

Lee Gilmore, *Theater in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 238 pp. + dvd, \$24.95 (paperback).

Rising above the barren playa stands an immense wooden skeletal figure lit with a framework of blue neon, emerging from a geodesic sphere. Despite a lack of any discernible gender, this postindustrial monstrosity is called “The Man” by the loose community of more than fifty thousand who participate in a yearly event that has come to represent millennial culture at its most alternative, the week-long festival in the Black Rock Desert of northwestern Nevada known as “Burning Man.” Decoding this figure, and the event that surrounds it, is a sketchy venture at best, with Burning Man participants, known as “Burners,” and even the festival’s founder, Larry Harvey, offering conflicting and evolving interpretations—and sometimes refuse definitions altogether. Accordingly, Burner and religious studies scholar Lee Gilmore, in her recent book, does not attempt a fixed definition either. Rather, she explores the myriad ways that participants undertake or resist the complex task of assigning meaning to the event. Having attended Burning Man since 1996 and served for several years as a staff member with the organization’s Media Team, Gilmore presents readers with a picture of the festival at times clarified and artfully blurred by her observations as both an insider and a scholar.

Following in the footsteps of her dissertation advisor, Sarah Pike, who immersed herself in the Pagan festival scene in *Earthly Bodies, Magical Selves: Contemporary Pagans and the Search for Community*, (2001), Gilmore addresses both the common philosophies and conflicts of festival goers. At both Pagan festivals and Burning Man, these individuals gather to celebrate, form communities, dance around fires, and explore their personal narratives and identities through artistic expression and ritualization. Unlike specifically Pagan festivals, however, Burning Man’s ethos is much more based in an avant-garde art, performance, and activism milieu. Indeed, because Burning Man encompasses a diverse set of culture jammers who at times embrace alternative religions or reject religion altogether, we might consider Burner culture an even wider umbrella that can (and does) accommodate contemporary Paganism just as easily as other spiritual (or non-spiritual) expressions. Thus, Gilmore ostensibly grounds Burning Man within a contemporary context of spiritual quest outside the bounds of organized religions, framing the event as representative of a “movement in which creative expressions of spirituality and alternative conceptualizations of religions are favored,

thereby destabilizing and reinventing normative cultural assumptions about what constitutes 'religion.'"

In her first chapter, Gilmore introduces the reader to the history, both factual and mythic (and the blurring between), of the event, its civic and political structure, and the various tenets of its philosophy. This includes principles such as "leave no trace," radical self-reliance, radical expression, decommodification and gifting, and radical participation. Further contextualizing Burning Man within discourses of religion, Gilmore's second chapter presents survey questions and interviews to analyze participants' self-definitions as "spiritual, but not religious." These responses help shape Gilmore's picture of Burning Man as an intellectually and emotionally fraught process of grappling with questions of religion, its role within the individual, and its place in the world, even as she highlights certain participants' assertions that Burning Man is not a religious or spiritual event at all.

Despite the fact that she avoids a full discussion of performance theory and its application to Burning Man, Gilmore's emphasis on "creative expressions" and ritualization renders *Theater in a Crowded Fire* a salient work of theatre and performance studies, as well as anthropology and religious studies. One example of this focus is Gilmore's recurring consideration of the feedback cycle surrounding Burners and their understanding of Victor Turner's theories of *communitas*, the liminal and liminoid, and rites of passage (coincidentally, the theme of the 2011 Burning Man). Demonstrating a case of theory influencing practice, Burners absorb anthropological theories like Turner's into their understandings of ritual, culture, and religion, much the same way practitioners of Witchcraft and Paganism adapted the concepts of James Frazer into their common parlance over time. This becomes especially apparent in Gilmore's third chapter, in which she explores the various ways that participants construct, embrace, or resist spontaneous and planned rituals and ritual performances. For Gilmore, this synergy between popular ritual theory and Burner practice is not due to "any universal applicability of these theories (although this may be partly true) but more because Burning Man's rituals and ritual theories have emerged from – and in critical opposition to – default Western cultural contexts."

For me, Gilmore's fifth chapter, entitled "Media Mecca," presented some unique insights into the intricate web of anthropology, ritual, media and performance present in Burning Man discourse. Here, her years of experience negotiating with outside media outlets (both mainstream and independent journalists) as part of Burning Man's Media Team, strongly contributes to the work. She relates how, in a rare instance in which ethnographic subjects choose how they want to be studied, Burning Man

has evolved media relations to the point where they regulate the production of outside documentaries (often privileging filmmakers who address underexposed subject matters). Gilmore also describes the festival's method of encouraging journalists to "go native" so that those journalists have their own unique Burning Man experience as immersed participants. Through examining these media practices, Gilmore is able to engage with current media theory, particularly Henry Jenkins' notions of convergence culture, positing Burning Man as a negotiated and mediated space, like the Internet, where participants shift their approaches to religion and spirituality. Moreover, she takes full advantage of the opportunity to explore this mediation in her own work, while describing the production and editing of the DVD included with the book. Broken up into chapters that correspond to her text, the DVD offers a broad picture of images and experiences from the playa, contextualized by Gilmore's enthusiastic narration. Significantly, in the text, Gilmore acknowledges the problematic nature of such a project while underlining the ways in which the DVD illuminates her theories. On its own, the DVD offers the viewer a brief taste of the range of available performance and ritual paradigms being explored at Burning Man. In conjunction with Gilmore's interrogation of the medium and the media theories that informed and challenged its production, the DVD highlights the contentious issues present in the act of recording and editing such a document. Thus, the DVD itself becomes a scholarly document rather than just a supplemental documentary.

Thankfully, the field of anthropology has come far enough that Gilmore does not need to spend an entire chapter justifying participant observation and exploring its contingencies. However, her role as a participant at an event that holds "No Spectators" as a foundational dictum is essential to illuminate the multivalent experiences at hand. Gilmore's "Burner" presence is active throughout her text as evidenced by her early, uncritical use of the term "default world" to refer to normative, mainstream (i.e. not Burning Man) culture (a term, I should add, that I have only used heard in Burning Man discourse). However, that insider position provides the reader with personal observations and insights that never threaten to overwhelm the scholarly project, but rather complement and extend its discourse. This is especially true when Gilmore gives voice to participants that are in fact critical of various aspects of the event. In many cases, these dissenting opinions are only possible to illuminate when the researcher is down in the trenches and privy to such discussions, or is aware of general, if unofficial, consensus. Furthermore, Gilmore's own personal, often poignant, reactions to various scenarios and events, including the 9/11 tribute from popular performance artist

Rev. Billy and the Stop Shopping Choir that she describes in the book's conclusion, inform her characterization of the Burning Man ethos and experience. According to Gilmore, this reflexivity is already built into Burning Man's engagements with performance, ritual, and relationship between individual and community. Thus, Gilmore's approach to theorizing such a significant cultural event is highly appropriate and successful, offering a cogent model for the study of contemporary Western countercultural festivals. As the sheer number of these immersive events grow every year, under the umbrella of contemporary Paganism, Burner culture, or appealing to a general interest in fire, tribalism, and counterculture, *Theater in a Crowded Fire* couldn't have arrived at a better time. For Pagan Studies scholars who approach festival, ritual, or performance, this book could serve as an engaging model for ethnography (particularly when the scholar is not a complete outsider) and for negotiating the complex issues inherent to such a venture.

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