The *transformational festival* as a subversive toolbox for a transformed tourism: lessons from Burning Man for a COVID-19 world

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ABSTRACT

Examining transformational festivals can offer conceptual resources for a transformation of tourism into a more responsible and sustainable practice. By thinking together two usually distinct scholarly treatments of "transformation"—those of transformational tourism and those of transformational festivals—the COVID-19 pandemic can itself also be treated as a spatiotemporal threshold for the transformation of the travel industry. This approach can also help deconstruct the mechanisms that sustain deleterious aspects of tourism's guest-host divide. As borders reopen and mobility and recreation recommences, the capacity of transformational festivals—both within and beyond their highly porous time-spaces– to transform their participants offer lessons for the blurring, if not the outright obliteration of the demarcation between guests and hosts. The creative and pro-social responses of members of one such transformational festival culture—Burning Man– to this and past crises are presented as examples for how values such as participation and civic responsibility may help people overcome shared conditions of hardship, and support more sustainable tourism practices in the post-COVID-19 world. Such subversive inter-subjective inversions may bring the recognition, in-itself, and production, for-itself, of a shared humanity of co-creators and participants in not just ephemeral, but accretive transformational social and environmental projects.

摘要

研究非传统节日能够为旅游产业转变为更有社会责任、可持续发展提供概念性思路。通过同时考量两种截然不同的关于"非传统"的学术讨论（即非传统旅游与非传统节日），新冠状病毒自身可作为旅游产业转型的时空阈值。这种方法有助于解构旅游主客体间分歧带来的持续负面影响机制。随着边界的重新开放，以及新一轮的娱乐活动与旅游者流动的再次兴起, 非传统节日的承载力（即从时空范围内外调控参与者的能力），能够为削弱而非彻底消除主客之间的界限提供经验教训。我们以具有创新性、亲社会行为特征的非传统节日文化的代表活动——火人节作为案例, 分析在过去及当前危机中, 公民参与和公民责任等价值观如何帮助人们克服共同的困境, 以及旅游产业如何在全球性新冠状病毒危机中实现可持续发展。这种颠覆性主体间转

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化将会引发共同创造者和参与者对于共享型人性认知的形成、生产与发展，其影响不仅在暂时性的，而且在增值性的非传统社会与环境项目中得以体现。

Transformational festivals and transformational tourism

Burning Man, the paradigmatic example of what has since been termed a "transformational festival," may not seem like the most obvious event culture from which to draw lessons towards a transformation of tourism for a post-COVID-19 world. A resource-intensive and brazenly hedonistic ephemeral urban agglomeration, it has for decades attracted tens of thousands of participants on a pilgrimage to construct an annual temporary city in the harsh and remote Nevada desert and then clean it up, more or less, without a trace. Despite an organizational commitment to move towards carbon neutrality—one that is no more enforceable than the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals—it is by no means a thoroughly benign or even low impact activity. Yet, the exemplary and creative response of some of its participants to this and past waves of disaster and crisis can offer lessons for the formation and maintenance of community and connection that may support more sustainable social and environmental economies. Moreover, thinking transformational tourism and transformational festivals together can also provide conceptual resources for treating the pandemic itself as a spatiotemporal threshold for the transformation not only of the travel industry, but the transformation of the usual discursive and material mechanisms that sustain the divide between guests and hosts.

Even before the great travel freeze of 2020, various approaches have been promoted by tourism scholars, including "responsible tourism" (Sin, 2014), "multi-stakeholder approaches" (Timothy, 2007), and so on, to address tourism's capacity to amplify socioeconomic inequality and inflict irreversible ecological damage. As conceptual starting points or ethical orientations for practice, these approaches are laudable and useful, even as they approach the limits and contradictions of capitalist political economy. I submit here that a further part of the problem are the usual modes of distinction between the spaces and communities of guests and hosts, which can impede efforts at collective action. Many of these problems have been further masked by the ephemerality and fragmentation of global industry practice, which effaces and displaces such problems as climate change as economic externalities, to be solved by future generations, or by someone else, somewhere else.

Complementing the normative approaches mentioned above, "transformational tourism" is another turn that has been proposed to address the longstanding social and environmental challenges of tourism. Through "the transformation of our way of seeing, being, doing and relating in tourism worlds", so one story goes, we can effect "the creation of a less unequal, more sustainable planet through action-oriented, participant-driven learnings." In the process, argue some of its proponents, scholars can "translate essentially individual and often transitory experiences into transformation at a societal and global level" (Pritchard & Morgan, 2013, pp. 3 and 4).

My modest contribution here is to suggest that the transformative features of some festivals—particularly those that subvert social hierarchies while spurring pro-social behavior (Crockett, 2014)—may offer yet further inspiration for rethinking and refashioning tourism more broadly. In particular, these include a commitment to an ethos of participation and responsibility, experience with a collective overcoming of hardship, and the flattening or inversion of social hierarchies.

Part of the confusion and challenge of using a notion like "transformation" to effect transformation in industry and in academia is the ambiguity of the term itself, as different scholarly streams draw its meanings from distinct genealogies. Much of the work on "transformative tourism" stems from Mezirow's development of "transformational learning theory" to explain how US women returning to the workforce could be better integrated via the personal transformation of values and behaviors (Lean, 2009; Reisinger, 2013), although transformation can also refer to the effects of travel on a place (Lean, 2012), often in deleterious ways (Bruner, 1991).

Distinct from the term's appearance within tourism studies, the nascent "transformational festival" literature has drawn inspiration from the classic work of Victor Turner on liminality and rites of passage. The denotation itself has origins in pop culture that precede its academic uptake—the term was promoted via a TEDx talk by a regular festival goer and documentarian, and later taken up by scholars to describe festivals with most of the following characteristics:

> "an ecstatic core ritual provided through electronic dance music; visionary art, performance, art installations, and live art; a workshop curriculum covering a spectrum of New Paradigm subjects; the creation and honoring of sacred space; ceremony and ritual; a social economy of artisans and vendors (or, alternative gift economy); a natural, outdoor setting to honor the Earth; and a multiple (typically 3–7) day duration" (Schmidt, 2015, p. 47).

Key to this is the "the co-creation of an immersive, participant-driven reality" that produces a sense of empowerment while effacing distinctions between performers and spectators. Following Turner, transformational festival scholars treat these rites as occasions during which participants enter threshold spaces where the usual rules of social order don't apply, but by emerging personally transformed, they produce an effect of communitas and a shared reference point for emergent social structures. As put by Graham St. John (2015, pp. 6 and 7),

> As festal citizens, participants are afforded passage into a transitional world possessing liminal conditions and carnivalesque logics (or illogics) to which inhabitants are compelled to surrender … [This affords conditions for] a rite of passage, a structured ritual which possesses the power to transform an individual's status, identity and life; only, the liminality of the modern festival holds heterogenous, elective and hyper-mediated characteristics … [for] entrants who become liminars (literally: threshold dwellers) while occupying the demarcated time-space framework of the event.

Transformational festival as social movement, and Burning Man's culture of crisis response

Although transformational festivals could themselves be analyzed as temporary tourist destinations, their propensity to spawn mediated manifestations of community, both

in person and virtually, complicates efforts to bind them to a singular "natural, outdoor" setting. Furthermore, considering these phenomena from the perspective of the so-called "mobilities paradigm," one might remember that there are "many other ways one travels (e.g. communicatively, virtually and imaginatively) during corporeal travel" (Lean, 2012, p. 154), and transformational festivals are no exception. Such a point can be made by observing how the progenitor of this typology, Burning Man, has evolved into a wider cultural field with regional events and regular meetups worldwide in both on and offline worlds. This has come not simply through the repetition of ritual in bounded-time-spaces, but through the invention of new forms of identification and subjectivity—basically, by transforming tourists to transformational festivals into participants in a broader movement.

What are some examples of how this might matter when contemplating the transforming role of mobility in producing more positive futures? Many Burning Man participants, or 'burners', had responded to past crises by upping their participation and sharing gifts developed through years of experimenting with temporary intentional community in adverse environmental circumstances. As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, regional 'Burn events' began cancelling worldwide. Plans for the main event, which had been held in the desert annually since 1990, and which through ticket sales covers most of the costs for a year-round office staff based in San Francisco, also fell into question. Yet, while still facing the potential impossibility of meeting face-to-face en masse, the organization and community that supports it returned to its roots, emphasizing participation, connection, and civic engagement in the face of isolation.

Of course, such community mobilization is not unique to Burning Man. Initial efforts are illustrative, if not entirely distinct from those of other event communities. Monthly 'burner pub' socials became weekly online chat sessions, drawing not just city dwellers but participants from remote rural areas. Dance camps moved their gatherings and fundraisers into cyberspace, beaming bass lines and good vibes across the planet. Artists from San Francisco to Berlin to Bucharest set up virtual sessions to share pieces from productions and performances that were canceled in the wake of the outbreak, offering exposure not only for a limited number of established names, but potentially limitless participation from less well-known creators.

But far more profound and useful to those outside the community were the attempts to apply technical and organizational skills developed through years of experimentation in the hardship conditions of the Black Rock Desert. The first notable such case was in 2004, when Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the US Gulf Coast during the same week that Burning Man took place. As thousands of the region's residents fled to take temporary shelter, hundreds of burners in Nevada realized they either did not have homes to return to, or had skills and tools they could bring from the desert to help people who had lost their basic material and social support systems. This sparked the volunteer campaign later incorporated as Burners Without Borders, a non-profit relief organization that went on to rebuild a flooded Vietnamese Buddhist Temple in Mississippi (Chen, 2009, 2011). The establishment of Burners Without Borders also prefigured the later transformation of the privately held Burning Man company itself into a non-profit umbrella organization, the Burning Man Project, dedicated, per its mission statement, to "bring experiences to people in grand,

awe-inspiring and joyful ways that lift the human spirit, address social problems, and inspire a sense of culture, community, and civic engagement" not only in the Burning Man event itself, but in "the wider world".

In the early days of the COVID-19 crisis in the US, it quickly became evident that face masks, which had long been fashion items of both practical necessity and creative expression for burners accustomed to desert conditions, were dangerously scarce. As frontline health care workers faced an acute shortage of personal protective equipment, Burners who had accumulated stockpiles of desert-ready dust masks and other supplies that would be useful for frontline health workers facing shortages, began coordinating collection and donation drives. Burners Without Borders sprung into action, collaborating with Harvard microbiologist Ethan Garner to acquire and distribute masks and other necessary gear through a coalition and website #GetUsPPE getusppe.org (Chason, 2020; Graham, 2020). Designers developed methods to mass-produce homemade masks, and makers prototyped 3 D printing technology to decentralize and spur the production of mechanical ventilators to help compensate for widespread hospital shortages.

COVID-19 as an agent of liminality, and the possibility of more pro-social mobilities

Turning from this festival realm back towards travel more broadly, I would like to submit that several of the principles designed to both describe and spur such pro-social behavior could be of use for a reimagined and reconfigured tourism. Like tourists, most burners visit their destinations temporarily. Unlike tourists, burners have embraced norms and principles of "participation" and "civic responsibility" that have served community formation and crisis relief functions in the Black Rock Desert, as well as in authorized regional events in the so-called "default world" beyond Burning Man. As an ethos, participation implies that everyone has agency and parts to play. Unlike a conventional concert or staged cultural performance, there are, at least in theory, no spectators. Civic responsibility suggests that successful collaboration relies on understanding of local conditions and respect for local practices, also values which support more sustainable forms of tourism.

The unrealized promises of the capacity of responsible tourism, and its various permutations including "voluntourism", to manifest positive personal and spatial transformations are in part constrained by the reproduction of the fundamental divide between guests and hosts. However, echoing the transformative festival's cultural injunction against spectators, the physical immobility impelled by the pandemic, for a time, effectively *rendered almost no one a tourist*. Considering COVID-19 as an agent of global liminality that has subverted the usual social roles and subjectivities of tourism, I suggest that values such as participation and civic responsibility can inform and transform not only festivals and festival goers, but guests and hosts as we renegotiate our places within, between, and out of place and fixed subject positions.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic, like climate change, has affected nearly everyone on the planet, it has not done so in any kind of fair or uniform way – New York governor Andrew Cuomo's facile mischaracterization of the pandemic as "the great

equalizer" to the contrary. Tourism likewise will continue to unevenly affect guests and hosts. Still, as borders reopen and mobility and recreation recommences, transformational festivals and event communities, in their evident capacity to transform participants both within and beyond the time-space of their highly porous events, offer some hope for the blurring, if not the outright obliteration of the demarcation between guests and hosts. Such a subversive inter-subjective inversion may bring the recognition, in-itself, and production, for-itself, of a shared humanity of co-creators and participants in not just ephemeral, but accretive transformational social and environmental projects.

Facing the unfolding pandemic, the Burning Man Project announced in April 2020 that it would not construct a physical Black Rock City that year in Nevada. Instead the movement would manifest virtually and physically elsewhere in the world, if and when possible. It was therefore even more felicitous that the 2019 theme was "Metamorphoses", and the 2020 event theme had already been chosen as "The Multiverse", a topological notion drawn from quantum physics meant to explore,

> the quantum kaleidoscope of possibility, the infinite realities of the multiverse, and our own superpositioning as actors and observers in the cosmic Cacophony of resonant strings. It is an invitation to ponder the real, the surreal and the pataphysical, and a chance to encounter our alternate selves who may have followed, or are following, or will follow different decision-paths to divergent Black Rock City realities.

With their usual desert pilgrimage beyond the realm of possibility, burners found themselves approaching a liminal threshold, in which the annual distinction between the burner world and "default world" could no longer be made, and the definition of participation and scope of gift giving would have to be radically expanded. A Brooklyn-based Burners Without Borders organizer wrote on her social media account, "… we talk a lot about black rock city as a place for prototyping and exploration. It feels a little bit like the training wheels are off and now we are doing it live".

While housebound burners considered ways to move their projects out of the event time-space and towards the wider world, some segments of the travel and tourism industry, for their part, briefly adjusted towards more altruistic operations. Hotels and airlines offered otherwise unusable food to charities, delivered emergency supplies and personnel, and arranged to rescue or host stranded travelers (Morris, 2020).

It remains to be seen if and how these ephemeral convergences of gift and market economy may translate into communitas, for whom, and for how long. It is not hard to imagine that the tourism industry and the transformational festival scene may get back to (mostly) usual soon enough. Yet, it is heartening that at a time when a virus threatened the health and well-being of billions of individuals and the global biopolitical assemblage they constitute, many voices took the opportunity to push for collective action to address longer term (and often tourism-accelerated) threats such as socioeconomic inequality, mass extinction, and global warming (Robinson & Reddy, 2020). Indeed, even as COVID-19 compelled participants in the human event to surrender to liminal conditions of immobility, uncertainty, and extraordinary risk, many not only encountered their alternate selves, but conceived other, more sustainable worlds that may take yet more subversive experiments to realize.

Disclosure statement

The author has created art and facilitated Burning Man regional events on a volunteer basis.

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Ian Rowen is Assistant Professor of Sociology, Geography and Urban Planning at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. A Fulbright Scholar (2013–2014), he has written about regional politics, social movements, and tourism for publications including Annals of the American Association of Geographers, The Journal of Asian Studies, Annals of Tourism Research, International Journal of Transitional Justice, Asian Anthropology, Journal of Archaeology and Anthropology, the BBC, and The Guardian. Prior to earning a PhD in Geography from the University of Colorado Boulder, he worked as a tour guide, translator, and journalist in China, Taiwan, and elsewhere.

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