

Researching Sex (and Drugs) at Burning Man

Unlike some of my research venues in which I'd travelled halfway around the globe and visited a single time, I've journeyed to the inimitable Burning Man Festival in the Black Rock Desert of Northern Nevada a total of eight times. Despite the hardships of damning dust storms which can cause whiteouts so intense one can barely see objects (and people) even a foot away and air so smoky and gravelly that respiratory infections become the norm, year after year, I could not resist. During the last week of August and culminating on Labor Day, Black Rock City becomes the most interesting place on earth. Artists from around the world gather to perform, enchant and connect. Attracting upwards of 50,000 attendees, five square miles of dusty desert playa become the third largest city in Nevada (just behind Reno) with an axiom like Las Vegas, with whatever happens at Black Rock City, stays at Black Rock City. About the fourth day in of the festival, I and my 20-something nephew track each other down and reveal all of the things we've imbibed and all the amazing revelations that have since ensued. (In the default world we're of different generations and typically such cross talk would not and could not occur.) Burning Man is different and the playa becomes a huge opportunity for culture jumping. In one moment one can be dancing to screechingly loud techno-music, in another being served a slice of berry pie by a cross-dressing waitress with a full beard and a "Betty" Name Tag, in another surveying a graveyard filled with dead Barbie dolls, or receiving a very full-body massage or finally writing a wish inside an utterly spectacular about-to-be-burned temple.

Sex and Gender are some of the many things Burning Man plays with. Guards are dropped; what usually seems out of touch suddenly feels around-the-corner accessible. Veteran members of alternative sex and gender practices invite playa newbies to drop by and sample new flavors. While barely two percent of Americans practice polyamory, at the playa, it can feel more like the norm than an outlier exception. Male to female cross dressing becomes another playa norm

with whole camps being dedicated to biological males sporting female finery. This access to the otherwise inaccessible becomes so appealing, that Burning Man decompression parties abound in September and October as burners attempt to reconcile all the things that were around-the-corner-possible with their tightly bound default world lives.

While participation at Burning Man can push sex and gender boundaries, typically it's done with utmost attention to communication and consensuality. A case in point is the Human Carcass Wash sponsored by Poly Paradise, a well-respected theme camp for polyamorous burners and their friends. At the wash, participants equipped with spray bottles filled with soapy water take turns washing and scrubbing each other. Before water is squirted or hands are placed on a fellow burner, touch boundaries (e.g. no breasts, no nipples, and/or no orifices) are fully disclosed. In the end, car wash participants emerge a bit cleaner and certainly more enlightened about interpersonal communication. The casual nudity afforded by the Human Carcass Wash can lead to chats about body differences and similarities. During one wash, a woman approached me and disclosed that she, too, had once had large breasts, but the year before she'd had reduction surgery. Her now smaller breasts had enabled her to engage in more vigorous sports and as a result she'd lost 40 pounds. Her body looked lithe and muscular...part of me so wanted a body like hers. I then examined the scars on her breasts and they didn't interest me at all...

During my first year (1998) at Burning Man I met Andy (re: Baxter Zappa on Facebook). While we didn't emerge as a couple, we soon became good friends, leading to him agreeing to co-host this evening's party. That year only 23,000 people attended the week's festivities and my eyes were forever popping as I'd run through magically lit tunnels and climb through a panoply of erotic, humorous and sacred worlds and spaces. Every couple of years I'd declare I'd had enough of the dust, the post-burn coughing and feet so torn apart it would take months for them to stop feeling like sandpaper. Then something would pull me back. In 2002 I was in the midst of gathering data on polyamory and jealousy towards my doctoral dissertation and decided there would be significant research benefits to camping at Poly Paradise. I brought a large stack of questionnaires, pens and an

open mind. I assisted in hosting afternoon discussion groups, referred to as Poly High Teas and chatted up everyone I could. In each tea-discussion I'd raise different questions, ultimately gathering mountains of rich data.

One of the Poly Paradise campers was Zahai Stewart who coined the term NRE, referring to New Relationship Energy, the attraction phase of romantic love where new lovers have elevated levels of dopamine and norepinephrine. We discussed how polyamorous people learn to process that phase as simply a phase (that will soon end) as opposed to rest of the world which considers falling in love a (potentially) life-changing event. After five days of being a dedicated researcher, my lover Chuck flew into Reno.

I spirited myself away from the Black Rock Desert and drove several hours, refreshing myself with extra-cold water and ice cream, before picking him up. After buying fresh fruit for our campmates, we zoomed back into our desert womb. It was my first time to have a lover join me at Burning Man and everything—I mean everything changed. The spectating of other people's sexualities shifted into joining everyone in everything. One of my campmates, "Touch" (many burners give themselves Playa names) noted the frequent screeching and moaning coming from our tent and offered up his much larger, better appointed tent to extend our play. He then volunteered to be our fluffer, assisting with the application of copious amounts of lube, a must due to the harsh super-dry desert air. Once I had exhausted Chuck, "Touch" offered to take a turn. We all agreed it would be a great idea...and during the rest of our time around camp we functioned as a joyous threesome!

One morning Chuck and I visited Hebegebees Healer Camp and requested an erotic massage. While typically burners book sessions to heal physical and/or emotional injuries, our request was for erotic enhancement. Our healer was extraordinary and our session, utterly unforgettable. He placed each of us on the same massage table with our heads on the far edges and our crotches in the middle. He then began to massage the especially sensitive parts of our bodies and eventually placed a glob of lube in each of our palms, instructing us to apply it to our genitals. Then he fit Chuck's cock into my vagina and we began fucking on

top of the massage table. Our bodies were so fired up; we could barely get enough of each other. It was a once in a lifetime massage—not on the menu and only in that moment for that moment.

One evening Poly Paradise hosted a Masturbatathon. In a dome-shaped chill space covered with pillows and foam pads 30 or so campers washed their hands, helped themselves to gobs of lube, a vibrator (if desired) and brought themselves collectively to orgasm. The contagious moans generated a potent, yet respectful atmosphere. After a good amount of masturbating, several of us proposed that we culminate all of that solo orgasm-action into some group fucking. While certainly beyond the purview of the workshop, being Burning Man the organizer nodded a “go ahead” and all of our bodies flew into action.

Another evening, Chuck and I competed in Gigsville’s Beaver Eating Contest. Here exhibitionism, especially pretzel style yoga-esque postures and the feigning of amazing orgasms were far more important than true-blue cunnilingus. While some other hot couple got the evening’s prize, I wallowed in how much I’d stepped out of my shell. Our high buzz continued for days following the burn. As we left the Playa late Monday afternoon, we faced we were no way near ready to return home. We drove north on Highway 89, not knowing where it would take us. Serendipitously, we arrived at Sierraville Hot Springs and were rented a lovely guest room. That night we found our way to the Meadow Pond. Being completely alone in what felt like a huge yet shallow sandy-bottomed lake, we made love for hours. Eventually we found our way back to our pretty room and engaged in the kind of lovemaking where the brain takes a long nap and bodies completely get each other. In that moment, I knew that I’d reached the apex of sex, love and connection. When I returned home to Los Angeles, my brains (and body) were still overcome by bliss; the serious cautious researcher was clearly on hiatus.

Several years later I decided at the near 11th hour to go as a catharsis for having spent the previous five months fantasizing about a guy who barely gave me the time of day. (We’d had sex one time and then the following 4 ¾ months he kept promising to get together...) I found a ticket on Craigslist and tracked down some

friends who were leaving on Tuesday evening. I landed in Poly Paradise and despite that the camp was packed to the gills, I was welcomed with open arms and within minutes I felt as if I had arrived home. A couple of guys set up my tent and inflated my air mattress; by the next afternoon I was hosting Poly High Teas and making up for all of the touch and hugs I'd been so craving.

While polyamory is about consensual open relationships, camping with over 100 other poly people, can bring consensuality to a whole other level. In one moment I'd be making out with one wonderful guy whom I felt an exquisite resonance with and the next time I'd see him, he'd be embracing someone else with the tenderness, I'd thought was exclusively ours. But being that there was a whole playa filled with engaging wonderful souls, it was absurd dig my talons into any particular soul mate. This protocol was celebrated via the services of the Costco Soul Mate Trading Camp. There one could bring in a former soul mate and happily trade him or her in for a slightly used one who might generate that fresh and exciting feeling once again.

At best the culture of Burning Man is about surplus—during the much awaited week of festivities, just about everything was gifted. Gifts could be handmade sparkling trinkets, amazing massages, food, drink or access into the playa's best dance halls and jazz clubs. Over the years I've offered up a grand range of services. I've worked as a masseuse at some of the massage and healing camps, delivered heady lectures at Entheon Village (one of the intellectual camps), made cappuccinos as a barista at center camp (they fired me because I was too slow), and wrote stories for one of the playa newspapers. My all time favorite job was offering Sex and Relationship counseling at Hebegebees. I'd offer half-hour sessions to gorgeous young women whose boyfriends had become captivated by other gorgeous young women and to near-perfect young men who were worried that their current girl friend wasn't as perfect as a woman might be. From my sagely perch as a well-traveled Sexual Anthropologist, I'd dispense reflections and a bit of advice, often to the tune of, "you have no idea how good you've got it—dive in and drink it all up!"

Burning Man is also a place for nerdy men to access more female eroticism than the default world ever allows. On Friday afternoon, there is the Critical Tits Bike Ride where swarms of women join in a topless bike ride all over the playa. They are cheered on by even greater swarms of men who provide post-ride libations. One year an enterprising and especially nerdy 60-something man, set up a pussy washing camp. He'd dragged in a gynecological exam table replete with stirrups to effectively wash the vulvas of willing females. I questioned several of the women who had partaken of the "service" and ascertained that the washer was well-behaved. Still cautious, I watched while a girl friend received the service. I then slipped off my panties and positioned myself in the stirrups. While, the nerdy guy was deferent and well-behaved, it was nonetheless a huge mind-fuck to allow an odd-looking dirty old man sort of guy to view and painstakingly wash my vulva.

If that wasn't enough boundary-pushing weirdness, later that evening while walking along the edge of the Esplanade, I found the Orgasmatron. Being alone, I cautiously investigated. I stepped inside the booth and found an equally nerdy man with a contraption quite similar to a Sybian. Vibrating Sybian saddles have been around since the 1980s and I'd been fortunate enough to try them at several Lifestyles Conventions. Perusing the man and the contraption, I figured he and his "Orgasmatron" looked safe enough. I doubted that in the presence of a stranger on the wide open playa, I'd actually be able to reach orgasm. At one moment, I noted it wasn't working for me and offered to dismount and give another woman the opportunity. He encouraged me to stay on...and then out of nowhere I came. He then invited me to stay on and come again. I did and I did. I'd allowed a strange, yet safe man, to witness my largely clothed body in orgasm. Was it weird? Was it okay? It did feel good to orgasm and so I thanked him and left with a slightly sheepish smile.

2009 was by seventh year to attend Burning Man and the first year I tried drugs. My boyfriend and co-conspirator, Jeffrey opened the door for me. Why did it take me so long? I was really scared to lose my brain. So much of my identity had been wrapped around being smart that the thought of compromising my intelligence in any way, was absolutely horrifying. For Jeffrey, drugs were treats

that he'd used sparingly over the years. His intelligence was intact and so I decided to trust him. I'd purchased some high quality ecstasy from a friend in Los Angeles and then while on the playa, he'd picked up some hallucinogenic mushrooms. Under his guidance we fasted for six hours before taking the ecstasy tablets. I watched him swallow his and for an instant didn't want to do it. I was still scared, but the thought of being in the same altered state moment as he, sounded so appealing, I swallowed. During the next hour our campmates were indulging in turkey deep fried in huge vats of vegetable oil. It smelled delicious, but the thought of not getting the most out of our ecstasy trip overrode sampling it.

Jeffrey and I biked out to the middle of the playa to distract ourselves from the turkey aromas and gravitated to a crowd of people awaiting the desecration of a grand piece of playa art. Suddenly the ecstasy began to hit and my brain began spinning. A light dust storm swirled up and all I could do was hold Jeffrey tight. In that moment I so needed touch; lots and lots of touch. We looked into each other's eyes and in the same moment agreed to bike as fast as we could back to our van. The dust thickened, but our determination to stay close and get to the van quickly overrode all obstacles. Once in the van, we immediately pulled off our clothes and began kissing and hugging. His touch was absolutely amazing. I lost all self-consciousness about whether my touch was working for him and just touched. Soon we were making love. Every bit of him, me and us became utterly delicious. The missed turkey dinner became a minute afterthought. I swallowed huge amounts of water, ensuring I would not fry my brain over this mega dose of serotonin. In that moment, life became absolutely perfect, and ecstasy became my absolute drug of choice.

The next day I was scheduled to volunteer as a masseuse in a massage camp. Touch was so exquisite to me that every one of my clients remarked on my incredibly sensitive fingers. That evening the man burned and we tried out the mushrooms. The visual distortion afforded by the mushrooms paled in comparison to wanting to rip off my clothes and slather my body all over Jeffrey. The following year we did ecstasy again. The fogginess of my brain on ecstasy coupled with the thick soft playa dust recalled the absolute sweetness of the year

before. My trip was once again amazing, while Jeffrey's dose didn't take. Mostly I was in my own delirious space, more alone with myself than together with him... Ironically this portended our breakup; two months later, he met someone else and within a year, married her. And I haven't taken ecstasy or been to Burning Man since. Perhaps that chapter of research is now complete. Still, I miss the power of Burning Man – of weathering stark desert conditions amongst an ever expansive community of like-minded souls...and collectively getting to the guts of it all by burning the most beautiful things and further sensing their essence via their transformation.