tightening bonds and asserting a certain status within the group. So, in that sense, it might actually be quite constructive as a practice. I think that was the central tension in that project that I dealt with, as a PhD student, and when I was writing up the thesis in terms of publications following that, the focus was how to bring those two things together. On the one side, the very chaotic, disorganized, transgressive elements of the stag weekend and, on the other hand, the socially rule-bound, anticipated, scripted behavior. But I think that’s where some of the tensions and some of the intrigue lay for me.

**AB:** About masculinity: you had this idea that the fulfillment of hegemonic ideals of masculinity, per Connell, may involve a certain level of flexibility in embodied performance. Can you elaborate a little?

**TTR:** The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been around for decades now and, periodically,
Connell offered a reformulation of it, a defense of the concept; and typically a response to, I would suggest, some of it being applied more freely or inaccurately. And one of the things that is interesting about the debates about hegemonic masculinity is, yes it’s hierarchical, but it was never intended, as a concept, to perfectly reify specific men or groups of men in that hierarchy. In my work, I was studying men who are behaving in a certain way in this liminal, disinhibited space. The stag tour weekend is a particular time and place in which they can express this sort of unbounded embodiment of masculinity. And I was thinking that flexibility came into it too. They’re not necessarily like this all the time. And this is one of the virtues of a participant observation approach—that it was possible to speak to them and try to understand that the appeal of that weekend was forty-eight hours where there’s nothing to do but drink and joke and play. Indeed, it was quite infantilizing, in the sense that you were meant to be losing control of yourself. You are meant to not take anything seriously. It’s meant to be a sort of trivial time; playfulness dominates everything that you do, from the moment of getting on the plane from the UK to arriving in the city and every element in between. In terms of embodiment, this is interesting and I think it is the point when I began to identify alcohol as something I wanted to continue researching, because the embodied nature of it, this very sensory nature of alcohol consumption, just struck me as so fascinating.

Still to this day, when I write about alcohol, or speak about alcohol, I remain struck by what I think of as its sort of transformative quality. People often drink with the intention of becoming something that they want to be; being more sociable, being less inhibited, being more able to partake in that kind of masculine male bonding ritual. And the embodied side of things was very important in the fieldwork—it hit you in the face because you saw people not just consuming alcohol but vomiting, and urinating.

My fieldwork was periodic so I made many trips to Poland, a week or two at a time, and then I was back in the UK. On one of those return visits home, speaking to my supervisor, he said “there’s a lot of mess in your notes isn’t there?” Indeed, the field notes I made during these observations were full of descriptions of how much people were consuming and putting into their bodies. There was a lot of detail about nudity, injuries to the body – drunk men were drunkenly falling over tables and bars and collapsing in the street and just absolutely making a mess of themselves. I think this was the start of this analytical thread of saying: well, a lot of the literature on masculinity is all about this hegemonic, stoic, in control, very bounded, very controlled kind of manhood. And I didn’t see that. It was a celebration of transgression, a bodily transgression. And I think that really relates to how modern manhood is quite flexible and knowing when and where to be tough and strong and independent and stoical and when not to be. And, on the stag tour, one of the men in the group who would drink lots but not let it have any effect on him, showing how tough he was by drinking the most, wasn’t actually particularly celebrated by the group. Because the aim was to transgress, the aim was to lose control. And the guy standing quietly in the corner showing how tough he is by drinking ten pints and drinking vodka shots and not losing control one bit, was actually seen as the one who was deviant in a way because they weren’t following the stag script.

In the years after the PhD, I began to look at real ale drinkers, beer drinkers in the UK, and changing practices amongst beer consumers. When I started that research ten or twelve years ago, we were still looking at a very clear stereotype of a middle-aged or older man with
a large beer belly, old unfashionable clothes, sitting in the pub drinking pints of ale and writing the flavor in his little bookkeeping a list of all the beers that he had tried—a kind of geeky older masculinity. When I started that research I felt an obvious connection: I'd spent the last few years researching younger men and their consumption, what role alcohol played for them and their masculinity, and their identity; and now I was moving on to older men and that was for me an interesting continuation. I think around that time I published a paper that was trying to put these two ideals side by side, and I called the paper “yobs and snobs” because you have the image of a young man drinking too much alcohol and losing control and becoming violent and becoming disordered. And then you have the image of the older man, the real ale drinker in the pub, whose masculinity may be questioned because he's lost the shape of his body, he's got the beer belly, this is a kind of centuries-old cultural trope of the older man having let go of his physical embodiment. So yeah, I think the embodied masculinity side of things was one of the strands that I carried on after the stag tourism research.

AB: You already answered a bit but I was wondering: Why did you work on stag tourism rather than stag nights at home?

TTR: Well, when I received funding for my PhD, originally, the topic was going to be “gap year tourism.” I’m not sure how it is in France, but in the UK—perhaps less so now, but in the past—there was this idea of mainly middle-class kids taking one year or more to go and do some volunteering or traveling, and that was kind of bound up with class and age and gender a bit as well. Only, by the time I started the PhD, there were a few people in the UK already studying or writing about gap years and I had drifted away from that topic in a way, but I wanted to keep the tourist elements and saw that, as stag party tourism was happening overseas, that could be a link. It also felt like it was a topical subject, in the sense that these eastern European cities that became known as the stag tour destinations of choice, really did so from 2004. This was when countries like Poland joined the EU and it was when the budget airlines like Ryanair created the new routes between the UK and these eastern European locations. And just as much or even more so than the tourists traveling east, it was people from eastern Europe traveling west too who sustained these new mobilities and connections, not just the tourists. When I was conducting fieldwork, I would sit on the plane as a researcher flying out to my research site and half the plane would be drunk British men going out to the city to get drunk. But also half the plane might be the Polish workers, Polish migrants, who had been working in the UK, who wanted to see family for a while. So it was, I think, “the moment” for this research project. I wanted it to feel topical and feel current.

Earlier, I think in the 1990s, Dublin and Amsterdam were destinations that were precursors to the eastern European stag tour destinations, and both those cities had almost their moment when it became a phenomenon that councilors, tourism industry representatives, and residents became frustrated with in terms of the presence of large groups of drunk men on the streets. I carried out the fieldwork in Poland at a time when that was, I would say, the tipping point, from what I could see. In the first few years, it was—I certainly spoke to plenty of local people in the city, in Krakow, who felt that “oh, to begin with, when it was one or two groups you could kind of laugh along with them and, if needed, you could avoid them, avoid some of the mess.” But the summer of my fieldwork, in 2008, I think I counted fourteen or fifteen stag groups on the main Market Square in
Krakow and it was really hitting a point where people were fed up with the noise and the mess, and I think the timing of the project was quite important. It would probably feel very different if I did it today.

Interestingly, this is a project that’s always gained a lot of interest from journalists and the media, and I’ve done quite a lot of interviews over the years about this. The framing that they often started with was: a generation ago, the stag party would be a night in the local pub with your dad, your uncle, and a couple of mates from work. All very subdued, just a few beers. And the journalistic approach would be to kind of almost downplay and trivialize previous stag parties so they could make the phenomenal stag tour seem something really extreme and really over the top. In the actual data, from speaking to stag groups, stag group participants, the movement toward an overseas stag tour was in part driven just by a general accentuation of sort of nightlife amongst a generation of British men who would fuel the growth from the 1980s and 1990s onward of the night-time economy in the UK. If your average night out as a man in your twenties was a bar crawl involving four, five, or six pubs and then a nightclub and quite extreme, then the stag weekend would need to top that, to go above and beyond. The architecture of the night-time economy, with the shots and the music and that, became sort of very heightened. Spending money on a big night out became much more essential to the way young people were engaging with leisure space. As a consequence of that, what do you do when you want an extra-special event that symbolically marks that life occasion of getting married? So for the stag tour, I think “doing something bigger” involved a couple of nights, two or three nights away in an overseas city, particularly one like Krakow, which at the time had the reputation for having excellent nightlife. Because it was a student city it had bars and clubs, it was already there. I mean most of this didn’t spring up to cater to British tourists: nightclubs were already there for Polish students and young people. And of course, at the time, the alcohol and food were very cheap for British tourists.

The pound was stronger then. So again to answer your original question: looking back on it now, it feels that it was topical, that it was the right time to do that study. It felt like a new phenomenon. My experience was of having started some preliminary research on the gap year phenomenon and finding some excellent sociologists already studying it, further ahead in that process than me.6 But as a PhD student, you want to be as original as possible. I found that no one had really written about stag tourism. There had been some papers in the US about bachelor parties and bachelorette parties. Some of those were really helpful in terms of getting me thinking and framing my project. But there was very little to go on at that point. I think that was the starting point.

**AB:** My relationship with my field, Lloret de Mar, a festive seaside resort, was complicated at first, but then I learned to like my field and my respondents, which seemed essential to me to be able to carry out research without making value judgments that are often attached to this type of behavior. What was your relationship with the parties you investigated? I know that sometimes it can be complicated to deal with all that mess and drunk people. And for me, as a female investigator, I had to deal with a lot of sexism, for example.

**TTR:** I think that’s a really important question. At the time, because as an undergraduate and as a postgraduate I had taken optional modules relating to ethnography and read all these classic

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ethnographic studies and was pretty wrapped up with this idea that good ethnography needs to involve this kind of fairly challenging, arduous fieldwork, I was fairly wrapped up in the idea that you go off to the field and you'll be challenged. In terms of gaining access to groups, as I sort of walked through the process, it was a case of deciding the topic and then figuring out how am I going to do this, how am I going to find these groups? I gained access primarily through a stag tour company who were able to introduce me to their clients, groups that they were hosting in the city. And I was able to meet them very early in their weekend, right at the starting point when they arrived, before they'd been drinking too much and that was the point where I could explain who I was, a doctoral researcher from the UK. Interestingly, I felt, probably in those stages I downplayed some of the focus on masculinity because I'd been reading this in the literature from people studying masculinity: When you say to men, I'm studying masculinity, they can become either defensive, or suddenly know to play up and be a bit on their best behavior. And I didn't want that to be a theme and have that reaction where their behavior would be moderated because of my presence.

In terms of explaining my interest in them, it was a case of saying, well, I just want to understand why groups of British men would come out here for their stag rather than staying in the UK. I think that the tourism element of the project was a little bit easier and more palatable to explain. In that sense, the focus on masculinity did emerge through my interactions with them and particularly through the topic of friendship, because, when I met these groups, one of the first things you'd ask is how do you all know the stag? How do you guys know each other? And you'd get these quite complicated histories: friends from school, friends from university, colleagues from work, family members, and so on. And in a sense, that's probably what was surprising. I found it easier than I anticipated to join the group because at first I thought, this was a group of best friends and I'm going to feel like an outsider. Yet the majority of stag groups are comprised of several smaller peer groups, relating to different elements, different parts of the stag's life. So obviously I'm still an outsider to that, but particularly in the early stages of the stag tour, there's a lot of time spent doing exactly that. Getting to know each other, bonding.

One of the things I also reflected on methodologically was that, as a researcher, I kind of benefited from the hospitality sector, these pubs and bars, and night clubs: it's conducive to socialization, getting to know people, feeling relaxed, having that rapport. It was different when I did the research with the firefighters that I mentioned because they were at work and that was their commitment there. These were working practices, whereas with the stag tour, I think I was able to build some rapport with them because of the sociable setting. Undoubtedly that is the privilege of being how I am, who I was at the time. At the time I was in my mid-twenties, white, British, middle class, male, able-bodied, heterosexual. All those things privileged me in the setting because I could more or less blend in and fit it. Interestingly, in the final stages of the PhD, when I started presenting some of my findings at academic conferences, I often got the kind of tongue-in-cheek comment, people in the questions after the paper saying, “So your next project is going to be hen parties” and things like that. It was not exactly sexism but I remember saying, “well, no” because gender is so central to the social structure of these occasions, it would be, not insurmountable, but it would be very different. It wouldn't make sense for me to go and do a comparative study of hen parties because the dynamic of me as a male joining a group of women would not make sense. It would be problematic in other ways.
Thinking back to the thesis, the research involved a lot of reflection on my own sort of masculine embodiment, and I remember buying some nice, new shirts and some clothes to kind of fit in with the group. And that’s partly because I knew that, well, if I’m a researcher wearing jeans and T-shirts and they’re going to go into a nightclub where there’s a dress code, I need to look smart too. Also, in some of the groups the men were in their thirties and older and I felt conspicuously young in a couple of situations. I also felt like dressing the part because of some of the more inconsiderate behavior I saw from stag groups, some of the fairly obnoxious behavior toward local residents. I felt like I wanted to sort of shrink away from the group. It’s the classic dilemma of ethnographic field workers—you see things you don’t agree with but which fascinate you also. It’s not your job to change it, to intervene, is it? In my thesis, though, somewhere in the methodology section, there’s a mention of sending lots and lots of emails to my partner at the time, who is my wife now. During fieldwork, writing back to her was an outlet for some of my frustrations and quite a complicated emotional experience because in some senses the fieldwork was lots of fun. It’s this space with noise and music and laughter and that was a lot of fun and enjoyable, and at the same time it was quite challenging.

Maybe I have become milder in older age but I wouldn’t do the same project now, I just wouldn’t want to put myself through all those weekends of going to nightclubs and … this kind of approach to things would put me off and some of it was quite uncomfortable. I’ve reflected on that in my methodological writing since as well. On how what should be quite an enjoyable occasion, from the position of a researcher, feels challenging and tiring and emotionally quite conflicted. This was also expressed by researchers like Karen O’Reilly, who researched British tourists in Spain a few decades ago. Hazel Andrews, who was my external examiner for my PhD, also studied tourists ethnographically and her work was a really big inspiration for my own. Something I particularly enjoyed in Karen and Hazel’s work was their emotional honesty as ethnographers. And something they both refer to in their writing is, how do you, as a field worker, have a right to feel unhappy that you’re going to this tourist destination? Other people are paying a lot of money to go there as tourists, it’s a leisure space. And when you tell people that you’re gonna spend weeks or months in these desirable locations, sometimes that trivializes the work that you’re doing, and all three of us (I know Karen, I know Hazel) and I think all three of us had people joke that our research wasn’t serious, that it was “an excuse” to go and spend some time in a nice location. And I think that at least drove me to want to publish that methods paper. When I tried to make an account of it, some of it was fun and exciting and exhilarating, and, even on the same night, parts of it would feel totally overwhelming and conflicting. Like you just didn’t wanna do it. You didn’t want to be there emotionally. It could be quite challenging to be in those situations.

**AB:** I understand that. I felt the same way. And there was another problem for me in that type of field: the state of drunkenness of partygoers. It is part of the analysis, but doesn’t collecting observations on drunk people raise ethical issues?

**TTR:** Yes, I mean, I sit now in my office and discuss ethical approval processes with my PhD students and I just think, the processes, rightly so, are much tighter these days. They have become that way in most areas. I’m not sure if it would be possible to do the project in the same way because of the question of the intoxication of participants relating to issues with informed consent. As I mentioned earlier, pragmatically, I ensured I got consent very early in the weekend, as early as possible, and we did quite a lot to ensure the timing was at a point when they weren’t
too drunk. And I think in a way I had to push back against the idea that, one beer and you sort of lose control and cannot give informed consent. Would people say I must have had problems recalling everything? How could I remember anything if I’d been drinking? Well, I can have a beer and still remember. And I resorted to the usual ethnographic practice of making ethnographic jottings in a diary, building them up as extensive field notes later on, either later that night or the next morning. That said, I think there were evenings when things became quite hazy. The pace of the events changed and was very quick.

I think something I tried to get across in all my writing about the stag tours was that it’s a very emotionally rich sensory, embodied occasion. All the same, methodologically, as a sort of practical consideration, I had to take myself out of that at times. I had in every pocket, in my jacket, trousers, small bits of paper and tiny notebooks, and I had things I could make notes with that I’d transfer into a larger field diary the next day and I’d write these things up. It was the early days in terms of smartphones and things, but I recorded some sounds and I took a few pictures. Although I regret not making the visual and audio elements more prominent in the data collection earlier on, I think my main worry was, these are spaces associated with leisure and playfulness and a heightened atmosphere and if I’ve got a notebook and a voice recorder out, then it will mark me out as different. I’ll be conspicuous, and people will change their behavior.

Doing the fieldwork over the course of the year and spending a lot of time out there, when it came to an end and I finished my fieldwork, I really did need a period of sobriety. I was sick of the smell of beer and vodka and things, and it was quite nice to have a break from all of that. Again, it’s enjoyable when it’s for leisure. When it’s for work and for a PhD, you have various anxieties about whether what you’re doing is worthwhile; we might call it imposter syndrome now. At the time, I just doubted whether this was going the right way and whether what I’d done would be taken seriously or not. I think being able to, in a way, have times during the fieldwork when I wasn’t in the thick of participation was central to the ethnography. Participant observation is a continuum. My data leant most heavily on the more involved participant end of things, when I was hanging out with the group in the bars and the clubs. But in the wider framing of the phenomenon, I took a lot from the evenings or the daytime I spent just walking around the city or being a distant observer and I referred earlier to counting fourteen stag groups on the square in Krakow on Saturday afternoon in the summer one year.

As my interest in space and embodiment and placement of bodies within space and movement and mobility through space became clearer in the latter stages of fieldwork, even as I carried on with the participant element, I saw more value, a lot more value in being a bit more distant as an observer, and I would walk through the city, I would spend time in some of the bars and clubs and I can remember sitting with a coffee and a notebook and looking around me and off to one side is one stag group, off to another side is another. Every few minutes there was a group passing me on the street in fancy dress or something like this, and actually being slightly removed, being not involved, was insightful. Less so specific individuals and more so just the social and spatial dynamic taking place in the setting. So I spent a lot of time kind of looking at how other people, locals, and other tourists would move away from these groups or sometimes stand at a distance when it’s almost theatrical in a way. Some of these groups had these fancy dress costumes and they were almost staging something quite humorous in the way they were behaving as they walked around. You’d see groups move tables away from them or finish their drinks and
change to a different café to get away from them. But you’d also see people turn around and take pictures and almost become drawn into it. At the time I was reading quite a lot of Erving Goffman and that behavior in a public place—how different actors and different groups of actors in public spaces modify any kind of “game” in their behavior in relation to their interactions with others—I felt that I had quite a lot of fun making notes and observations based on that.

**AB:** Have you seen a change, a greater institutionalization and recognition of this type of qualitative research – on alcohol for example – in the last ten years?

**TTR:** Yes, there’s been a lot of progress, and shortly after completing the PhD, I was able to get involved at a very early stage with the British Sociological Association Alcohol Study Group that was set up around that time. Some of the early events that they organized were fantastic for me. And one thing that struck me was there were people whose subject of study was alcohol and drinking, but they were outnumbered by people who were studying something else entirely and suddenly realized, wow, alcohol is central to this phenomenon or this group and these people’s lives or leisure activities. Being able to meet those kinds of scholars and share our experiences with them was excellent. I was also involved in the start of the Warwick Drinking Studies Network, when I was a PhD at the University of Warwick. I was involved partly in the early days of that and it’s now just called the Drinking Studies Network because it’s much bigger and has moved beyond just being focused on Warwick. Those two groups, I think, have done a huge amount to bring scholars together, including historians, sociologists, public health scholars, cultural studies, and youth studies. It’s very interdisciplinary. I think that a real advance in the past ten years or so has been connecting those people up, building alcohol studies into something that feels very interdisciplinary and very inclusive of qualitative approaches. Public health and epidemiological perspectives on alcohol are still dominated by population levels and statistical analysis, but the space for qualitative, if not ethnographic, research into drinking is improved. It’s just more common, at least.

When I started writing about this topic, the literature about the night-time economy mostly sprang from social geography, urban geography, and criminology studies of urban city centers in the eighties and nineties being sort of recreated as playscapes, as Paul Chatterton and Robert Hollands called them.\(^\text{10}\) That literature was hugely useful. And one of the things I always liked about it was that it didn’t start with the idea that these were deviant people. This was part of the social, economic, and cultural fabric of British society. This was the economic planning of many British cities at that time to deregulate and allow bars and nightclubs to open, to bring people into the city, spend money, have fun, and consume. That was the mantra at the time. I like the fact that those studies looked at regulation and control, but in a broad sense in that they looked at how people control their behavior and also the variety of actors involved in the production and consumption of night-time leisure.

We spend a lot of time focusing on the people drinking. It’s also possible to focus on the city center’s policing, like club bouncers and things. But I made the point in one paper that there’s student drinking, and there are student societies where you have student secretaries who plan the pub crawl.\(^\text{11}\) You have tour guides like the stag tour company employees, almost entirely young Polish women, who guide these groups of British men around the pubs and bars in the city, and the role they played is so fascinating. I think in recent years there’s been a lot of fantastic developments.
work from qualitative researchers in the UK\textsuperscript{12} and beyond in Scandinavia, Denmark, and Norway as well.\textsuperscript{13} I think that what they've really done is to show the meaning and motivation involved in this kind of drinking, particularly for young people. Again, it is trying to get through to that idea that it's quite socially normative to drink in these sorts of ways, and what from a distance might, as I said originally, have looked like very disorderly behavior, actually kind of has its rules and expectations.

Recently I've been intrigued by ideas of the life course and we've got this edited book out this year about alcohol, age, generation, and the life course.\textsuperscript{14} Many of the chapters we brought together for that book try to make sense of how drinking practices change but also how the meaning of drinking changes throughout the life course. I don't think I will, but it would be fascinating to catch up with all these men who were on these stag tours in 2007 and 2008 and to see where they are now. I mean, I became a father at the start of last year and I have a lot less time for alcohol. I don't go to pubs often enough; I don't go to clubs at all anymore. Personally, biographically, I think my research interests have shifted because of that, and I'm more interested in other forms of drinking. But I think it's fascinating to think about how the meaning and the purpose and the function of our alcohol consumption and intoxication might change as we age, and they are different between generations as well. In many countries in the Global North and northern Europe in particular, anyway, it's a steady trend now that young people are drinking less. And I think when this group of young people gets through to marriage and things, is a drunken stag weekend in a foreign city something that they'll want to do? I think it's probably less likely. If the expectation that intoxication is central to your friendships diminishes, then I think the ritual of the stag tour becomes less important. The pressure to confirm to the script I mentioned previously also weakens. But it will be interesting to see how this develops with time.

\textbf{AB:} When I started to look at party tourism, the existing analysis oscillated mainly between studies of risks and the paradigm of transgression. Without ignoring either of these aspects, your research takes a sideways perspective. Do you maintain a dialogue with researchers who are interested in the question of risks, health, etc.? Is it controversial not to focus on health risks when it comes to alcohol study?

\textbf{TTR:} I think dialogue is a good word to use and it's a question of where those dialogues take place. The research I've published in more recent years, particularly the last few years, has involved looking at the role of pubs and drinking spaces in social connection, particularly combating loneliness, and most of this was looking at older people in Britain. In that sense, there's obviously risk in the health implications of drinking, but also some, for many people, very real social benefits of alcohol as a way to connect with other people, a way to find social connections, which are very difficult to come by. And I think there's a real awareness now that loneliness and social isolation are hugely damaging to physical and mental health. I mean, probably the straightforward answer is to say that I don't have as much dialogue as I should about risk. I think the closest I've come to it is a few years ago, when I did research with the real ale drinkers and craft beer drinkers, and I published a paper which was looking at the concept of moderation.\textsuperscript{15}

The starting point for that was this idea of the number of units of alcohol per week and if you're above a national guideline, you're a problem drinker, if you're beneath that, you're “OK.” Healthwise,
my starting point for that paper was that this doesn’t really reflect the way the majority of people relate to alcohol, particularly those who see themselves as that kind of connoisseur of beer. They learn about breweries and they travel to beer festivals and breweries to try different beer styles. And through the fieldwork and interviews with those people, what I clearly saw was people who were drinking a lot of alcohol regularly. Drinking lots, but very rarely being drunk. And that was the critical thing: for a lot of them, in their mind, they were “moderate” drinkers. They were sociable, sensible drinkers because they tended to drink in pubs, nice pubs, not the ones known for their disorder or violence or anything like this. They would drink regularly with friends or colleagues. They were polite and sociable. They wouldn’t get drunk and vomit and fall over and things like this. And a lot of them used that as a foil, as a contrast to what they thought young people or students, whoever, and the way in which “others” are drinking. It was the wrong kind of drinking, involving drinking just to get drunk. You don’t care what it is, it can taste horrible and could be the cheapest alcohol, but it’s about intoxication, it’s about the loss of control. I think that was more of my qualitative approach to this, that the idea of safe or unsafe, acceptable or unacceptable drinking, is framed more in terms of what you’re drinking, where you’re drinking, who you’re with, and how you behave. It is very contextualized. It is not as if people in practice said “ohh if I have one more beer that will take me over my fourteen units for this week, I’ve become an unsafe drinker.” I know others working on that. Henry Yeoman, a criminologist at Leeds University, theorized very well this sort of problematic or changing concept of moderation. As I alluded, I think there’s a current generation of young people who just have a very different orientation to risk. The idea of drinking so heavily you black out and break your phone and rip your jeans and vomit on yourself and that being fun really doesn’t resonate so much now. There has been a generational shift. Not for everyone, but I think many young people for various reasons just don’t see that as pleasurable anymore.

**AB:** So you think it’s the end of the era of binge drinking?

**TTR:** To be honest, I think it will always have some appeal and I think quite a lot of this heavy drinking for young people can be very cathartic and it’s a way of releasing tension and finding a kind of pleasure in forgetting what you’re meant to be doing or not meant to be doing. A lot of young people feel that pressure of work, university studies, the future, having the best career, being fit, being healthy, be all of these things, and binge drinking can retain the significant appeal of forgetting that, even just for one evening or just for a few hours. But the recent research coming out on this is certainly pointing toward young people having the feeling that they’ve got less time for it faced with competing demands and pressures, and just not finding that sort of drinking as appealing as a previous generation did.

**AB:** I see. And so now you are studying producers and not consumers, right? What brought you to this turning point?

**TTR:** I have pursued both subjects in parallel, I think. Most people just focus on one or the other. But it really started after the PhD when I began looking at real ale drinkers. And I was participating in various ways with the organization called the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) who was founded in the early seventies in the UK. They were, they still are, primarily a campaign group aimed at promoting or preserving traditional British cask-conditioned beer. I won’t go into the technicalities of what qualifies something as real ale or not. And I was again interested

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in that ethnographically speaking; there’s this kind of quite a unique group of people who had a particular orientation. I spent time with many people from the organization and what was interesting about that was the fascination of the knowledge amongst some of those people about pubs, beer, and breweries. They knew the history of every pub in the town where they lived. They had tried beers from every single brewery in the region. I have written about this being a very masculine leisure activity, that idea that “oh, it’s not just about drinking beer. Now you should own twenty books and follow all sorts of writers online about your expert knowledge of different beer styles and the history of different breweries and all of this. You should have a very informed intellectual opinion about what makes a good or a bad beer.”

And so, as part of that research, I just fell up on it. I started to go on some brewery tours; I asked some brewers if I could interview them about their work and that’s when I found a real interest in the idea of craft and really seeing brewing as craft. And later I interviewed craft gin distillers as a kind of cultural work. The way they don’t just try and make a certain type of product, but the way they talk about it, the way they give it a certain name and a style and packaging. I spoke to lots of craft brewers and gin distillers who would go out and do these kinds of Meet the Brewer events where they’re meeting the customers, the consumers. I think that was what led me back in a way to looking at the labor involved in creating the alcohol. I think it’s more or less a parallel interest, but I keep coming back to it.

I still think it’s fascinating how quickly that has developed in the UK, but many countries around the world have this kind of evolving craft scene which has its own particular way of relating to alcohol. I find it very interesting and I try my best to write about that. Most people who end up as craft brewers have been very committed consumers before they start. You don’t just suddenly, overnight, decide to open a brewery! Many of the people I spoke to had spent twenty years drinking beer, being that kind of knowledgeable consumer of beer, maybe home brewing and finding their way into their job that way. So that was an interesting angle. I think the blurred boundary between consumer and producer was quite interesting.

**AB:** So it’s related. They are not two clearly separated objects.

**TTR:** Yeah, I think. Certainly one of the things that the brewers, many of them, were interested in was this idea of a community approach, that the brewery should be the center of the local community. The brewery should be a place that people who want to support a local business will buy their beer from. People are opening up breweries, buying their own pub, or opening their brewery tap or somewhere attached to the brewery where people will gather to drink the beer. And that notion of a community focus being very valuable socially, culturally, and economically has been a central asset to the craft narrative, I think. I have a book chapter out recently about intoxication and connoisseurship. And again it goes back to the idea that some people who drink very heavily don’t see a problem in it because they’re doing it for the taste of the product. They know a lot about it. At some craft beer festivals it can be difficult to find beers that aren’t over 9 or 10 percent alcohol. The trend has become, at the moment anyway, toward very strong imperial stouts and porters and things like this. Very strong triple IPAs and things. But it’s all framed as, this is about knowledge and taste. It’s not about just drinking strong beer to get drunk.

Looking at big craft beer festivals, it’s clear that the focus is on bringing people together and
momentarily creating a space in which everyone comes together. This idea of conviviality or communitas is quite interesting. It is certainly the case in the beer festivals I’ve attended in my sort of private life and as a researcher, that they’re fascinating to study if you’re interested in events and atmospheres and festivals. In many cases, it’s a village hall or an exhibition area or a marquee, or a tent set up at the back of a pub. They’re temporary spaces where a particular atmosphere is generated with alcohol, food, with sensory stuff. A lot of beer festivals will have bands, and just the noise, the collective atmosphere, is fascinating for our research, I think for anyone interested in festivity. Again, we’re back to my interest in all the different actors in those settings who create the atmosphere. A lot of beer festivals are volunteer-led, so it’s not people earning money doing it, it’s people giving up their weeks or their weekends to come and be a steward or a bartender for a beer festival.

AB: And is masculinity still a part of your research today?

TTR: It is. I mean it’s something that’s always been there and thereabouts in the background. Craft beer is still very gendered. In recent years, there’s been some progress. Craft beer often presented itself as being quite progressive and hip and liberal. In the last couple of years, they were having their “me too moment,” really. Not because it’s been branded as rebellious and hip and progressive and all these things—craft beer spaces and culture have been as guilty of sexism and racism as more mainstream actors of drinking culture. But there’s a bit of a reckoning going on. There are some really good initiatives from writers and activists who are trying to push to make craft beer genuinely more inclusive, which is excellent.

In terms of my current research, it’s focusing more on pubs and their quite precarious role in British society. I’m planning some research that looks at pub closures and their impact on loneliness, and I think that the gender element is sort of in the background there. Pub closures particularly affect older men for whom pubs were one of the main places where they could be socially engaged after they retired. They are possibly more vulnerable to social isolation because of that. Once work is gone, for older men, pubs can be a really important place to just feel connected, whether they sit quietly in the corner with a beer, reading the newspaper, doing the crossword, or whether they are talking, meeting old friends, and things like this. Interesting as well, I think pubs are far more diverse than they used to be. There’s a shift in many pubs toward food and a broader range of things like being open in the day, much more akin to the café, with coffee and cake and lunches and things. There’s a lot of data I’m trying to work with at the moment that looks at how, quite often, it’s groups of older women who are doing kind of care and support for each other through pub going, although this often doesn’t involve alcohol at all, but connecting up with each other and ensuring that one of their neighbors, if she is an older woman living alone, “we’ll take her once a month or once every week.” They take her to that pub on the end of the road that does a nice lunch or does good coffee in the daytime. And again, I mean it’s still gender, and it’s still relating to sociability. It’s a different end, a different side of things. A different approach to it, certainly, but I don’t know the way an academic research career unfolds. You try to craft some coherent narrative about why you study things but, partly, I’ve just picked up each opportunity when I felt it was interesting. So certain themes cut across everything I’ve worked on, really.

AB: Interestingly, age is very important in your research. The young and then the middle-aged
and then now maybe older people in pubs. Different places and different moments of life...

TTR: Every day, almost every week there’s a new challenge for the pub trade, the pub sector. So it feels like the timing is right to look at what’s happening in pubs and the pub sector in the UK, and I think it’s a struggle. Since I’ve been doing this research, when I’ve been interviewed by journalists, there’s so much acceptance that the pub is a cornerstone of British culture and British social life, and at the same time, they’re closing. For twenty years or more, they’ve been closing. There is probably a sort of diversification: some traditional pubs close, but there are these kinds of cafés where you can buy alcohol and there’s also food, there’s much more hybridity and diversity that’s customer-driven in a way, and it’s all partly underpinned by economics and policy changes as well. But the post-COVID challenges and the cost-of-living crisis, the energy crisis at the moment will rapidly close many more pubs and local communities will suffer. There are so many places in the UK—I can’t speak for other countries—so many towns and suburbs in the UK where the pub might be one of the few places where people can just connect for the price of a drink, go in and have a conversation and meet a neighbor, meet a random person from their community they’ve not spoken to before. There’s that sort of social capital that is lost when pubs close. Hopefully, an empirical investigation of the impact of pub closures can help to examine this. So that’s where I’m going, the latest directions.

AB: Well, thanks a lot, Thomas.

TTR: It gives me a lot to think about because now, I think about how I really enjoyed some elements of previous research and it’s something I want to go back to. That gives me ideas about things to do. Thank you, Alix.
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NON-THEMATIC ARTICLES

Wine Barrels, Bonfires, and Battling Beggars: The November 11 Feast of St. Martin in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Netherlandish Art

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ABSTRACT

Among the many scenes of seasonal festivity by Netherlandish artists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are a number that portray Martinmas, the November 11 feast of St. Martin of Tours, a late harvest festival and something of a mini carnival before the penitential season of Advent. These scenes are usually marked by the inclusion of the “Charity of St. Martin,” the venerable icon of a young soldier slicing his mantle in two with a sword to share it with a naked beggar, an image that is variously manipulated and often compromised. This article catalogs these artworks in various media (paintings, drawings, engravings, and tapestries) and attempts to ascertain the degree of documentary evidence (“genre interest”), as opposed to satiric/moralistic appropriation, that can be gleaned from the various festive motifs presented.

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Wine Barrels, Bonfires, and Battling Beggars: The November 11 Feast of St. Martin in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Netherlandish Art

Martin W. Walsh, University of Michigan

Nor shall men pervert the celebration of the saints and the visitation of relics, into revelings and drunkenness; as if festivals are celebrated to the honor of the saints by luxury and wantonness. Let so great care and diligence be used by bishops touching these matters, as that there appear nothing disorderedly, or unbecomingly or confusedly arranged, nothing profane, nothing indecorous.

—Council of Trent, Decree of December 3, 1563

This article is an attempt to ascertain the documentary value of a group of artworks, including paintings, drawings, engravings, and tapestries, that have often been labeled the Feast or Festival of St. Martin and that emanate from the workshops or from the more distant imitators of Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel the Elder. It is an almost impenetrable thicket, this tangle of clones, knockoff artists, and more serious followers, that surrounds these two great painters.1 There is also the possibility that some of the compositions here considered may derive directly from lost originals of the masters. I make no claim to art historical expertise in the attribution or dating of these works but would like, as a student of carnivalesque festivity, to interrogate them for what they may or may not say about actual festival practice in the Netherlands of the sixteenth through early seventeenth centuries and how the image of St. Martin is therein manipulated.

The secular importance of St. Martin’s feast day for the Netherlands can be gauged by the early sixteenth-century proverb: “Tis altijt gheen s. martens avont” (It isn’t always Martinmas Eve), which was also said of vastenavont or Shrovetide.2 The broaching of the new wine and the slaughtering of livestock for winter provisions were two seasonal activities that converged at Martinmas and gave rise to various communal expressions—feasting, donations of wine, bonfires, etc.—in a kind of little carnival before the penitential season of Advent. In an almanac of 1606, St. Martin’s is referred to as “een Bacchus-feest omdat men dan meer den duivel dan God dient” (a Bacchus feast wherein one more serves the devil than God).3 William of Orange gives some idea of the pervasive drunkenness associated, ironically, with the feast day of this great ascetic saint. In a 1563 letter, William writes: “Nous avons tenu la S. Martin fort joieulx, car il y a avoit bonne compaigne. Monsr. de Brederode at este ung jour que pensois certes qu’i deboift mourir, mais il se porte mieulx” (We celebrated St. Martin’s [at Breda] very jovially, for there was good company. For a day Mons. de Brederode seemed certain to die but he is better now).4 The presiding figure in this celebration, the shadow image of the saint as it were, in the Netherlands and elsewhere, was the beggarman, a persona inspiring pity, fear, or loathing but also carnivalesque release.

At the time of our sampling, the icon of the “Charity of St. Martin,” the young saint slicing his mantle in two to share it with a distressed beggar, was nearly a thousand years old. From straightforward exemplum of Caritas, the configuration had by the late medieval period become somewhat more problematic. The single beggar of the original vita began to multiply, and these beggars were now not simply “naked” as in the original account of Martin’s biographer, Sulpicius Severus, but also blind and severely crippled; suffering from ergotism, leprosy, or other hideous...
diseases; and representing both genders and all age groups. Far from being passive recipients of Martin's largesse, they are frequently pictured violently grabbing at the saint's cloak or fighting each other for access to him. "Too many beggars, not enough Martins," these images seem to say. The icon thus became ironically tinged, one might even say compromised. It became a barometer of the establishment's anxieties over the proliferation of the diseased, deformed, and destitute in the early modern period. It was still available, of course, for perfectly straightforward devotional images in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—witness the major paintings of El Greco, Anthony van Dyck, Jacob van Aelst, Pieter Coeke van Oost, Caspar de Crayer, or Caravaggio's *Seven Works of Mercy*—but serious slippage had also occurred, detaching the icon for other, more ambiguous purposes, comic or satiric. A conspicuous example is the frontispiece of a popular 1654 Amsterdam jestbook, *De Gaven van de milde St. Marten* (The gifts of the liberal St. Martin), in which the saint enacts his mantle splitting on a stage before an appreciative audience of men and women with evidently a Jew in a fur hat, while his beggarman is transformed into a naked Bacchus or satyr figure flogging the publication. Wine and roast goose, the traditional Martinmas fare, are also conspicuously "on stage."

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In the late medieval roof vault paintings of St. Maartinskerk, Kollum (Friesland), for another example, the Charity of St. Martin is juxtaposed to an obese figure making a grotesque face by pulling out the corners of his mouth with his index fingers, a large wine bottle under one arm and a goose under the other. Above this embodiment of gluttony is an upside-down bishop's miter.6 The icon of the Charity of St. Martin could therefore serve as a simple marker for the secular celebration of Martinmas or might even be pulled into its carnivalesque orbit.

The majority of the works here studied were produced in the Spanish Netherlands at a time of great confessional struggle, the Eighty Years’ War. A few later examples come from the Dutch Republic, which still retained a Catholic minority. It is hard to find, however, any specific confessional slant to these works since Martin, like George, Nicholas, and a handful of other non-biblical saints, retained a certain degree of popularity in Protestant areas, not as objects of veneration but as patrons of festivals loath to be discarded. Thus Protestant academic Martin Schoock of Utrecht could pose an “exercise” in 1663 in Qua quaeritur a liceat Martinalibus anserem comedere?, questioning whether it was lawful to consume roast goose on Martinmas, given the prevalence of “goose markets” during that season. He answered somewhat equivocally. If eating fish on Friday does not make one a Papist, consuming a Martinmas goose could likewise pass if one avoided any commemoration of the saint (indirecta idololatria).7 Moreover, the Charity, the predominant image of the saint, was to a large extent a secular icon, an exemplum of Caritas easily detachable from the ecclesiastical figure of the Bishop of Tours. With regard to Martin’s portrayal, then, the works in question evince neither harsh Protestant satire nor ecstatic Counter-Reformation piety. They essentially employ a traditional, universally agreed upon popular image of the saint, like George with his dragon or Nicholas with his bags of gold.

While the Charity of St. Martin is an “obligatory scene” in all dramatic versions of the saint’s vita that survive—four in French, two in Italian, and one in Spanish—enactment of the scene was not initially part of the secular celebration of Martinmas. The earliest dramatic scene of Martin’s Charity detached from sacred drama that I have found was staged not specifically for Martinmas, although it nearly coincided, but for the London Lord Mayor’s show of November 9, 1702. This was poet laureate Elkanah Settle’s pageant for the Vintners’ Company, Martin being their patron saint.8 Today, on the other hand, such street enactments are quite common on the eve of the saint’s day, November 10. Beginning in the Rhineland, and particularly Düsseldorf, in the 1830s, evening enactments of the Charity with an accompanying children’s lantern procession spread to other parts of Germany, the Low Countries, many parts of eastern Europe, and even North America. But this is another story. In the works at hand, the Charity of St. Martin serves as a festival marker and/or as an example of the slippage discussed above. This article will attempt to tease out and distinguish these differences.

It will be my operating assumption that lesser artists, the clones, tend to produce more realistically accurate (read: less strikingly creative) versions of contemporary festival practice. It would be a mistake to elevate this into a general principle, but I feel that for this particular sampling, this seems to be the case. In examining festival practice through early artworks, we can perhaps distinguish three basic categories:


A. Those that portray festival activity more or less for its own sake, for its “genre” interest, allowing for a certain amount of “artistic license” or selectivity.

B. Those that appropriate specific festival content for satirical or didactic purposes and so are at one remove from the festival itself.

C. Those that only reference in a very general way festival practices for the same satirical or didactic purposes and so are of little use for the purposes of historical documentation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WORK</th>
<th>ARTIST</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>MEDIUM (NO.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A  Fires of St. Martin</td>
<td>Maarten van Cleve</td>
<td>ca. 1570–80</td>
<td>paintings (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Battle with Pilgrims</td>
<td>Maarten van Cleve</td>
<td>ca. 1570–80</td>
<td>paintings (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fires of St. Martin</td>
<td>Sebastian Vrancx</td>
<td>ca. 1620–30</td>
<td>painting (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allegory of Autumn</td>
<td>Sebastian Vrancx</td>
<td>ca. 1620–30</td>
<td>paintings (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hampel St. Martin</td>
<td>possibly from studio of Pieter Brueghel the Younger</td>
<td>ca. 1620–30</td>
<td>painting (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B  Wine of St. Martin</td>
<td>Pieter Baltens</td>
<td>1560/65</td>
<td>paintings (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wine of St. Martin</td>
<td>Pieter Bruegel and sons</td>
<td>1566/67, 1580/95, 1600/23, 1670–90</td>
<td>paintings and fragments engraving (1), drawing (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint Leaves the City</td>
<td>possibly from lost Bosch original</td>
<td>ca. 1545, ca. 1555</td>
<td>tapestries (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C  St. Martin in Boat/ Harbor</td>
<td>possibly from lost Bosch original/ possible involvement of Pieter Bruegel</td>
<td>ca. 1560–68</td>
<td>engravings (2), drawings (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Martin’s Charity</td>
<td>Michael Herr</td>
<td>1618</td>
<td>drawing (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. An Inventory of Images (according to the above categories)

Let us begin this examination with an unpublished work from the early seventeenth century, which I would place between categories A and B.

**The Hampel Feast of St. Martin**

This oil-on-wood panel from a private collection in France was auctioned by Hampel Fine Art Auctions, Munich, in September 2014. It went unsold and has been returned to its anonymous owner. The piece displays multiple Martinmas motifs, a compendium of them in fact. Most of the works of the above inventory are referenced in this panel. The auction house attributed the
work to Peeter Baltens (1527–84) or Marten van Cleve (1524–81), which is clearly wrong. The saint’s costume belongs to the early seventeenth century, not the mid-sixteenth. His soft lace collar, broad-brimmed felt hat with plumes, and cavalry armor bespeaks the era of the Thirty Years’ War. Updating an earlier Baltens or van Cleve subject might have occurred; there is no way to tell. A more likely attribution would be the prolific workshops of Pieter Brueghel the Younger (1564/65–1637/38) or Pieter Brueghel III (1589–1638/39), which churned out multiple versions of popular genre subjects through the early decades of the seventeenth century. What is clear is that the anonymous painter clearly wished to encompass all the popular Flemish Martinmas motifs of the previous hundred years in a single encyclopedic panel.

The early Boschian engraving of St. Martin “in a boat,” or “in a harbor,” discussed below, is recalled in the left third of the composition with its high dark gateway filled with beggars and by the particular way Martin’s cloak is passed off to them. The waters of a broad river behind Martin also harken back to the harbor scene, although Martin is mounted on rather than standing beside his horse. On the far right of the painting is a distribution of the “wine of St. Martin,” perhaps recalling Bruegel’s Prado painting or Baltens’s two versions, but on a much more modest and realistic scale: a city magistrate doles out the new wine to the clamoring poor from a medium-sized barrel on a cart. A bonfire in the middle distance with a pennant waving beside it recalls van Cleve’s November festival scene, the row of wine barrels in front of the townhouse, right, being another compositional echo of his Fires of St. Martin. And prominently in the center of the composition are two battling mendicants, raised begging bowl against crutch, much in the manner of Dutch genre painter Joost Cornelisz Droochsloot for whom battling peasants and beggars seemed de rigueur in any portrayal of the Charity of St. Martin. An array of five leg-crippled beggars occupying the foreground presents more evidence of the Bosch/Bruegel legacy,

Figure 2. Anonymous, Feast of St. Martin, panel, early seventeenth century. Private Collection. ©Hampel Fine Art Auctions.
while other wine barrels anchor the two lower corners of the composition. A small figure in the middle distance defecating into the river, three figures wrestling and evidently “debagging” a fourth, and what appears to be some sort of combat dance in front of three distant farmhouses add to the energetic carnivalesque effect of the panel as a whole. It is a good example, I would argue, of a lesser artist achieving a better record of actual festive practice than his more accomplished contemporaries. With this painting as a rough guide, let us examine the works listed in the inventory moving from bottom to top.

Figure 3. Unknown, St. Martin in a Boat, Boschian engraving, mid-sixteenth century. British Museum, London.

School of Bosch: An Engraving and a Tapestry

St. Martin in a Boat or St. Martin in a Harbor

The engraving variously titled St. Martin in a Boat or St. Martin in a Harbor represents one of the more unusual appropriations of the Charity of St. Martin. Like many such fantastical scenes designed for mass consumption, it was assigned to Bosch as inventor. This is no guarantee of authorship, of course, Boschian “knockoffs” being quite common in the sixteenth century. This was how the young Brueghel began his career, and some earlier art historians have in fact attributed this Martin engraving to him. (Bruegel’s Hope engraving from his series on the Virtues bears many compositional similarities with the Martin harbor scene.)\(^\text{10}\) The piece is now assigned to the print shop of Johannes and/or Lucas van Doetecum, circa 1560–70.\(^\text{11}\) Clearly it has Boschian elements. Although there are no human-animal-plant hybrids or demonic chimeras among the figures that surround the saint, there are plenty of grotesque and crippled beggars, battling each other, some of them in danger of drowning. Many have musical instruments (harps, lutes, gitterns), mendicancy-cum-minstrelsy being a typical Boschian symbol for culpable folly. The crazed mendicants range from perfectly realistic portrayals to the surreal fantasies Bosch
was famous for—a naked female harpist with two children on her back, for example, who strokes along in the sea like a water bug by means of long emaciated legs sprouting out of a great cauldron. We can also locate some of Bosch’s favorite symbolic animals, an owl and a spoonbill.

Secondhand though it may be, the Martin engraving has some claim to being descended from Bosch himself, and not an independent invention. The 1598 inventory of the artworks belonging to Philip II mentions three Bosch paintings, all now lost, having to do with the saint of Tours, one of which featured Martin “quando va pasando una barca y el cavallo en otra” (in which a boat goes by and the horse in another). The lost painting and the van Doetecum engraving, then, are more than likely linked, although the Spanish catalog entry indicates separate boats for Martin and his horse. With other boats being represented in the print, the error is perhaps understandable.

The harbor setting remains something of a puzzle. The Charity incident occurred at the city gate of Amiens according to Martin’s fourth-century biographer, Sulpicius. It cannot be that the historical site was here mistaken for a seaport; every Fleming would know that Amiens, capital city of neighboring Picardy, was an inland town. The engraving might simply reflect the great popularity of Sebastian Brant’s Das Narrenschiff, in the sixteenth century, Martin’s abused Charity being presented as yet another chapter in The Ship of Fools. The theme of “Folly Afloat” in the Netherlands goes back even further, to the Gesta abbatum Tordonensium (Deeds of the Abbots of Sint-Triuden) account of a deranged festival ship float that “sailed” from Aachen to Sint Triuuden in the 1130s and Jacob van Ostvoorne’s carnival monologue, Het gilde van de Blauwe Schuit (Guild of the blue barge), circa 1450, with numerous examples of nautical folly in Bosch’s work as well. Other compositions of the Bosch “school,” such as his contemporary Alart Duhameel’s St. Christopher Bearing the Christ Child, are also set on a grotesque, demon-infested seacoast. Another van Doetecum engraving, the Temptation of St. Anthony (1561), of approximately the same size and date as the Martin subject, presents a similarly odd setting of a traditional hagiographic theme. Far from the remote Egyptian desert, the engraving shows a seaside dominated by a giant marine grotesque with wrecked and burning ships and boats, several human figures struggling in the water, and various dead sea creatures beached on the shore.

To launch St. Martin into a nautical, nightmarish travesty of his festival seems a quintessentially Boschian strategy.

Actual Martinmas festival elements are referenced but only as part of an essentially fantasy world. A great bonfire blazes on the quayside at the top of the composition, for example. Referencing the Bacchus-feest (Bacchic festival), alongside Martin’s barge floats a festival craft, a veritable bateau ivre, a drunken boat loaded with wine barrels and an improvised banquet table with three hooded fools. It is accompanied by various naked swimmers, again a very Boschian hallmark. Perched on the ship’s great barrels are a horn blower, a bagpiper, and a naked peg-leg standing on his hands, his X-shaped pose echoing the design of crossed crutches emblazoned on the ship’s banner (a guild of beggars?). We have here a pastiche of elements from Bosch’s Allegory of Gluttony and Lust (Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT) and the Ship of Fools (Louvre, Paris), now considered together as parts of the left wing of a lost triptych. To the left of this fantasia in the engraving, on the other hand, is a somewhat more realistically portrayed water joust in fantasy armor with spectators crowding the seawall. This latter can hardly represent an activity of the chilly November festival of St. Martin, however.
The purpose of the *St. Martin in a Harbor* engraving is certainly morally didactic and satirical. Martin's famous act of charity is compromised, overwhelmed by the press of cantankerous beggars. The saint appears to be fleeing the city given the orientation of the typical Netherlandish ferry that he and his horse are on, while the more fantastically realized ship of drunkards is clearly inbound. The act of charity itself is also very oddly conceived. We are stopped in the moment before the actual cloak sundering and sharing. The saint ports his sword in the crook of his left arm and extends his open right hand toward the shore, his long garment draped over his arm and uniting him with the creatures that spill out of the gate. The single naked beggar of the Martin vita is replaced by a triple-decker monstrosity: a bald hulk of a man with deeply shadowed eye sockets dressed in a paenula, and on his shoulders a dwarfish figure in a wimple, with the ubiquitous Boschian owl topping the pile. The human figures perhaps recall the crippled man piggybacking on a blind man from the grotesquely comic, posthumous Martin miracle, most notably dramatized by Andrieu de la Vigne in 1496. Is Martin offering his cloak to these figures, or is the cloak being drawn out of his hands into the grotesque world of the beggars? The saint’s expression is ambiguous. He is frozen in the moment before commitment to his act of charity, perhaps in a moment of alienation or doubt. His sword is at rest, the famous iconic event held in suspense. Like St. Anthony, Martin is beset by grotesque, somewhat threatening demons here in the form of crippled beggars, but also, like Hamlet, he seems to “lose the name of action.” The Flemish inscription at the bottom edge of the engraving clearly drives home the point:

De geode sinte Marten is hier gesteldt,

Onder al dit grue vuyl arm gespuis;

Haer deylende synen mantele, in de stede van geld;

Nou vechten om de proeye dit quaet gedruis.

(The good St. Martin is here represented

Among this foul, impoverished brood.

He divided his mantle in lieu of ready money

And so, this wicked sort fought each other for the windfall.)

Martin’s ferry is intercepted by a rowboat full of beggars, which serves as a bridge between the barge and the shore. The object of this piratical raid seems to be Martin’s long-suffering horse, not his cloak. The crippled beggars are scrambling and scuffling under and around the animal in much the same way as thirsty peasants surge about the great tun in the *Wine of St. Martin’s Day*. One of them, with a walking stick in his right hand and a lute slung at his buttocks, has succeeded in sprawling himself over the saddle and has seized the right stirrup. He occupies the exact center of the composition and quite likely enacts the widespread early proverb, “Set a beggar on horseback and he’ll ride to the Devil,” which perfectly fits the satirical situation. An added irony is that this ferry-bound horse cannot move. But the overall message is clear.
Martin’s world is going to hell and no single charitable act is going to save it. Martin’s Charity can offer very little toward ameliorating the essential brutishness of the mendicant world and, by extension, of fallen humanity as a whole.

I will mention only in passing here a 1617 drawing by the Swabian artist Michael Herr.18 It is an equally radical treatment of the Charity of St. Martin with definite quotations from the harbor engraving in the lower-left corner. Its most unusual feature is a composite putto and goose, a kind of “hobby-bird,” who pirouettes on top of Martin’s horse scattering coins from a large purse as Schlaraffenland’s (Land of Cockaigne’s) already-roasted geese fly down on the swarm of crippled beggars. This is more a baroque theatrical fantasy than a truly Boschian monstrosity. Festival elements, again, are only referenced in this fantasy scene, but unlike the harbor engraving, the saint appears particularly nonchalant amid the mendicant chaos.

Figure 4. Michael Herr, St. Martin among the Beggars, drawing, 1618. Inv.-Nr. Hz5186, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg.

Leaving the City Tapestry

A set of five tapestries on Boschian themes was owned by King François I, one of them being Saint Martin environne de plusiers mendians. The fact that two of the tapestry subjects match surviving, authenticated works of Bosch, The Haywain and The Garden of Earthly Delights, suggests that the subject of Martin Leaving the City also existed as a major painting, if not directly by Bosch, then by an artist or artists very close to him, and that the tapestry was considered an authentic Bosch composition at the time of the weaving. Before 1560, Cardinal Antoine Perrenot de Granvelle commissioned, from the Brussels workshop of Willem Perrenot, copies of four of these Boschian tapestries, which eventually became the property of the Spanish royal family. The St. Martin tapestry now exhibited in El Escorial in Spain is evidently from this set.19 The tapestry set was somewhat controversial. Granvelle, writing from Antwerp to García de Toledo, viceroy of Catalonia, in May 1560, advised the viceroy against commissioning a similar series of Boschian tapestries.
tapestries for himself: “In Spain, works by Bosch, like the ones you have mentioned, the hay cart, and the paradise and hell, and Saint Martin, have been defended before the Inquisition.” Granvelle called his Boschian subjects *disparates* (absurdities/follies), the same word Francisco Goya used for a nightmarish suite of prints, and they had evidently attracted the unwanted attention of the Inquisition.20


The young saint has left the city gate. Crippled mendicants are arrayed on each side of the road in anticipation of Martin’s passage, the saint indeed running a gauntlet of misery. One unfortunate has thrown himself in front of Martin’s horse and is now trying to avoid a descending hoof. Among the *miserables* are three who display a diseased or malformed hand or foot on a square of white cloth, the better to enhance their display of suffering. One indeed has lost his foot entirely. It lies on its cloth completely detached from its owner’s right leg; his left leg is also unnaturally swollen. A leg manacle lies nearby, probably representing a contributing factor for the need to amputate. This same detached foot motif can be found on the closed right wing of the *Last Judgment* altar by Bosch portraying a youthful saint usually identified as Bavo, patron saint of Ghent. A detached foot also hangs from the crossed crutches banner in the harbor engraving. The foreground of the tapestry is likewise occupied by beggarmen and beggarwomen, most with musical instruments—harp, hurdy-gurdy, snare drum. These crippled beggars appear a lot more cartoonish than those in the engraving previously discussed, rendering the extreme physical deformities, perhaps, somewhat more “entertaining.”

Martin’s roadway leads to a connected set of festival scenes in the top third of the composition.
From left to right we have a corral for a combat sport, a press of beggars clamoring for entrance to a banqueting hall, and the interior of the hall with, we may presume, a Martinmas revel in progress. In the corral, a game of boar bashing is being staged before an enthusiastic crowd. This carnivalesque entertainment, amply documented by the Dutch art historian Dirk Bax, involved blind men in ridiculous armor (the crests on the tapestry’s helmets are probably meant to be parodies), or sighted contestants in blind helmets, attempting to club to death a staked-down boar and mauling each other in the process. A detailed description of the practice can be found in a publication by the anonymous chronicler known as the “Bourgeois of Paris.” For the last Sunday in August 1425, on or about St. Bartholomew’s Day (August 24), he described an entertainment given at Hôtel d’Armagnac on Rue St. Honoré:

Four blind men wearing armor and each carrying a club were put into an enclosure in which there was also a strong pig. This they were to have if they could kill it. They fought this very odd battle, giving each other tremendous blows with the clubs—whenever they tried to get a good blow in at the pig, they would hit each other, so that if they had not been wearing armor they would certainly have killed each other. On the Saturday before this Sunday the blind men were led through Paris wearing their armor, with a great banner in front of them with a picture of a pig on it. In front of this went a man beating a drum.

The association of such blood sports with the autumnal slaughtering season of Martinmas would seem a natural development. Johannes Böhm, known as Boemus Aubanus, reported for late fifteenth-century Franconia, his home province, in a 1611 translation:

There is not one throughout all the whole country be he neuer so needy, or neuer so niggard but vpon Saint Martins day hee will haue some roste meate, or boiled meat, and it be but Hogs intrails, or Calues intrails, & glut them-selves with wine, for then they tast of their new wines from which till that time they have abstained; and all their households drinke wine with them: and vpon this day in Herbipolis [Würzburg] and in diuerse other places besides, is much wine guien to the poor for charity: then have they their publicke shews and pastimes, as to haue two or three Boares put into a place together, and to behold them fight and teare one another with their tuskes till their guttes traile about their heeles, deuiding the flesh when the Boares be dead, some to the common people and some to the Magistrates.

A goose-decapitation game, as we shall see, was also popular in the Netherlands during this season. A Martinmas bull running, slaughter, and communal meal persisted in Stamford, Lincolnshire, up to the early nineteenth century.

To the right of the boar-bashing melee, there is a concerted assault by more crippled beggars upon a dining hall. One is springing over the wall; a trio is hopping mad as some liquid, presumably foul, is poured on them from above. There is a great press at the entranceway. Inside we have a large wine barrel with one peasant drinking directly from a new bunghole, a motif that can also be found in the *bateauivre* of the harbor scene. Other countrymen sit at a table, a platter with a boar’s head thereon, more than likely sourced from the combat scene. A pair of musicians entertain the room. At the head of the table sit three figures, another peasant, a lady, and a mitered figure. Given the carnivalesque nature of the scene, these might well be “characters” in some enactment, the mitered figure perhaps representing some sort of mock “Martin Bishop” as lord of the feast. A final festival element in the tapestry is the Martinmas bonfire represented just inside the city gate. Unlike the water joust in the harbor engraving, the tapestry’s frieze of festival activities, though farcically conceived, reflects actual practices of the Martinmas season.
The Wine of St. Martin’s Day: Bruegel and Baltens

Itaque nihil est in terris es die vinosius, nihil petulantius.

(There is nothing on earth more wine-soaked, nothing more wanton.)

—Giovanni Gioviano Pontano on Martinmas

Give strong drink unto him that is ready to perish, and wine unto those that be of heavy hearts. Let him drink, and forget his poverty, and remember his misery no more.

—Proverbs 31:6–7

In omnibus eius operibus intelligitur plus semper quam pingitur.

(In all his works he often gives something beyond what he paints.)

—Abraham Ortelius on Peter Bruegel the Elder

In September 2010, the Prado Museum announced the rediscovery of a long “lost” painting of Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Executed in the delicate Tüchlein technique (tempera on linen), this was the Wine of St. Martin’s Day, a festival scene known previously from a fragment (a portion of the right half of a panel with most of the St. Martin figure) now in Vienna, at various times attributed both to Jan Brueghel the Elder and Pieter Brueghel the Younger, as well as by the complete scene in reverse values in a 1670 engraving from the Roman print shop of Nicolas...
Guérard commissioned by Abraham Brueghel (1630/31–90), the master's great-grandson. There is an early seventeenth-century copy of the painting, possibly from the workshop of Breughel the Younger, as well as an ink-and-wash drawing of the scene contemporaneous with the engraving. Van Dyck had made copies of some of the Bruegel figures from one or the other of these later versions. There is also a small anonymous painting (ca. 1700, Private Collection) with reversed values that is likely derived from the Abraham Brueghel engraving.

Relegated to a dark corridor in a private residence for generations, the original Bruegel was not in pristine condition but has been painstakingly restored by the Prado and now can take its place among Bruegel's mature works, circa 1566/67. Unlike the famous *Battle of Carnival and Lent* or Bruegel's many kermis scenes, this panel does not present a crowded field of various festival activities from a highly elevated visual position. Rather, it focuses on a single event, the evidently free distribution of the new wine traditionally broached on St. Martin's Day. The Charity of St. Martin is present as a clear festival marker, but the saint is quite literally sidelined by the artist, his back turned on the viewer and on the mayhem around the large red barrel on its high scaffold. He is astride an all-white horse and sports a somewhat incongruous curl of a white plume in his hat, but his signature mantle, in a muted antique rose, is hardly distinguishable from the dominant earth tones of the scene. The saint's patronage, his effect on the festival, seems compromised, impotent. The chaotic scene around the barrel seems beyond his control—or beneath his interest.

This is certainly a scene of festivity, this Martinmas dole of new wine to the hard-pressed country folk, but beyond Bruegel's celebrated realism there is a larger artistic purpose with perhaps as well an underlying moral agenda. If a scene of festivity, where are the donors of this largesse, where are the agents of control to see the event to an orderly conclusion? There are none. This appears to be a quite deliberate choice on Bruegel's part. The glowing wine barrel, a magical little piece of *Luwillekerland* (Land of Pleasure), stands isolated at the edge of a village entirely exposed to the peasant mob who strenuously vie for access to the wine with receptacles of all sorts—mugs and pitchers in various states of repair, swallow bowls, even a hat and a shoe. Every figure in the composition is of the peasant class, men, women, and children, some fairly well off, some clearly destitute. A similar strategy is found in *Children's Games*, where a sizable town is inhabited only by dozens of children, no adults. Only around the mounted saint do we find contorted beggarmen harkening back to the icon of the Charity and its concern for the handicapped and marginalized. There is a blind traveler (a pilgrim?) tucked into the crowd at the left of the composition, but otherwise, the figures in the painting are fairly fit, quite lively, and totally self-absorbed, giving no heed to the patron of the feast.

As with all great Bruegel works, the details seem endlessly intriguing. Front and center in the crowd below the barrel is a young pickpocket, a monastic postulate it would seem by his robe and tonsure, who is taking advantage of a mother's momentary indulgence in a dish of new wine. She holds a plump infant before her on her hip, as an older child stands clamoring at her apron for his share of the dole. Interestingly, she wears a leaden pilgrim badge. This may be an indirect comment on the Roman church's exploitation of the peasantry (compare to Lucas van Leiden's engraving *Beggars* [1520] where a boy in a monk-like cowl with an owl on his shoulder possibly represents a satire on the mendicant orders, with his bagpiper father sporting pilgrim badges). At the far-left edge of the painting, just outside a circular arrangement of serious drunkards, spewing and fighting, is another young mother, her infant in a kind of "snuggly." She is feeding the
infant its first sip of alcohol. Tussling, shoving, outright brawling, vomiting, and passing out are thus not the only foibles the painter holds up to the viewer for negative examples and/or comic forgiveness. Dubious parenting is included. But Bruegel’s scene is not simply one of gluttonous wrangling for there are several examples of cooperation on the part of the crowd helping each other to get at the wine. As so often in Bruegel, larger questions lurk beneath the festival scene. Is wine man’s chief comfort or constant bane?—this realistic and yet deeply ambivalent work seems to be asking. And what can St. Martin take credit (or take the blame) for in this, his festival world? Bruegel in late career here is midway between the moral-allegorical landscapes of Bosch and the straightforward “genre” scene.

26. The proportions of Bosch/Brant moralizing versus Rabelaisian amusement in Bruegel’s mature works, *The Wine of St. Martin’s Day* included, are still being worked out by art historians. Bruegel’s affinity with and affection for the peasantry also remains subject to debate. This article generally follows Margaret A. Sullivan regarding the painter’s class biases in *Bruegel’s Peasants: Art and Audience in the Northern Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Walter S. Gibson for his comedic sense in *Pieter Bruegel and the Art of Laughter* (Berkeley: University of California, 2008). Given the painting’s size, one of Bruegel’s largest, and its bacchic festival subject, it would most likely have served as a conversation piece in a privileged Antwerp dining room. See especially Claudia Goldstein, *Pieter Bruegel and the Culture of the Early Modern Dinner Party* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2013), chap. 3, “The Dinner Party as Performance.”


Baltens also painted the *Wine of St. Martin’s Day*, in two versions, one now in Antwerp, the other in Utrecht. It was customary earlier to dismiss Baltens as an inferior imitator of Bruegel. His reputation has been somewhat rehabilitated, however, by a substantial dissertation by Stephen J. Kostyshyn. It is now clear that one can no longer assume that Baltens’s versions are simply uninspired later copies. They may well be contemporaneous with or even anterior to Bruegel’s 1566/67 painting. While exhibiting the same general arrangement of elements, they show multiple variations in detail. The barrel head has a distinctive red-and-white quartering, for example. An empty barrel can be seen; we are evidently on the second round of distribution. Mounted on the barrel is a banner displaying the device of crossed crutches (as in the harbor engraving), which flies from a fresh green sapling topped by a small bush, all of which are totally absent in Bruegel. The Utrecht version clearly has the words “Sint Marten” emblazoned on its green flag. The ensemble of characters around the barrel is markedly different as well. These are no mechanical copies of Bruegel but variations on a theme.
A most important distinction in the two artists’ renditions is in the matter of control of the event. Up on the barrel, Baltens includes a vintner figure, evidently with some assistants. He is in his shirtsleeves in the Utrecht example with what looks like a sash about his torso; in the Antwerp version, he wears a vest and an apron. In both versions, he has a chaplet of vine leaves on his head. In the Utrecht version, the two assistant figures are in white open shirts with red vests, matching the colors of the barrel head (as well as being Utrecht’s city colors). The assistant atop the barrel seems to be filling jugs for others from the upper of two bungholes drilled in the barrel. There are two presumably empty jugs immediately below him and there is a group of five jugs and a bowl under the barrel waiting on the right. The Utrecht vintner figure leans on the shoulder of the second assistant below him as if giving instructions. This gesture is less clear in the Antwerp version where the vintner may be restraining a peasant from climbing up onto the platform. In the Utrecht version especially, the scene atop the barrel seems to be one of a reasonably under-control distribution of wine by the vintner and his people. They seem to be in charge. Nothing like this occurs in Bruegel’s version.

Baltens, unlike Bruegel, also includes bourgeois observers at the far left of the composition, including a couple and a white-bearded man with a youth. The middle-aged figure between these two groups might be a self-portrait. Could these be, in some sense, the sponsors of the event? There is also a military figure bearing off his portion of wine in his helmet. Unlike Bruegel, Baltens seems intent on presenting a broader cross-section of society in his *Wine of St. Martin’s Day*. Baltens moreover turns his mounted St. Martin some 45 degrees back toward the viewer, creating a much more standard image of the Charity. Martin’s red mantle also stands out far more than in Bruegel, the saint affording a much less ambiguous marker for the festival. No commentator, to my knowledge, has located historical documentation for such large barrels.
on high scaffolds for holiday distribution of new wine. One might do well to search the archives of the Compagnie der Wijnverkoopers and the St. Martensgilde der Taverniers in Antwerp. Historian Gerard Rooijakkers records “trakteert op de dagen van Sint Maarten” (treats of drink on the St. Martin holidays) in the Noord-Brabant town of Geldorp for 1630 but with no details for the barrels. Gigantic wine tuns certainly did exist but were more a prestige item than for practical storage. The first of four successive great tuns in Heidelberg Castle, the Johann-Casimer-Fass, dates from 1591, and English diarist John Evelyn notes for June 6, 1644, that the Abbey of Marmoutier outside Tours had one of a similar size. But there is no reason for such an object to be standing isolated on the outskirts of a village as in the Bruegel/Baltens paintings. Recall the Hampel Martinmas scene above where the free distribution of wine to the poor was managed by a robed figure from a modest barrel on a cart. It seems clear, however, that the two versions of the Wine of St. Martin’s Day have somewhat different agendas. Baltens’s work looks and feels closer to reportage, while Bruegel’s is a full artistic transformation of realistic components.

An engraving commissioned by Rome-based Abraham Brueghel from Nicholas Guérard in 1670 was fulsomely dedicated to Don Gaspare Altieri, nephew to the new pope, Clement X, who as Generale di Santa Chiesa was in charge of the papal military forces (thus the soldier-saint Martin as subject). It was an obvious bid for patronage that probably did not succeed since Abraham soon after relocated to Naples. The later cabinet painting was evidently based on the engraving since it has its reversed values and similar dimensions as well as a color scheme diverging from the original painting. It is possible that it emanated from the circle of the Bentvueghels (Birds of a Feather), the benevolent society/festival fraternity of Dutch and Flemish artists in Rome. Abraham was an active member with the “bent” name of Rjingraaf (Count of the Rhine). The work was possibly an homage to him and his ancestors and/or a festival offering, bringing interest in the “wine of St. Martin” motif up to the eighteenth century.

Figure 9. The Wine of Saint Martin’s Day, engraving after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, 1670. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.
Figure 10. Anonymous painting after Abraham Breughel engraving, late seventeenth/early eighteenth century. Private Collection.

Figure 11. Follower of Cleve, Maarten van (painter), Peter Paul Rubens, The Feast of Saint Martin, RH.S.219, Collection City of Antwerp, Rubenshuis photo: Bart Huysmans & Michel Wuyts.
The Fires of St. Martin: Marten van Cleve and Sebastian Vrancx

An exact Antwerp contemporary of the elder Bruegel, van Cleve also belonged to an extended family of painters and, like Bruegel, was a member of St. Luke's Guild. He had moderate success as a genre painter in what has been designated his middle period, sharing Peasant Wedding, Children's Games, Blind Leading the Blind, and Massacre of the Innocents subjects with his greater contemporary. Van Cleve's Het St. Maartensvuur (The Fires of St. Martin's Day, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dunkirk, with another version in a private Belgian collection and a copy by Peter Paul Rubens in the Rubenshuis, Antwerp) is rare among early Netherlandish genre subjects in directly portraying the November 11 festival. It constitutes a major document for the celebration of Martinmas in mid-sixteenth-century Flanders.

In the central middle ground of this crowded street scene, in what one would assume to be a modest bourgeois neighborhood of Antwerp, is a bonfire of vertical logs, half surrounded by a crowd composed mainly of youths and children, several of whom are holding their hands out to warm themselves. A relief of St. Martin's Charity can be made out over the door of the dark building on the far left, possibly a chapel or oratory (no major Martinian foundations are found in Antwerp). The circle of figures directly below the bonfire presents vignettes of quotidian violence: on the left a middle-aged woman thrashes a boy, while opposite, four lads are fiercely contending for a white pennant on a long thin pole. A sketch of Martin's Charity can be made out on this improvised holiday flag.

The foreground figures consist of, on the left, an elderly burgher in a red mantle with a fur lining and carrying a conspicuous purse. He appears to be accosted by a little beggar girl holding up a dish in her right hand. Rather than dropping a coin in the dish (as representations of Bishop Martin frequently show), the old man points admonishingly toward the right and the scene of the tussling youths. He likely registers some class and/or generational disapproval of the raucous festival, since he is positioned next to the woman trashing the boy and evidently dragging him away from the bonfire. In the center foreground, a neatly dressed country woman with her toddler has set up shop. She sits on an overturned basket, her small wheelbarrow behind her, with baskets full of apples and chestnuts to peddle. A fashionably dressed youth is amused by the monkey he has on a long chain that has gotten into the apples behind the woman's back. The farm woman oblivious to this activity is filling with her chestnuts the cap of a boy in a neat black jacket. He looks nervously over his shoulder, responding either to a barking dog and the tussle over the Martin banner or to the strange figure in the lower right-hand corner of the painting. This is a somewhat wizened, undersized figure, not a child, who wears a long white apron and sports a chaplet of vine leaves on his head. He carries a small square flag of yellow, red, and white horizontal stripes and appears to be singing or yowling. Is he the town idiot celebrating, or the vintner's man crying up the new wine, or both? A boy in a fool costume bears the identical banner as he invades the territory of Lent in Bruegel's well-known Battle of Carnival and Lent (1559). As we have seen, a vine-leaf crowned figure is also found atop the great tun in Baltens's versions of
Wine of St. Martin’s Day. The figure serves no doubt as an important holiday marker, what later folklore would dub the Martensman, the bacchic inebriate of St. Martin’s Eve.

In the far background of van Cleve’s canvas, other Martinmas activities are depicted: on the right, garlanded wine barrels are lined up with some figures drawing wine from them. Some children are begging at a doorway in an apparent queue. As with the German-language tradition, Martensliede (Martinmas songs) have been part of the Netherlandish celebrations of the saint’s day up to the present time. To the left, there is another bonfire at the corner of a house. Two covered wagons are also in evidence in the center distance, part of a fair perhaps, with some running figures who may represent a contest of some sort. All in all, van Cleve’s painting presents a lively if somewhat contentious holiday scene. Given the number of young people and children represented it would seem that St. Martin’s feast had already, by the mid-sixteenth century, become something of a youth-dominated if not a youth-oriented festival, at least in the public streets. In the autumn section (Vom den herft) of the comical prognostication Knollebol (Turnip bulb) of 1561, exactly contemporaneous with the painting, Sinte-Martensavont is noted as the time when children make merry building fires. It even records their chanted cries of “Stoock vier, maeck vier” (Stoke a fire, make a fire) in gathering, by begging or stealing, the wood and turf for their bonfires.32 A woodcut vignette for November in a suite of the “Twelve Months” by Dirk de Braij and Christoffel van Sichem (ca. 1660) shows a troupe of a dozen children, boys and girls of various ages, with uniform paper lanterns atop long poles.33 By the mid-seventeenth century, Martinmas had become a children’s festival not greatly different from that practiced today.

Apart from the figure in the lower-right corner, our Martensman, there is surprisingly little reference to the “wine of St. Martin’s Day.” No doubt, a more extensive sampling of the new wine went on at some length indoors among the adult population. The Bruegel/Baltens compositions can be read as humorous allegories, coupled as they are with the “sidelined” icon of the Charity, combinations of realism and fantasy. The peasantry having untrammeled access to such a wine source is a fantasy out of Luilekkerland, and the ensuing chaos around the great barrel is only to be expected, given the privileged classes’ view of peasant boorishness. Van Cleve’s Fires of St. Martin, by comparison, offers more realistic reportage, a genre scene not overly dominated by moralizing and thus affording a glimpse of the evening celebrations of Martensavont in the streets.

A generation after van Cleve, the subject of the Martin fires was still current. In late 2012, the Kunsthuis Lempertz auctioned an oil-on-canvas, St. Martin’s Feast in Antwerp, which they attributed to two artists, Sebastian Vrancx (1573–1647) for the figures, with Frans de Momper (ca. 1605–60) supplying the cityscape.34 The painting shows the Meir, a well-known square in Antwerp where the famous Ommegang with its elaborate floats and giants was staged at the Feast of the Assumption (August 15). One can see the tower of the Cathedral of Our Lady in the distance. In the center of the square, next to a public well, is a great bonfire with an enormous plume of smoke arising from it. A group of young people is focused on the fire, but the principal activity seems to be festival combat. Youths with wicker shields, evidently the bottoms of ruined baskets, fight with staves some four to five feet long. In the lower-right corner is a lad with a large square white banner on which is a sketch of St. Martin’s Charity, paralleling the improvised flag in the van Cleve painting. On the left side of the square, a mother is pulling her daughter inside the house out of harm’s way. On the left side, an elderly man with a little girl by the hand may be engaged in the same activity. A boy is picking up stones from the street. Another pisses against


the churchyard wall. In the lower-left corner, bourgeois figures, all in black, gesticulate negatively at the ongoing battle. Unlike van Cleve’s work, no wine barrels are in evidence on the square. From a short distance, this composition with its great smoke plume and fighting figures could be mistaken for a battle scene, one of Vrancx’s specialties.

What we have here is evidence, I would venture, of impromptu carnivalesque gangs probably based on neighborhoods or parishes, each with its Martinmas banner to be risked in the field and each with its festival weaponry. The phenomenon of ritualized festival street fighting is quite common in pre-Lenten celebrations. I will instance only the stone-throwing battles over neighborhood bonfires, the capppannucci, in Quattrocento Florence, or the “Indian” tribes in New Orleans Mardi Gras and the whip-wielding Jab Jabs of Trinidad Carnival as early twentieth-century examples. The tussle over the Martin pennant in the van Cleve scene now becomes clear. Herman Pleij and other cultural historians have made the point that Netherlandish cities in the sixteenth century had an unusually large population of servants and apprentices, leading to legislative attempts in Mechelen, Brussels, Ghent, Utrecht, and elsewhere to suppress festivals and seasonal games for fear of youth violence.35

Another painting by Vrancx adds further detail.36 His Allegory of Autumn, now in a Belgian private collection, displays the fruits and fowls of the season in the foreground. The central figure, sitting beside a potted marigold and a basket of apples, I would take to be one of the youthful celebrants of secular Martinmas. He wears a vine-leaf chaplet on his hat and carries the same little square tricolor festival banner that we find in van Cleve’s Fires and in Bruegel’s Battle of Carnival and Lent. He has a red nose and a somewhat “zoned out” expression. Perhaps he is singing, evidently, he is drunk. His hose is in disarray, and he has skinned his right knee. His right hand rests on a stick on the ground, roughly the same length as those employed in the Fires of St. Martin combat. This is a portrait of a Martinmas stick fighter, which the painter has selected to represent the

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autumnal season—no wine-bearing Bacchus or another allegorical figure but a completely quotidiant personage, the festival rowdy.

The right edge of the composition is taken up by a structure of stacked wood and broken baskets, the makings of a Martinmas bonfire. There is a broken-out basket bottom, the evident source for the stick fighters’ “shields.” A young lad is bringing more wood to the pile. It was common folk practice to beg or steal such materials. Out of the stack of combustibles flies a triangular white pennant, again with a sketch of Martin’s Charity in the lower right corner. On the ground between the central figure and the boy with the wood there lies a cowhide complete with tail, ears, and horns. It might be too much to suggest, lacking documentation, that this was also a festival prop of some sort, perhaps for a masquerade, but it remains a curious detail.

The background of the painting shows more traditional labors of the season, to the right, bringing in the herds from summer pasturage, and to the left, the sowing of winter wheat. The upper left of the composition, however, is devoted again to holiday sport. A goose is suspended by its neck in the fork of a dead tree and a peasant is hurling a sharp-edged stick at it as others look on from in front of a farmhouse. This goose-decapitation game occurs elsewhere, in the foreground of a drawing circa 1555–60, by the so-called Master of the Small Landscapes, once attributed to Bruegel, and in the distant background of Bruegel’s Harvesters (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) as well.37

A variant of this practice still takes place on St. Martin’s Day in the Swiss town of Sursee, which I witnessed in 2015. A dead goose is suspended from a wire stretched across a large...
scaffold. To the accompaniment of ominous drum rolls, a blindfolded contestant tricked out in a very theatrical red robe and golden sun mask approaches the wire and attempts to decapitate the goose in a single stroke with a dull militia saber. If he succeeds, he wins the goose for his traditional Martinsschmaus (Martinmas banquet). The event is under the auspices of the local carnival society named for a historic court fool and Sursee resident, Heini von Uri. The November event conveys a very carnivalesque atmosphere in which clowning, blood sport, and public execution raucously mix signals.


Figure 14. Sebastian Vrancx, November, ca. 1620, painting, Lowet de Wortrengen Gallery, Phoebus Foundation, Antwerp. Another seasonal allegory by Vrancx, November, also features a Martinmas fire. In a large town swept by a squall left and blessed by a rainbow center, a tall slender pole, some dozen meters high, has been erected in the square and piled about with wood and what looks to be broken baskets. Several of the youths assembling the bonfire carry sticks over their shoulders, possibly for later street fighting. A pennant flies from the pole, but no sketch of the Charity is discernable in the reproduction. The animals far down the street left and the prominent cow right indicate that this is a cattle market as well. The central figure, a countryman, seems well prepared for November, the “slaughter month” (slachtmaand). He carries a mallet over his shoulder from which hangs a sturdy sledge, evidently for hauling meat. He also carries a length of rope and sports a set of carving knives at his belt. The lad who precedes him carries over his shoulder a large meat axe.

A panel attributed to the circle of Baltens (late sixteenth century) recently auctioned by Bonham’s (July 4, 2018) presents an autumnal and specifically a November scene in Busy Market Scene given its multiple references to the Martinmas micro-season. These include a small bonfire, the moving of household effects (changes in tenancy), bringing cattle to market, selling winter squashes and heads of cabbage, and especially three wine-related scenes: a rack of wine barrels in the upper right, an aproned vintner proffering a soldier a dish of wine in the lower-left corner,
and, again, the vine-wreathed “wine-crier” figure with his little tricolor festival flag holding a dish of wine near the center of the composition. The disabled man appealing to the young market woman in the lower-right corner provides an additional reference to Martinmastide.

Figure 15. Circle of Peeter Baltens, Busy Market Scene, painting, late sixteenth century. Private Collection.

By way of conclusion, we might mention another van Cleve, the Battle of Peasants and Pilgrims (ca. 1565), which exists in at least four versions: the original, it would seem, in Wroclaw, another in the new Museum het Zotte Kunstkabinet in Mechelen, and two recently auctioned examples. The figures in the right middle distance have been interpreted, plausibly, as a Charity of St. Martin. Several peasants, including a lame man, are gathering about a mounted figure in cavalry armor with a drawn sword and red mantle visible. The season is clearly winter, with frost or snow evident, and could represent Martinmas, but there are no festival activities depicted, the focus instead being on a massive brawl between local peasants and some pilgrims taking place in front of a walled churchyard and under a large stone cross.

The distancing and thus the partial obscuring of Martin’s Charity is of a piece with the Bruegelian strategy employed in such biblical and mythological works as The Way of the Cross, The Census at Bethlehem, The Conversion of St. Paul, or The Fall of Icarus. One only finds the Charity icon after moving through the foreground mayhem of peasants and pilgrims. But this is not a simple contrast between peasant brawling and the distant virtue of Charity, for there is a sectarian theme apparently at work here as well. The pilgrims are evidently a Catholic husband and wife, identified by their multiple pilgrim badges, but there are two other victims of the angry knot of male and female farmers. The reading would seem to be: fired-up evangelical peasants are taking on intrusive “Popish” pilgrims and their local supporters or relatives.

39. Ertz and Nitze-Ertz, Marten van Cleve, 175. Two other versions of the subject were auctioned by Christie’s London in July 2011 and June 2022, the latter originally from the Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels.
Figure 16. Marten van Cleve, *Battle of Peasants and Pilgrims*, painting, circa 1565. Muzeum Narodowe we Wrocławiu, Wrocław. This image is identified as being open domain.

Figure 17. Detail of *St. Martin's Charity* in Marten van Cleve, *Battle of Peasants and Pilgrims*, painting, circa 1565. Muzeum Narodowe we Wrocławiu, Wrocław.
Thought worthy of being copied several times, the work might possibly refer to some locally notorious altercation that had transpired around Martinmas or, to speculate further, perhaps an event in the wake of the Beeldenstorm, the iconoclastic fury that swept through the Netherlands in the late summer of 1566. The relationship between the pilgrim couple and St. Martin however remains unclear. Could they be returning from Tours or some other important Martinian foundation, such as Utrecht or Ypres? Pilgrim badges displaying Martin's Charity have been found in the Netherlands but are by no means common. This curious scene must await the discovery of further documentation. It anticipates, nevertheless, the “fighting peasants” motif that was frequently part of the representation of the Charity of St. Martin when placed in village settings by later genre artists. Utrecht master Droochsloot and his followers employed this motif in five separate compositions from the early to the mid-seventeenth century. The most accomplished Droochsloot, now in the Rijksmuseum, is dated 1623.40 It would seem that the festival energies of Martinmas in these later works had devolved into a scrum of wrangling peasants behind the saint’s back. The brawl now equals the festival of St. Martin.

Conclusion

The sequence of Netherlandish works here arranged, in time from roughly the death of Bosch to the Thirty Years’ War, shows the moralizing quotient and a certain amount of “drollery” inventiveness gradually draining away to be replaced by genre interest and greater realism with regard to the major festival bearing the saint’s name. At the same time, there appears to be a consensus among the later generations of painters, and particularly those of the Dutch Republic, that Martinmas, signified by the Charity of St. Martin, was a particular occasion for drunken disorder and mayhem in the peasantry, the more congenial aspects of the traditional festival having been left behind.
The range of images examined here, from a masterpiece by a major artist to routine journeyman work, demonstrates the interdependence of a particular festival and a venerable icon of Western sacred art. They can be employed to extract some documentary information, particularly in the area of material culture, but they also illustrate a larger phenomenon. The Charity of St. Martin deeply informed the saint’s November festival season, the last harvest festival-cum-first winter revel, the little carnival before Advent, but it was also greatly shaped by it in turn. It affords a prime example, one might argue, of the symbiosis of elite and popular cultures in the early modern period. Like king and fool, charitable Martin and his cavorting, drunken beggarman are among the great archetypal pairs of Western European art.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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NON-THEMATIC ARTICLES

Traveling to Audiences: The Decentralization of Festival Spaces at the Festival Films Femmes Afrique in Senegal

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ABSTRACT

As African countries gained independence, filmmakers saw cinema as a weapon for decolonization. With the increasing disappearance of cinema venues following the global economic crisis of the 1970s, however, films were rarely able to reach local audiences. In the twenty-first century, especially since 2010, new audience-centered curatorial and managerial approaches have turned film festivals into key platforms for introducing African cinema to local audiences. This article investigates one of these approaches, namely, the decentralization of festival spaces, using one Senegalese film festival as a case study. Instead of asking audiences to travel to a festival venue, the Festival Films Femmes Afrique—the first film festival in Senegal dedicated to films about women—travels to local audiences, offering a variety of free activities across a wide range of venues and spaces. This study relies on data visualization methods as well as practice-based ethnographic research. The focus on the decentralization of festival spaces seeks to encourage further research on creative curatorial and managerial strategies to build and engage with diverse audiences, by increasing the accessibility of programs and boosting the circulation of films that are often marginalized in global distribution platforms.
Traveling to Audiences: The Decentralization of Festival Spaces at the Festival Films Femmes Afrique in Senegal

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Introduction

The field of film exhibition in Africa remains largely under-explored, especially exhibitions outside of commercial cinema venues, such as film festivals or mobile cinema. The focus on spatial decentralization at film festivals in Senegal in this article seeks to address this research gap. I understand spatial decentralization at film festivals as an audience-centered curatorial and managerial technique that consists in diversifying the film-curated program across multiple festival spaces, moving films and filmmakers to often remote locations with limited or inexistent access to cinema. Most significantly, this strategy involves reversing the usual direction of people at festivals. Instead of asking audiences to travel to a specific festival venue, the festival travels to local audiences, across a wide range of spaces, which allows the festival to be felt and lived by a larger portion of the population, thus increasing its cultural and social impact.

I illustrate the decentralization of festival spaces through the case study of the Festival Films Femmes Afrique (FFFA), the first film festival in Senegal devoted to films starring strong women, directed by people of all genders. This festival was founded in 2003, with “Violence against Women” as its initial theme. It was an initiative of Trait d’Union, a Senegal-based association created in 1997 by French women married to Senegalese men with the goal of integrating into local society. The festival was launched as part of the association’s cultural program and started with the screening of Nous sommes nombreuses (There are many of us) (directed by Moussa Touré, 2003, Senegal). Guided by Lidia, the film features strong women who managed to survive aggressions during the 1993–99 war in Congo Brazzaville.

After a break of thirteen years, the festival resumed in 2016 as a biennale, that is, an event held every other year. Beyond the diversity of its annual themes—“Women and Labor, Women and Migrations” (2016), “Women and Education” (2018), “Women in Resistance” (2020), and “Women, Creators of the Future” (2022)—the festival has been characterized by a consistent focus on “herstories.” In the words of Amayel Ndiaye, co-organizer of the festival and head of...
communications, it is “a festival which tells stories of African women, be the story based in Africa or not, or told by African or non-African people, men, women, or other.” However, when doubts emerge in the curatorial process between several films, there is a tendency to favor the work of African women filmmakers. This is a response to the global underrepresentation of women directors, especially African women filmmakers. Since 2019, due to consistent growth and a desire to open the festival up to Senegalese men and women in general, the festival has come under the management of an organization called Films Femmes Afrique Association (FFAA), and it is now supported by a range of Senegalese and international private and public sponsors that share resources, such as spaces and services (including media coverage) and funding.

The thematic focus on women and the festival’s promotion of African cinema singles out the FFFA as an activist film festival. As reflected in the official communication of the festival—its website in particular—the festival aims to bring African films to Senegalese audiences at a time when barely any cinemas are open in the country. It thus participates in the dissemination and democratization of African cinema. It also contributes to raising awareness and developing critical thinking, rethinking the place of women in our societies, and fighting for the equality of rights between men and women. This activist dimension translates into the spatial decentralization of the festival venues, offering an entirely free festival in Dakar during the first week (February 25 to March 5 in 2022) and in over thirty different spaces across several regions during the next (March 6 to 12 in 2022). The FFFA thus constitutes an illustrative case study in scholarly discussions on film exhibition in Africa and on audience-centered curatorial and managerial approaches in Senegal, the African continent, and the cinematic world more broadly. This effort is particularly timely, since it engages with a global interest in building audiences and curating inclusive programs to respond to increasingly diverse populations in plural societies.

By examining audience-centered curatorial practices at the FFFA, I argue that the festival, functioning as engaged (engaged) cinema, promotes the circulation of African films during and beyond the festival to diverse audiences. On the one hand, the festival forges a discussion-based circuit for chosen films, with several screenings curated across different spaces. It allows diverse audiences to interact with the films, filmmakers, and each other, as the festival travels to audiences. On the other hand, beyond the festival dates, the festival promotes the circulation of films across the range of film festival networks in and beyond Senegal. In other words, the FFFA is a showcase for Senegalese and international curators, offering a range of films on women that inspire both audiences and curators. The festival, operating as a signifier of quality, is the initial point in a “site of passage that function[s] as the gateway to cultural legitimization.” Being selected for the FFFA adds value to a film, fostering attention at other festivals, as renowned film festival scholar Marijke de Valck has noted, within global festival circuits. This can be evidenced in the collaboration between the FFFA and the Leeds International Film Festival (LIFF) in 2022, which included a section named after the theme of the latest edition of the FFFA, “Women Creators of the Future,” cocurated by Molly Cowderoy (LIFF) and Amayel Ndiaye (FFFA). This development broadens the spatial decentralization that characterizes the festival, making a number of films travel transnationally to Leeds audiences in the United Kingdom.
Moving Images in Senegal

Senegal occupies a central position in the history of African cinema. The country was home to pioneering filmmakers who were concerned with the representation of Africa through an African lens. Cinema was thus conceived by these early filmmakers as a weapon for decolonization, especially in the aftermath of independence throughout Africa in the 1960s, when African filmmakers were finally able to become storytellers after centuries of colonialism. By 1966, when the country hosted the Premier festival mondial des arts nègres (First World Festival of Black Arts), a celebration of African cultures worldwide organized under the patronage of the first president of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal boasted a significant number of cinema venues. Press coverage of the festival included several articles reflecting about cinema as the seventh art, listing films, and discussing film director Ousmane Sembène's first feature-length film, La Noire de... (Black Girl) (1966, Senegal), which won an award during the festival. An April 1966 press clipping revealed the existence of at least sixteen different cinema venues in Dakar—with such names as Plaza, Liberté, Club, Palace, Royal, Roxy, Magic, Lux, Rio, Vox, Le Palais, Rialto, Bataclan, Al Akbar, Vog, and ABC. These air-conditioned one-screen venues built during the French colonial period exhibited international films, such as Sunday in New York (directed by Peter Tewksbury, 1963, United States), starring Jane Fonda and distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer—as shown on the top left corner of the news page in figure 2.


Figure 2. Films shown in Dakar at the time of the First World Festival of Black Arts. Dakar-Matin, April 22, 1966, Cheikh Anta Diop University Library, Dakar.
The cinematic scene changed significantly in the 1970s, when an economic crisis led to the gradual disappearance of theaters. Today, as is the case in many places around the world, some of these closed cinema venues have turned into shopping malls and art galleries. They are “ruins of utopias,” anthropologist Ferdinand de Jong and arts scholar Brian Quinn’s term for abandoned buildings that “constitute a palimpsest of African futures in ruins.” In other words, they are places from the past that articulate ideas about the future or, in the case of cinema, that project dreams fabricated by the camera. Their existence in the present fosters a multi-temporal sense of nostalgia, of the future dreamed of in the past and no longer in the present. Film becomes at times a key site of memory and preservation of those cinema venues, as evidenced by the short film *Samedi Cinema* (2016, Senegal), directed by Mamadou Dia, featuring Cinéma Awa; the documentary film *SenCinema* (2017, Senegal, United States), directed by John Gibson and Amadou Fofana; or, more recently, the Guinean Senegalese documentary film *Au cimetière de la pellicule* (The cemetery of cinema) (2023, France, Senegal, Guinea, Saudi Arabia), directed by Thierno Souleymane Diallo, screened during the latest edition (2023) of the Festival international du film documentaire de Saint-Louis (StLouis’ Docs) in Saint-Louis, Senegal. These films bring back to the screen these ruins of utopia, inviting reflection about the importance of cinema venues and addressing the need for the preservation of these sites and film archives.

Promoting cinema is not just a resilient endeavor but also an activist mission. To build African audiences for African cinema, innovation and creativity are crucial. Such strategies have been the focus of a recent section on Senegal in *Black Camera: An International Film Journal*, “Close-Up on Senegal,” coedited by scholars of Francophone Africa Molly Krueger Enz and Devin Bryson. Enz and Bryson note that in light of the increasing disappearance of cinema venues, “theatre owners, in collaboration with the government, film producers, and distributors, must innovate in order to maintain viewers.” But what does such innovation look like? And to what extent does it contribute to making cinema accessible? I analyze the spatial decentralization at the FFFA as one of the most significant innovative techniques in film exhibition, spreading exhibition spaces across a large number of venues to engage diverse audiences with the festival’s mission. This promotes the accessibility and inclusivity of the festival. I also examine the spatial decentralization of festivals as a *caring*, audience-centered managerial and curatorial technique in that, instead of expecting audiences to travel to a main venue to be able to participate, the festival travels to audiences.

First, however, I want to make clear that, as innovative as it may seem, the spatial decentralization of film festivals is merely the extension—although with key differences, as outlined below—of an older innovation in film exhibition, the mobile cinema, which consisted of transporting all necessary equipment to screen a film onboard private cars, usually to remote areas that would otherwise have no access to cinema. During the early 1950s, just after the Second World War, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) encouraged *cinéma ambulant*, considered to be the sole mode of distribution and “the first form of film exhibition for the African population.” Within this context, filmmakers engaged in proactive entrepreneurship, often organizing film screenings in remote locations across Senegal, that is, moving cinema to various geographical areas. This practice played a crucial role in building local audiences for a cinema that had not been permitted during centuries of European colonialism, cinema made by Senegalese filmmakers, such as Sembène. Mobile
cinema, however, was conceived in a different way than film festivals, since it did not focus on under-exhibited films, that is, African films. As African screen worlds scholar Lindiwe Dovey notes, "the first African filmmakers and critics were haunted by the audience—or, rather, by the lack of African audiences for African films." Moreover, mobile cinema had a commercial and entertainment purpose, where access was only granted to those able to afford tickets. In contrast, contemporary forms of digital mobile cinema of film festivals offer free entrance to all film screenings and tend to have an educational purpose, both in themes that concern the population and in building African cinephilia.

More recently, private cars have been replaced with motorbikes, minivans, and bicycles. Most film exhibitions at festivals are now facilitated by MobiCiné, whose slogan is “Cinema near you.” This initiative dates from 2011 and is currently managed by the company Ella Global Solutions and the nonprofit Association Culture WAW. Since 2018, the project has received financial support from the French Fonds de la Promotion de l’Industrie Cinématographique et Audiovisuel, the French Ministry of Culture, and, at times, UNESCO. According to its cultural manager, MobiCiné is an “innovative response to a severe problem in Africa: the closure of cinema venues and the large number of African films not accessible to African people.”

Another initiative of note, Cinécyclo, launched by French cultural actor Vincent Hanrion in 2015 but since managed by Senegalese people, uses bicycles to both transport and exhibit films. The FFFA is one of the cultural projects in which Cinécyclo has been involved. The format is participatory in that audience members are invited to engage in the physical labor of pedaling to make the screening possible. This project is also highly innovative in that beyond bringing African cinema to the people, it does so in a sustainable way, in complete darkness, with the dynamic energy resulting from the collective act of pedaling in shifts.

In spring 2016, Senegal also participated in a mobile film project initiated by two Spanish cinephiles, Isabel Segura and Carmelo López, who created Cinecicleta, traveling in a bicycle across the African continent and organizing pop-up screenings in collaboration with local populations and associations. As with Cinécyclo, Cinecicleta offers an innovative format, promoting the screening of films (not necessarily African, in the case of Cinecicleta) that are not easily accessible in remote locations and doing so in a sustainable and participatory way.

All three initiatives, with MobiCiné a well-established organization at present, share an interest in promoting African cinema for local audiences beyond the capital of the country, Dakar. Since the publication in 2018 of the aforementioned “Close-Up: Senegalese Cinema” in Black Camera, Dakar has witnessed a cinematic resurgence, with the opening of four new cinema venues: Canal Olympia (on May 11, 2017), Complexe Cinématographique Sembène Ousmane (on March 31, 2018), Ciné Pathé (on October 6, 2022), and Seacinema (on November 11, 2022). These venues, however, still focus on showing foreign (mostly US) films, which means that festivals continue to be “among the few public arenas in which [Senegalese and African] films are screened.” When they first emerged in the 1960s, festivals were conceived as “acts of cultural and political resistance, liberation and self-empowerment.” In Senegal, most film festivals emerged in the twenty-first century, especially after 2010. They appeared as a response to the limited infrastructure devoted to bringing African cinema close to local audiences, as well as to the marginalization of African cinema in international film festivals and commercial cinema.
overcome these obstacles, Senegalese festivals have favored audience-centered curatorial and managerial approaches that are discussed below. These practices aim to place audiences at the very center, considering and caring for them from the preproduction stage (selecting films and venues) to the postproduction stage (mediating film screenings through introductions and discussions with filmmakers or experts either on film or on the themes addressed in the films).

In Senegal, to increase accessibility, these discussions happen in two languages: Wolof, the most widely spoken lingua franca in the country, and French, the official language.

Research Methods: Traveling with the FFFA

This study sits at the crossroads of practice and research. During my PhD fieldwork, which focused on local and international festivals in Senegal, I became aware of the importance of decentralization in festival management. Festivals routinely offer an official and an alternative program, the latter being a sort of fringe festival, located in different regions, and with a calendar of events often longer than the former. In my doctoral thesis, I suggest that it is usually the “fringe” festival that fosters the most excitement among audiences. My main case study is the Festival international de folklore et de percussion, also known as FESFOP, held in Louga, a rural region in northern Senegal, where cultural infrastructure is scarce. The festival was designed as a “project of territory,” meaning that it was created for and by the population of Louga. To avoid spatial hierarchies, its program makes no distinction between official and alternative events. While people are invited to attend the evening performances at Place Civic—a public square adjacent to the town hall—the festival also offers afternoon performances in different neighborhoods and regions for people who would have otherwise struggled to travel to the festival.

During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2019–21, I became interested in studying the many ways festivals foster audience participation. Being based in London and unable to travel to Senegal, I started following social media more actively and teamed up with a Gandiol-based journalist, independent researcher, and cultural actress, Laura Feal, to review the 2020 StLouis’ Docs, hosted from December 15 to 19, 2020. It was in this context that I first interviewed Martine Ndiaye, the founding director of the FFFA. Our conversation, which focused on the 2020 festival that took place from February 21 to March 7, 2020, just before the first wave of the pandemic, provided the basis for an academic presentation at the “Transnational Screen Media Practices: Safeguarding Cultural Heritage” symposium organized by the University of Regina in June 2021. In my presentation, I focused on the curation of representations of African women on Senegalese screens, and once more, attention to space became crucial.

De Valck had already alerted us to the importance of space when stating that “although both spatial and temporal dimensions are indispensable to the theoretical understanding of the festival network, we need to pause for a moment to elaborate on the incorporation of the spatial dimensions into our theoretical framing.” This article does precisely that, offering an analysis of a trend and practice in Senegalese festivals, through the case study of the FFFA, with the hope of inspiring festivals worldwide.

One of the most pertinent statements by Martine Ndiaye, in this respect, was: “We go to the public because, following the abandonment of cinema venues at the end of the twentieth century,
people have lost the habit of going to the cinema.”³⁰ This statement echoed words I had already heard from festival organizers in Senegal, in the context not just of FESFOP but of other film festivals as well. For example, Souleymane Kébé, a film producer and co-organizer of StLouis’ Docs, when reflecting about the choice of festival spaces as part of the curatorial and managerial structure, claimed: “We decided to focus on the local people from the neighborhoods. We would go to them.”³¹ I therefore decided to apply a data visualization method and created a Google Map marking the range of locations in the 2020 edition of the FFFA.

In December 2021, I was finally able to travel back to Senegal after over two years. I reconnected with Martine Ndiaye and suggested a cocurated hybrid event during the festival, in collaboration with the European Research Council–funded project “Screen Worlds: Decolonising Film and Screen Studies,” led by Dovey, my colleague at SOAS, University of London, and on which I serve as an advisory board member.³² This involved the screening of two debut short films by Senegalese women filmmakers, followed by a roundtable with them, in conversation with me and Ken Aïcha Sy, a cultural promoter, researcher, and founder of Wakh’Art, with whom I collaborate through my media work in Wiriko.³³ The roundtable was curated as part of a focus on women filmmakers in Screen Worlds, preceded by an online roundtable, “Shaping the Conversation: Decolonising Film with Nigerian Women Filmmakers,” curated by Nigerian film scholar Añulika Agina and cochaired by both of us.³⁴ The Senegalese roundtable, titled “La Voix des Réalisatrices/Decolonising Film with Senegalese Women Filmmakers,” was hosted on Wednesday, March 2, at Centre Yennenga in Grand Dakar and screened live via the YouTube channel of Screen Worlds. The invited filmmakers were Fama Reyane Sow, director of Anonymes (2020, 14 min., Senegal), and Dieynaba Ngom, director of Fissures (2021, 23 min., Senegal), and their films were screened just before the roundtable. As part of this partnership, I was able to travel again for the FFFA in Dakar and to participate in a range of festival screenings, discussions, and activities beyond the cocurated roundtable.
What follows is an analysis of the 2022 edition of the FFFA, based on practice-based research, as a collaborator and cocurator of one of its activities (the aforementioned roundtable), and ethnographic fieldwork, "being there" and "deep hanging out" with festival participants. Due to a focus on the decentralization of festival spaces, the key research method is data visualization. This method was inspired by work led by film festival scholar Skadi Loist on film circulation and the research project "Understanding and Supporting Creative Economies in Africa," which identifies cultural spaces and practices beyond institutions. I created a virtual map of the different screening spaces during the FFFA, including in these maps moving and still images, as well as written articles associated with the venues, some of which I have produced. This interactive map, created through Padlet, serves as the basis of the critical analysis of the festival and understanding its ability to promote the circulation of African women-led films in and beyond Senegal.

Analyzing Spatial Decentralization at the FFFA in Senegal

As stated above, the FFFA is a festival showcasing African films whose stories are led by women, with an emphasis on resilience and agency. The main curatorial criterion, according to festival director Martine Ndiaye, is that "the film must be about a story of women's struggle ... the message it disseminates." The inclusive dimension of the festival, which accepts films directed by filmmakers of all genders based in or beyond Africa, allows the festival "to offer different points of views concerning the same subject." It is thus a "negofeminist" festival, that is, a "no-ego feminism" or "feminism of negotiation," as defined by Nigerian scholar Obioma Nnaemeka. This refers to intersectional understandings of feminism as able to "negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts."

As a matter of fact, the FFFA is a locus for an intertextual and extra-diegetic negotiation of what "feminism" means. On the one hand, films from different African contexts enter into dialogue with each other, through their very inclusion in the festival. On the other hand, and at the same time, there are dialogues that happen between the diverse realities represented on screen and the various audiences encountered off screen, facilitated by mediators, such as festival hosts and guest speakers. These result in a continuous negotiation of what "feminism" means, with reference to women's stories. Amayel Ndiaye highlighted the festival’s interest in "creating spaces to have a debate, criticize a bit the society ... in short, to open a space for the spoken word."
In other words, the curatorial approach at the FFFA becomes a nego-feminist space, favoring diverse viewpoints about the same subject, African women.

Discussion is thus a crucial component of this festival, as it is in other activist film festivals, because the festival is driven by the organizers’ intentionality, be it to increase awareness, to expose, to warn, to prevent, or sometimes to change the course of events. Activist film festivals “embody the belief that film is powerful enough to have an impact.”41 This is largely due to the accessible dimension of audiovisual language, particularly in a context of high rates of illiteracy and a long history of oral tradition. Such optimism is apparent in Amayel Ndiaye’s reflection on the potential impact of the festival program, when she stated: “We choose films where women fight for their choices. They fight in order to live the lives they want. So it is very empowering to see that. It is inspiring. For us it is very important that young, older women and men alike see strong women on screen.”42

As a result, the FFFA is an emblematic mobile platform to raise awareness about women’s rights through presenting women-led stories on screen in an accessible way. This resonates with film festival scholar Dina Iordanova’s comment that “films make the highly abstract categories of human rights discourses easier to grasp and understand.”43 As summarized in the local press, it is “a feminist film festival that raises awareness of women’s rights, their liberation from the sexist obscurantism and emancipation from stereotypes.”44

The 2022 edition, the fifth since the festival’s inception, revolved around the ideas of agency and change, with the theme of “Femmes créatives d’avenir,” later translated as “Women Creators of the Future” in the program cocurated in collaboration with the LIFF. This theme highlighted both women’s emblematic role in creativity and creative economies and women as key agents for change, consistently pushing forward. The festival included 63 films (out of the 450 viewed by the curatorial team), screened several times across different locations (including schools)
and divided into five sections (competing short films, noncompeting shorts, competing feature-length films, noncompeting feature films, and one film category focused on Senegal specifically). The festival also paid tribute to Safi Faye, a pioneering Senegalese filmmaker considered to be the “mother of African cinema” and who passed away just twelve months later, on February 22, 2023. The program included parallel activities: two master classes and a nine-day intensive film training program called Kino Linguère, done in partnership with the association Esprit Ciné, which provided training to fourteen women. These activities were responsible for making two short films to be screened at the closing ceremony at Canal Olympia Teranga, one of the recently opened cinema venues in Dakar. Finally, the festival program included an international meeting of women working for film festivals, in which they shared practices and explored synergies.

Every film screening was followed with a debate, either with the invited filmmaker or with someone with a certain connection to the film’s topic or its production. Despite its recent decentralization, the festival proved to be a magnet for the cinephile community and a key networking and communal space. The judging panel was carefully and strategically curated, involving key figures in the production and promotion of Senegalese cinema. The 2022 edition, for instance, included Baba Diop, a Senegalese cultural journalist, film critic, and former president of the African Federation of Film Criticism (2009–13); Diabou Bessane Diouf, a Senegalese journalist, filmmaker, and producer; Cornélia Glele, a filmmaker from Benin and the founding director of the Festival International des Films de Femmes de Cotonou; Amélia Mbaye, a Senegalese American actress; and Souleymane Kébé, producer and co-organizer of StLouis’ Docs. These judges attended the festival, watching all public screenings of the feature-length films in competition and leaving during the post-screening discussions, in order not to be influenced by the audience’s feedback, questions, and discussions.

In the following section, I present the results of a data visualization method highlighting the range of locations used in the 2022 FFFA. By detailing the many ways films and filmmakers traveled to audiences and engaged with them that year, this interactive map will hopefully convince practitioners of the benefits of a more decentralized approach to film festivals.

![Interactive map of the range of venues in the 2022 FFFA.](https://example.com/map.png)

Figure 6. Interactive map of the range of venues in the 2022 FFFA.
As the map above shows, the FFFA has expanded across a wide range of locations. The festival now travels to the nineteen different districts of Dakar and to several Senegalese regions, with the goal of “bringing back love for cinema.” This mission has already been achieved, at least to some extent, according to one of the festival collaborators, Fatou Kiné Sene, president of the African Federation of Film Criticism, who features in the map in a video-recorded interview during the festival: “Festivals like Festival Film Femmes Afrique give people an opportunity to see many African films and to talk about them. There are also several events that show that there is a return to cinema venues.”

Despite their disappearance in the 1970s, cinema venues are reopening in Dakar, with a project to expand to other regions. This is the case of the Complexe Cinématographique Ousmane Sembène, launched on March 31, 2018, and the CanalOlympia Teranga, inaugurated on May 11, 2017, both home to the festival. These, however, are not the only screens showcasing women as creative agents of the future.

The festival offers an alternative itinerary in public space, a women-led discovery or reappropriation of spaces that may not often be part of audiences’ everyday lives. This can be navigated in the map, clicking on each of the points that locate the various festival spaces and venues, including some still and moving images of the events hosted there. In Senegal, while the festival travels to audiences across the capital and regions, audiences are invited to also engage in such circulation by attending screenings in different spaces. As the director and festival organizers introduce the screenings, they acknowledge such accompaniment and endorsement by loyal audiences, referring to them as festivalgoers. The repetition of festivalgoers, seen several times across several venues during the festival, represents a caring engagement that fosters the kind of engagé mobile cinema performed at this festival.

The specific locations the festival travels to include cultural associations that have an annual program of cultural activities and training, such as the Maison des Cultures Urbaines, the Centre Socio-culturel de Hann, Centre Socio-Culturel de Sacré-coeur, the Centre-Culture Blaise Senghor, the Centre Culturel Léopold Sédar Senghor in Bountou Pikine, the Centre de Bopp, and the Maison de la Culture Doua Seck, a large space that is home to many festivals and cultural activities in Dakar. It travels to European institutional cultural spaces with physical presence in

One of the key findings of the 2022 UNESCO global report on cultural and creative industries was that mobility is “a fundamental part of the professional trajectory of artists of cultural professionals.” And yet “global inequality in freedom of movement persists due to unequal distribution of funding and burdensome visa regulations.” During the COVID-19 pandemic, with increased restrictions on freedom of movement, there was a continuous reflection on the need to “re-imagine mobility in more digitally accessible, sustainable and environmentally friendly ways.”

An activist group formed in 2017, the Care Collective, whose members wrote a Care Manifesto during the pandemic, noted that “the global lockdown has paradoxically given us sudden, fragmented glimpses of how we could create better worlds.” They thus issued a call to “put care at the front and centre,” which entailed “recognising and embracing our interdependence.” In a similar spirit, Dovey and I issued a call to decolonize the world of film festivals, a field notorious for its precarity, hierarchies, and inequalities—including unequal access. We invited film festivals across the world to rethink their ways of operating, to engage in anti-racist activism, and to look at creative curatorial and managerial strategies in Africa, such as the decentralization of festival locations.


48. On our call for decolonization, see Lindiwe Dovey and Estrella Sendra, “Towards Decolonized Film Festival Worlds,” in Rethinking Film Festivals in the Pandemic Era and After; ed. Marijke de Valck and Antoine Damiens (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 269–89. On the precarity, hierarchy, and inequality in the field, see de Valck, Film Festivals, 39, 77; and Skadi Loist, “The Film Festival Circuit: Networks, Hierarchies, and Circulation,” in Film Festivals: History, Theory, Method, Practice, ed. Marijke de Valck, Brendan Kredell, and Skadi Loist (London: Routledge, 2016), 49–64.

the country, such as the Institut Français or Aula Cervantes. The itinerary includes film-specific spaces, such as Cinéma Empire, one of the few, if not the only, open-air cinema venues from the 1950s–60s still standing in Dakar; the Centre Yennenga, a film hub that has made its mark on the city of Dakar despite its recent establishment; Ciné Banlieue Unité 18, in Parcelles Assainies, a volunteer-run free film school that makes training accessible to young people from the outskirts of Dakar; Ciné Banlieue-UCAD 24, also in Parcelles Assainies, which collaborates with Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar; Keur Yaadikoone, a film club located in Ngor Island; SUP’IMAX (Institut Supérieur des Arts et Métiers du Numérique); Ciné UCAD, at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD) in Dakar; the Université Virtuelle du Sénégal; the West African Research Centre; and hotels, associations, and spaces in and beyond Dakar.

The organization of film screenings in these spaces is understood as a reciprocal collaborative practice in that it is beneficial to both parties involved. On the one hand, it allows the festival to spread its program to audiences with an interest in culture, thanks to the work done by the cultural association in that area. On the other hand, it honors the cultural work led by the cultural association and boosts its visibility among local communities, thus contributing to audience development for both. This collaboration also demonstrates an inclusive and caring managerial strategy, creating a festival for the population, involving cultural actors as chairs, speakers, and hosts while caring for the films that are screened across such spaces, often screened several times during the same festival.

Choosing films to be screened is carefully curated collectively with audiences at the center of the decision-making process. Amayel Ndiaye shed light on how the collaboration works:

> We suggest some of the films in our program and most of the time, they choose. In high schools, sometimes, students vote, or a particular teacher selects it. In cine-clubs, for example, they choose a film whose director is someone they have heard of many times, but they have never managed to watch a film by them. ... We try to leave, as much as possible, the choice for the films to people who are coming to see them. And they are also accessible for free.

The festival’s complementary nature is crucial to understanding the audience-centered curatorial approach and the goal to make the festival as accessible as possible. Martine Ndiaye further stressed the involvement of women associations in including this festival in the broader negofeminist agenda of the city and country.

> We partner up with the women associations in different neighborhoods, so that they take the lead in the organization the evening in their local area. ... We give them five or six films and they choose the film and theme. That is a way of mobilizing them. Otherwise it would be hard to make them come to a cinema venue in the center of Dakar. And also, it is a way of allowing filmmakers to meet and connect with those women in different neighborhoods.

Audience figures confirm such an endorsement, with a jump from 3,500 in the first edition in 2003 to over 12,000 people in 2022, according to the festival organizers.

Audience members are not invited as silent passive viewers but, rather, as active interpreters. Discussions often start during the film screening in a collegial environment surrounded by
practices of care. This became evident in 2022, when the festival took place in a period of unexpected cold weather in the evenings (most screenings take place in the evenings). In Cinéma Empire, for example, after having had to shorten the discussion following the film screening of *Zinder* (directed by Aïcha Macky, 2021, Niger, France, Germany, South Africa)—winner of the Best Feature-Length Film award at the festival—due to the low temperatures (around 21ºC, quite rare for the Dakar spring season), blankets were provided for the screening of *En route pour le Milliard / Downstream to Kinshasa* (directed by Dieudo Hamadi, 2020, Democratic Republic of Congo) a couple of days later in the same venue.

Beyond the cracking sound of chairs in which once sat cinephiles of the postindependence period, there is also the added murmur of voices, eager to express themselves, triggered by the stories represented on screen. A dialogical and multilingual active viewing experience is created, prompting another form of movement through the circulation of words. As Martine Ndiaye noted:

In Senegal cinema venues are not characterized by silence. People translate [from French] to the “neighbor” [into a local language, such as Wolof]. There won’t be the problem of being “shhh.” We can translate. There is a very detailed presentation of the film [in Wolof] so that people can understand the stories. And the debates following are also in Wolof.56

Some of the most carefully curated and moderated discussions happened at educational institutions. This is, as Iordanova notes, “a special feature of activist festivals,” which aim to “mobilise public opinion and nurture committed cultural citizens.”57 Martine Ndiaye expressed a high degree of satisfaction at the feedback she received from the high school principals and teachers involved in these screenings: “Whichever high school we went to wanted us to come back in the following festival edition. And we realized that most of these high schools were directed by women. It is no coincidence.”58 Looking forward, Amayel Ndiaye expressed a desire to decentralize the festival further, not just through space but also through time, by establishing a long-term partnership with the schools in order to host screenings outside of the festival’s dates.

This has been somewhat already achieved through the decentralization of the festival with screenings in regions outside of Dakar, an opportunity to engage with the film community beyond the capital. This is why, while I was not able to stay in Senegal during the festival in the regions, I have still mapped these festival spaces. I have in fact intentionally made this map open access and collaborative, with the desire of seeing contributors add festival audiovisual experiences to the map. This collaboration could bring another opportunity for the circulation of these stories, in a dynamic archive, accessible digitally. This approach aligns with the observed decentralization of the festival through digital space. When I was in Dakar, it was common to see WhatsApp and Facebook stories and posts of audience members identifying as “feminist” or “cinephiles,” through which they provided visual evidence of their participation in the festival.

The important role of collaboration and decentralization was also evident in one of the events included in the map at the headquarters of the United Nations in Dakar: the first Rencontre internationale des festivals de films de femmes (International Meeting of Women Film Festivals), hosted on Saturday, February 26, 2022.59 The meeting was a first step toward sharing practices and thinking of more efficient and productive ways of collaboration among festivals sharing the same theme of women. Participants included Karin Osswald, from the Rencontres...
Films Femmes Méditerranée, founded in 2006 in Marseille; Hicham Falah, from the Festival international du film de femmes de Salé, created in 2005 in Salé; Cornélia Glele, from the Festival international des films de femmes de Cotounou, launched in 2019 in Cotonou; and Martine Ndiaye and Amayel Ndiaye, from the FFFA.

60. Ibid.

61. De Valck, Film Festivals, 35.


Figure 7. Panoramic view of the February 26, 2022, Rencontre internationale des festivals de films de femmes at the UN headquarters in Dakar.

Other participants included filmmakers, film critics, journalists, educators, and managers of cinema venues who shared ideas around the potential ways of collaborating and the important educational role of festivals in a context of structural marginalization, through limited access to funding opportunities and global distribution networks. During this one-day rencontre, participants discussed four main themes: the creation of a network of women film festivals; audiovisual education through cinema and for our societies; the female gaze in cinema in our societies; and independence, sustainability, and private and public funding. The final aim of all sections, according to the FFFA, was to "create and consolidate, with all the festivals, an international collective of women's film festivals in which we will subsequently invite all the women's film festivals people to join us." The event was an opportunity to reflect on the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities faced by all festivals. In this case, the exchange was a form of decentralizing the specific work by the FFFA to other regions where more women film festivals are hosted. At the same time, the rencontre was a crowd-sourced public reflection on what such a network could entail. Some of the aspects considered included the cocreating of a shared festival calendar, so that no festival clashes with another, broadening collaboration between Anglophone and Francophone Africa, sharing films and enjoying localized networks in each of the festivals, accessing funding collectively, and sharing the costs of subtitle production. These discussions demonstrated the need to build new, localized circuits in Senegal, able to respond to the increasing number of film productions.

Forging Fruitful Circuits for Senegalese Films: The Example of La Danse des Béquilles (The dance of the crutches) by Yoro Lidel Niang

As de Valck notes, "by travelling the circuit, a film can accumulate value via the snowball effect. The more praise, prizes and buzz a film attracts, the more attention it is likely to receive at other festivals." As mentioned above, being selected for a festival legitimizes a film and gives it cultural value. This value is enhanced through the existence of a competitive section, with awards. Award-winning films can experience longer circulation. Festivals thus become "a key force in the film business, and a central platform for the exhibition and distribution of international cinema." This is even more so the case within the context of films that could be marginalized from two perspectives: being African and women-led.
Some of the films screened and awarded at the 2022 FFFA added a further intersectional approach to women's stories, receiving great criticism from audience and jury members alike. An illustrative example is *La Danse des Béquilles* (The dance of the crutches) (directed by Yoro Lidel Niang, 2021, Senegal), awarded the Best Short Film among the thirteen short films in the competitive short film section. The judging panel differed from the panel for the feature-length film screenings in that, for the first time, it was composed of several Dakar-based high school students. *La Danse des Béquilles* is a remarkable story of feminism and ability, led by Penda, a woman who dares to challenge all stereotypes associated with her physical impairment. A lover of dance, she decides to join a dance group. Over the course of the film, she is able to take life into her own hands, sustaining herself as a professional dancer and providing for her mother. The director, Yoro Lidel Niang, was inspired by his own personal experience, having faced continuous social obstacles due to his physical impairment. When interviewed about the significance of the award, he stated: “For me it is important, due to the level of the festival and the quality of the films. A prize like this motivates us to keep working even harder. Already participating is an honor, so even more so to have been awarded.” His statement confirms the value added to films earning awards at festivals and the long-term impact these awards can have on film careers, decentralizing them also over time and not just in terms of space.

The film, which was a debut short film by the Senegalese filmmaker, had already received the Best Actress Award at the Festival Dakar Court in December 2021. During the festival, it was screened twice, in the Museum of Black Civilizations and in Centre Culturel Léopold Sédar Senghor in Bountou Pikine, also known as ARCOTS Pikine, on the outskirts of Dakar. Its circulation had been growing beyond the festival dates, accumulating additional awards along the way. Later in March, the film was seen at the DC Francophonie Festival in Washington and at Keur Yaadikoone (a film club), in Ngor Island, in Dakar, along with a master class. The following month, from April 1 to 10, 2022, the film and director traveled to Canada for the 38th Festival International de Cinéma Vues d’Afrique, where the film received the Special Mention for the Best Medium/Short Fiction Film. In June and July 2022, the film traveled to the Dakar-based Festival de cinéma Les Téranga, accumulating two more awards: for Best Short Film and Best Actress.

As I wrote this article, the film had just been nominated in three categories (Best Short Film, Best Script, and Best Actress) at the Congo Filmz Awards, hosted in August 2022.

Alongside this circulation, the film has also mobilized audiences around a debate on working as a professional dancer; on the importance and real possibility of being self-sufficient as a woman; and on accessibility issues in contemporary public spaces, institutions, and societies. These are the reasons why it is possible to speak of festivals as a form of engagé mobile cinema, in continuity with the efforts by pioneering Senegalese filmmakers to bring African cinema to African audiences. This engagé mobile cinema raises awareness about key issues concerning Senegalese society and African people in the world, while promoting national and African cinema.

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64. Yoro Lidel Niang, interview by author, March 8, 2022, WhatsApp.

65. The film director was also present at the Brussels International Film Festival, on behalf of a friend, a Togolese filmmaker.
Conclusion: Boosting Circulation through Festivals

This article has offered an analysis of a key audience-centered curatorial and managerial strategy, namely, the decentralization of festival spaces. It has examined how festivals can be perceived as a form of engagé mobile cinema, in continuity with mobile cinema initiatives in the 1950s and 1960s and postindependence efforts by pioneering African filmmakers to find audiences for African cinema, as a way of decolonizing the gaze. By creating an open access crowd-sourced map of festival spaces in Senegal, I have sought to intervene not just theoretically but also methodologically, outlining the opportunities offered by data visualization methods in the production of knowledge. The ever-unfinished map boosts the circulation of words and audiovisual accounts of festival experiences by diverse participants, thus adding multiple directions in the range of journeys favored by this festival. I have specifically referred to how the decentralization of the festival spaces initiates a circuit for films screened at the festival, viewed and interpreted collectively at several venues. This favors the circulation toward festivals internationally, increased through the accumulation of awards and critics. Film is a medium embracing orality, inspiring filmmakers and scholars alike to refer to filmmakers as “screen griots,” that is, storytellers responsible for preserving and transferring heritage through the screen.66 Film festivals thus are naturally responsible for opening up spaces for the spoken word, as claimed by Amayel Ndiaye. With this article, I hope to open up further space for discussion and practice, by contributing to the circulation of the audience-centered strategy of the decentralization of festival spaces. This may not just encourage further research on festival audiences but also become inspiring, as festivals rethink their formats toward more inclusivity, diversity, and sustainability.


Figure 8. Filmmakers Yoro Lidel Niang (left) and Mamanding Kote (center) with festival director Martine Ndiaye (right), during the discussion following the first screening of La Danse des Béquilles on February 27, 2022, at the Museum of Black Civilizations in Dakar.
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Comradery and the Arts: Experiences of Senior Volunteers in a Festival City

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ABSTRACT

This research is a result of the collaborative relationship between the Creative People, Products and Places (CP3) Research Centre at the University of South Australia and Festival City Adelaide (FCA). FA manages the consortium of South Australia’s eleven major arts and culture festivals. This report examines the current literature on volunteering in the arts sector and surveys the experiences of senior members of the Festival Volunteer Network, a platform managed by FCA that connects three thousand volunteers to the eleven festivals. In December of 2021 a survey was issued to the Festival Volunteer Network. Researchers received 176 responses (n=176). The survey was comprised of both qualitative and quantitative questions. The qualitative responses were coded thematically using NVivo software. Thematic coding was applied to each question separately. In order of recurrence in survey responses, the reasons why participants volunteered were for a more immersive festival experience, to connect with other volunteers, and to give back to the sector. Challenges to volunteering for senior patrons were finding the time to volunteer more, difficult patrons, and dealing with difficult festival managers. Skills learned while volunteering fell under the categories of festival management, event-related skills, customer service skills, and communication. Most senior volunteers maintained social contacts that they made while volunteering. This project builds upon existing research on volunteer labor at festivals and offers recommendations for improving volunteer management.
Comradery and the Arts: Experiences of Senior Volunteers in a Festival City
Stuart Richards, Jessica Pacella, and Kim Munro

Introduction

This project examines the experiences of senior volunteers in Adelaide, South Australia. The research conducted in this project has been carried out in partnership with the Creative People, Products and Places (CP3) Research Centre at the University of South Australia and Festival City Adelaide (FCA). FCA manages the consortium of South Australia’s major arts and culture festivals. These festivals include the Adelaide Festival, WOMADelaide, Adelaide Fringe, South Australia’s History Festival, Adelaide Cabaret Festival, DreamBIG Children’s Festival, Adelaide Guitar Festival, South Australian Living Artists Festival, Illuminate Adelaide, OzAsia Festival, Adelaide Film Festival, Tarnanthi Festival, and Feast Festival. We examine the current literature on volunteering in the arts sector and survey the experiences of members of the Festival Volunteer Network, a platform managed by FCA that connects volunteers to the thirteen festivals. We are specifically interested in the experiences of senior volunteers. While the Australian Bureau of Statistics define a “working aged person” as between 15 and 65 years old, and thus “senior” as older than this, we chose to have the identity category of “senior” as being self-identifiable and opt-in.

Adelaide is renowned for its festival culture. Adelaide Fringe is the second-largest open-access arts festival globally, and the Adelaide Cabaret Festival is the world’s largest festival devoted to cabaret. Adelaide also boasts one of Australia’s leading arts festivals in the Adelaide Festival and one of the few WOMAD festivals in the world. Adelaide also has an abundance of community-oriented events, such as the History Festival and Feast Festival, the city’s LGBTQIA+ festival. This provides a rich environment for volunteering, which in turn offers the opportunity to build interpersonal skills and friendships as well as demonstrating a commitment to the local community. Adelaide is an ideal setting to explore the dynamics of volunteering in the festival sector. The stories provided by our survey respondents demonstrate this, whether it was helping an elderly woman find some shade on a hot day at Adelaide Writers Week or working behind the bar at WOMAD and being told by a customer that they pour a great tap beer. Camaraderie and acknowledgement are key to a fulfilling experience, even during challenging moments.

We examine motivations to volunteer and how these experiences can be better managed. Further, South Australia is an old state, with 20.1 percent of the population being over 65 years of age, which is above the national average of 17.2 percent. This positions South Australia as having the second-highest proportion of those over the age of 65. Festivals are always going to be volunteer-intensive; as such, it is imperative that we continue to better understand this demographic’s experiences.

Volunteer labor is integral to Adelaide’s festival culture. It is imperative that a welcoming, enjoyable, and safe environment is provided so that volunteers are willing to return and contribute to the sustainability of the arts sector. This research project explores how participants are ardent supporters of the arts and wish to support each other and further experience this festival culture. Volunteering is not just an altruistic act, however. Benefits need to be clearly considered from the outset of festival production. This project will thus also highlight areas where the volunteer experience can be improved in order to increase the likelihood of volunteers returning for future
festival seasons. The following literature review explores the importance of recruitment and retention as central concerns of volunteer research. We then outline our open-ended methods strategy before discussing the results of our research. We close with recommendations for those that work in volunteer management in the festival sector.

Significance of Topic

Research shows that cultural participation lessens as we age. In Australia, this decrease is represented in the data from the Australia Council's National Arts Participation Survey. The survey found that the rate of people engaged in creative participation—defined as being actively involved in the creation of any artform—decreased from 66 percent in the 15–34 age bracket to 31 percent of those in the 55-plus age bracket. The rate of those who attend live art events also decreases with age, down from 81 percent in the 15–34 age bracket to 57 percent of those aged 50-plus. The latest Australian Bureau of Statistics data on "participation rates in cultural activities" shows a similar decline, albeit with some nuance when filtered by sex. Overall, the participation rate is lowest in the 65 and over age bracket (28.2 percent), with the 55–64 age bracket the third-lowest (29.5 percent). For women, however, the participation rate rises as they leave middle age, with the 55–64 (37 percent) and 65 and over (36 percent) age brackets higher than the 35–44 (34 percent) and 45–54 (34.1 percent) age brackets. A similar decrease in both art events attendance and creative participation is also shown in studies focusing on the UK and the US. However, this decrease is not consistent across all artforms, with artforms such as reading and crafts rising in popularity among older-aged groups.

Given this decrease in cultural participation, it is no surprise that much of the literature focuses on the barriers that prevent older people from engaging with the arts. The Australia Council National Arts Participation Survey found that the main barriers preventing those 55 and over from attending live art events were "the cost of tickets," "events being too far away" and "difficulty getting to events." In their study of older people in the US, Meg Fluharty et al. similarly find that cost and transportation are the biggest barriers to arts attendance. The same study identifies barriers to participating in creative activity, including "illness and disability, living alone, lower educational attainment, ethnic minority status, and living in areas with high levels of poverty." Emily Keaney and Anni Oskala's survey of older people in the UK finds the main barriers to "arts engagement" to be "the impact of poor health" and "the lack of social networks and transport." Finally, a survey of older Romanian people finds the biggest barriers to "cultural engagement" to be "health status, living arrangements, a low level of education … economic resources available … a lack of or high costs of transportation and inadequate transportation."

When these barriers are overcome, seniors who participate in cultural activities gain a wide range of health and well-being benefits. Identified health and well-being benefits include lower incidence rate of dementia; reduced risk and slower development of frailty; lower mortality rates; fewer doctor visits and fewer falls; greater well-being; and higher quality of life. While the literature on such benefits is growing, there is comparably much less exploring older peoples' motivations for and experiences of engaging in culture. Karima Chacur, Roderigo Serrat, and Feliciano Villar write that "the voices of older people themselves are largely absent from existing research," and Kimberley D. Fraser et al. therefore call for "a more sensitive understanding of..."
the significance of arts-based involvement in later life, beyond needs for support and care. The limited research that does exist in this area shows that older people are often motivated to engage with culture for reasons other than the health and well-being benefits, such as "cultural exploration," "enjoyment, relaxation, [and] to see a specific performer or event," "challenge and achievement," and "a sense of personal and group fulfilment."

Global Context of Volunteer Research

The International Labour Organization defines voluntary work as "unpaid non-compulsory work—that is time that individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organization or directly for others outside their household." Likewise, Volunteering Australia define volunteering as "time willingly given for the common good and without financial gain." Foundational to this research is the belief that volunteering amounts to more than an altruistic act. Indeed, volunteer workers create substantial economic value, and they play a pivotal role in the festival ecosystem, as many festivals rely on their labor.

A key framework to this project will be volunteer management. Diane Zievinger and Frans Swint’s research shows that the more training and assistance a volunteer receives, the more motivated they are to return to the organization. Good management practices have a social benefit, as they strengthen the volunteer’s identity as being tied to the organization. While many frameworks for examining volunteer motivations exist, a popular one that is commonly used is from E. G. Clary et al. that lists six dimensions. These are: (1) values (i.e., altruism/selflessness); (2) understanding; (3) social; (4) career; (5) esteem; and (6) protective. Studies that utilize this framework demonstrate that the most important dimension determining whether a volunteer returns is value whereas the least important is career motivation.

Research suggests that motivations to volunteer are both symbolic and economic, where the nature of volunteering is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. The accrual of cultural and social capital is key to the volunteer experience. Beyond this, studies demonstrate volunteers’ delight in their ability to engage in noncommodified social experiences. For older volunteers, previous research shows that many volunteer to further long-standing interests or gain personal satisfaction through feeling useful. Volunteer tourism, for instance, is seen as a more authentic experience and allows for better interactions with locals. This is predominantly based upon shared value systems and the development of one’s identity, a motivating factor to engage in festival life. Through investigating the volunteer experiences of "grey nomads" at the National Folk Festival in Canberra, Anne Campbell found that the social value included "camaraderie and security in being part of a larger, supportive group, being a valued participant rather than a spectator, insider enjoyment and pride in one’s achievement." Among Campbell’s
findings, relevant to the present study is that “context, age, gender, and purpose affect the motivations of individual volunteers.”46 Ultimately, this research builds upon this existing literature on volunteer labor at festivals and offers recommendations for improving volunteer management. Here, we argue that volunteering is an integral part of the festival ecosystem. A stronger understanding of the experiences of those that volunteer will only strengthen this sector.

Recruitment

The recruitment of volunteers is an integral process of festival management. Recruiting from within existing networks/aligned professions, and using word-of-mouth strategies, is likely to be more successful.47 Further, older volunteers prefer to feel in control of, and informed in, their decision to volunteer.48 As stated above, it is important to acknowledge that many volunteers contribute their time for more than altruistic reasons, and this should be reflected in the recruitment and reward process. Some volunteer for egoistic reasons as well as altruistic,49 and both can be leveraged in recruitment marketing and retention strategies. Margaret Deery, Leo Jago, and Judith Mair note that “older [Australian museum] volunteers rated the motivation of helping people as the lowest of all the groups.”50 Regardless, “giving” is a vital aspect of the contribution made to local festivals,51 as is contributing to the “sustainability” of regional, grassroots organizations, as explored by Lawrence Bendle and Ian Patterson.52 Organizations require clearly defined recruitment and induction processes, determined in accordance with the target segment and the organization’s value proposition, to effectively integrate volunteers into the workforce. These may include decisions around the requirement for/desirability of applications, interviews, trial periods, and the associated level of formality/informality that is appropriate/desirable.53 Gesa Birnkraut finds that the needs of the institution and the volunteers must be clearly identified to improve efficiency.54 Efficiency can be improved by implementing a volunteering program structure and embedding it into the organizational structure before recruitment begins.

All festivals associated with Festival City Adelaide have some form of volunteer policy. Many policies are informed by the National Standards for Volunteer Involvement (NSVI), which offer a framework through which organizations can adapt their own policies. These standards are implemented through state bodies, and in South Australia and the Northern Territory they are deployed through Volunteering SA&NT. The eight standards pertain to leadership and management, volunteer involvement and their roles, recruitment, development, safety, and quality management.55 The National Standards abide by these principles:

- Volunteer involvement should be a considered and planned part of an organization’s strategic development, aligned with the organization’s strategic aims and incorporated into its evaluation framework.
- Effective volunteer involvement requires organizational leadership and a culture and structure that supports and values the role of volunteers.
- Volunteers have rights, which include the right to work in a safe and supportive environment with appropriate infrastructure and effective management practices.
It is ideal for festivals to have a user-friendly volunteer set of guidelines that are clearly informed by the above principles, such that volunteers have a clear behavior protocol and are promised training and the camaraderie associated with participation. Duties pertaining to each role should be clearly outlined at the outset of participation. This is an important element of volunteering, as according to Volunteering SA&NT, approximately one million active volunteers generate an overall contribution equivalent to about AUD$5 billion annually in South Australia. They calculate the “dollar replacement hourly rate figure” as AUD$45.10.

**Retention**

Keeping volunteers is an integral component to a thriving volunteer sector, as they are often organizational advocates. Understanding volunteering as a reciprocal relationship, in which motivations are constantly reevaluated, and recognizing volunteer contribution, accordingly, is vital to retention. Strategies to improve volunteering experiences include integrating volunteers into the organizational structure, with clear reporting lines—and ideally a dedicated volunteer manager—alongside an agile management plan for the organization's volunteer workforce. This is vital for the retention of volunteers. In line with this, access to sufficient, dedicated resources for managing volunteers is vital to attract, retain, and effectively deploy volunteers. Dedicating time to developing personal relationships with volunteers is critical. This personal, meaningful relationship can allow a recruit to develop into an ongoing organizational advocate. For productive volunteering experiences, tasks should be matched to the volunteer, rather than recruiting to task. Tasks should be varied, ideally providing opportunities for volunteers to develop skills, unless the volunteer is motivated by a specific, long-standing interest in one particular role. Finally, communication with volunteers around roles, expectations, and their organizational value is vital, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the retention of volunteers in the festival sector. The extent of this impact is still emerging. Across the world, events that traditionally relied on volunteers were canceled due to the pandemic. This has put "volunteering on hold in many countries as opportunities at all levels have disappeared." Cancellations included major cultural events such as the Edinburgh Fringe, as well as "a myriad of community events and festivals, all of which also were planned to utilize volunteers to a significant degree." In Australia, data tracking the number of people volunteering across all sectors showed a significant reduction due to the pandemic. Cassandra M. Chapman et al. found that 17 percent of surveyed participants were volunteering less than pre-pandemic; Nicholas Biddle and Matthew Gray found that 22.6 percent of surveyed participants had stopped volunteering altogether at some point during the pandemic; and Volunteering Australia found that over 80 percent of surveyed nonprofit organizations had stood down volunteers during the pandemic. The reduced number of volunteers is of considerable concern for the festival sector as this will likely impact the financial stability of the arts sector, particularly nonprofits. While many arts organizations have used the pandemic as a chance to make operational and governance changes, notes that organizations have been slow to find new ways to engage volunteers. While digital volunteering can be a valuable opportunity for some, the digital is not inherently accessible.
Worryingly, the data shows that volunteering is not returning to pre-pandemic levels despite easing restrictions across Australia. Biddle and Gray found that over half of participants who had not volunteered between April 2021 and April 2022 were either not very likely or not likely at all to resume volunteering in the next five years. Similarly, Volunteering Australia found that over half of nonprofit organizations surveyed between December 2020 and January 2021 reported needing more volunteers. This steep decline from pre-pandemic levels is further exacerbated by a steadier, long-term decline in volunteering numbers in Australia.

Studies have shown that being unable to volunteer due to the pandemic has affected well-being. Biddle and Gray found a gap in life satisfaction between those who were able to continue volunteering during the pandemic and those who were not, writing that "results strongly suggest that the interruption in volunteering has impacted on the wellbeing of potential volunteers." Of particular concern is the well-being of older volunteers, who risk being isolated socially without the connection provided by volunteering. Olga Lo Presti writes that "volunteer programs provide older people with an opportunity to maintain their social networks and get personal satisfaction from being active participants in culture life." As a result of the pandemic in the United States and subsequent layoffs of people who organize volunteer programs, most older people are now left with no places to socialize, share their expertise, and feel valued. Jurgen Grotz, Sally Dyson, and Linda Birt describe a similar concern in the UK: "The cessation of most volunteering activities in the UK from 16 March 2020 means that around five million older people might currently not be experiencing the health and wellbeing benefits they derived from volunteering.

The reduced number of volunteers is also of considerable concern for festivals as this will likely impact the financial stability of the arts sector, particularly nonprofits. Kara Newby and Brittany Branyon note that US nonprofits, including arts and cultural organizations, relied on volunteers to get through the financial impact of the 2007–9 economic recession, and that "this ability to utilize free labor is a strategy that many nonprofits depend on to keep their overhead low, especially during times of economic loss." However, the health restrictions of the pandemic meant that "moving toward a more volunteer-centric work force was not an option," and as a result "organizations had to either reduce services or hire some of this work out at increased expense."

Given the importance of volunteering to both individual well-being and organization stability, literature has focused on ways of re-engaging the volunteering in ways that acknowledge the continuing threat of COVID-19. The Volunteering Australia survey found that the biggest priority for organizations was "re-engaging and recruiting volunteers." Tom Baum et al. say that organizations’ ability to do so will depend on their "volunteer resilience," described as "the ability of volunteer communities to absorb and recover from these shocks, whilst positively adapting and transforming their volunteering structures and means for delivering volunteering activity in the face of uncertain impacts of stresses." The most frequently discussed transformation is "virtual volunteering," in which volunteers’ tasks are moved online. However, some studies have found that the satisfaction gained from volunteering is reduced when conducted virtually. Any major transformation to volunteering operations, including but not limited to a move to virtual volunteering, will put additional pressure on volunteer managers and may require additional human resources.
Methods

In December of 2021 a survey was issued to the Festival Volunteer Network (FVN). Researchers received 176 total responses (n=176). While the survey was conducted, there were 2,850 members signed up to the FVN. Although our sample size is small, we were only targeting senior volunteers, and the FVN encompasses a broader cross-section of the South Australian community. The survey was comprised of both qualitative and quantitative questions. Participants were asked for text-based responses to the following: Why do you volunteer? What are the most challenging things about volunteering? What have you learned while volunteering? Do you maintain friendships/contacts with those you have met while volunteering? Participants were offered a 1–100 scale (Never/Sometimes/Always) as an indication to the following prompts:

- “I feel more socially connected when I'm volunteering”;
- “My overall sense of well-being improves when I'm volunteering”;
- “Free access to festivals is a major reason why I volunteer”;
- “I feel adequately compensated for my volunteering”;
- “I feel adequately prepared and supported to conduct my volunteering duties”;
- “I think the FVN should provide free training and skills-building relevant to volunteering”;
- “The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted my decision to volunteer at a festival.”

In January of 2022 the survey was closed, and the qualitative responses were coded thematically using NVivo software. Thematic coding was applied to each question separately. Each qualitative question is discussed in the following sections below.

The survey targeted senior volunteers who were registered with the FVN. Older individuals comprise the majority of volunteers in the US and UK. According to other global research in this area, they are more likely to be over 50 and retired, or younger people; female; and part-time workers. The respondents in this survey (that is, those in the FVN) mostly conform to these global trends. Seventy-eight percent of volunteers identified as female (fig. 1; the survey offered a textbox for this response for participants to write in, rather than a check-box or drop-down option). The average age of respondents was 56. Interestingly, as figure 2 shows, while more participants were retired (32 percent) the second-largest proportion of respondents were full-time employed (28 percent). The proportions of participants who were part-time or casually employed were significantly lower (11 percent and 6 percent respectively).

51. Coren et al., “An Examination.”

52. Bendle and Patterson, “Mixed Serious Leisure.”


Results

Motivations to Volunteer

In our study, we asked volunteers why they choose to volunteer as an open-ended question. The results provided here are the percentages of references to each theme that arose in the responses. While altruistic reasons remain a popular motivation to volunteer, several other reasons became evident in our research. This finding corresponds with existing literature, which states that motivations to volunteer include more than just selflessness and are a multidimensional phenomenon.98 Still, altruistic reasons remained a key reason why senior volunteers chose to volunteer at an FCA member event. This was the third-most popular reason as to why participants chose to volunteer, with 14 percent of participants highlighting this reason. Some responses included:

- “As a musician I’m a proud supporter of the arts! It’s a great way to contribute and feel part of the community!”

- “I volunteer because I want to give something back to the community, provide some structure in my retirement life and meet people with similar interests, and because I enjoy the work I volunteer for—it makes me feel valued.”

- “Supporting the community; giving back to others who have helped me over time; using skills and experience to assist and mentor others; personal gain and feeling of well-being and usefulness; helping a wide range of ages and abilities; feeling worthwhile; following family traditions and experiences of giving back to others.”

- “Because I realize that I’m privileged—I’m an educated, white, English-speaking female living in a first world country. I like to give back to my community and support and encourage those not so fortunate as me. It’s a great way to connect with, and learn about, my community. I’ve made some lovely friends, met through volunteering.”

As Kari Jæger and Kjell Olsen have identified, volunteering allows participants to engage in a noncommodified experience and be involved in what many deemed as a deeper experience of festival and arts culture.99 This was the most popular reason as to why participants chose to volunteer, with 36 percent of participants highlighting this reason in their response:

- “Because I love the arts, yet my 9–5 job is not in any way to do with the arts. This way I get to be part of an industry I love with people who also share the same passion as me.”

- “Love being ‘part’ of the festival, the atmosphere, the shows, the installations, the whole experience.”

- “I value the arts and artists; I want to be involved and immersed in festival experiences and behind the scenes; I am considering a career in arts festival management.”

Anne Campbell found that camaraderie and feeling valued are key to a positive experience for...
senior volunteers.\textsuperscript{100} As appendix 1 shows, most respondents feel more socially connected while volunteering (an average of 81.35 percent). This sense of \textit{connectivity} was also evident in our research, with this theme being highlighted in 27 percent of responses.

- “I meet lots of new people, make new friends, and learn new skills. I can choose organizations that interest me and would benefit others. It is an experience that expands my world.”

- “I enjoy the good spirits of being with fellow volunteers and being able to assist patrons with experiences. It’s also great to be able to get a closer look at some of the installations.”

- “I love the camaraderie. I love the feeling of being part of something so special. I am privileged and it’s my way of saying thank you.”

Other reasons as to why participants chose to volunteer were a sense of \textit{fulfillment} ("To continue in my retirement to use my hard-earned skills from my career in a constructive way, which achieves much fulfilment for me") and \textit{labor}-related reasons ("Volunteering allowed me to find ongoing seasonal paid work in the arts"). Free access to festival culture was a minor reason for volunteering. When asked if free access to festivals was a major reason to volunteer, responses were notably spread out, with the average being 63.6 percent (see appendix 3). Thirty more respondents answered within each of the 40–50 percent and 90–100 percent categories.

\textsuperscript{66}. Deery, Jago, and Mair, “Volunteering for Museums.”


\textsuperscript{68}. Baum et al., “Future of Volunteering,” 504.

\textsuperscript{69}. Ibid.


\textsuperscript{71}. Chapman et al., \textit{Generosity in Times of Crisis}, 10

\textsuperscript{72}. Biddle and Gray, “Volunteers and Volunteering,” 6.

\textsuperscript{73}. Volunteering Australia, \textit{Re-engaging Volunteers and COVID-19}, 2021, 3.

\textsuperscript{74}. Biddle and Gray, “Experience of Volunteers”, Guillaume

\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{motivations_to_volunteer.png}
\caption{Motivations to volunteer. Respondents: 175.}
\end{figure}
Challenges to Volunteering

Addressing challenges to volunteering is key to high retention rates. The primary difficulty faced by participants is time management, with 32 percent of respondents highlighting this theme after being asked an open-ended question about the challenges that they face in volunteering. This involves balancing volunteer hours around paid work and their desire to see other events during the festival.

- "Having enough time to volunteer and then go to a performance that I have booked for in that festival."
- "It was easier to contribute when I was part-time, but now that I work full-time, it can be hard to accommodate—especially when shifts are snapped up so quickly."

The second-highest challenge for volunteers (around 20 percent) revolved around the general theme of festival conditions. This involved extreme weather and mundane tasks:

- "Working outdoors when the weather is very hot, and when shade and seating is unavailable (e.g., when there is a popular speaker ... drawing a large audience that exhausts all possible seating and shade—leaving the volunteer standing in the hot sun)."

Pertaining to this second subcategory, existing research into festivals supports this finding, where varied tasks that allow for volunteers to develop skills are ideal.101

Third, difficult patrons were a notable challenge, with 19 percent of respondents citing this theme. For a small number of respondents, dealing with crowds is a particular challenge, with one respondent saying that "people" were the key challenge, as they are "not an extrovert, and large crowds make [them] a little anxious." Many participants that fell into this category identified rude and difficult patrons as a challenge:

- "Keeping 'cool' with rude people."
- "People who decide that it is easier to air their grievances to a volunteer rather than go to the trouble of contacting the right area. They prefer us to 'pass it along.'"
- "I have usually had a good experience, although sometimes dealing with upset patrons can be challenging, I manage OK, as I have a background in customer service, but have seen others struggle without much support."

Another notable challenge identified by participants was feeling mistreated by paid festival staff and management (14 percent). As research shows, taking care to develop personal relationships with volunteers is critical.102

- "Sometimes the staff managing an exhibition/location are not that friendly. They often ask you to do tasks that they themselves are not doing or while they are standing around chatting... I would say my biggest hesitation with volunteering is the staff."
Some respondents indicated that they feel underutilized by venue coordinators:

• “Lack of direction from festival management. Sometimes they are unsure what to do with volunteers. They feel they need volunteers but don’t know why. Staff that use volunteers to do the ‘donkey work’ that they don’t want to do or feel it is below them to do. Sometimes feeling that volunteers are unappreciated regardless of the lip service by some festival directors.”

An interesting contradiction developed in our research, however. While 14 percent identified festival management and staff as a challenge to deal with, appendix 5 shows that 82 percent of respondents feel adequately prepared and supported to conduct their volunteer duties.

Final themes in responses related to practical matters. Twelve percent of responses identified transport, particularly around public transport, and parking. Three percent of responses identified police checks as being time consuming and costly.

Skills Learned While Volunteering

The development of skills was often perceived as its own reward when volunteering. When asked whether Festival City Adelaide should offer skills development workshops, responses were mixed (see appendix 6). Robert Stebbins defines this as a form of self-actualization. When asked an open-ended question about the skills acquired while volunteering, the most popular thematic response that arose in the coding was festival management. Forty-seven percent of responses included examples such as queue management (in food and beverage areas, site entry needs), flows of foot traffic, site layout, waste management protocols and best practice, legal policies, and leadership skills. This is an outcome that coincides with Bendle and Patterson’s research on volunteers in amateur arts organizations. Clary et al. also identified this as a key motivator for...
Additionally, given the often intense time-pressure nature of festival management, being able to “get things done” and broad problem-solving capacity were also seen as important (and acquired) skills for volunteers in terms of festival management.

• “I have learnt about legal matters; about how policies work and how to embed them into general workplace; have learnt management and leadership skills.”

• “You learn a lot about temporary installation and safety procedures.”

• “Have learnt about the behind-the-scenes component of major arts events (e.g., the organization, the planning, the resources, the team commitment).”

• “I learnt more about what goes on behind the scenes at a festival or a big production and that helped me prepare better for when I need to organize my own productions.”

Several participants, 14 percent of responses, also commented on the range of customer service/social skills that had been acquired as part of their volunteering experiences and the wide array of roles in which these skills were deployed within the festival environment. These included answering questions at information booths, answering phones, assisting attendees with ticketing queries, and assisting artists/performers during rehearsals with check-ins.

• “People skills or soft skills, like active listening, managing awkward situations, resolving conflict, supporting team members”

• “I have learned how to interact with complete strangers better!”

Eleven percent of the participants in this study commented upon improvement more broadly in communication skills:

• “I credit volunteering to having developed my communication skills, which is a critical skill to learn when you’re an adult!”

• “How to work with a variety of people. Talking to members of the public.”

• “Sound problem-solving skills, conflict resolution, the art of giving constructive feedback.”

• “To maintain my people skills because my positions in employment have mainly been focused in that area.”

Point-of-service (event/employment related) skills were cited by 28 percent of respondents. This is distinct from festival management skills because there are fewer macro-organizational skills required:

• “My roles have mostly been serving alcohol to customers, which has led to employment in that field. I have also chosen to work selling merchandise, which gave me experience to work for some events and musicians. Occasionally I choose roles in the family zones because I


95. Kulik, “Multifaceted Volunteering”; Sun et al., “Older Adults’ Attitudes.”


98. Toraldo, Contu, and Mangia, “Hybrid Nature of Volunteering.”

enjoy working with children."

- "Pouring a tap beer, using a cash register, memorizing useful locations in Rundle Mall for tourists and locals and gaining knowledge of local and SA tourist venues and activities."

- "I have learned a wide range of skills such as problem-solving, customer service, radio use, and performing as a volunteer, which have helped me in my paid work in many industries."

- "I have developed great bartending skills while volunteering and this has led to occasional paid work at festivals."

It is important to note that the learning of new skills is not an aspiration that is confined to younger demographics. In a study on museum volunteers, Deery, Jago, and Mair found that with those that have a long-standing interest in a particular subject matter, learning new skills is a key motivator. They also note that "this group may prove to be the more difficult of the older volunteer groups to manage. This is because they are motivated by what the museum has to offer regarding exhibitions." Thus, it is important to take care when providing these volunteers with duties to complete. An awareness of the required skills to complete required roles is also important. This will allow for a more fulfilling experience.

Social connectedness

The relationship between volunteering, well-being, and social connectedness cannot be understated. This is especially the case for older volunteers, for whom the benefits of volunteering include better cognitive, emotional, and physical effects as well as increased social integration. Increased social integration has been shown to have wider implications, such as reducing the mortality risk of older volunteers. While volunteering increases a sense of well-being, Coren et al. note that volunteers often possess a higher sense of "subjective well-being" than those in a similar demographic and that this only increases through the experience of volunteering at a festival. While volunteering has tangible social benefits for older volunteers, the literature also suggests that those drawn to volunteering are also more socially connected

Figure 5. Skills learned from volunteering. Respondents: 166
and from higher occupational classes.\textsuperscript{110} Having said that, while there are several factors which motivate someone to volunteer, meeting people and making friends is one of them.\textsuperscript{111}

In our study, we asked whether the volunteers maintained the friendships and social connections with people they had met while volunteering. Once again, this was an open-ended question. Fifty-eight percent of those surveyed replied positively and 32 percent were neutral, with qualitative responses indicating that for some volunteers the connections extended beyond their volunteer roles, while for others, they were limited to the time spent volunteering.

Evidence of long-lasting friendships can be seen in the following response from volunteers that were surveyed:

- “I have developed and maintained several friendships with other volunteers, and some local and international artists. One in particular where my wife and I have developed a close friendship with both him and his wife that has resulted in travelling within Australia and internationally over the past six years.”

Other responses indicated that the opportunity for meeting like-minded people was one of the key benefits of volunteering:

- “This has been one of the highlights of volunteering! For example, I met a lady at the [festival] volunteer induction who had only just moved to Adelaide and it turned out we live in the same suburb. We have similar interests and continue to catch up—we’ve gone to shows together, caught up for dinner, etc.”

- “Some people are still my close friends, whereas others are lovely to see whenever we bump into each other. It’s lovely getting to know people in the performing arts industry on a personal and professional level.”
The data in the survey also suggests that repeated occurrences of volunteering increase the likelihood of deeper connections. For others, however, as festival volunteering is an annual event, and involves busy schedules, it is harder to maintain connections:

• “As an annual event it’s not so easy to develop and maintain friendships. In comparison I have a group of eight people from the RAH [Royal Adelaide Hospital] with whom I have connected and formed a strong friendship group. This is different as we see each other every week.”

• “Unfortunately, I haven’t done so far as you don’t always have overlapping shifts with people. I would love to have that, though!”

• “Usually, it is a roster of random opportunities, so volunteers appear/disappear without introduction. Schedules can be intense and free time is limited.”

However, multiple opportunities for volunteering across festivals further strengthened the ability to maintain connections:

• “Because I have volunteered for multiple festivals, I have got to know several regulars, which increases the sense of community.”

Events hosted by the volunteer network were seen as beneficial in helping to foster ongoing connections, as reported by one volunteer:

• “This is one of the reasons social events sponsored by the volunteer organization [are] so valuable. It enables us to meet others and to share stories and experiences.”

Many of the survey respondents who answered neutrally, and were less likely to form friendships beyond their volunteering roles at the festivals, still enjoyed connecting with familiar faces in the following years. In response to the question of maintaining friendships, respondents answered:

• “Seeing the same people over the years and at different festivals has made me feel like they are friends.”

• “Not really but it is always nice to see them again at the next season.”

Although the survey showed a wide range of responses to the question of maintaining friendships and connections with fellow volunteers, responses did indicate positive attitudes toward volunteering as a vehicle for social connectiveness.

**Conclusion**

We offer several recommendations in consideration of the above data. Organizations can host volunteer-appreciation events that enable volunteers to bring guests; such events can assist in recruiting more supporters\(^{112}\) and provide additional opportunities for volunteers to socialize together.\(^{113}\) Again, if aggregated, this may be facilitated as a cross-festival recruitment tool.
Rewarding volunteers with access to public events and exclusive activities is likely to be welcomed, as is the provision of identifiable collateral visibly associating volunteers with each festival. For older volunteers, personal recognition, such as service awards, is key. Festival City Adelaide could facilitate aggregated/state-wide volunteer awards to recognize and celebrate regular volunteers. Since many volunteers contribute their time for more than altruistic reasons, tangible benefits should be clarified in the recruitment process.

Feedback is integral to improving the experiences of future volunteers. Anonymous surveys are one method to elicit this feedback. This would allow for festivals to engage in a form of self-assessment and to meet the National Standards for Volunteering, wherein “volunteer involvement is regularly reviewed in line with the organization’s evaluation and quality management frameworks” and “opportunities are available for volunteers to provide feedback on the organization’s volunteer involvement and relevant areas of the organization’s work.”

This would allow for regular feedback on volunteer experiences, such as those contained in these results.

Festivals are heavily reliant on volunteer labor. As such, respecting this labor is integral to the sustainability of the arts industry. As is evident in this research, senior volunteers are passionate about the arts and the festival environment of the festival and arts sector. Notably, in our research, as is evident in appendix 7, respondents’ attitudes were quite mixed toward volunteering despite COVID-19. When asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 100 regarding the degree to which COVID-19 impacted their willingness to volunteer, the average response was 43.5 percent. While this is not negligible, it is evident that there is still a willingness to support the sector in the form of volunteering. It is important, then, that the needs of the volunteer cohort are met. Their experience while volunteering is key here, as most respondents already feel adequately compensated for volunteering their time (see appendix 4). As this research demonstrates, this experience is the strongest reason for volunteering. For many of the respondents, volunteering improves their sense of well-being (see appendix 2). Even though many responded that they get nervous when dealing with strangers or putting themselves out there, they nevertheless do so for several reasons, such as supporting cultural events, having deeper experiences of the arts, or meeting like-minded others. Continued skills development of both the volunteers and those that manage them works to strengthen retention in this sector.

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Appendix 1: Social Connection and Volunteering

Appendix 2: Well-being and Volunteering
Appendix 3: Festival Access and Motivations to Volunteer

Free access to festivals is a major reason why I volunteer

Appendix 4: Compensation and Volunteering

I feel adequately compensated for my volunteering
Appendix 5: Festival Volunteering and Support

I feel adequately prepared and supported to conduct my volunteering duties

Appendix 6: The Festival Volunteer Network and Training

I think the Festival Volunteer Network (FVN) should provide free training and skills-building relevant to volunteering duties
Appendix 7: Festival Volunteering and COVID-19

The COVID19 pandemic has impacted my decision to volunteer at a festival.
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Stuart Richards' research focuses on screen-based creative industries and queer screen media. His first monograph, *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn & Politics* (2017), was published as part of Palgrave Macmillan's Framing Film Festivals series, which looks at the queer film festival as a social enterprise and its growth in the creative industries. He has also published in journals such as *Senses of Cinema, New Review of Film & Television, Media International Australia, and Studies in Australasian Cinema*, and in emerging publications such as *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture*.

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HOW TO CITE

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WHERE YOU ARE
by Aydin Quach
Images by Timothy Nguyen
Photography

Community and Space Making through Shuffle Circles at EDM Events
This article uses the author’s auto/ethnographic experience while participating in a shuffle circle to interrogate the stakes at play when a shuffle circle and a community are created at an electronic dance music (EDM) event. Shuffle circles develop as a method of understanding the porosity of community building and as a space in which individuals can learn to feel and sense “the vibe” of others and themselves. Methods of interpreting the energy flow between participants or “the vibe” are discussed and instances in which the energy changes and is redirected are highlighted not as points of weakness in community but as opportunities to strengthen and reimagine “the vibe.”

Keywords
Raves, Electronic Dance Music, Music Festivals, Cultural Studies, Dance, Shuffle
Foundation takes place in the PNE Forum, a warehouse-style building in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
Do you dream alone
Under the moon?
Is it brighter, brighter
When I’m with you
Is the afterglow strong enough?

— “Where You Are” by John
Summit & Hayla (2023)
This reflection piece builds off my auto/ethnographic experiences at Foundation, a local electronic dance music (EDM) event in Vancouver, Canada, that pays homage to a key chapter in EDM’s “foundation,” house music. New sounds featuring the Roland TR-808, a drum machine that became popular and affordable in the late 1980s, were the focal point of house music, and the Warehouse was a Chicago, Illinois, club that pioneered its popularity with Frankie Knuckles as its resident. The Chicago-based music grew to influence and define much of the music heard at raves today.

Shuffle circles are communal spaces forged amid the chaos of a rave. Ultimately, they foster the ability to feel the wavelengths of others, and from an academic viewpoint, their existence could be viewed as a unique method of understanding community building in and beyond the
dance floor. I experienced my first shuffle circle on February 19, 2023. Text below set off as block quotations represents my own journaling and storytelling of the experience. My writing weaves in and out of this personal narrative and my academic musings.

Early into the evening, I slipped through the dense, packed crowd. Nora En Pure, a South African Swiss DJ was beginning her set and the stage lights started to sparkle and dance. Her DJ sets and visuals are known to be inspired by the ocean and her work as a scuba diver.

Swimming through and treading around people, I made my way to the center of the venue where I was squished, heated, and compressed by a sea of bodies bobbing up and down.

An hour went by, and my friend Ryan texted me. “Come to the back [of the venue], we are making a shuffle circle.” Both Ryan and I are part of a local Vancouver dance collective called YVR Shufflers, which is an online Facebook group that promotes community meet-ups and allows for more experienced dancers to teach newer members the popular rave dance known as shuffling. Shuffling is a dance style built around the “running man” and the “t-step.” Reading Ryan’s text, I dove through the ocean of people to the back of the dance-hall and was surprised to see that a cluster of people had been able to make a clearing amid the jam-packed floors. Here, you can feel the cool breeze of the evening from the gate. Every person brought their own glowstick and linked them together to form a giant circle. “Don’t worry, I brought you one,” Ryan told me. He handed me a glowstick and invited me to add mine to the chain. Placing the circle on the floor, finally the shuffle circle was assembled.
The crowds at Foundation.
FIG 3.

Nora En Pure at the helm.
A dancer flowing to the beat of the music.
I had never participated in a shuffle circle before. This was also my first time seeing one. I suspect it is because there are never enough people to make them. This shuffle circle was made possible because of a local online group – a community that wanted to be displayed within a physical space and with the literal construction of a circle. Performance studies scholar Kemi Adeyemi notes, in her work on the specificity of community organizing in nightlife culture, that “this movement could only happen here because of this party.” Intimate moments such as the shuffle circle echo these sentiments.

I unpack and untangle assemblage of community and space through the creation of shuffle circles. In examining the construction of shuffle circles, I highlight lifeworlds on the dance floor – communities that are life giving and life sustaining to those who embrace its energy. Lifeworlds, as defined by the late critical refugee scholar Y-Dang Troeung, capture methods of thinking, sensing, and imagining that cannot necessarily be captured.

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Adeyemi, Feels Right, 7.
through traditional methods of archival research but must be felt.  

Perhaps in a similar vein to Adeyemi’s discussion of queer Black life, lifeworlds can only become apparent once you take out the noise, attune yourself to the music, and “punch a hole” through the blanket of a crowded rave.  

Thinking within the physical shuffle circle, “the vibe” and invisible flow of energy, the dancers, the observers, and then the larger rave itself, my offering is that the shuffle circle constructs a new vantage point from which to understand the porous nature of the community: “porous” in that it is public and open for invitation for people to join but also “porous” in that it is mutable and changes as people join and leave. In this texture of porosity, individuals negotiate and sustain community. The shuffle circle thus represents a crystallization and a starting point for considering how festive spaces and moments of closeness and community might offer us new insights into what it means to be present.
Are you wide awake counting the stars?
Or just lying, lying in the dark?
Uh-oh

—“Where You Are” by John Summit & Hayla (2023)
“The vibe” is a term used within electronic dance music culture (EDMC) scholarship to describe the energy flow at raves. Attempts to constitute the vibe, to name it, and to give it meaning have been perennial challenges for EDMC scholars everywhere. In its broadest terms, the vibe is, as dance music scholar Graham St John notes, “irreplaceable with words.”

Permanence scholar Alice O’Grady speaks to the importance of how the vibe escapes written words yet is also incredibly difficult to capture when located outside of words. For music journalist Simon Reynolds, it is a “sonic science” where the audience is the star from which energy is created and derived. Reynolds writes: “Each sub-individual part (a limb, a hand cocked like a pistol) was a cog in a collective ‘desiring machine,’ interlocking with the sound system’s bass throbs and sequencer riffs. Unity and self-expression fused
in a forcefield of pulsating, undulating euphoria.”¹³ Likewise, Adeyemi notes that “vibrations” in a space require an acute sense of one’s own body and energy, coupled with the energy of other bodies within the space.¹⁴ The emphasis is never just on how your body feels but rather also on how it feels in relationship to your personal perception of the environment. In consonance with these scholars, the shuffle circle represents this in a physical, tangible way. As each member adds their glowstick to the circle, they add their own personal stake to the creation of the space and to the vibe.

As I added my glowstick to the circle, I thought about the graciousness of Ryan and his kindness in offering me an extra glowstick—as a fellow body sharing his energy with me and offering a light and invitation to bring my own spark to the circle. In many ways, the glowstick was an embodiment of myself. I felt deeply attuned to the music and the way it was resonating through my body, through my bones. Like the glowstick in my hand, I felt that I too needed to bend and be flexible for the light within me to shine. Connecting my glowstick to the larger chain and circle felt like I was physically adding my energy into the creation of the shuffle circle. Putting my own glowstick into the circle also felt like my petition, or demand, to develop this space into reality. In a crowded space
like a rave, where everyone is standing nearly shoulder to shoulder, it takes a village to create a clearing safe enough for us all to shuffle without bumping or harming someone. Once I added my glowstick to the circle, the chain was handed off to someone else for them to add their glowstick. I could see my yellow glowstick sandwiched between Ryan’s blue one and the shuffle circle’s organizer’s green one (the organizer for the night’s event was “Turtle”). I felt the need to dance and move to let myself shine like my glowstick in the circle.
FIG 5.

“Turtle” all lit up with glowsticks.
Mixed emotions
Hearts still open
Though we’re far apart
I get this feeling
I wanna be where you are
I wanna be where you are
I wanna be where you are

— “Where You Are” by John Summit & Hayla (2023)
With the circle on the ground, the shuffling began. Ryan and Turtle entered the circle first and eyed each other down, each showcasing how they interpreted the beat and the vibe of the music. Then slowly, and almost psychically, they started shuffling together, trading steps, and working collaboratively as the music passed through them and into the soles of their shoes. The light of the glowsticks on the ground marked the space they shuffled as sacred. The other shufflers, including myself, stood on the side and brought out our hand fans and started fanning and cheering them on. Eventually, Ryan and Turtle started making eye contact with those of us standing outside of the circle, seeing who would fill the void if they were to step out. Eventually, they both locked eyes with Adriana, a dance and shuffle instructor from Abbotsford and the “mother” of YVR Shufflers, and she nodded and entered the circle. She started introducing her own steps and stylizations, and Ryan and Turtle started to sync up and try her moves. After a bit of joint shuffling, Ryan and Turtle hopped out of the circle and Adriana stole the show. This process of passing the spotlight through acknowledgment as well as a melding of shuffle styles before passing the baton repeated itself over and over again. This was the magic of the glowstick circle we created. In the circle, we spoke using our bodies in “kinesthetic grammar.” The thin fragile fluorescent tubing on the ground was how we made our space to share and create something new.
FIG 6.

Adriana dancing the night
The term “kinesthetic grammar,” as I articulate it, has less to do with how the body is legible to the outsider and more to do with how the body makes itself visible to those within the group. It is further empowered through synchronicity with the vibrations of the community as a whole. It is a wordless, ethereal vitality that skirts just between the photons of light and the sweaty bodies: life giving and life sustaining. It is, in part, a method of answer to performance studies scholar Diana Taylor’s query about “what is at play” beyond the corporeal, the energy, the humor, and dexterity of the performer.15 To whom are the performers performing? What is at stake for the spectator? Here I take the sensorial experience of dance as the language to which the performer translates the vibe legibly and invites us to experience the vibe as they see it, before gently passing off and acknowledging a new interpretation of the infinite energy of the rave (or as Taylor notes, the “act of transfer”). Every kick, jump, spin, and flourish the performer does informs us, the spec-

tator, of how the performer interprets the music and our presence. The invitation to model and try shuffling their way before allowing for a new interpretation to enter the shuffle circle demonstrates that within this construction of “fun” there is an ethics of care built into how the vibe must be held by every member of the community. You must hold space for others and the way they vibe before you can invite someone to see the world as you see it.

The interplay of introducing an interpretation, followed by a countersubject, and then cycling back and forth between members in a circle is perhaps akin to a fugue in the realm of music. That is, each introduction of an interpretation must, in some capacity, pay homage to what came before it. Operating in the “minor key” of cultural studies and learning to be attuned to the notes being played as well as to the way dance is making a performer feel are thus integral to the experience of the new, incoming performer and the spectator. The small snapshots of a smile, a wink, or a flamboyant flick of the wrist provide the
necessary transcript to interpreting “joy” and possibly seeing the body as an arena of symphonic euphoria.

The fragility of the glowsticks reflects the careful construction and the embodied nature of creating a shuffle circle. This echoes what musicologist Luis-Manuel Garcia has noted as the brittle and temporal nature of the vibe.¹⁶ The vibe is special, is temporary, and must be constantly tendered by those who create it. I reflect back on the moment during the shuffle circle:

I was just returning with a bottle of water for Ryan who was drenched in sweat when I saw that a new person entered the shuffle circle who was not from within our group and was not following the careful protocol of gaining permission to enter the circle. In a way, they brought their own interpretation of the vibe into the space. They stumbled into the circle, nearly tripping on the glowsticks on the ground, and started bumping into people within the circle. They were promptly escorted out of the circle by Turtle, who was kind enough to sit the individual down and ask if they needed water. In the process of leaving the circle, the individual broke the physical shuffle circle. Ryan and Adriana quickly went over to fix the break by reattaching the broken link in the circle and to check if anyone was potentially hurt from the bumping and bashing instigated by the intoxicated individual.

The vibe can be transferred during a brief moment when eyes connect, when bodies touch, or when the concussive beat of the music resonates through your body.
This delicate method of care demonstrates the continual cultivation the vibe requires. It also shows the porous nature of community, as someone can easily enter. What the community does in response to this porosity can determine how the vibe can shift and transform. The stranger’s offering to the shuffle circle and people’s interpretation of the shift in the vibe were further supported by the incorporation of this new offering by the stranger and transformation into something new.

Later, after a short break, I saw Turtle return with the intoxicated individual and invite them formally to try shuffling with us and enter the circle. I observed Turtle teaching them the basic “running man” step and introduce this new person into the group. I also saw Adriana jump in and teach them a few more advanced steps and also guide them into understanding the beat. “Close your eyes. Do you feel the way the music vibrates through you? Let it take you where you need to go. We can do it together.”

In many ways, Turtle and Adriana’s choreography of care and support resonates with Adeyemi’s notion of choreographies of support from those within a communi-
ty who help others join in and teach each other about their bodies. It perhaps also is harmonious with the idea of “attuning” one’s body with one’s feelings and the vibe and with others in a constructed space, as performance studies scholar Alexandra T. Vazquez notes in The Florida Room. I also see this as echoing the observations made by Adeyemi in her analysis of the hip-hop cypher where a “bad dancer” finds themselves in a reciprocal position feeding off the energy of being the center of attention. Adeyemi notes: “a cypher is successful when there is equal participation in the (unwritten) rules of the social norms of the gathering and the exchange it fosters.” In the shuffle circle, this cypher happened between the newcomer and Turtle and Adriana, the group of them working together to inject new energy into the vibe.

Eventually, everyone started to shuffle again. In fact, some new individuals were curious by Turtle teaching shuffling, so they also joined in on the lessons. In synthesis, and with leadership, Adriana and Turtle led people into bringing in the stranger’s vibe and helped add something
new into the shuffle circle that was never there before.

In this specific case of the shuffle circle, not only is the community porous but it also stands to benefit from this porosity to grow and fortify itself. By bringing this new shuffler into the fold, the community continued to expand the circle and overall enjoyment of the event. It also helped set a precedent on how to respond when a new individual enters the circle. By sharing this space with “newbies,” more and more people become invested in the shuffle circle and see the importance of its protection.
Through the shuffle circle, more and more people are invited to join and create community, strengthening yet also changing what was already there.
FIG 9.
After the rave, there is hugging and lots of chatter about seeing each other at the next shuffle meetup, as well as checking in with each other about life, work, kids, etc. Feeling right feels remarkably ordinary in some ways as well. As I conclude my reflection, I turn to my own gut thoughts about why the shuffle circle even matters at all. In crowded venues of raves, the shuffle circle acts like a clearing to which we can take a breath and recalibrate ourselves not just to the music but also to each other. The shuffle circle reorients how we consider a festive space by taking the focus of energy away from facing a stage toward facing each other in a circle. The headlining artist matters little. The real headliner is us. More important, the shuffle circle makes me feel something. To say it feels “good” might be a bit too centered on my own experiences. It feels right in that everything has lined up perfectly: the
space we have created as a group, the music in our bodies, and the way together we translate the music into footwork as if in perfect harmony. As a developing, junior researcher, I have struggled with the research of “fun,” often deemed unsubstantiated or perhaps too shallow of a form to be considered for academia. In many ways, watching and participating in a shuffle circle has taught me much about how even the concept of “fun” is incredibly labor intensive. Fun is born of intension in tension. In looking at the labor of folks like Ryan, Turtle, and Adriana, a clearer picture can be drawn about the hard work it takes to make space for fun. This momentum is built through studying the shuffle circle and is thus a disruption from how we might classically analyze bodies in movement as well as nightlife spaces on the whole. In punching a circle into a rave space, we can see how negotiations of community are translated and communicated through kinesthetic grammar.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Aydin Quach (he/they) is an MA student in the Department of History at The University of British Columbia. His research deals primarily with sex, gender, race, and sexuality in the transpacific, with a particular focus on the queer Asian diaspora and queer nightlife. His work is guided by pleasurable objects of analysis (music festivals, fetish wear, sexuality) and their illustration of queer Asian or “Gay-sian” lifeworlds in diaspora across the Pacific Rim.

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REVIEW


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A line from St. Augustine’s Confessions, “Vera tu [domine] et summa suavitas” (You [Lord] who are the true, the sovereign joy), which Miguel Valerio found after coming up with the title of his book, sheds light on the two main concepts through which Sovereign Joy explores Afro-Mexican kings and queens in New Spain’s festive culture. The book focuses on three events in Mexico City that featured performances by Afrodescendants: the 1539 celebration of the Truce of Nice; the 1610 festivities for the beatification of the founder of the Society of Jesus, Ignatius of Loyola; and the dances that accompanied the arrival of the new viceroy, don Diego López Pacheco Cabrera y Bobadilla, in 1640. According to Valerio, these festive practices constitute an avenue to capture Afro-Mexicans’ political agency, since he views performance as a body language that allows Afrodescendants to articulate a “discursive sovereignty,” that is to say, the capacity “to tell ourselves and others about ourselves” (p. 11). In this sense, the joyful dimension of Afro-Mexicans’ festivities—achieved through the use of dance and music and the display of sumptuous paraphernalia—is more than an expression of mere emotion but is rather conceived as a means of increasing “one’s power to affect and be affected” (p. 13).

These lines of interpretation might seem surprising in a context characterized by unequal power relationships between enslaved Black peoples and owners, the emergence of a racialized discourse on Blackness, and the growing criminalization of Afrodescendants in the governance of New Spain. But Valerio takes these factors into account in his analysis, especially in chapter 2, which focuses on the supposed 1608–9 and 1611–12 Black conspiracies against the Spaniards. He convincingly shows how the fear of Black rebellions led the colonial authorities to mischaracterize Afro-Mexicans’ festive customs and to unleash a fierce repression against the alleged conspirators. One of the book’s challenges consists precisely in unraveling the contradictions of imperial rule and highlighting how Afro-Mexicans took advantage of interstitial spaces to negotiate their position in the urban context of Mexico City.

To do so, Valerio bridges the gap between two types of sources, celebratory and accusatory texts, which have been treated separately in historiography. Within the first category falls chapter 201 of Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España (ca. 1575), the anonymous “Relación de las fiestas insignes” (1610), and Festín hecho por las morenas criollas de la muy noble muy leal Ciudad de México (1640), written by the secular cleric Nicolas de Torres, who also composed the Latin texts that accompanied Black women’s dances. The second one consists of the audience’s “Relación del alzamiento” (1612), and the letters to Philip III authored by the magistrate López de Azoca. Maybe more importantly, Valerio makes use of what he calls a “diasporic approach” in order to fill the multiple lacunae and silences of the colonial archive in which Black voices are largely absent or misrepresented. The book therefore

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establishes a constant and fascinating dialogue with scholarship on the Black Atlantic, which finds its justification in Afrodiasporic experiences across Africa, Europe, and America.

This approach allows Valerio to incorporate in the analysis a wide range of textual and visual sources, especially from sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Iberia, Kongo, and Brazil, which not only sheds new light on Afro-Mexican festive culture but also inserts New Spain into the Black Atlantic. In this sense, Sovereign Joy makes a major contribution in showing the central role that Mexico City played in shaping Afro-American history and cultural development, without disregarding local specificities. The insertion and analysis of a significant number of illustrations is worth emphasizing since, following Diana Taylor, Valerio views performance as a “nonarchival form of knowledge transfer” (p. 14) that visual sources can help unravel.

The book includes an insightful analysis of how Afro-Mexicans’ confraternities, or lay Catholic brotherhoods, were pivotal in socially and materially supporting Afro-Mexican festive kings and queens. Valerio traces the roots of this tradition back to early modern Iberia and their role in taking care of the sick and dying, in supporting Black litigants in court, and, more broadly, in negotiating Afrodescendants’ Catholic identity and defining the contours of their political agency. But Valerio also makes a necessary detour to Kongo to explore the African precedents of Afro-Mexican festive culture. In this sense, he makes a point of showing how the Kongolese royal pageantry and the sagamento, an African martial dance, bore the marks of contact with Portuguese material and political culture as well as Christianity. According to Valerio, then, these precedents might have inspired Afro-Iberians and merged with Moorish and Christian battles and European carnivalesque inversions before being refashioned in Mexico City.

There is little doubt that Sovereign Joy is part of the current effort to rethink the African-European encounter, as Herman Bennett puts it, “beyond that of superior-inferior power dynamic, but rather as one that entails negotiations” (p. 11). Valerio convincingly shows “how Afro-Mexicans used festive culture to navigate colonial psychosis and Iberian racial ideology to redefine their position in colonial society” (p. 125). He brings to light the paradoxes of imperial rule, and how thin the line was between what was tolerated and what was criminalized. The last chapter, focused on the discourses that accompanied the 1640 dances for the new viceroy, is particularly illustrative of the inherent ambiguities and constant tensions of Afro-Mexicans’ agency in a context marked by both structural asymmetric power relationships and cultural intimacies. How indeed to disentangle Black women’s agency and their bodies being transformed into symbols of creole identity, a claim of cultural difference and political agency on behalf of the local elite, and advice to the viceroy regarding the need to act with prudence in an unknown territory? Sovereign Joy makes a significant contribution to addressing this complex methodological challenge.
AUTHOR BIO

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REVIEW


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The 1720 Imperial Circumcision Celebrations in Istanbul offers an in-depth analysis of the sumptuous festivities and symbolic representations associated with the grand public celebrations staged by the Ottoman court to celebrate the circumcision of Sultan Ahmed III’s four sons in early eighteenth-century Istanbul. The overall period of the festival, a total of three weeks, was preceded by two months of planning by the Ottoman bureaucratic machine. Thousands of citizens from all social classes, foreign guests, courtiers, military corps, attendants, clerks, supervisors, guildsmen, religious authorities, and others participated in the festival, which took place from September 18 to October 7 at different sites within the capital and outside its walls. Thousands of boys from the city were also circumcised.

The author of the book, Sinem Erdoğan İşkorkutan, whose research focuses on early modern Ottoman visual culture and cultural history, has documented each of the constituent stages of the festival, the first such account in the relevant scholarly literature. She examined archival, textual, and pictorial sources, which consist of the registers of the imperial chancery and the imperial head treasurer, Vehbi’s illustrated book and Hafiz’s unillustrated book of the event, the books of previous festivals, panegyric poems, chronicles of the time, and foreigners’ accounts. Unlike previous studies, which were merely descriptive and/or focus on iconographical analyses of the paintings, she approached the sources as representations of the process of the construction of social reality. The distinctiveness of this volume lies in her analysis of the preparatory phase of the festival. İşkorkutan aims to highlight the ideological motives behind the Ottoman court’s commission of this event and the semiotic dimension of its planning, organizing, staging, and representation phases.

In order to demonstrate the complexity of this extraordinary occasion, she also describes in detail the emblematic role, social position, and tasks of each contributor. She studies how the festival reflected the Ottoman society and culture of eighteenth-century Istanbul and how the Ottoman court represented this festival. Her comparative analysis with the previous 1582 and 1675 circumcision festivals aims to better understand the continuity of this tradition and its transformations over time.

This publication contains many documents, including several lists of the people employed in preparations, parades, and spectacles; schematic and detailed tables of the items borrowed or purchased to use during the ceremonies and rituals; tables indicating the food provided at the banquets, served according to the hierarchy of the participants; a list of performers, a list of guilds, et cetera. Moreover, the text is embellished by images taken from the illustrated book of the festival, the so-called sūrnāme, a peculiar literary genre (prose or verse) to record imperial
festivals on the occasion of circumcisions, marriages, and births. Through the display of these textual and pictorial records, the author accompanies the reader in her overall conceptual framework. Her holistic analysis has the merit of covering all the aspects of the event, from its historical background to its social and political dimensions to its financial aspects.

In the introduction the author focuses on the historical context of the Ottoman court in the early eighteenth century. Ahmed III’s reign started with a deficit of legitimacy because of the 1703 rebellion of large groups of citizens including artisans, Janissaries, students, and ulema who fought against the dignitaries’ nepotism and the choice of the city of Edirne as the seat of government. The result was the return of the court to Istanbul, imperial architectural patronage, and an unprecedented number of public ceremonies as manifestations of imperial power to the end of regaining public consent. In particular, the political reason behind this magnificent festival was the recent military failure against the Habsburgs, which caused the loss of Belgrade and western Wallachia with the Treaty of Passarowitz (1718). Ahmed’s reign became known as a period of peace called the “Tulip Age,” during which the Ottomans expanded their international relations through diplomacy and trade. They opened to Western influence in social life, in the arts, and in material culture.

Previous studies underlined the new spirit and culture of pleasure and enjoyment during the Tulip Age and argued that the 1720 circumcision festival reflected this Westernization, for instance in the choice of Frankish music and the Frankish style of interior decoration. In contrast, Işkorkutan stresses the lack of a break with the past and suggests that these choices were meant to propel a political agenda with international audiences. Further, she considers the revitalization of some court celebrations, continuity with the 1675 festival in the morphology and organizational scheme of the rituals, and the revival of high-ranking elite and the dynasty’s architectural patronage. Even the commissioning of the two books to represent the 1720 festival symbolized the revival of the tradition after a one-hundred years break. Moreover, because of the military defeat, the sultan and his court had to emphasize the enduring power of the rulers and the state through the display of benefaction in the form of distribution of money, gifts, clothes, food, circumcision, and positions to thousands of people from all social strata.

The two benefactors were the sultan, Ahmed III, and his grand vizier, that is, his chief deputy, Ibrahim Pasha. Over time the grand vizier increased and consolidated his prestige through patronage and marriage, with the result of curbing the Ottoman court’s patronage/clientage. Ibrahim Pasha, as shown by his central position in the imaginery of the festival, was the real patron behind its planning and the commissioning of its illustrated books.

The first chapter analyzes the fifty-two-day preparatory stage of the festival, a process that required meticulous organization and also the involvement of citizens outside the court. It started with the appointing of some supervisors along with personnel and budget. The first appointed court official was the superintendent of the festival, and other officials were assigned the roles of supplying food products, utensils, tableware and kitchenware items, and other objects. Some clerks were appointed to register every object supplied, others the names of uncircumcised boys and the names of performers such as musicians, dancers, jugglers, and singers along their places of origin. About seven hundred performers participated on a voluntary basis although for
many others participation was compulsory. They enjoyed relative autonomy within the festival program and received daily food allowances. Other attendants worked on the configuration and decoration of festival sites. Accordingly everyone had their own task in a very organized scheme of the preparatory plan. The festival's sites were served by over five thousand attendants. Among them were cooks, barbers, and physicians temporarily employed from outside the court, and they received a daily wage.

Other citizens of the guilds and religious institutions included non-Muslims (except Jewish residents) who had the obligatory duty to supply utensils and other items, which were returned to their owners after the festival. Every loaned object was registered in a book along with the name of the owner, who received a receipt from the imperial official in charge of the utensil provisioning process. The most valued items coming from imperial treasury were for the exclusive use of high dignitaries. Within this chapter the author dedicates a very interesting paragraph to the making and the rituals of nahils and candy gardens. The nahil, literally "date palm," was a large-scale wooden pole decorated with wax, flowers, and ornaments. Forty attendants carried it through the streets during the closing procession of the festival. Supposedly the nahil embodied the protagonist of the event during the rite of passage from boyhood to manhood. The candy gardens were huge-scale architectural models made of confections and sugar paste. Considering that sugar was a luxurious, expensive product, these candy gardens represented the host's wealth and power. The less an object cost, the lower the status of the host and the prince to be circumcised.

The clerks documented every detail of the preparation of both the nahil and candy gardens, as well as their design process and construction. A superintendent and other court officials were in charge of supervising each stage of the entire project and the delivery of necessary materials. However, the few skilled craftsmen who were highly specialized in this kind of work were underrepresented in the official narrative of the festival.

In the second chapter Işkorkutan examines the staging phase of the event from a semiotic perspective, in particular three ritual aspects: the food, the gifts, and the performances. These rituals and performances were staged outside the walled peninsula in new sites instead of the Hippodrome, the major site of Ottoman celebrations where the sultan and his courtiers were secluded from the public. The choice of Okmeidani and Tersane Palace and the ways in which the sultan and his court were represented projected a new imperial imagery. A large open site designed to host a large group of spectators, the sultan's tent was surrounded first by those of the guests and the grand vizier, then the high dignitaries, the middle-ranking officials, the imperial armory, and the court units, all arranged in a hierarchical order.

The food-related events started with a bountiful banquet offered to the ruling elite and invited guests every afternoon. On the fourteenth day a banquet was offered to the citizens. During the daytime performances, honeyed water was offered to all spectators. Each night, trays of confections were offered to the members of the Imperial Council and the royal family. Daily allowances of meat and bread were provided to court officials and attendants for their services during the festival. Also, some Janissaries and other beneficiaries such as inner palace personnel, superintendents, the chief of the eunuchs of the imperial palace, and judges received
food donations. Even the sultan's grant to someone for his service consisted of food. Of course, the quantity, quality, and variety of food differed according to the individual's status. Every beneficiary and his food donation were noted in the festival registers. The central role of the food events reinforced imperial power and the hierarchical structure of Ottoman society.

The gifting ritual was another peculiar aspect of the festival. At different times of the day the sultan and the grand vizier granted gifts to the dignitaries, officials, circumcised boys, and performers, but the beneficiaries also had to give presents to the sultan as a sign of their gratitude. These gifts, which were staged publicly after the banquet, could vary widely according to social status, ranging from a few coins to luxurious robes of honor. The reciprocal aspect of the gifting ritual was a fundamental strategy of the patronage system, which followed a precise protocol. For instance, a monetary gift to a superior official was a customary practice in the Ottoman gifting system.

The third ritual aspect that the author highlights consists of the many performances enacted daily. Shadow plays, puppet shows, games, dance spectacles, fireworks, guild parades, acrobatic and jugglery shows, horse races, and music shows were presented in a certain order following a repertoire. Guild performers were unique in that their participation in the festival was not compulsory, as it was for others.

The last chapter clarifies the ways the narrative and pictorial books of the festival served as representational strategies. The court commissioned two illustrated sūrnāme copies, one for the sultan and another for the grand vizier, which present some differences in terms of size, binding, and description of the concluding scene. Unlike the previous illustrated festival books, these two manuscripts were planned simultaneously with the event, and they were commissioned and addressed to the elite by the grand vizier, who often intervened concerning the content. The author and the painter focused more on the involvement of high-ranking participants, among whom the figure of the grand vizier was prominent and more frequent than the sultan. Festival books were constitutive parts of the multilayered representation of royal and vizierial power and patronage.

In conclusion, the real strengths of this volume, which make it more original than previous studies, are its dialogue between the different sources and analysis of all stages of this festival from new points of view, including the semiotic dimension.
AUTHOR BIO

Anna Tozzi Di Marco is a cultural anthropologist whose work focuses on Mediterranean and Islamic societies. Her first long-term fieldwork, on Cairo’s City of the Dead, resulted in two books, *Il Giardino di Allah: Storia della necropoli musulmana del Cairo* (2008) and *Egitto inedito: Taccuini di viaggio nella necropoli musulmana del Cairo* (2010). Her next two books, *Un sarcofago egizio per Giuseppe Parvis* (2016, cowritten with Riccardo Manzini) and *Agiografia e culto dei Sette Dormienti nel Mediterraneo* (2023), concerned the interaction between memory, place, and identity in the Mediterranean world and beyond. She has published numerous articles in Italian and international journals and was the director of the Anankelab Publishing series Studies on Islam and Mediterranean Societies. Her latest research focuses on votive tabernacles on the island of Procida (southern Italy).

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In *Yuletide in Dixie: Slavery, Christmas, and Southern Memory*, Robert E. May, emeritus professor of history at Purdue University, proposes to dismantle a long-lasting myth about antebellum slavery: that enslaved people benefited from their enslavers’ clemency and generosity during Christmas celebrations. Southerners’ will to insist on that period of indulgence was also used as a way to distinguish themselves further from their counterparts in the North, where New England Puritans had suppressed Christmas celebrations. Repeated references in Southern propaganda to times of relief as being integral to enslaved people’s experience were intended to justify slavery as a benevolent system and give the lie to Northern abolitionist critiques before the war. After the Southern defeat, the need was felt to attenuate the harshness of the system to better portray Southerners as victims of Northern aggression. In this rewritten version of history—the myth of the “Lost Cause”—Southerners had lost their precious civilization “populated by ‘Southern gentlemen,’ ‘gracious white ladies,’ ‘Negro mammies’ and ‘unwaveringly loyal bondsmen’” (p. 6).

Robert E. May recognizes that many sources document these moments of recreation: diaries and letters not only of Southern slaveholders but also of the wives and daughters of plantation owners, travel accounts, state and local newspapers from across the Old South, national publications like the *New York Times* and *Harper’s Weekly*, runaway slave narratives, antislavery tracts, popular publications like Celina E. Means’s *Thirty-Four Years: An American Story of Southern Life* (1878), children’s literature like Louise-Clark Pyrnelle’s *Diddie, Dumps, and Tot, or Plantation Child-Life* (1882) or folk stories like Joel Chandler Harris’s *Uncle Remus, His Songs and Sayings: The Folklore of the Old Plantation* (1880), and even oral interviews of former enslaved people conducted by the Federal Writers’ Project in the 1930s. Yet this reality cannot be generalized; if it indeed happened, it is just one side of the story, and one needs to “recover the missing elements of the narrative” (p. 11). For the enslaved, Christmas also meant extra work to prepare their masters’ festivities, along with the ever-present risk of being whipped or sold.

The aim of this book is thus not only to highlight the way history has been distorted but also to denounce the “slavery-wasn’t-all-that-bad” trope that “hampers racial reconciliation today” (p. 11). Through an impressive collection of primary sources emanating from slaveholders themselves, letters, plantation journals, diaries, newspaper reports, travelers’ accounts, and fugitive slave advertisements, May reveals a very different story from the paternalist one that has been commonly told. The book claims to differ from previous studies on the subject as it depicts Christmas as a time of tension rather than compassion between the enslaved and the enslavers. It also adds new elements, with an emphasis on enslaved people’s agency, as they were not only the mere recipients of enslavers’ generosity but were active in taking advantage of their masters’ lack of vigilance to simply enjoy a moment of relief, to escape, or to foment a rebellion. The book follows a chronological progression, with five chapters on the antebellum period, one on the Civil
The first chapter, “Time and Punishment,” immediately debunks the myth of Christmas clemency as it plumbs the tension between merriment and chastisement, explicitly detailing the many instances when masters showed their power by resorting to whipping enslaved people at Christmas time. Moreover, sources seem to show that enslaved people received less free time than has been commonly thought, and because plantation owners liked to organize extravagant parties, enslaved people were expected to furnish “herculean efforts” in the preparations (p. 30).

The second chapter, “Purchased at Little Cost,” reflects on the reasons enslavers would indulge in generous behaviors at Christmas. For May, “unsentimental calculations” need to be considered (p. 57). Masters acted out of pure self-interest, delivering as gifts necessities like food or clothing that they ordinarily provided, money representing “payback for produce provided from slave plots” (p. 67), or alcohol to stave off potential discontent. May underscores the agency of enslaved people when he describes the dances they performed for their masters, through which they could transmit some ancestral West African traditions. According to him, Southerners enjoyed these performances just as Northerners relished watching minstrel shows, with both audiences “engag[ing] in ‘erotic consumption’ of ‘the Other’” (p. 74).

Chapter 3, “Human Trafficking on Jesus’s Birthday,” addresses a darker side of the allegedly joyous Christmases: “the Christmastime commercialization of slave bodies” (p. 102). Indeed, as Christmas marked the end of the year, many masters negotiated new deals that resulted in the hiring or selling of human property. Moreover, enslaved people could themselves be given as gifts and thus be separated from their families. May tells us this caused great “terror and anxiety” among enslaved people and resulted in their running away (p. 91). For instance, Harriet Tubman’s first return trip to the South in 1854 was to prevent her brothers in Maryland from being sold to the Deep South on Christmas Day.

Chapter 4, “Gaming the System,” gives us very interesting instances of Southerners’ clemency on Christmas day, “endearing display[s] of mutual adoration” that were later used in the post-Civil War romanticization of Southern life (p. 109). The Christmas Gif’ game consisted in masters and slaves competing to be the first to exclaim “Christmas Gif’” on Christmas Day, with the loser providing the winner with a small gift. For May, this ritual incarnated “a reaffirmation of master power within the context of a competitive game stacked to give slaves a superficial victory, a kind of temporary role reversal” (p. 110). In the same way, the John Canoe performance, found mostly in coastal North Carolina, in which enslaved men clothed in “exotic-looking garments and accessories made out of animal skins and rags marched . . . shouted, played music, clattered bones, hit triangles, and danced and gyrated,” gave enslaved people the feeling that they could temporarily regain some agency (p. 113).

Chapter 5, “Winters of Their Discontent,” delves into the key issue regarding Christmas clemency: the desire for rebellion. The paradox lies here in the fact that if enslavers showed some compassion by granting enslaved people some moments of relief at Christmas time, they would consequently be consumed by the fear that enslaved people would take the opportunity to plot a rebellion. As May rightly puts it, “there were no widespread southern slave rebellions at Christmas War, and the last one on the Reconstruction period.”
before the Civil War. However, white southerners had fallen into repeated panics about *phantom* Christmas revolts year after year* (p. 119). Indeed, enslaved people who were unsupervised or allowed to travel to visit friends and family were given plenty of opportunities for revenge but interestingly, they rarely revolted. Nevertheless, private letters and diaries show that Southerners were consumed by fear that they would. This is exactly the situation Jason Sharples depicts in *The World that Fear Made: Slave Revolts and Conspiracy Scares in Early America* (2020): enslavers created that fearsome environment, constraining and subduing their workforce through terror. Enslaved people feared their masters’ potential use of violence and enslavers were terrified that enslaved people would take revenge on them. That Christmas became for some synonymous with freedom, was a notion spread even by Northerners as part of their abolitionist propaganda, which depicted Christmas as more emblematic than Thanksgiving for “colored people.”

Chapter 6, “Ransacking the Garret,” digs into the celebration of Christmas during wartime. Very interestingly, May reminds us that Southerners used their Christmas celebrations—which, they claimed, were far more cheerful than in the “Puritan” North—as a justification for the war and their willingness to become independent. If they tried to continue their practice of gift-giving to maintain control over their enslaved population, the war turned Christmases into “declension rather than normality, stress rather than celebration” (p. 161). Indeed, enslaved people managed to take advantage of the wartime chaos and the presence of Union troops to escape from the plantations, to find relatives, or to join Union troops.

Chapter 7, “Sanitizing the Past,” tackles the rewriting of antebellum Christmas practices during the postwar period. Again very interestingly, while Southerners had been animated by fears of rebellion throughout the antebellum period, May explains that they “found it convenient to forget, or subconsciously repress, that they or their ancestors had feared holiday revolts in the first place. Recalling such panics would have been inconvenient in constructing the legend of the Lost Cause” (p. 198). As May explains, “legions of southern white memoirists, essayists, novelists, folklorists, children’s writers and editorialists . . . forged a genre of stereotypical slave Christmas idyls glorifying the coercive labor system that lay at the root of their antebellum society and the recent Civil War” (p. 198). If these representations prevailed well into the twentieth century, the reader may be astonished to learn that they were also spread in Northern writings, the authors of which May calls “Yankee collaborators” (p. 222), or in interviews of formerly enslaved people in the 1930s, who seemed to wish to “repress memories of slave times, including Christmas, as a kind of ‘prehistory,’ upsetting to recall much less write or speak publicly about” (p. 235).

In the epilogue entitled “Beyond the Candlelight Tours,” Robert E. May shows the legacy of these myths as shown in Southern magazines like *Southern Living* or on plantation tours. If some museum curators and plantation managers are striving to change the narrative, long-held representations will take a long time to eradicate. One must start by reading compelling works like *Yuletide in Dixie*. Indeed, the book is essential to fully grasp the current debates about the presence of Confederate symbols all over American territory, North and South. The book’s significance does not lie in its analysis of Lost Cause rhetoric—although May’s examination of the ways Christmas was romanticized is novel—but in the way it traces the origin of the Lost Cause rhetoric in slaveholders’ attempts at manipulating enslaved people during the antebellum period with pretended acts of generosity in order to ensure the latter’s loyalty and alleviate their own fears of slave rebellions. The distortion of history started then and endures to this day.
AUTHOR BIO

Anne-Claire Faucquez is associate professor in American civilization and history at University Paris 8. She published *De la Nouvelle-Néerlande à New York : La naissance d’une société escalavagiste (1624–1712)* [*From New Netherland to New York: The Birth of a Slave Society, 1624–1712*] in 2021. She works on New York’s colonial past and more specifically on the issue of race in colonial America. Her next project deals with history writing and the erasure of the history of slavery in nineteenth-century history books and textbooks. She is also interested in the commemoration and representations of slavery in public space (museums, monuments, and contemporary art).

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REVIEW


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Annette Gordon-Reed’s *On Juneteenth* is about much more than the history of, revelry during, and fun on June 19. Juneteenth started as a Texas commemoration of the day news of emancipation reached the last of the enslaved people in the South and has since grown into a federally recognized holiday. Every June 19, African Americans commemorate the end of slavery and celebrate Black history. *On Juneteenth* is a collection of vignettes ranging from the colonial period to the present, each of which explains the context leading up to the holiday or the ways its memory influences the modern day. Juneteenth is a framing device for the missing aspects of white historical memory of US history. Like Civil War historians who refocus the narrative of the war on emancipation rather than on military exploits, Gordon-Reed refocuses US history on the long struggle for freedom and civil rights but frames it through the study of festivals and celebrations.

Gordon-Reed shows how historical memory shapes individual and community identities by seamlessly transitioning between the historical and the personal, using autobiographical anecdotes as examples within her big picture analysis. She flows from recalling seeing a white man dressed as a Native American, to noting that the common memory today is that Native Americans were merely the opposition to colonists and cowboys, and finally to providing a historian’s analysis of both memories. She first expands the imagined role of Native Americans in US history to be more than a roadblock to modernity and then counters their romanticization, presenting readers with the fact that Native Americans participated in the enslavement of Black people. Gordon-Reed addresses the desire to view Native Americans and Black people as historic allies but urges readers “not to import the knowledge we have into the minds of people and circumstances in the past” (pp. 82–83). Furthermore, she explains that the historical misremembering of the past stems from a fallacious division of peoples into “white” and “not white” categories and that this division loses sight of the complexities of historical reality in order to create a historical memory that is better suited to the modern fight for racial justice. As noble as this political cause is, Gordon-Reed argues, the United States needs to acknowledge the grayness of human morality in the past to work for justice in the present.

Gordon-Reed explores the relationship between culture, race, and identity, particularly in her home state of Texas. *On Juneteenth* wrestles with seemingly conflicting truths, such as Black Texans’ dual pride and chagrin when remembering their state’s history or Native Americans as both victims of oppression and enslavers of Black people. Gordon-Reed believes that these complicated realities and the state’s racial diversity make Texas the ideal microcosm for studying the US. She explains that white historical memory is selective, focusing only on slavery’s end but reciting *ad nauseum* the glorious tale of the Alamo. The current historical memory expects
minorities not to dwell on the past, while also encouraging white Americans to memorialize events that make white people feel heroic. Moreover, Gordon-Reed emphasizes the numerous archival examples of discussions about race throughout Texas and broader US history.

On Juneteenth is an exemplary work on the relationship between memory and celebrations. Holidays are never just an anniversary of an event; they affirm a community’s values and identity through memorials and commemorations. Juneteenth marks more than just the calendar-day that emancipation reached the last enslaved people’s ears; it is a declaration that Black memory lives on despite white supremacists’ best attempts to silence it. Gordon-Reed enthusiastically engages with the contradictions of America’s historical memory and resulting identity. She presents readers both with an examination of the past and an explanation for why it continues to matter. On Juneteenth is thoughtful and thoroughly engaging. Those interested in Texas history would especially enjoy Gordon-Reed’s affection and pride for the Lone Star State.
AUTHOR BIO

Kris Plunkett is a PhD student at Tulane University. Her academic interest is Civil War memory, especially its relationships with race and epistemology. Outside of academia, she coaches the speech and debate team at St. Mary’s Dominican High School and is an active member of both the Louisiana and National Senior Classical League.

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Arguably, the celebration of life and death known as Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) has become one of the most recognizable non-Anglo holidays in the United States of America and is quickly gaining popularity around the world. In the second edition of the book *Day of the Dead in the USA: The Migration and Transformation of a Cultural Phenomenon*, Regina Marchi (professor of media studies at Rutgers University) explains that the holiday’s rise in popularity is largely due to media representation. She notes that Hollywood blockbusters, such as the *Book of Life* (2014) and *Coco* (2017), as well as the James Bond film *Spectre* (2015), have brought a greater awareness to the celebration. Interestingly enough, my first exposure to Dia de los Muertos thirty years ago was through a scene in the classic Chicano film *Bound by Honor* (1993), also known as *Blood In Blood Out*.

The book is divided into eight topical chapters, an introduction, a conclusion, notes, references, an index, a glossary, and a methodological appendix. It presents several interesting arguments, but the book’s crucial point is to explore “the political, social, and economic dynamics of Day of the Dead celebrations in the United States” for the purpose of “illustrating the complicated intersections of cultural identity, political economy, media, consumer culture, and globalization” (p. 5). In chapter 1, Marchi provides a necessary corrective on the ethnic scope of the holiday, especially as it relates broadly to Indigenous cultures of Mesoamerica and South America, and dispels the notion that this is a uniquely Mexican tradition. Chapter 2 takes a closer look at how the holiday developed in Mexico as a hybridization of Indigenous and European traditions and challenges some aspects believed to be of Aztec origin. This sets the stage for chapter 3, where Marchi’s study offers a novel interpretation, namely that the holiday’s current form “would not exist if not for the Chicano movement” (p. 7). This argument is perhaps the strongest one in the book and will be discussed further below. By employing the use of various analytical frameworks, for example, “invented tradition” and “imagined community,” Marchi adeptly elucidates the complicated history of the holiday over the last fifty years.

In chapter 4, the reader learns how the holiday morphed from its folkloric roots of honoring and remembering dead loved ones into a means of conveying pan-ethnic solidarity in a foreign and often hostile land, the Unites States. As chapter 5 points out, that cultural shift was made possible by the innovations that Chicana/o/x artists and activists introduced through their efforts to convey sociocultural and political messages in public places. This change turned the strictly spiritual tradition into a secular one that, nonetheless, retained its authenticity in the process. The remaining chapters, 6, 7, and 8, explore the role that media played in popularizing the holiday, the increased exposure of the celebration among non-Indigenous populations, and the eventual commodification of the once private spiritual tradition.
There are a few points that merit expanding upon, especially the fact that holiday owes its contemporary popularity and resurgence to the work of Chicana/o/x activists in the 1970s. For context, the Chicano movement arose in the mid-1960s and lasted roughly through the 1970s. It was defined by three main objectives: better economic opportunities, more substantial political representation, and adequate educational opportunities. The Chicano movement, or “El movimiento,” also encouraged the affirmation of indigeneity among Chicanos, and by embracing the Day of the Dead—a distinctly Indigenous tradition—artists were doing exactly that. Therein lies one of the shortcomings I found in Marchi’s work: she does not fully explore how indigeneity motivated Chicanos to pursue and embrace things like the Día de los Muertos.

Because Marchi is primarily looking at the subject through a media studies lens, she does not engage the current literature that calls into question the usage of outdated terms, such as “Mestizo,” to describe populations disconnected from their Indigenous roots. That term in particular is used excessively throughout the book and implies clear distinctions between populations that might have more in common than they appear, as the following quote succinctly captures: “Day of the Dead celebrations and other Mexican cultural activities . . . of working-class Mestizo and Indigenous Mexicans . . . reflected Chicanos’ own struggles for equality in the United States” (p. 45). A more nuanced discussion of these seemingly disparate groups would have benefited the reader by explaining the cultural and ethnic overlap among them. Nonetheless, this omission does not detract from appreciating her noteworthy excavation in other areas, such as that of “arte contestatario”—art designed to challenge mainstream racist tropes—and the fantastic work of artists like Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Tere Romo, Rene Yáñez, and Yolanda Garfias Woo.

Through the work of such artists, Marchi explores how Chicana/o/x artists countered historically negative stereotypes of Mexican Americans in the usually negative mass media environment of the United States with artistic expressions contesting political racialization through collectivist spiritual efforts. This was a period in which people of color in the US were reclaiming their cultural roots, such as language, clothing, art, music, rituals, and other ancestral traditions that had been lost to enslavement, colonization, reservation systems, and assimilation. For communities unaccustomed to seeing positive images in the media landscape, the significance of publicly honoring collective experiences and cultural traditions was transformative and empowering.

Historically, US news coverage depicted ethnic Mexicans and nonwhite Central and South Americans as lazy, less intelligent, less moral, and prone to crime. This pattern of negative representation existed in magazine, television advertising, and Hollywood films. Ethnic Mexicans were stereotyped as banditos, gang bangers, Latin Lovers, dangerous temptresses, or dim-witted buffoons, and newspaper coverage reinforced the negative stereotypes found in the “social disadvantage” framework, which depicted certain neighborhoods as cesspools of crime. The residents of those barrios were shown as lacking basic education and employment skills, and were often presented as illegitimate non-citizens. Arte contestatario worked to counteract those harmful stereotypes.

Another great point brought out by Marchi is how, before the 1970s, most religious commemorations of dead loved ones followed the Catholic All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day
on November 1 and 2, respectively. Families attended mass, placed flowers by the graves of departed loved ones, and prepared meals for family gatherings. Indigenous traditions such as “pan de muerto” (bread of the dead) and elaborate altars were relatively unknown in the US until Chicanos introduced them as they reconnected with their cultural roots. Additionally, Chicanos looked to their communities for inspiration as well and incorporated lowrider cars and Danza Azteca into their events and neighborhood parades. These and many innovations emerged as pieces of the larger contestation puzzle intended to revitalize positive cultural messaging.

To demonstrate this, Marchi details how Chicanos used the Day of the Dead to focus on social ills affecting local communities and how they connected to national and global events. The very act of remembrance was coupled with biting criticism of the dominant power structures through the creation of altar installations intended to raise public awareness of sociopolitical causes. Activities such as these expanded a tradition originally meant for memorializing relatives into one that incorporated people outside of one's own family group. Thus, from the very beginning, Chicano altar installations have commemorated political concerns that are current at any given moment. These have included the plight of farm workers poisoned by pesticides, migrants who die crossing the US-Mexico border, urban youth victimized by gangs and drugs, factory workers killed in industrial accidents, and victims of US-funded wars, such as those in Chile, Argentina, El Salvador, Guatemala, Vietnam, and more recently, Iraq and Afghanistan.

In terms of methods and research, Marchi's reliance on interviews and active participation is both the book's strength and its weakness. The inclusion of a few primary and secondary historical sources would have added some of the missing nuance to the narrative. For instance, a more thorough exploration of Aztec celebrations of the dead, such as the Hueymiccaihuitl, and how they fit into contemporary celebrations would have provided some necessary historical perspective. The book is topically organized and the chapters (some of which have been previously published as articles) can be used as standalone readings. This might explain why there are several instances of repetition from one chapter to the next. There is use of technical jargon throughout the text, but it is not excessive, does not overwhelm the reader, and the streamlined definitions will satisfy the lay person, if not the specialist.

In all, the book is a one-of-a-kind study about a holiday that has had wide-ranging appeal and continues to grow each year. As Marchi rightly notes, since the publication of her first edition in 2009, the holiday has springboarded to surprising heights and gained exponential exposure, so it is only appropriate that her second edition came out during the fiftieth anniversary of the very first Dia de los Muertos events in the US, which took place back in 1972. It is the opinion of this historian that the book is a valuable addition to scholarship relating to religion, politics, ethnic studies, and festival culture.
AUTHOR BIO

Ruben A. Arellano is an Indigenous Chicano and member of the Miakan-Garza Band of Coahuiltecan Indians of Texas. He is a founding member of Kalpulli Tonalpilli (an Indigenous Chicano community) and serves as repatriation officer for the Indigenous Cultures Institute. His community service includes serving as vice president of the Dallas Mexican American Historical League and as a founder and director of the Mexican American Museum of Texas. He holds a PhD in history from Southern Methodist University and is a faculty member at Dallas College–Mountain View Campus. His scholarship explores the history of Mexican Americans in Dallas, examines notions of indigeneity in the Chicana/o/x community, and expounds the history of the Coahuiltecan people.

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Many cultures have itinerant rituals like mumming in Ireland and England. Folklorist Steve Siporin focuses on one such ritual still prevalent in Italy, the *befanata*, which takes place on Epiphany Eve (January 5). On the evening in question, squads of performers follow a prearranged itinerary to arrive at neighbors’ houses, some as musicians and others costumed as the Befana and her family; the Befana is an old witch whose name is derived from the word “epiphany,” and the members of the squad perform songs and skits about her and her family. The visits to the households can last between fifteen and forty-five minutes, and the performers are offered drinks and food for their efforts.

Starting in 2001, Siporin spent several years observing the befanata in Pitigliano, a township in southern Tuscany, and the result is this in-depth analysis of the tradition. Divided into eight chapters, the book explores the history of the befanata, its relation to other similar traditions in Italy and elsewhere in Europe, the socioeconomic context that influenced it, and the key aspects of the ritual. Thus, while it focuses on the befanata in one small community during the brief period of several years, it provides a panoramic view that makes it relevant to the tradition throughout Italy.

Following an introduction that lays out both the tradition and the approach of the book, the first chapter is dedicated to the history of the befanata. A Napoleonic survey of Italian customs provides the earliest documentation of the custom, dating back to the first decade of the nineteenth century. While not specific to Tuscany per se, the survey depicts the befanata in a manner recognizable even today, and nearly a century later, in 1901, folklorist James George Frazer described the befanata of Rome as also relatively similar. Those texts speak of rural ceremonies of people going house to house, dressed as the Befana and her family, and singing songs that are sometimes transgressive in humor. The written record of the befanata in Tuscany, a song text, begins in 1885. The overview of the documentation indicates that the custom was widespread and stable throughout Italy, and southernmost Tuscany seems to be the area where the ritual has persisted the longest.

The second chapter examines the relationship of the befanata to other folkloric practices in Italy, such as the spring festivals of carnival and Lent. Local Italian carnivals may contain such rituals as burning or sawing in half an effigy of an old woman (*brucia la vecchia* or *sega la vecchia*, respectively), which are like the befanata in several ways: with the figure of an old woman, of course, but also with the transgressive humor of the associated skits. Nonetheless, there are also important differences between them, and it is in the third chapter that Siporin teases out those differences. There, he examines the economic system of sharecropping, *mezzadria*, that...
shaped the befanata of Tuscany. For over six centuries, the tenant farmers of Pitigliano kept only half of what they produced, paying the rest as rent to the landowners. The system of mezzadria—literally, going halves—resulted in the impoverishment of the farmers despite the relatively high production of the area. Begging days may have developed to aid those who were less fortunate; to this day, the squads avoid the homes of the poor so as to not shame them for their meager tables of food. In other words, the evolution of the befanata appears to be strongly linked to the economics of sharecropping, in that it allowed assistance to the poorer farmers of the area who could perform for nourishment.

The following three chapters, "Food," "Song," and "The Old Woman," analyze the important elements of the tradition. They highlight how, unlike other traditions, such as mumming, the focus of the performance is the music and not the skit. The squad assembles and sings outside a home before they are invited in, performing songs that can be adapted according to each family and addressing the different age groups who are present. These songs consist of repeated verbal formulas that are the hallmarks of verbal compositions, and Siporin notes that he heard almost every phrase also appear in some of the previous transcriptions; in other words, the songs are formulaic and the tradition is stable. The focus of the performance is the Befana herself, an old woman who embodies numerous contradictions; she is grandmotherly but witchlike, kindly but fearful and powerful, domestic and also a wanderer. There are numerous legends about her, including those that have entered Italian commercial culture that cast her as benevolent. In the oral tradition, however, she can intercede like a saint or help the unmarried find husbands, but she can also curse the crops. In this regard, she is more in line with the popular beliefs in Italy about the saints, being helpful and frightening at the same time.

The last two chapters address the befanata in recent decades. Chapter 7 looks at the reaction when, in 1977, the Italian government, to reduce the number of nonworking holidays, decreed that Epiphany would stop being a holiday. A widespread grassroots rebellion occurred, and only five years later the government partially reversed itself; it fully reversed itself in 1986. The book closes with Siporin reflecting on the tradition two decades after he observed it at the start of the twenty-first century, highlighting how it is further evolving. In conclusion, Siporin offers a wide-ranging view on the local tradition of Pitigliano. He gives his readers the historical and geographical scope of the befanata while remaining focused on the customs of one specific locality.
AUTHOR BIO

Fabian Alfie is a professor of Italian at the University of Arizona, specializing in medieval literature. He received his PhD from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1997, where his PhD minor was in folklore. He has published extensively on Dante, Boccaccio, and Petrarch and has translated the poetry of Rustico Filippi, Folgore da San Gimignano, and Domenico di Giovanni, nicknamed Burchiello (with Aileen Astorga Feng).

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REVIEW


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Queer Carnival: Festivals and Mardi Gras in the South, by Amy L. Stone (they/them), is a multi-sited ethnography that examines Mardi Gras in Mobile, Alabama, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in the US Gulf South and fiestas in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and San Antonio, Texas, in the Southwest. All of the traditions studied are not queer per se, but within these traditions, the author locates events that are central to the local LGBTIQ+ communities. As the author notes in their conclusion:

This book addresses questions at the heart of cultural citizenship. Am I valued because of (not in spite of) my difference? How do I build a community in which difference is valued? Am I treated in an equitable way by others? Can I take care of members of my own community? The answers to these questions depend on who is speaking, where they live, and when the question is being asked. This kind of cultural citizenship is constantly being made, undone, and remade in a dynamic process. (p. 199)

In addition to the introduction and the conclusion, the book is organized into seven chapters. The appendix provides insight into the author’s approach and methods, although the latter are also elaborated on throughout the book. The introduction and the first two chapters can all be considered introductory chapters. The introduction highlights how and why Stone chose the places and festivals studied: most research on LGBTIQ+ lives focuses on major cities (San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago) and on Pride celebrations, gayborhoods, bars, and activism. But, as Stone notes, “beyond LGBTQ spaces, we need to understand the complex ways that LGBTQ people become citizens of the city” (p. 16). The author therefore examines how LGBTIQ+ people carve out their own spaces in urban events.

In the next two chapters, “Thinking about the South, the Southwest, and Festivals” and “Mardi Gras and Fiesta in the American Gulf South and Southwest,” Stone lays the theoretical groundwork for the chapters that follow. They debunk myths about the region and argue that “festivals are much more than the carnivalesque,” because “festivals exacerbate existing social inequalities and antagonisms” (p. 29). Consequently, the author describes “festivals as pluralistic, highly organized, linked to local culture and power dynamics, and a site of cultural citizenship” (p. 30). In addition, they present the festivals and sites and already hint at LGBTIQ+ involvement in these events.

The remaining five chapters can be described as the main body of the book. They analyze the different dimensions of the festivals that are central to queer carnivals. Chapter 3, “The Hottest Ticket in Town Is a Gay Ball: On Being Wanted,” looks at what the author calls “fabulousness” and the popularity of gay events among the local population—regardless of gender and sexuality. In
this chapter, they focus on three events in three of the four cities (Santa Fe did not have an event that was explicitly queer). All of these events “put the outrageous (and at times disreputable) parts of gay culture on display” and were simply fun for participants (p. 79). But the author also questions whether the culture on display is indeed solely gay: in fact, although the events were dominated by gay men, some of the organizational and artistic work was performed by queer women, whose contribution was often not recognized and/or downplayed.

The following chapter, “Inclusive Collective Partying: On Making Community,” is the longest in this book and discusses community and collectivity. The events selected for this chapter are (more or less) inclusive in terms of sexuality, gender, race, and class, often creating “a sense of togetherness across differences” (p. 87). Some LGBTIQ+ participants felt that heterosexual influence was changing the festivals, while others feared that heterosexuals were attending out of a desire to see the “spectacle.” Stone argues that even this superficial motivation could build a (more) inclusive community. Other queer participants, in contrast, perceived straight attendees as supporters. Additionally, Stone discusses events that are rooted in gay culture. And although gay culture is understood here as an umbrella term, it often means gay in the narrowest sense: men (or non-women) who are sexually and romantically attracted to men (or non-women). These events are now organized by straight-presenting white men with sometimes homophobic and transphobic content. During the Spanish Town Parade in Baton Rouge, for example, the author noticed several homophobic floats, many in support of Phil Robertson of the then-popular show Duck Dynasty. Yet many events emphasize inclusivity, particularly in contrast to other racially segregated events. True inclusivity, though, cannot be achieved without equity, Stone argues.

In chapter 5, “Social Elites, Glass Closets, and Contested Spaces: On Being Treated the Same,” Stone focuses on access and acknowledgment, on the one hand, and glass closets, on the other. Queer participants, like all other participants, seek access and acknowledgment during the events and beyond. These lead to a sense of belonging. In contrast, social elites control access and “reinforce cultural inequality by drawing symbolic boundaries and distinctions of taste, along with reinforcing systems of cultural imperialism, in multiple domains” (p. 134). Access and acknowledgment are often granted only when participants appear to conform to heteronormative standards, particularly for major festival royalty. As a result, the sexuality and gender identity of LGBTIQ+ people remain an open secret if they are to reign: they remain in the glass closet. The author further discusses other spaces where queer people are (almost) invisible in the cities studied.

Chapter 6, “Fundraising and Benevolent Aid: On Taking Care of Our Own,” talks about how fundraising events are used to take care of the LGBTIQ+ community and sometimes even the urban community beyond. Through fundraising, participants not only help their community but also gain respectability within their broader social environment. Yet gaining respectability is not the main reason why queer participants engage in fundraising. Instead, they do it to take care of those “who all too often [are] neglected by family, the city, and the state” (p. 178).

The final chapter, “Partying with the Mayor and Your Mom: On Progress,” looks at the participants at LGBTIQ+ events. And while it is true that queer participants perceive the substantial attendance and support of allies as validating, for many of them it is more important that certain
groups of people attend their LGBTIQ+ events and support them: relatives and (local) politicians. In the case of relatives, particularly family members who are not allies, their support and/or attendance “can even be reconciliatory, repairing damage done to parent-child relationships in volatile reactions to coming out, shaming reactions to living openly, and other harms that have cut closest because they came from family” (p. 183). While politics often invalidates, ignores, and/or excludes queer people, the attendance of politicians, in contrast, can send an important signal to queer participants and affirm their status as valued members of the urban community.

While reading the book, I was a bit surprised that the author never mentions nonbinary/genderqueer participants, even though they talk about cisgender and transgender issues in this context. Surely, the events studied are based in heteronormative standards, but in a study about queer carnival the author must have met participants outside the binary. This question is somewhat answered in the conclusion: “In many ways, transgender and non-binary people were invisible in these recognition processes” (p. 199). And while I would have liked to see more insight into nonbinary/genderqueer realities during the events studied, I can suspect why it might have been difficult to gain access to such a demographic.

In introducing the research sites, Stone provides accessible pronunciations for Mobile, Baton Rouge, and Santa Fe, and I think more authors should help their readers in this way. For the sake of consistency, however, the pronunciation of San Antonio should have been included. More important, they also acknowledge the names of the Native American territories that these cities occupy.

This book is excellent. I particularly enjoyed the author’s selection and comparison of the four sites, the stimulating theoretical discussions, and the author’s often personal approach to the material. Initially, I expected the book to be about queer people celebrating carnival. But Stone does more than that: much of the book is about people of color and Indigenous people and their space in these events. In addition, Stone illustrates how female participants and contributors to the events are visible—or not.

*Queer Carnival* is an academic book, but its accessible style and content as well as its wonderful photographs also make it an enjoyable book—a book you might read just for the fun of it. The book is a valuable read for anyone interested in queer lives and gender, festivals and carnivals, or community and belonging.
AUTHOR BIO

Cora Gaebel (she/they) is a cultural anthropologist affiliated with the University of Cologne. She did her doctoral research on two Hindu festivals celebrated in Puri (East India), examining the relationship between these events and the economy in a broad sense. She is currently laying the groundwork for their postdoctoral research project on LGBTIQ+ lives in Bangkok.

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McKenzie Wark’s 2023 book *Raving* is the latest edition in Duke University Press’s Practices series (edited by Margret Grebowicz), whose books “are for real-life hobbyists, devotees, and enthusiasts. They are by and about amateurs in the original sense — those who engage in pursuits out of sheer love and fascination.” Wark takes the reader into New York’s underground techno scene in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, a large and interconnected series of parties with varying degrees of legality that cradle the physical, sexual, and otherwise hedonistic urges of its queer and trans participants. Vacillating between first-person narrative, autotheory, and histories of urbanity in the postindustrial developed world, *Raving* adapts different forms of writing in order to represent a subculture whose personal, urban, and musical histories intersect in the thick of a dark, foggy warehouse.

I should note that I too am a participant in this scene, having been engrossed in queer nightlife in Brooklyn since I moved here eleven years ago as a dancer, organizer, and DJ. I have watched the scene move farther away from the shores of the East River over the past decade into the outer reaches of Bushwick, Ridgewood, and Maspeth as gentrification swept North Brooklyn. I do not know Wark personally, but we have many mutual friends in the scene, and I have deduced that many of the events she describes in *Raving* I also attended. I was also present for Wark’s reading of an excerpt of *Raving* prior to its release at Geoffrey Mac and Zoë Beery’s “Writing on Raving” event at Nowadays in Ridgewood, (a fantastic series worth attending) and can attest both to the excitement for the book’s release and to Wark’s deep involvement in the queer and trans dance music community. At a moment when DIY venues are becoming more scarce in favor of legal venues thanks to rising commercial real estate costs, when younger, poorer people are increasingly unable to move to or stay in the city anymore, and when many of our club nights are advertised to tourists on TikTok, I can personally corroborate that a meaningful exploration of the personal, urban, and economic narratives that govern this era of New York nightlife is a difficult yet necessary endeavor.

*Raving* sits at the nexus of two trends in contemporary writing practices. The first consists of works that seek to make theoretical interventions in nightlife and dance music scenes, including DeForest Brown Jr.’s *Assembling a Black Counter-culture* (2022), Dhanveer Singh Brar’s *Teklife, Ghettoville, Eski* (2021), and madison moore’s *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* (2018). These works take a detailed, ethnographic approach to dance music and nightlife scenes past and present, synthesizing musical and/or performance analysis with critical interventions in radical black and queer theoretical canons. The second is a growing canon by highly educated trans women writers working in narrative (auto)fiction and poetry, such as Torrey Peters’s *Detransition, Baby* (2021), Casey Plett’s *A Dream of a Woman* (2021), and Kay Gabriel’s *A Queen*...
Wark lays out this merging of writing forms in the first chapter, where she describes the two “layers” of her writing style, autofiction and autotheory. The personal, anecdotal narratives that reflect Wark's experiences as a participant in the scene reflect autofiction as the book's binding structure. These stories take the reader through the middle of a dance floor where Wark illustrates her experiences dancing on drugs like mushrooms and ketamine. Ketamine provides a framework for Wark's musings on time, where the physical environment and collective inebriation of a rave’s participants blur and disrupt the traditional linear structure through which humans have traditionally measured the passing hours. On the dance floor, Wark details the interactions she has with friends, lovers, and *punishers*, or what she (through her friend B) defines as usually straight, white, cisgender men who “treat the [rave] space as a spectacle for their entertainment, contribute nothing, and get in the way” (p. 92). Wark measures the time in between these interactions through beats rather than minutes or seconds, and illustrates how ketamine blurs even these musical delineations of linear time through its dissociative (or reassociative?) properties, allowing the user to lose their sense of reality in the midst of the rave. Wark defines this as *k-time*, where the turntables, speakers, and synthesizers that produce the musical environment of techno prompt the participant to reconstruct their concept of time through an emphasis on immediate sensorial experience. It is at these moments when Wark theorizes the individual experience of participatory listening that her writing shines: she imbues in the raver a logic with which they can track their experience on the dance floor, and provides a framework for the non-raver to infer the sensorial and relational dynamics which govern the often (intentionally) mysterious crowded club.

Wark attempts to use this same autotheoretical logic to generalize about nightlife more broadly, using her own experience to draw conclusions about dance music history, the way urban politics and economics affect nightlife cultures, and the racial dynamics which govern Brooklyn’s post-lockdown queer and trans dance music scene. However, by using the parties she attends as her only objects of analysis, the substantiation of her claims through grounded theoretical reasoning becomes stunted. Her limited breadth is perhaps most blatant in a section in chapter 5 that outlines her theory of *style extraction*: “Parties lose their aura, ongoingness, get replaced by others. . . . Often what kills it is the style extraction. Which inevitably starts with blackness, the most hauntedly auratic zone of situations—and also the one that can be harvested with maximum exploitation, particularly if it’s Black and queer and trans. The ballroom scene has been picked clean, from Madonna to *Paris is Burning* to *Pose* to *Legendary*” (p. 64). If the predominantly white, middle-class parties she attends do in fact “extract style” from the ballroom community, that claim is not elaborated on with historical evidence. It also says nothing of the underground ballroom scene’s resilience in the face of the capitalist media spotlight of the past few years. In North Brooklyn, OTA is a long-running weekly vogue night on Mondays at 3 Dollar Bill in Williamsburg, many Uptown vogue houses still thrive, and many stalwarts of New York’s
ballroom scene have been featured in the aforementioned mainstream media depictions, such as Dominique Jackson in *Pose* and MikeQ and Leiomy Maldonado in *Legendary*. Perhaps I have a different interpretation of “picked clean,” but to use vague, figurative language to describe the very material impact of capitalism on underground communities she is not a part of requires a degree of care and ethnographic diligence to substantiate her claims.

The limits of Wark’s autotheoretical framework extend to her intertwining musical and racial analyses. Musical analysis is limited; there are few references to specific tracks or artists, and her interpretation of the music lies solely within how it makes her feel, with little objective description of sounds to guide an unfamiliar reader. Where objective descriptions do exist, their veracity is questionable. She describes techno as “repetitive, four-to-the-floor beats, from about 120 to 140 per minute. Few if any vocals. Few sounds that bear any relation to any recognizable musical instrument” (p. 5). This is not true. Techno regularly exceeds 140 beats per minute, and many styles of techno such as hardgroove foreground acoustic drum samples in their composition. These tempos and styles are played regularly in North Brooklyn (particularly in the trans scene, where many affectionately refer to the faster, aggressive styles played by transfemme DJs as “doll techno”), so Wark’s framing of the genre is puzzling. Perhaps this detail is trivial to the larger structure of the book, but it again suggests a lack of close listening one would expect in a published text on a musical subject. For the unfamiliar, the aforementioned DeForrrest Brown Jr. text or *Energy Flash* by Simon Reynolds can provide more vivid sonic imagery of techno.

Throughout the book, Wark asserts that techno has roots in black urban America, particularly Detroit. She gestures at the ongoing debate between European and American aficionados on whether Berlin or Detroit can claim the genre’s origin story, and comes down on the side of Detroit’s claim, a consensus that continues to grow, particularly since the 2020 uprisings for racial justice that swept the globe. It is clear that Wark is well read in black liberatory theory, with claims rooted in black Marxism, afropessimism, and African diasporic history. However, she does not reckon with these texts or histories in a particularly thorough manner. She declares a link between blackness and transness through the rave, stating that “the rave is one of several gifts of blackness, that’s the first (and last) thing to say about it. A gift that already gestures toward transsexuality, even if it doesn’t always feel (like) it” (p. 9). This small paragraph ends with a footnote listing eight books that may validate this claim, but does not elaborate on how any of these texts may reckon with her ideas. Wark expects the reader to either be familiar with all of these books already, or seduced enough by her language and syntax to not bother diving deeper. Her modus operandi is clear in a rather flippant treatment of Queen Nanny of the Maroons in the final chapter: “I know [about Queen Nanny] because I just looked it up on my machine, here in bed with you. But what does that other history, of Black marronage and resistance, have to do with techno?” (p. 82). Queen Nanny’s 1732 uprising in Jamaica is a regularly cited historical inspiration for black liberatory techno projects like Drexciya (a household name among techno aficionados) and Underground Resistance (whom she cites as the impetus for her inquiry into Queen Nanny). Furthermore, there exists a clear musical lineage from Akan and Ashanti war drums among Caribbean maroons to black(-inspired) contemporary music genres cited in countless texts on black Atlantic history and musicology. Rather than reckoning with the historical data on its own terms, she reckons with how that historical data makes her feel, underplaying the impact of a centuries-long history of black resistance and music making.
Raving provides a framework for illustrating both the strengths and weaknesses of autotheoretical writing. Wark’s status as a devotee of the dance music scene is unquestionable, and the book provides illuminating ways to theorize personal and social dynamics inside the doors of a crowded club. Her positionality as a relatively older trans woman in the scene, an “othered body” in a sea of “othered bodies,” lends her an authority to make unique and keen observations with regard to how ravers relate to themselves and each other. The theories that come out of these observations are her strongest; ideas like k-time, enlustment, and ongoingness, concepts which relate to the immediate sensory encounters of dance floor participation and provide intimate frameworks to analyze the raving experience, which is no small feat under the haze of psychedelic and dissociative drugs. It is through this focus on the immediate that the value of a nonprofessional’s insight is made clear, and Raving’s placement in a series “by and about amateurs in the original sense” becomes more and more evident as one reads it. However, as Wark extends her authority to musical and racial histories on which she is no expert, the limitations of an analysis using solely autothoretical techniques become glaring. This is not inevitable; many accounts of rave practices from the perspective of a dancer act as insightful historical records of their respective scenes thanks to their focus on the immediate experience. (Doug Liman’s film Go [1999] and James Kirk and Two Fingas’s book Junglist [1995] immediately come to mind.) These works do not need to make bold claims about blackness or contain musicological analysis in order to be effective in this regard, and they are perhaps made better for it. In chapter 5, Wark cautions the reader that her autofiction and autotheory are “not to be taken too seriously” (p. 50). However, as a DJ and raver myself, as a witness both in my life and in my research to the devotion of its practitioners throughout the past five decades, and as someone who observes the ways that raving touches ever more pressing and intertwining themes of gentrification, commodification, and African diasporic histories, I question the need for a book on raving that sees itself so frivolously.
AUTHOR BIO

Kyle Rogers is a PhD student at New York University’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences studying ethnomusicology. His work is centered around the origins of jungle music in 1990s London and intersects with Afro-Caribbean diasporic histories, the politics of musical sampling, and postindustrial urbanity. He is also a DJ based in Brooklyn under the moniker AFTRMTH.

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REVIEW


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After analyzing the modeling industry in her previous book, *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model* (2011), Ashley Mears now offers an ethnographic exploration of the VIP party scene across the globe, with New York as its center. She provides insights into the practices and customs of the global elite's leisure nights, into the ways they establish their social status and indulge in shared cultural experiences, and into the gendered dynamics around them. The book focuses on the stories of promoters, the young women who attend these parties with them (named "girls" by all the actors), and the wealthy men who seek to be surrounded by beautiful women.

It is important to note that Mears benefits from her particular position: she is one of the few sociologists in the world who can access this data thanks to her former model status. Indeed, as she points out, "Many VIP destinations are public spaces, ostensibly accessible to everyone. But by design, they are effectively closed off to all but the world's most privileged" (p. 36). Her immersion and involvement are intense since she takes on the role of a girl (to which she is sometimes brutally referred to, such as in the passage where a businessman who welcomes her into his Hamptons home makes it clear that she is not there because she is a writer but because she is a "hot girl" [p. 105]) on over one hundred different nights in seventeen different clubs in New York over eighteen months. The author succeeds in finding a good distance in her observing participation. She integrates, in a very appropriate way, the narrative and analysis of some moments that directly involve her, but far from the self-heroization that sometimes mars the exercise of the observing participant in difficult-to-access environments, she mostly remains in the background, letting the actors involved speak for themselves. In addition to her observations, she conducted forty-four interviews with thirty-nine promoters, twenty with "girls," and twenty with clients. Mears provides a convincing explanation of her position as a researcher and former model and the prominent role of promoters in her work. Promoters have socially fascinating and rare upward trajectories and are brokers at the junction between the different actors. Nevertheless, one can regret that the girls' point of view is not put forward more.

The book consists of a prologue, six chapters, a concluding chapter, and a research appendix detailing the methodology used. The organization of the chapters is mostly thematic but sometimes chronological as well. Because of the importance of time in Mears's research, the first chapter begins at 11:30 p.m., ending with Dre, one of the promoters, reflecting on the previous night. The following chapter, titled "Daytime," describes a typical day of several promoters. Placing the notes at the end of the book allows for ample commentary on sources and concepts that will satisfy specialists in the field without making it too cumbersome to read. Overall, this is an accessible sociology book that never sacrifices scientific rigor.
Mears spent a year and a half immersing herself in the elite global party circuit to write this ethnography. With remarkable empirical density, the text exposes the mechanisms that govern leisure consumption and production among the rich and provides a welcome analysis of the plurality of actors involved. She delves into the inner workings of VIP nightclubs, where promoters are paid to attract stunning young women, mostly models, to the clubs to lure men into spending exorbitant amounts on bottle service. Studying these VIP places, which attract mostly white and male elites, provides an excellent opportunity to examine the dynamics of masculine domination and white supremacy. Mears admirably shows how issues of race, gender, and class intertwine in her field. These “girls” are seen as a status symbol for men and a source of profit and standing for club owners. They provide promoters—usually men from working-class and/or ethnic backgrounds—with access to the club’s wealthy clientele, mostly white males, from which they believe they could establish valuable connections to obtain investments for their future projects, a largely illusory dream. Despite their centrality in this system, they receive relatively meager and fleeting benefits. They exchange their body capital for free drinks and dinner, the opportunity to party and have fun in a luxurious environment, and sometimes the hope that this VIP network will facilitate their career. As Mears writes, “The value of women’s labor, I would come to see, went disproportionately to men” (p. 103).

In the Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions (1899), sociologist Thorstein Veblen showed that to demonstrate their superiority and display their wealth, members of the leisure class ostentatiously consume goods and recreational activities. Mears argues that by focusing on the question of “cultural capital” (a notion developed by Pierre Bourdieu in his book Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste [1979]) and its transmission, researchers have overlooked the issue of economic power that Veblen had emphasized. She situates herself in the continuity of Veblen’s work while updating it. Thus, while the nouveaux riches of Veblen’s leisure class went to great lengths to show that they did not have to work to earn money, in contrast, the wealthy bankers and businessmen Mears met during her investigation have little leisure time and are proud to accumulate numerous working hours. During these moments of relaxation in nightclubs, they engage in conspicuous waste. Mears shows, and this is one of the most exciting elements of her analysis, that contrary to what Veblen presented and what is commonly perceived, ostentation is not an inherent trait of wealthy people. Indeed, many actors and infrastructures are necessary to construct the conditions of this ostentation, which is, therefore, only spontaneous in appearance.

Mears assimilates this practice to a potlach (this is indeed the title of the chapter that examines it). The potlach consists of extravagant gifts and rituals and festive destruction of goods. Gifts and waste mark the domination of those who dispense them and materialize social hierarchy. The parallel is therefore quite relevant, but perhaps it should not have been pushed to the point of assimilation. First studied by anthropologist Franz Boas in various Amerindian communities at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the potlach designates a situated and standardized ritual institution. In his famous book, The Gift (1925), sociologist Marcel Mauss (Émile Durkheim’s nephew) compared the potlach to the kula observed by Bronislaw Malinowski in the Pacific Islands (Argonauts of the Western Pacific [1922]) and considered these systems of giving as total social facts, in other words, activities involving the whole group and having implication throughout society—in the religious, economic, legal, and political spheres. The use of this term...
undoubtedly serves Mears to lead the reader to take seriously the practices she describes. The parallel remains superficial, however, since not every wasteful ritual is a potlach. I think Mears could have been more specific in her use of this concept.

In the prologue, we wake up with Mears after several days of parties in a villa rented by wealthy men excited to lend the place to the group of model women to which Mears belongs, led by promoter Santos. This could be a book by Bret Easton Ellis, yet from the third page, the author introduces such notions as the gendered economy, ritual performance, the hierarchical system of prestige, and so on. The tone is set, and Mears never stops brilliantly intertwining ethnographic narrative and sharp sociological analyses.

The first chapter, titled “We Are the Cool People,” is an introductory essay that presents the space and actors involved in this ethnography and introduces the key hierarchies of the VIP scene. By following promoter Dre on his night’s work, we meet the different protagonists of the VIP nightlife scene as well as the relevant locations. Mears takes advantage of this to summarize the book’s claims, which she then details in the following chapters. She begins with a brief but important reminder of the economic changes that have turned New York into a “destination for international millionaires, affluent tourists, and rich businessmen” and discusses how this change has affected nightclubs by putting VIP bottle service at the heart of their profits (p. 9). The VIP table and bottle service system was an additional service that the wealthiest paid for to avoid queuing, but it has become a means of ostentatious consumption. She then introduces the central actresses of this world: the girls. To be recognized as a VIP club, establishments must display as many young, tall, and thin women as possible, ideally fashion models, within the crowd of partygoers.

Promoters are paid up to one thousand dollars per evening to bring in girls. In exchange for their body capital, they are taken to dinners at fancy restaurants and are granted free admission and drinks at VIP nightclubs. Mears details the hierarchy of people in this world of VIP nightlife. This hierarchy is highly gendered. For women: authentic models (height and slenderness) are at the top; good-looking civilians (women who look like they could be a model) follow; and civilians or pedestrians (all other women are excluded from the category of “girls”) are at the bottom. There is also a hierarchy of men. At the very top are the “whales.” The term “whale” is derived from the casino industry, which refers to a wealthy gambler who places huge bets. In the world of nightclubs, it refers to people who spend tremendous amounts of money in one night, sometimes over one hundred thousand dollars. Then there are the celebrities. These two categories are also the ones who enjoy free entry, free drinks, etc. Next, there are affluent tourists and businessmen (this third category is the one that clubs profit from), followed by the “fillers” (those who are not rich or influential enough to have a table but look good enough to enter and add to the crowd). Finally, those who do not make it in are the “bridges and tunnels,” who may have enough money to buy a table but do not have the right look, as well as the “goons” and “ghettos” (lower-class and non-white people). VIP clubs have very few people of color, including girls, though Mears notes that a black model will always be preferred to a white woman who does not have the required physique. The subject of race is quickly broached here but becomes more central in Mears’s analysis of the clients (mostly wealthy white men) and promoters (mostly working class and many of whom are not white).

1. See, for example, Bret Easton Ellis, Glamorama (London: Picador, 1998).
The second chapter focuses on the promoters. It shows the daily work that is necessary to attract girls to nightclubs (hence the title “Daytime”). Through scenes of active searches for girls, Mears portrays different promoters while explaining their strategies for finding girls and their different approaches to the profession. Spending afternoons in a black SUV parked in downtown Manhattan looking for new models, going directly to casting locations or having lunch at fashionable places and engaging with passersby, working their network and cultivating relationships with girls they already know: this part of the work, which Mears makes visible, takes a lot of time and energy. The description of a scene in which Malcolm mentors Trevor on how to recruit the correct type of girls for their promotions serves to explain the selection criteria as well as the work that promoters have to do to adjust their vision of beauty to conform to the key indicators of the VIP field: height, slenderness, youth.

In the third chapter, Mears explores the clients, their extravagant spending in nightclubs, and the infrastructure that enables and encourages it. Despite the disgust that repeated mention of the exorbitant sums paid on champagne by some clients in a single night ($10,000, $100,000) may provoke, Mears strives to bring the reader to consider the phenomenon in all its complexity and never passes moral judgment. She conducts a precise and convincing anthropological analysis of the super-rich’s rituals of conspicuous consumption and demonstrates, for instance, how the size and quantity of bottles and girls around them allow them to display their status. In fact, not all the bottles are consumed, and the clients do not interact with the girls, who are sometimes too numerous and in too noisy an environment for that to be possible. The important thing is to be surrounded by an excess of girls as well as an excess of bottles. Waste is the hallmark of status for these mostly white rich men.

Mears notes that women who do not have a model-like physique are excluded from these spaces where contacts are made and information exchanged, meaning that these women are not only excluded from festive moments but also from business circles. The book largely focuses on the symbolic violence suffered by girls, who are objectified and lack the necessary information to benefit from the exchange of their own physical capital fully. A chilling scene in this chapter serves as a reminder that physical violence, the brute force of a man toward a woman, can happen at any time and anywhere. A wealthy man wants the girls around him to drink champagne straight from the bottle. One of them refuses; he violently grabs her chin and forces the $1,700 bottle of champagne into her mouth. She swallows, chokes, and spits out some champagne. He turns away, ignores her, and starts to dance to the beat with his hands while looking at the DJ. Placed at the beginning of the chapter, amid mentions of the staggering amounts of money spent that night, this scene subtly reflects on gender-based violence within the analyzed ritual’s description, though one may have wished for a longer development on the systemic violence of the VIP party scene.

Mears also examines the mechanisms that put clients in the right conditions to push them toward consumption and ostentation. VIP nightclubs leave nothing to chance and strive to pit clients against each other regarding the amounts spent, valorizing their clients’ spending. The bottles are often served with sparkler fireworks, and sometimes the amount spent by a customer (several thousand dollars) is emphasized by the DJ on the mic. All the players judge this behavior as ridiculous, yet they participate in it (either by spending or enjoying the spectacle). In part, this is
because “clubs are spaces designed to sublimate people’s criticism of clients’ wasteful displays and refashion them as play” (p. 88). In this chapter, Mears also reminds us of the importance of senses and pleasures. These are not disembodied rituals that we witness; they involve dance, music, and the pleasure of feeling powerful, a pleasure that one client compared to drugs. The rituals of waste bring status and intense sensations of pleasure to the participants. However, it is rarely sexual pleasure since what is at play in the presence of girls is not the possibility of sexual activity but “the visible display of high-status femininity” (p. 97).

The fourth chapter is focused on the “girls.” At least, that is what it purports to be. However, the reader, who may already be impatient to finally hear the perspectives of the main protagonists in this system, may end up a bit frustrated. Indeed, while Mears, faithful to her desire to show all the players’ agency and perspectives, gives the girls a voice, this is too quickly dealt with and took far too long to be exposed. The first twenty-one pages of the chapter are devoted to men’s (clients’ and promoters’) visions of the girls and what they allow them to acquire. This vision and strategy have already been extensively explored in the previous chapters. In these pages, Mears sketches new interesting ethnographic scenes that could have found a place elsewhere or been pruned entirely.

The second half finally gives voice to the girls, and as elsewhere in the book, does so rather finely and by trying to expose the diversity and complexity of the situations. Mears first reveals the internalization of the male gaze by the girls. She is particularly interested in the stigma of prostitution that weighs on the girls, which drives some girls to call other women “sluts” to distance themselves from the stigma. They display their lack of sexual interest during nightclub outings as proof of their morality. Aside from the figure of the prostitute, another category of negative thought governs the world of girls: that of women. Women are too old to go out. Partying after thirty is considered pathetic; it is desperate women who have not found men and will soon be too ugly to seduce one who continue to go out. Mears notes that some girls find the double-age standard—which does not exclude men over fifty but excludes women over thirty—to be unfair. Mears shows that, unlike other actors, most girls do not cultivate their social capital. They do not seek to do so because they know they are not in a position to do so: they are not taken seriously. Mears explains that access to the VIP scene can allow some to learn the tastes and manners of the global elite and can help them penetrate this world later, but she still insists on the homogamy at work in this milieu. What she calls “girl capital” does not benefit girls but men. As she points out, “The unequal ability of one person to capitalize on another is a classic measure of exploitation in [Karl] Marx’s terms” (p. 141). Mears notes that, like other forms of women’s labor (domestic work in particular), this exploitation is hidden under the guise of “non-work” and, in this case, masked by fun. Yet many accounts from her fieldwork reveal the limits of fun for girls: they must stay at the promoter’s table and show that they are having fun, even if they are tired or not in the mood. Promoters deploy many tactics to encourage them and even publicly reprimand them if the girl wants to leave anyway. They cannot go to the club of their choice or with a competing promoter.

It is only on page 144 that Mears finally asks the terrible question, “Why do women consent to being exploited?” Unfortunately, she settles the matter in just four pages: “getting high, having sex with good-looking men,” and having “a sensual break from the rest of their lives”; overcoming a breakup; getting access to refined wine and food, exclusive destinations, and high-profile
events; and being chosen for that (p. 144). These are all very plausible reasons, but they deserved to be expanded on. Such elaboration would have been welcome not only from a scholarly perspective but also from a symbolical one in that it would have allowed to finally give voice to these objectified girls and fully restore their subjectivity. Unfortunately, the book partly fails in that regard. Moreover, even though she emphasizes it in the next chapter, Mears could have stressed more the question of the unequal sharing of information, knowingly orchestrated by men to keep women out of their profitable system. From this point of view, the admirable essay by French anthropologist Nicole-Claude Mathieu, “When Yielding Is Not Consenting,” for which an English translation is available, would have allowed Mears to extend and enrich her analysis.²

In the fifth chapter, Mears explains the hidden work behind the appearance of leisure. She also shows how promoters weave their influence, even their grip, on the girls, which is suggested by the title “Who Runs the Girls?” Mears reveals in detail the daily work done by promoters to maintain relationships with the girls and cultivate what she calls “strategic intimacies.” They accompany them to castings, invite them to lunch or bowling games, and flirt with them. Promoters deploy a lot of energy and time not only to build these relationships but also to make them appear social and intimate rather than purely economic. As Mears writes with particular bite, “Exploitation works best when it feels good” (p. 154). Promoters present themselves as friends. Still, the girls are not fooled by the ongoing economic exchange (even though they tend to vastly underestimate the money involved). In addition to this work of connection, promoters must motivate a certain number of girls daily to accompany them to their dinner and nightclub events. They send messages to all their contacts and even call them. They also obtain the numbers of agency-run apartments. Many models who have just arrived in New York have little money and do not know anyone, which puts them in a vulnerable position. Beginner models are not always paid to walk in shows (or are paid in clothes), and some are already happy with the prospect of a free meal. The dinner and attention are exchanged for the “support” of the girls, meaning their commitment to accompany them to a nightclub. However, the girls never receive cash, which would destroy the appearance of non-work and associate them with prostitutes. Mears, always concerned with balance, nevertheless wants to show that some connections seem sincere. She takes the opportunity to present a stimulating development on the question of friendship, the fiction of its purity, and the reciprocity that builds relationships. Paola Tabet’s work on economic-sexual exchange and Sebastien Roux’s study of the effects of prostitutes in sex tourism could have further nourished this analysis from the perspective of the relationships woven around a financial relationship.³ She concludes this chapter with two small thematic sections: one on the question of control (of the table space, of the girls’ bodies—especially through the imposition of wearing high heels—and of their departure times), which is not uninteresting but a bit redundant. The other is more informative and details the costs incurred by promoters and girls to access nightlife.

The book’s sixth and final chapter discusses the promoters’ ambition to access flourishing businesses and to become extremely rich, to access the same positions as their clients. Most come from low-income families, and many are of foreign origin. Their social ascension is already a statistical anomaly. However, their dreams are met with a glass ceiling. They are identified as outsiders based on their race and social class. Indeed, they put businessmen in contact with each other (and do not receive a commission for it), but they are not involved in

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As is often the case when dealing with leisure (sports or tourism, for example), the subject may seem superficial at first glance. However, through this book, Mears raises essential questions beyond trendy discotheques’ walls. Issues of class, race, and gender are intertwined in this description of the spaces and relationships formed within VIP nightclubs. The book does not always avoid redundancy in its demonstration. However, Mears delivers a very rich ethnography of a world that is extremely difficult to penetrate and endeavors to restore the points of view of a maximum of actors in all their complexity by presenting a nuanced analysis of the dynamics of power that bind them. In sum, this book makes an invaluable contribution to research on festivities; the work behind them, and the issues of gender, class, and race that they raise.
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Alix Boirot is a postdoctoral researcher with the National Institute of Health and Medical Research (Inserm) at Aix-Marseille University. She received her PhD in social anthropology from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), in Paris. Her dissertation, based on deep ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the Spanish seaside resort of Lloret de Mar, focused on the construction of masculinity/ies through party tourism. She now studies bartenders and their relationship to alcohol and is increasingly involved in public health research (health literacy, addictions, etc.).

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The Journal of Festive Studies (ISSN 2641–9939) is a peer-reviewed open access journal from H-Celebration, a network of H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online, and is the inaugural journal published through the H-Net Journals initiative. It can be found online at https://journals.h-net.org/jfs.
With all the commentary about the proliferation of festivals and the rise of festivalization in recent decades, it can be easy to forget that festivals have played important societal roles for centuries.¹ John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold, both human geographers, remind us of this in their latest monograph, *Festival Cities: Culture, Planning and Urban Life*. The colorful image on the cover of this book takes us straight into medieval times and into carnival as performed in Venice’s Piazza San Marco, an urban square and a city that, perhaps beyond all others, epitomize the staging of public events. This attractive cover sets the tone for a book that draws the reader into engagingly written historical discussions on how “regular, non-ambulant, place-based festivals have become embedded in the life and planning of cities in the developed world since the end of the nineteenth century” (p. 29). The focus is mainly on urban arts festivals and carnivals, and a key concern throughout is to understand the interplay between the development of these events and their planning and management by the host cities. For these authors, this necessitates investigating the importance of festivals as cultural phenomena, as activities that always have economic ramifications, and as events that are intertwined in an infinite number of complex ways with the places that host them.

In an introductory chapter, the authors set out the book’s purpose and explain why they think that understanding festivals is best advanced by considering the roles they play in the transmission and reception of culture and their contributions to place identity and to the urban economy. Following this are seven chapters of substantive content. Chapter 2 presents an interesting historical overview of urban festivals which will be helpful for students and researchers approaching the study of festivals for the first time. It leads well into the next four chapters (chapters 3–6), all of which are case studies of western European cities that feature prominently in the historical evolution of arts festivals: Venice (Italy) with respect to the visual arts and the Biennale; Salzburg (Austria) in terms of classical music and the Salzburg Festival; Cannes (France) in relation to film and the Cannes Film Festival; and Edinburgh (Scotland), with the Edinburgh International Festival and the further development of multiple arts festivals, including Fringe. Together, these four chapters, along with chapter 2, are coherent, and the book is well worth reading for these alone. All of the studied cities host internationally renowned, influential festivals. The authors trace the emergence and development of festivals, including the Salzburg Festival and the Cannes Film Festival, in a style that is fluid and engaging. The historical analysis is rich in detail and promotes, in an accessible way, an understanding of how the trajectory of the festivals is bound up with the temporal, cultural, and political contexts encasing the cities.

However, it is clear that all of the festival cities studied in depth come from specific temporal and spatial contexts. All are western European and all have their origins pre–World War II. There
is a strong preoccupation with the "high" arts in the discussions of Venice, Salzburg, and the initial story of Edinburgh's rise as a festival city. This concentration on the high arts reflects the predominant nature of the arts festivals associated with the time period under study. Overall, and as clearly stated early in the book, there is a focus on arts festivals as opposed to any other kind of festivals. Arguably, criticism could be leveled at the authors for limiting their in-depth discussions to these specific contexts. In a book titled Festival Cities, including a detailed analysis of a younger festival city located outside of western Europe would have been novel and important, although the authors themselves admit that they realize the need for such an approach. Similarly, an interesting counterbalance could have been created with the inclusion of a case devoted to a different kind of festival.

Next, chapter 7, "Proliferation," discusses key features characterizing the expansion of festivals and the festival form in more recent decades. Theater and literature festivals as well as biennales receive particular attention in individual sections. While this chapter differs from the preceding chapters, it continues to maintain a focus on festivals that privilege "high" art forms in western Europe and North America. Somewhat surprisingly, given that the authors say that their book focuses on both urban arts festivals and carnivals, a singular focus on the latter only comes in chapter 8. Here, carnivals like the Mardi Gras in New Orleans and the Notting Hill Carnival in London come center stage, as do the carnivalesque dimensions of St. Patrick’s and Pride Parades. The authors use these to underscore how processes of identity formation and assertion and of commodification characterize the workings of carnivals.

This book is engaging and accessible. Throughout, individual chapters are supplemented with notes sections, many of which recommend further reading for those wishing to delve further into specific issues. Overall, it will be of interest to those coming to the study of festivals for the first time as well as to those interested in appreciating, and gaining deep insight into, the long-standing relationships that interlink the historical evolution of festivals and their host cities in the developed world. I hope that it will inspire other researchers to add to the stories presented here by producing historical and contemporary accounts of how festivals have been, and continue to be, integral to the reproduction and representation of cities beyond western Europe and North America. Such work could yield important insights into a great diversity of cultural forms and practices and enrich our understanding of how different kinds of geographical, political, and economic contexts and interrelationships influence the interconnected development of festivals and their host cities.
AUTHOR BIO

Bernadette Quinn is a human geographer who works as a senior lecturer and researcher at Technological University Dublin, Ireland. She has written extensively about arts festivals and cultural events and is specifically interested in the roles that they play in transforming space, reproducing place, and shaping identities. Her current research interest is investigating how arts festivals are evolving in the context of digitization. Her work has been widely published in social science journals and edited collections. Among her latest publications is the book Festivals and the City: The Contested Geographies of Urban Events, coedited with Andrew Smith and Guy Osborn and published in 2022 by the University of Westminster Press.

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