“PLAN YOUR BURN, BURN YOUR PLAN”: How Decentralization, Storytelling, and Communification Can Support Participatory Practices

Katherine K. Chen*
The City College of New York and the Graduate Center, CUNY

Research has found that compared with larger groups, small ones had fewer difficulties with retaining their participatory-democratic practices and values. However, the endurance and expansion of Burning Man, from 20 friends and family in 1986 to a temporary arts community of more than 66,000 persons in 2014, suggests that collectivities can maintain and augment participatory practices over increasing scale. Using an ethnographic study of organizing activities spanning 1998 to 2001 and follow-up research through 2012, I focus on how the Burning Man organization has sustained its participatory-democratic principles over dramatic growth. Specifically, I show how the Burning Man organization promoted and sustained authentic voice and engagement by (1) decentralizing agency, (2) contextualizing norms and practices via storytelling and discussion, and (3) “communifying” labor.

Keywords: collective behavior and social movements; organizations, occupations, and work; altruism, morality, and social solidarity

INTRODUCTION

Crimson Rose: “… We need to talk it to death…[Let’s] have dinner, talk it to death and kill it. I just feel like sometimes there is not enough time –”

Marian Goodell: “To reach consensus.”
(Observation of Senior Staff meeting of the Burning Man organization, November 29, 2000, San Francisco)

Various collectivities ranging from corporations to social movement groups have adopted participatory-democratic practices, particularly decision making by consensus where people collectively make decisions. These practices have generated both enthusiasm and consternation among contemporary social movement groups such as Occupy and organizations such as Burning Man, as evidenced by the above quoted exchange between two Burning Man leaders. A key question for such groups is how to cultivate authentic voice and engagement so that all persons can share their views and fully participate? By examining the implementation of participatory practices at Burning Man,

*Direct all correspondence to Katherine K. Chen, The City College of New York, CUNY, NA 6/133, 160 Convent Ave., New York, NY 10031; e-mail: kchen@ccny.cuny.edu
we can learn how collectivities can maintain and augment these practices over increasing scale while still supporting authentic voice and engagement.

Burning Man originated in 1986 when a group of 20 friends and family celebrated the summer solstice by igniting the event’s signature wooden sculpture on a secluded San Francisco beach. By 2014, Burning Man, an annual weeklong celebratory arts community, attracted nearly 66,000 persons to the desolate Nevada Black Rock Desert (Burning Man n.d.a). With its distinctive features and extreme conditions, Burning Man seems like an extraordinary case. Nonetheless, the organization behind this temporary city, hereafter referred to as the Burning Man organization, shares a dilemma common to other democratically organized groups: how can a growing organization retain or even enhance its participatory practices while maintaining authentic voice and engagement? Based on their research of cooperatives and collectives, Rothschild and Whitt (1986) found that compared with larger groups, relatively small ones had fewer difficulties with retaining their participatory practices and values. From his observations of a political party, Michels ([1915] 1965) famously argued that even groups devoted to democracy yield to oligarchy as they grow—they not only lose members’ participation but also no longer support their members’ interests (Michels [1915] 1965). In contemporary groups, some participants are so disheartened by challenges such as integrating multiple perspectives during long, emotional discussions (Mansbridge 1983) that they have expressed reluctance about continuing democratic practices (Lee and Lingo 2011).

The experience of Burning Man suggests that participatory practices can endure growth and that the dampening of authentic voice and engagement is not inevitable. By studying how Burning Man supporters have handled organizing challenges of coordinating complex tasks on a growing scale, we deepen our knowledge of the fuller potential of democratic and participatory practices. Using an ethnographic study of the organizing activities behind the Burning Man event that spanned time periods between 1998 and 2001 and follow-up research through 2012, I focus on how the Burning Man organization sustained participatory-democratic principles while reliably facilitating a weeklong endeavor with multiple stakeholders and parties. My previous research documented how this organization confronted various organizing dilemmas (e.g., Chen 2009, 2012a, 2012b). Synthesizing my prior research and using follow-up research, this research focuses on how the organization has sustained participation even as it grows and its Burning Man–inspired groups spread worldwide.

Here, I show how the Burning Man organization promoted and sustained participatory democracy by (1) decentralizing agency, (2) contextualizing norms and practices via storytelling and discussion, and (3) what I call “communifying” labor. First, decentralizing agency empowered members to act. Guided by principles, members could undertake activities without awaiting leaders’ approval or orders. Second, via storytelling and discussions, Burning Man organizers and members contextualized how to enact principles. These redirected activities away from ones that could erode the community toward ones that enhance cohesion. Third, the Burning Man organization treated members’ contributions as central to its mission of creating and protecting an artistic
community. Rather than commodifying labor and thereby alienating members from their work efforts, output, each other, and themselves, the Burning Man organization “communified” labor by valuing and integrating members’ contributions to the collective. Together, these guiding values and practices helped maintain participatory practices that enable Burning Man to not only thrive but also expand, even as members depart and leaders anticipate their eventual retirement.

Burning Man offers crossover lessons for other collectives about how to sustain and enhance democratic organizing activities over the long term. Burning Man’s ability to grow while continuing to promote and even disseminate its practices suggests the potential for other groups to do the same. Using findings from my own research and other studies, I conclude by suggesting several conditions that impact the maintenance of participatory organizing practices.

THE CHALLENGES OF MAINTAINING AND EXPANDING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY

Building on Weber’s (1946) typology of forms of authority that was first published during the 1920s, Rothschild’s seminal article (Rothschild-Whitt 1979) identified eight features of the collectivist organizational form. Collectivist practices were intended to counteract the perceived pitfalls of bureaucracy and enact desired forms in both practices and goals by encouraging members to participate in collective decision making, rotate tasks, and obey based on a shared belief in the mission (Rothschild and Whitt 1986). The 1960s–1970s ferment ushered in experimentation with participatory-democratic practices that continue today. These have afforded researchers multiple opportunities to study the challenges of forming and sustaining a variety of collectivist organizations that produced goods or services, such as cooperatives (Rothschild and Whitt 1986; Whyte and Whyte 1988; Cheney 1999), free schools (Swidler 1979), and health clinics (Kleinman 1996), or established intentional communities including communes (Kanter 1968, 1972) and kibbutzim (Simmons and Ingram 2003).

In addition, social movement groups that pursue societal transformation have also developed creative participatory practices. Their members engage in direct action and prefigurative practices with the intention of enacting their desired society (e.g., Breines 1982). Viewing participatory practice as a means and ends, such organizations have sought, for example, to expand civil rights (Polletta 2002) and women’s rights (Bordt 1997) or undertake philanthropy (Ostrander 1995; Eikenberry 2009). The recent increased visibility of social movement groups that practice direct action, such as global justice movements (della Porta 2005), Occupy (Graeber 2009, 2013), and their offshoots, has rekindled scholarly interest in collectivist practices.

Because their practices violate convention, collectivist organizations face strong pressures to weaken original practices and values or replace these with accepted ones. These changes may curb authentic engagement, such that participants cannot partake in activities in a meaningful way. A few studies, such as Sobering’s (2016) research of an Argentinian worker-recovered cooperative, have examined how collectivities have tried to rectify a
gendered division of labor and differences in participation. Without such mindful practices, members may inadvertently reproduce inequalities associated with hierarchy and oligarchy. For example, in growing cooperatives, new workers may not share the same rights and pay as longtime and permanent members (Darr 1999). Despite their rejection of hierarchy, collectivist groups can also reproduce inequalities by marginalizing new members through cliquish behavior (Freeman 1973, 1976) or by valuing tasks along gendered lines (Sutherland, Land, and Böhm 2014). In particular, organizations that professionalized (Beeman et al. 2009) and standardized to ease coordination issues evidence stratification among members. Such changes commodify labor, inflicting alienation. Marx ([1844] 1978) argued that when workers are reduced to exchanging their labor for wages, they can no longer relate to work processes, what they produce, themselves, and other persons.

Another vexing challenge is promoting authentic participation so that all have the chance to share their voice. Studies have shown that in decision-making matters, the most articulate or privileged tend to dominate discussions, and those who are less educated or more marginalized are less likely to talk (Beeman et al. 2009). While groups have introduced practices to incorporate individuals from marginalized groups (Maharawal 2013), at certain moments, the most skilled have been able to direct “leaderless” movements (Wengronowitz 2013). Members, particularly those who are not paid staff, have expressed mystification about how to participate. This confusion can suppress their involvement; yet, members affirm the importance of having a say even if they don’t participate (Beeman et al. 2009; Leach 2013). Nonetheless, repeated negative encounters can dissuade members from engaging (Mansbridge 1983). If such participatory practices become fetishized, collectives may not agree on what goals to pursue and will experience democratic practices as exclusionary rather than inclusionary (Smith and Glidden 2012).

Such challenges are not insurmountable. While some organizations undercut their collectivist practices with more conventional practices that mute authentic voice and engagement, other organizations use their values to fend off pressures to conform. To preserve their free time against overwork, for example, cooperative members have cited their organization’s mission and values (Franke, Raghavan, and Issac 1998; Kokkinidis forthcoming). Likewise, one art collective rejected a lucrative work contract, citing concerns that the increased workload would result in new hires who would be treated unequally from longtime members (Vail and Hollands 2012). For this group, staying small helped preserve their desired form and values. Other groups manage external relations to stave off pressures. To protect their independence from for-profit corporations, open source software projects either diversified corporate support or had members relinquish their leadership positions if they had conflicts of interest. These steps ensured that programming code continued to be freely available for use and modification by the commons, rather than be restricted by corporations seeking competitive advantage (Chen and O’Mahony 2009).

Several practices can also facilitate authentic participation, encouraging the involvement of those who might otherwise be silenced for questioning the majority view. To avoid foreclosing discussion, collectivist organizations formalized channels for expressing dissenting opinions, especially in discussions with leaders (Osterman 2006). Rather than regarding conflict as divisive and something to avoid, members...
can deploy conflict generatively to explore possibilities (Husemann, Ladstaetter, and Luedicke 2015). When making decisions, one collective doesn’t aim for uniform agreement; instead, its members foster decentralization (Leach 2009, 2013). More study is needed of how groups can use decentralization and other means to more fully realize participatory practices’ authentic, transformative potential.

Top-down bureaucracies that have converted into leaner, “post-bureaucratic” organizations (Heckscher 1994) shed additional insight into the challenges of implementing participatory practices for purposes besides cultivating democracy. Unlike collectivist organizations, these organizations were not founded with participatory practices. Instead, these organizations deployed participatory practices as a means of increasing efficiency and profitability, without corresponding support for members’ interests or ownership (Rothschild and Ollilainen 1999). During the 1980s onward, workplaces, particularly manufacturing firms competing with Japanese corporations, reorganized their hierarchical bureaucracies with “high performance,” “Total Quality Management” (TQM), or teamwork practices. Teams of workers became responsible for assessing and improving their outputs. Rather than liberating workers, these practices comprised an even more powerful form of control based on peer pressure and internalization (Barker 1993, 1999; Sewell 1998). Moreover, while such workplaces conferred more responsibilities on workers for managing workplace processes, managers refused to share decision-making authority with workers (Vallas 2006). Under such conditions, workers withdrew, resisted, or symbolically complied with these participatory practices (Graham 1995; Vallas 2003). In these organizations, participatory practices suppressed authentic voice and engagement.

Countering the laudatory advocacy of participatory practices in governance (e.g., Baiocchi 2005; Fung 2006), several studies have detailed pitfalls that undercut participatory practices’ full potential. Similar to “high performance” workplaces, participatory practices in civic contexts serve as a means for ends other than democracy. Examples of this have included forums where New York City urban planners sought participants’ support without allowing real decision-making choices (Polletta 2014). By applying a one-size-fits-all approach to deliberation, professionals hired to facilitate such participatory processes failed to tailor practices to the issues and decisions, thereby curbing participatory practices’ full potential (Lee 2014). When carrying out “empowerment” projects with marginalized populations such as city youth in their local communities, participants and organizations undertake actions that reinforce organizational maintenance, and the status quo over societal transformation. Instead of encouraging participants to discuss resource allocation, organizations steered efforts toward demonstrating organizational efficiency, sustainability, and quantification of efforts for funders (Eliasoph 2011, 2014). In political campaigns, volunteers helped recruit support for candidates, but they lacked input in decision-making matters (Kreiss 2014). Given these studies, critics raise questions about whether participatory practices cool out authentic voice and engagement and promote buy-in of outcomes predetermined by technocrats and elites. While their studies have aptly documented the pitfalls and conundrums associated with implementing participatory practices, they do not substantively discuss how to ensure that participatory practices can reach their full potential.
DATA AND METHODS

The Burning Man Case

When Burning Man was small and informal, limited planning sufficed. After a government official stopped the 1990 bonfire at its original location at San Francisco’s Baker Beach, the evening bonfire moved to a remote Nevada desert where pioneer wagons and cattle had trekked along a “short-cut” to Oregon during the mid-1800s. As the event extended to a week’s duration during the late-1990s through the 2000s, its population rapidly grew, forming the annual, ephemeral Black Rock City. This transformation from a cozy bonfire into a city spanning several square miles encouraged organizers’ experimentation with participatory practices.

Organizers founded a formal organization to handle increasingly complex tasks, including securing an event permit, buying event insurance, renting portable chemical toilets, and training and managing volunteers. Originally formed as a three-person limited liability partnership in 1995, the organization became a for-profit limited liability company in 1997. At the time of this study, the organization was led by a seven-person board that later reduced to six persons. During these transition years, the Burning Man organization struggled with challenges that nearly ended the event, including a death and injuries from vehicular accidents in 1996 and disputes with county sheriffs about fees for their services. Burning Man cofounder Larry Harvey felt that mobilizing attendees’ support was critical for the event’s survival. Moreover, he sought to transform the event into a more civic, community-oriented collective, shifting away from the anarchist clans favored by other leaders who soon left (Chen 2013).

Despite its for-profit status, the Burning Man organization’s practices resembled those of a voluntary organization, with a heavy reliance on volunteers to carry out art projects, infrastructural services, and organizing efforts. Over the years, organizers codified collectivist practices such as decision making by consensus and allowed volunteers to select their responsibilities and to initiate and carry out projects, even if organizers were not yet convinced of these projects’ potential (Chen 2009). In addition, organizers articulated 10 Principles that now guide activities at Burning Man and related events: radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, Leaving No Trace, participation, and immediacy. For example, the principle of self-reliance urges attendees to prepare for desert camping and inevitable contingencies, as the nearest amenities involve a several-hour drive. The principles of radical inclusion, in which people are expected to “welcome the stranger,” communal effort, civic responsibility, and gift economy encourage sharing and cooperation among attendees. Leaving No Trace promotes environmental conservation, such as packing out garbage and wastewater, composting, and recycling.

To prepare for their eventual retirement and turnover, in 2011, Burning Man cofounder Larry Harvey and other organizers created the Burning Man Project. This organization supported the dissemination of practices and principles beyond the Black Rock Desert to other localities. Given practical constraints on the Burning Man event’s growth, such as the two-lane road leading to and from the event site, Burning Man is
expected to proliferate via its inspired off-shoots. By 2012, the Burning Man Project had a nonprofit status. In 2014, this nonprofit organization took over the coordination of the Burning Man event (Burning Man 2014a).

Previous research on Burning Man focused on its cultural aspects, such as its rituals and rites (Pike 2001; Sherry and Kozinets 2007; Gilmore 2010), the contradictions of its gift economy (Kozinets 2002), and creative synergies with Silicon Valley firms (Turner 2009). With its maturation and extensive expansion, the Burning Man organization is an ideal site for studying participatory organizing practices. While the community that the organization builds each year lasts just a week, its efforts expose what might otherwise be taken-for-granted and, therefore, not be discussed or acknowledged in “year-round” participatory democracies such as worker collectives. Burning Man’s extreme conditions intensify and make more apparent for study the challenges shared with other maturing and growing organizations (Chen forthcoming). Moreover, the spread of its principles and organizing practices to other locales provide opportunities to understand dissemination (Chen 2011).

Data Collection and Analysis
Data for this study included several intensive periods of ethnographic fieldwork covering several months at a time of the Burning Man organization’s activities between 1998 and 2001. During this time span, the organization became more formalized with a headquarters and enlarging volunteer corps. I also made subsequent follow-up visits through 2012, including observations of local events in New York City and the San Francisco Bay area and a 2011 conference for regionals. At the latter event, more than 150 representatives of local groups from across the United States and around the world participated in a three-day gathering to share experiences and ideas. These follow-up observations captured an additional phase in the organization’s development, the planning for an organizational transition and dissemination of Burning Man beyond a weeklong event. Moreover, I attended 13 Burning Man events between 1998 and 2012. While conducting these observations, I participated as a volunteer in three departments. In addition, I conducted 81 interviews with former and current organizers and volunteers, including those who were at the forefront of initiating new practices and departments. Finally, I examined the organization’s print and film archives, several email discussion lists, and Web site.

This research began with the intent of documenting the operations of a temporary organization. While Burning Man previously involved limited coordination in the months before the event, by the time I started my observations, its organizers were already operating on a year-round basis from their homes, albeit with some simultaneously working other jobs. My research question, thus, shifted to understanding organizing issues associated with growth. My field research over the years allowed for an unanticipated study of an organization that not only endured but also began disseminating its practices and values. When examining how growing groups can retain authentic voice and engagement, in situ observations of meetings, trainings, and volunteers activities were critical in revealing dilemmas and solutions that otherwise might not be
articulated or apparent. Interviews with those who held leadership positions within the Burning Man organization and Burning Man-inspired groups also provided informed insight into organizing experiences.

During analysis, I coded field notes and interviews, generating memos about themes such as challenges identified and differences from other organizations. Follow-up research, including repeated participation-observations of departmental activities over the years, facilitated additional abductive analysis. According to Tavory and Timmermans (2012:169), abductive analysis enables theory construction by “the cultivation of anomalous and surprising empirical findings against a background of multiple existing sociological theories and through systematic methodological analysis.” Abductive analysis involved three interrelated steps: (1) mnemonics—recording field notes, coding, and memo writing to substantiate phenomena and examine variations, (2) defamiliarization—examining data until otherwise taken-for-granted activities come to the foreground for closer scrutiny, and (3) revisiting observations—going over data to the point that connections can be made. Furthermore, comments made by a “community of inquiry”—colleagues who reviewed this manuscript or listened to presentations—helped refine analysis (Tavory and Timmermans 2014:103–14). This extended research, in conjunction with colleagues’ studies of other contexts, enabled continuous refinement of the relationship between observations and theorization. This approach allowed interpretation of puzzling findings, including volunteers’ willingness to engage in manual or seemingly tedious labor.

The term organizers refers to the head leaders of the Burning Man organization; the term members refers to those who volunteer for the event and/or its organization. Those who take part in the Burning Man event are called attendees and, using Burning Man terminology, participants and Burners. When quoting interviewees and observed persons, I use real names, as well as their Burning Man nicknames, with their permission unless they requested anonymity or confidentiality. Because the Burning Man event is impossible to disguise adequately given its unique features, the benefits of changing the name and altering the characteristics of the Burning Man organization and its participants seemed negligible. In addition, I felt that this research should recognize rather than obscure individual persons’ contributions to a larger endeavor, especially given the organization’s emphasis on authentic voice and engagement.

HOW CAN A GROWING ORGANIZATION SUPPORT AUTHENTIC VOICE AND ENGAGEMENT?

The mantra “Plan your burn, burn your plan” provides clues to how the growing Burning Man organization has supported authentic voice and engagement. This saying acknowledges two sets of seemingly diametrical organizing efforts. On the one hand, rational planning is necessary for reliably building and dismantling a city each year, especially given the number of persons, organizations, and resources involved. On the other hand, the event’s constantly changing conditions, including weather extremes, new attendees, and issues raised, require flexibility and adaptation. These have
encouraged the growing Burning Man organization to continually experiment with participatory practices. First, organizers decentralized activities while still providing support. Second, organizers used storytelling and discussions to help flesh out guiding principles, cultivating agency while curbing inappropriate activities. Third, organizers communified labor, thereby curbing alienating tendencies. Together, these practices promoted meaningful participation.

1. Decentralizing agency. Before an attentive crowd of leaders who organize Burning Man-inspired events across North America and Europe, Burning Man cofounder and Executive Director Larry Harvey shared a personal account of the state of the Burning Man organization, its leadership, and future plans. Noting the passage of time and his health issues, he described his experience of growing older, “I was attending a party at night, and at about 11 [p.m.], we’re all [yawns theatrically to indicate tiredness]. We drink a little less; life seems a little shorter.” With a metaphor that anthropomorphized death and also noted that year’s “rites of passage” event theme, he described the utopist impetus for a transformative transition:

When Death is in the room, he is talking to someone else, but he is in the middle of the conversation; he stops, takes a look in your direction, and nods. You can embrace that in your rite of passage... at that age, you’re thinking at the end of life without you. When you’re young, you can’t imagine it... when you’re in your thirties, forties—especially in you’re in your thirties, you’re burping up your ego, diapering it... I’m not sure it’s like that when you’re in your seventies. It is about what you’re going to do with your life, with the time you have left. What are you going to do—retire? Play golf? Why not act to change the world, a world you want to be in?

At this speech’s end, he invited attendees to join Burning Man as it moved to the aegis of the Burning Man Project, dedicated to disseminating Burning Man principles worldwide (Observation of Burning Man Conventional Caucus, April 1, 2011, San Francisco).

Burning Man’s participatory practices enable people to claim such agency in pursuit of both a weeklong and year-round society. Over the years, Burning Man organizers developed what they dubbed a “do-o-cracy,” their term for participatory democracy. Although participants do not exercise a direct say in all decision-making matters, they are empowered to enact Burning Man principles without waiting for top-down approval. This has fostered members’ experimentation with event activities and organizing practices. This also allowed organizers to focus on matters like budgeting and working with government agencies. At the same time, organizers have retained the authority to specify appropriate versus inappropriate activities. Typically, this was done in dialogue with members. Members may also independently raise concerns about matters, such as promoting environmental conservation via recycling and reducing waste (Chen 2009). Volunteer Eric Pouyoul, who coordinated 300 campers as one of the first “villages” at the 1997 Burning Man, opined a preference for enhancing democratic
processes as the event expanded: “When you’re small in the beginning, you can lead in some sort of a monarchist system, but when you grow, you need to grow in a more democratic way” (Interview with Eric Pouyoul, December 3, 2000, San Francisco). Regional leaders similarly reported adopting do-ocracy for their groups; as one stated: “We adopted do-ocracy—if you show up to a meeting, you get to do these things” (Observation of Burning Man regional summit, April 2, 2011, San Francisco). From this perspective, participatory practices are associated with growth. Rather than being incompatible with increasing scale, participants such as Pouyoul felt that these practices were crucial to the event’s vitality.

Decentralization has been as simple as using word of mouth or local groups to pass along information and guidance, which acculturates newcomers and integrates longtimers. Decentralization also facilitated more complex organizing with individuals and groups taking responsibility for initiating and self-managing projects, with the support of organizers. Rather than taking orders from leaders, participants can identify civic needs. They usually also have the energy and enthusiasm to initiate projects. As Jennifer Vermuth, aka Absinthe, explained, what eventually became an informational service emerged from event attendees asking questions of the Black Rock Rangers, a volunteer department that focused on monitoring the event for emergencies:

... he [John Nettle, aka Nettie, the volunteer coordinator] and I would sit at the booth, and people could come up to us with projects that they were working on and that they needed volunteers, and then that way, I also found out what was happening and what projects were going on, so that people would come up and say, “Hey, I’m looking for something to do?” or “Do you know something about the people who are putting this camp together?”, and then we had a big map there so that we could help people find locations. Some of the more important questions were people who were lost or people who were locked out of their cars, so then we eventually did locksmiths out of Checkpoint, too.

At the Burning Man event, some Burners build theme camps, or camps organized around a motif, like the Thunderdome or a disco roller-skating ring, that invite passers-by to participate. They can also make art installations (Chen 2012a), or they can volunteer for various infrastructural projects (Chen 2009). With decentralization, groups may “duplicate” efforts. Rather than being discouraged for efficiency reasons, such concurrent projects were welcomed and even celebrated for their creativity and diversity. For example, volunteers established two different newspapers distributed at the event, the Black Rock Gazette and Piss Clear, the latter of which was named after a mantra reminding campers to hydrate enough to produce clear rather than concentrated urine. Similarly, as former communications volunteer Naomi Pearce recalled, “there was one legit radio station and like six pirate radio stations trying to webcast the Burning Man” (Interview with Naomi Pearce, December 1, 2000, Albany, California).
Although participants are expected to coordinate the planning and the work themselves, they can request support from the organization. This support has included designated space at the event in high foot-traffic (or, if preferred, remote) areas, secured event tickets, passes for early event entry to setup, and even funds to help defray expenses. As Diane Whitman, cofounder of Recycle camp, explained, participants take responsibility for running their projects, but they can also turn to organizers for assistance or to share information when needed:

... our job is to conceive, plan, raise our own volunteers, and with ... the help of the organization, basically execute the whole thing, and when we run into trouble, we just come to Harley [Dubois, a Burning Man organizer]. If something that we planned doesn’t pan out, our responsibilities are also to stay in touch with the organization and bring all other staff information (Interview with Diane Whitman, August 18, 2000, San Francisco).

In addition, decentralized efforts can be experimental. As Whitman also explained, she and her partner had previously participated in an art project that smeltered aluminum cans and founded a theme camp that offered bicycle repair. The former was “a really great conceptual art idea” but the process was too “toxic”; the latter morphed from a bicycle repair theme camp into a can–collecting and–crushing operation (Interview with Diane Whitman, August 18, 2000, San Francisco).

For some local communities, Burning Man serves just as one of several focal points for coordinating decentralized activities (Schmitt 2008; Cox 2012). Seeking Burning Man in their everyday life, some participants also developed their own activities and events, including replicating camp-outs with bonfires of effigies. To coordinate these, participants formed what are known as regionals; some even established formal organizations modeled on the Burning Man organization. As of 2015, the Burning Man Web site listed 129 regionals located across North America, South America, Europe, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, Africa, and the virtual reality world Second Life (Burning Man n.d.b). The most active regionals host regular get-togethers like weekly socials at a local bar’s happy hour. A smaller number organize elaborate events involving art, overnight camping, and/or bonfires. For example, during the first half of 2015, the Burning Man Web site calendar showed 11 multiday events planned by regionals in Arizona, Austria, Barcelona, Spain, South Florida, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, New Mexico, Western Australia, South Africa, and Second Life. Partly, such events arise from some participants’ desires for additional, geographically closer, and more intimate events, as Jim Graham, aka RonJon, who volunteered as the Santa Cruz, California regional leader for three years, explained:

... it’s [Burning Man’s] evolving now where a lot of people who have been out for multiple years are saying, “It’s too big,” so ... they’re splintering off, and they’re doing like the one in Utah, “Synergy,” or they’re doing the burn in Austin, [or] the July 4th thing [Fourth of Juplaya] out in the Black Rock Desert,
where people are saying, “Let’s do something smaller and more interpersonal” (Interview with Jim Graham, September 23, 2000, San Francisco).

Other participants initiated community projects to address local needs, such as preparing backpacks of supplies for the homeless, rebuilding homes devastated by natural disasters (Chen 2011), or producing local art. In doing so, such persons sought to introduce Burning Man principles to their local communities. At a 2011 presentation to regional leaders, Marrilee Ratcliffe opined that local events were more accessible to the general public, in contrast with Burning Man’s “high barrier to entry” (Observation of Burning Man regional summit, April 2, 2011, San Francisco). Some regional events have attracted attendees who may not have the interest or ability to attend Burning Man (Cox 2012).

To help promote such decentralization, Burning Man organizers devoted space at Burning Man and related events for regionals and related organizations like Burners Without Borders, which carries out humanitarian projects. The Burning Man organization also screens potential leaders for the regionals, which agree to abide by Burning Man’s 10 Principles, and provides a communication infrastructure to advertise events and coordinate planning. In addition, they host an annual conference where local organizers present their efforts and tips to help others learn from their efforts. Organizers also encouraged regionals to undertake projects to help coalesce local communities. In recent years, with financial support and encouragement from the Burning Man organization, regionals designed and constructed art effigies representative of their communities. For example, in 2011, after several work parties in the backyard and basement of a couple’s live/work space, the New York City regional brought a “tree” made of wooden girders, encircled by wooden benches representing the bridges connecting the boroughs (Observation of NYC regional, July 31, 2011, New York City). After several days of display at a central location in Black Rock City, these artworks collectively burned as part of the “Circle of Regional Effigies (CORE),” raising participants’ awareness of local efforts with this new ritual. Regionals also help orient newcomers to the Burning Man principles, providing both helpful tips and network connections. For example, an e-mail announcement on the New York City regional list warmly welcomed “newbies” and longtimers to an orientation event. The e-mail emphasized connecting those looking for new recruits and persons seeking volunteer opportunities, art projects to support, or theme camps to join:

... From noon til 5pm, the club’s sunny roof deck will be packed with people ready to help YOU get to Burning Man!

This is an open invitation to everyone interested in
* learning more about Burning Man
* looking for a theme camp to join
* hoping to find an ART project to work on or otherwise assist
* eager to volunteer on-playa with one of the many groups who are “in service” at the event
* want to meet other burners who can help you prepare or share their experiences
* curious campers eager to catch a glimpse of playa-bound art projects
* working on ART projects in need of volunteers
* grizzled veterans with knowledge to share
* theme camp heads on the hunt for new campers
* representatives from [the Burning Man departments] Rangers, Greeters, Media Mecca, Earth Guardians, DPW, Playa Restoration, Lamplighters, Gate/Perimeter/Exodus, Airport, Center Camp Cafe, BMIR, The Artery, Arctica, Playa Info, DMV, Recycle Camp and more, willing to advise potential volunteers! (“2011 Burner Lab” New York City Regional e-mail list, Monday, April 25, 2011)

Some regionals also host weekly or monthly gatherings and meetings where attendees can mingle.

Comments by regional leaders suggested that such decentralized activities are more likely to thrive in areas with the density of those who have similar interests and the time and resources to share. Such areas offer existing venues where connections can be made. For example, to recruit people, Terra Cronshey, aka Kallisiti, a regional contact for Utah, recommended posting notices in libraries and grocery store boards. She also commented, “Community boards and coffee houses might be another place to distribute information.”

Regional leaders located in areas that lacked density of similarly-interested persons faced difficulties with rallying local enthusiasm. As Steveil, the leader of the El Paso, Texas region, shared with a note of exasperation, “We have very little contact because I am the only person in the region who has gone to Burning Man. I host a slideshow [with photos of Burning Man]—two people came to the last one. It’s [the El Paso regional is] teetering; it’s like beating a dead horse!” He attributed the low turnout to his city’s socioeconomic conditions: “The median income in my town is $14,000/year. It’s [attending Burning Man is] a luxury that people don’t have” (Observation of Burning Man regional summit, April 3, 2011, San Francisco). His experience illustrated the “chicken and egg” dilemma of authentic participatory democracy: participants need time and other resources to contribute; those who don’t have the capacity to do so often are the ones who might benefit the most from engagement. Moreover, a sizeable turnout of interested persons can energize and entice participants to return, as demonstrated by Occupy (Milkman, Lewis, and Luce 2013). These insights underscored the underlying conditions needed, as well as perseverance, to build participatory democracy.

To encourage participation, local organizers recounted how when describing Burning Man principles, they borrowed terms believed to be familiar to their target audiences. For example, rather than using the term *gifting* for the gift economy principle, one organizer explained that she referred to it as “freecycle” (Observation of Burning Man regional summit, April 3, 2011, San Francisco). In addition, local organizers felt that regionals and local activities were more likely to blossom in areas that were open to less conventional forms of civic engagement and solidarity or were seeking ways of
rejuvenating during economic downturns. An informal community in Portland, Oregon studied by Cox (2012) offers an example of the former. By affiliating with these groups, individuals can combat alienation and find like-minded compatriots and share values that promote artistic expression, creativity, and community. Through these connections, participants can barter exchanges of nonmonetary resources (e.g., labor for studio space), solicit financial support during medical emergencies, and gain emotional support during difficult times, meaning-making through relationships (Cox 2012). To secure acceptance, local organizers could also frame their efforts as solving city issues. At the 2011 regional conference, Cory Mervis, aka Lady Merv, described how she had approached Las Vegas officials about supporting an art project. Elected city officials saw this and another event that Mervis had spearheaded—the first Halloween parade—as opportunities to revitalize the city. City officials, therefore, extended resources, as Mervis revealed: “The city is interested in what we have to offer. We built a relationship with the city, and we reached out with the relationships; they gave us more than we asked for.” She added, to the audience’s whoops and applause, “Last, they’re giving us free money!” (Observation of Burning Man regional summit, April 3, 2011, San Francisco).

While some organizers mentioned affiliations with Burning Man when advertising their activities to the public, a few completely decoupled from Burning Man. These organizers feared that if they linked their events to Burning Man, the public and governmental agencies would stereotype and, therefore, dismiss their event. As presenter Ratcliff explained, she and her partner wanted to convert non-Burners into stakeholders of local events, thereby enhancing the likelihood that these would flourish:

“... we didn’t voluntarily mention that we were related to Burning Man. ... It is too easy for someone to make a judgment. We wanted as many people to live it and own it because when some people own it, the harder it is to kill it” (Observation of Burning Man regional summit, April 2, 2011, San Francisco).

By not referring to ties with Burning Man, an event perceived as countercultural and deviant by the mainstream, such groups built support for their activities as local projects. With public and governmental assent and support, events like FIGMENT on Governor’s Island, which brings participatory art for free to the general public on a small island off of Brooklyn and Manhattan, New York City, have since expanded to several other cities. In these ways, decentralization has not only facilitated Burning Man’s expansion as an organization and event, it has also assisted the dissemination of Burning Man principles across the United States and worldwide.

In general, groups may be reluctant to decentralize, as this involves relinquishing and sharing control. Throughout meetings, trainings, and interviews, Burning Man leaders acknowledged this dilemma, but they emphasized how it allowed members to excel in contributing to the larger endeavor. At the same time, they addressed actions that threatened their community’s well-being. If individuals or groups were physically or verbally abusive toward others and refused to change their actions, then they were banned from the community. Such actions show how
decentralization does not mean a laissez-faire abdication of responsibility; instead, when confronted by noxious activities, members must articulate and enforce what the community’s guidelines and norms allow versus discourage. Decentralization also runs the risk that one person’s misstep can taint others’ efforts. For example, at the 2011 regional summit, one participant recounted how one gung-ho local organizer “decided that he was more Burning Man than anyone else; he thought he would do it better than anyone else.” The organizer hosted events that attracted the attention of the fire marshal, who then issued a notice that ended these events. The participant reported this organizer’s actions made future events impossible: “He burned it for the rest of us” (Observation of Burning Man regional summit, April 3, 2011, San Francisco).

2. Contextualizing norms and practices via storytelling and discussions. Besides decentralizing activities, organizers and members used storytelling to inspire agency around Burning Man’s 10 Principles. Although rules and regulations can succinctly state what is permissible versus what is not, they lack context and nuance that convey why and how people should adhere to unfamiliar practices. Storytelling fleshes out possibilities that are otherwise not readily apparent in guidelines. For example, at a volunteer training meeting, organizer Harley Dubois covered one guideline about volunteer placement. Rather than just firing volunteers if they were not the right fit, she urged managers to redirect them to other departments: “This is where you can repurpose people . . . they can go to Lamplighters [or] Recycling. They [those departments] need warm bodies.” She explained the intent of this guideline, “We don’t want a volunteer walking away feeling like they failed.” Using a memorable story, volunteer coordinator Molly Tirpak then underscored Dubois’s exhortation to place volunteers. At Checkpoint (now called Playa Info), an information service, Tirpak discovered a volunteer puckishly providing incorrect answers to unsuspecting information-seekers. In her story, she recounted how she gently reoriented this person to contribute in mutually meaningful ways; the would-be mischief-maker both recommended another volunteer with a special needed skill and led another department that better suited his interests:

“I got a call on the radio, [another department] needed a skilled volunteer, which this person isn’t. I said [to the person], ‘I can give you a ride on my golf cart home to camp.’ I told him I was looking for a rigger; and he said, ‘I know a person I drove out with who was sailor.’ He [the sailor] tied knots for three days.”

She concluded her story with an added success, “That same guy who was a total nightmare at Checkpoint—days later, him and his loud voice were at Recycle camp, pedaling [the aluminum can crusher]. He’s now the volunteer coordinator of the Recycle camp” (Observation of lead training, July 5, 2001, San Francisco). Such storytelling made otherwise context-less guidelines come alive with real-life tales of success.

Moreover, storytelling can facilitate connective interactions that cohere new recruits with longtimers and reinvigorate mundane organizing activities with a sense of wonder.
and purpose (Chen 2012b). In addition, storytelling offers a chance for frontline persons to participate by sharing their perspectives on organizing. By allowing members to articulate their contributions and experiences, such storytelling can enhance greater organizational accountability to their interests (Chen 2013). At Burning Man-sponsored meetings, gatherings, and online discussion boards and blogs, organizers encouraged storytelling, thereby promoting authentic participation, even when recounted stories were critical of organizing efforts or reflected failures. For example, when eliciting stories about managing volunteers, Harley Dubois also encouraged the sharing of “negative experiences” (Observation of volunteer training, July 5, 2001, San Francisco).

Discussions about principles and practices also are crucial to enhancing participatory practices’ support of authentic voice and engagement. While bureaucratic organizations can rely on hierarchy to convince members to automatically obey, organizations like Burning Man primarily rely on value-rational authority, or belief in the collective endeavor, to secure members’ commitment. However, in such organizations, cooperation is not automatic and must be constantly cultivated (Swidler 1979; Chen 2012c). In other words, members need to be convinced to align their actions with the collective mission, or the mission needs to expand to incorporate members’ interests. If growing organizations like Burning Man don’t achieve such alignment, they can disintegrate when longtimers (and newcomers) wallow in nostalgia about the “good old days” and make distinctions that separate themselves from others (Chen 2014), rather than paying attention to the collective mission. When a mission emphasizes inclusion and community, this value-rational authority can help reorient members toward connecting, rather than dividing over differences, real or imagined.

While Burners urged inclusion, they did not expect complete consensus on all matters, as other collectivist groups have sought. For example, during a discussion of an organizing dilemma common across regional groups, attendees raised the thorny issue of how to reconcile three principles of community, participation, and inclusion: “How do we deal with divisive personalities while still supporting radical inclusion?” Solutions shared included a pragmatic acceptance of divergent perspectives: “It’s abnormal to agree all the time” (Observation of Burning Man regional summit, April 3, 2011, San Francisco). Rather than pursuing homogeneity to preserve participatory democracy, as recommended by Rothschild and Whitt (1986) and others (Kanter 1972), some groups were willing to acknowledge and accept multiple views. However, Burning Man-inspired collectivities also drew the line at abusive actions that might otherwise proliferate under the principles of self-expression and inclusion. When asked “How do we deal with groups of people who are part of the Burner community but do things that harm the community?,” meeting attendees shared answers that included teaching the 10 Principles, “be direct,” and “don’t fuel them if that’s what they want.” In addition, leaders urged others to mentor and model unfamiliar but desired actions, or to “lead by example” (Observation of Burning Man regional summit, April 3, 2011, San Francisco).

Burning Man organizers and members invited participation through questions in discussions. At a volunteer training, volunteer coordinator Molly Tirpak illustrated how
to invite dialogue, rather than resorting to top-down directives that could limit members’ engagement. “Someone gave an example of when they were building something. Instead of [saying], ‘You need to do this,’ it’s ‘How are we going to build this?’” She added how allowing such input was rewarding, “A lot of time you don’t know what kind of resources they’re [volunteers] going to bring, . . . It’s just amazing to see how people respond to that call, and that’s what I’m constantly amazed about, opening yourself up to being the ‘we.’ They will impress you” (Observation of volunteer training, July 5, 2001, San Francisco). Likewise, at a gathering in New York, Playa Safety Manager Wally Bomgaars, aka Odwally, described how participants proposed possible solutions to challenges such as managing exiting traffic, “Every year, dozens of people pitch ideas. There are dozens of ideas on the table—from relatively small things to big, event-changing things” (Observation of Burning Man gathering, October 28, 2012, New York City). Such reminders to constantly solicit participation reinforced authentic engagement, rather than mindlessly replicating bureaucratic hierarchy in which volunteers awaited orders.

Such invitations to participate included difficult interpersonal matters. At the 2011 regional conference, attendees discussed a scenario on this topic. An organizer didn’t want a regular attendee, characterized as “disruptive,” to visit his home for an event, but he also wanted to respect the principle of inclusion. After the presenter read submitted solutions aloud, including “bring in a neutral but accepted mediator” and if mediation failed, “switch venues,” one audience member stood up. In an even tone, the person stated, “I believe that I recognize the situation and that I am involved in this situation.” People applauded his subsequent request for mediation (Observation of Burning Man regional summit, April 2, 2011, San Francisco). Such discussions evidenced how members encouraged authentic engagement.

Storytelling can help engage listeners and build connections, bridging potentially divisive categories such as race and ethnicity (Su 2010). However, other research indicates that storytelling and discussion are not the only means by which participatory organizations can elicit cooperation. According to Schmitt’s (2008) ethnography of the Oregon Country Fair, this 40-year-old annual festival with countercultural ideals practices “soft power” appeals. Rather than telling booth builders what they cannot do, the booth inspector leaves hand-written and illustrated notes that deploy humor and creativity when sharing guidance on how they could improve structures’ sturdiness and environmental friendliness. Other participatory groups codify routines where members are expected to voice oppositional perspectives, thereby defusing potential oligarchy (Rothschild and Leach 2006). Such approaches invite conversations for imagining possibilities, rather than restricting actions to prohibitions and managerial imperatives.

3. “Communifying” labor. Extending Polanyi’s (1944) analysis of the shift from socialism to capitalism, Burawoy (2013) has called for ethnographic research into efforts to combat commodification, arguing that we need more studies of how “embryonic institutions” can blunt capitalism’s erosion of labor, market, and environment (535). Burning Man shows how collectivities can reverse commodification and alienation.
Rather than devaluing labor as a commodity exchange, Burning Man encouraged what I call *communification* by infusing actions with meaning and values that emphasized individual persons’ connection with the larger collective.7 At Burning Man, communification involved the following three checks against commodification and alienation: (1) revaluing of work, (2) building relationships among community members, and (3) supporting and integrating members’ perspectives and interests.

Volunteer recruitment processes illustrated how Burners revalued otherwise devalued work. As volunteer coordinator Molly Tirpak described, her recruitment techniques ensured engagement. Even “dirty” work that is usually associated with stigmatized, low-wage labor in the capitalist market was rendered meaningful at Burning Man:

> “I always found people when I needed them. No one gave me shit [when I asked for their help]. One girl told me, ‘You found Mexicans! ... You found eight people to unload the truck during the storm. I needed unskilled and happy people. How did you find people who were willing to help?’ She was referring to the Mexican unskilled laborers who wait in the streets for work.”

Tirpak then described how she approached potential volunteers by asking them to consider reciprocity:

> “I kept talking about karma, ‘Are you owed karma, or do you owe a lot of karma to volunteer?’ I need people to owe karma...[Sociologist] Marshall Ganz or someone else like Robert Goulds said, ‘When you ask for help, you always receive it. Not only do you receive it, people are happy to give it. So as long you say, ‘I really need your help,’ you’re given it.’”

With this relational framework for labor, Tirpak further elaborated how volunteers viewed their labor as meaningful contributions to the community, as symbolized, in this example, by Black Rock City’s anchor of the Man: “For instance, I stopped a woman ... and told her that we needed people to move hay bales around the Man. She was like, ‘I get to help build the Man?!’ She’s useful. It’s the chance to be part of something. It gives you a chance to make, to do something” (Interview with Molly Tirpak, September 21, 2000, San Francisco).

Moreover, the organization constantly solicited and incorporated volunteers’ perspectives and experiences into the design of work, thereby connecting individuals to the labor process and outputs. This was exemplified by groups such as Found, a service where conscientious citizens turn in lost items to be connected with their owners.8 As one of my participant-observation shifts at Found ended, “Lead Infomaniac” Lauren Carly asked volunteers for feedback on how Found’s operations could improve. As we spoke, she recorded these ideas in her notebook and responded with comments about resources and feasibility. With such feedback over the years, Found transformed from a trailer room of bins with clothing, bags, and miscellaneous items jumbled together into an inventoried and labeled system of items sorted on shelves by type. Searches became
more effective in matching owners with found items. More importantly, the opportunity to share feedback elicited discussions of decisions made, connecting volunteers to work processes (Observation of Burning Man, September 1, 2012).

Another check against alienation involved reining in overwork, even when self-inflicted by eager volunteers. Organizers urged managers to curb volunteer burnout, in which individuals no longer can work, by enforcing time off and limiting responsibilities. At a training seminar for regional leaders, organizer Harley Dubois explained how she prevented volunteers from overextending themselves through candid discussions of their contributions and capacity, “I will say [to a volunteer], ‘Tell me how you’re doing this? How do you do this? It’s so much! Aren’t you exhausted?’ “She advised coordinators to coach volunteers into scaling back grand plans, “Talk them off the volunteer edge” (Observation of Burning Man regional summit, April 1, 2011, San Francisco). Similarly, a 2014 manual counseled volunteers to candidly assess their capacity to contribute. Its authors reassured readers that reducing their volunteer efforts meant that colleagues could get involved, “It’s ok to step back sometimes; doing so allows opportunities for others to step forward” (Burning Man 2014c).

Managers set firm limits on demands to prevent overwork, as evidenced during my participant-observations of Found. When Lauren Carly announced that Found was closed but would reopen the next day, some in the 10-person-long line expressed dismay. She then calmly clarified that volunteers had been working since 9 a.m. (Observation of Burning Man, September 4, 2011). As I discovered at the end of another shift, without a firm cutoff, persistent lost-item-seekers cajoled volunteers like myself into looking for just one more item, creating a never-ending line that would exhaust volunteers. Carly predicted that volunteers would work overnight if they acquiesced to such demands (Observation of Burning Man, September 2, 2012). When combined with a sign that included a “No whining” injunction, such protections disabused attendees from treating volunteer labor as a 24-hour service economy.

When managing volunteers, organizers, and managers also considered their different motivations for contributing, as volunteer cooperation is crucial to the event. For instance, when matching volunteers with projects, managers paid attention to their interests, rather than just their skills, and they afforded volunteers more latitude and support than typically allowed by other organizations. Volunteers appreciated this consideration, especially when their bureaucratic workplaces didn’t. Mandy Tilles described the difference between her job as an administrative assistant at an engineering firm and her volunteer efforts on the Burning Man art team as follows: “Someone [at my workplace] had told me the other day, ‘... Mandy, we’re engineers here; we don’t think outside the box too much.’ It’s very family; I love family, but... there is a definite line between who’s the engineers and who’s the admin help. It’s this real old model, and it’s quite oppressive and depressing to me...” (Interview with Mandy Tilles, December 9, 2000, San Francisco). Moreover, at Burning Man, managers allowed for variable performance. Due to illness, exhaustion, or distraction, some volunteers could not fulfill their commitments while others unexpectedly excelled as “rock stars” (Chen 2009). This unpredictability necessitated workarounds such as recruiting more volunteers than
actually needed (Chen 2005), which also prevented the overwork of volunteers. Managers could have limited volunteer involvement to nonessential tasks, thereby increasing certainty at the expense of members’ interests. Instead, the Burning Man organization made concessions that both promoted authentic engagement and fulfilled the mission of creating a temporary community. According to Tilles, Burning Man “empowers people as individuals to delve into themselves and create with others and be a community” (Interview with Mandy Tilles, December 9, 2000, San Francisco). Her description captured communification’s ability to connect persons to themselves and others, thereby curbing alienation.

In short, the communification of labor offered a tool kit of actions and values as alternatives to taken-for-granted practices. Organizers and members could use these to recognize and curb organizational excesses, such as the privileging of bureaucratic efficiency above other values, and thereby ensure that authentic voice and engagement were not sacrificed to ensure certainty of work processes and outputs. Communification also disrupted conventional hierarchical decision making where frontline workers labor with no input or insight into the work process. Moreover, communification emphasized strengthening the relational aspects of work, forging connections that reminded members of their part within the larger community. As this and other research (Haedicke 2012) has shown, even communal “drudge” work can be an important source of connection, as well as a source of meaning, especially among those who are underemployed and marginalized in larger society (Schelly 2014).

CONCLUSION: CONDITIONS THAT HELP PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES REALIZE THEIR POTENTIAL

Contrary to prior studies’ claims, the growth of organizations, as exemplified by Burning Man, suggests that expansion is not necessarily incompatible with participatory practices. Under certain conditions, participatory practices may enable growth and dissemination. For the Burning Man organization, decentralizing activities, fostering storytelling and discussion, and communifying labor bolstered participatory practices. In other words, the organization and its offshoots encouraged members to carry out activities, on their own initiative, via do-o-craty. In addition, the organization promoted storytelling to help members understand guidelines, and they actively elicited members’ input into discussions, thereby facilitating engagement. Finally, the organization prevented alienation and commodification by communifying labor. To connect individual persons to the larger collective, the organization revalued work, built relationships among community members, and supported and integrated members’ perspectives and interests. These combined practices ensured that members could fully participate, thereby contributing to the continued vitality of the Burning Man organization and its offshoots.

My and other studies (e.g., Rothschild and Whitt 1986; Rothschild and Tomchin 2006; Eliasoph 2014; Kreiss 2014; Lee 2014; Polletta 2014) suggest conditions under
which organizations can partially versus fully enact participatory practices. When partially enacted, participatory practices may become symbolic rituals, rather than fully enabling persons. Conditions under which participatory practices fall short of their potential include (1) contexts where the stated goals are diffuse rather than targeted (“democracy” versus a yearly event), (2) resources are dependent on funders who demand quantifiable accountability versus volunteers who uphold values that can curb rationalization tendencies, (3) a reliance on centralization (top-down coordination) over decentralization (parallel coordination), and (4) the use of participatory practices for other purposes such as efficiency, profitability, or buy-in at the expense of other ends, such as member transformation. In particular, studies of groups that operate on a year-round basis, such as cooperatives, are vulnerable to pressures that erode authentic participation. For example, without adequate checks against excessive rationalization, groups can become enmired in increasingly bureaucratic rules and coercive control (Barker 1993, 1999). For such groups, the communification of labor could offer a potent reminder that the organization should attend to its members’ interests.

The environment in which organizations are embedded impact the selection and enactment of organizing practices, as people’s expectations are shaped by larger societal norms about what is appropriate. For example, Rothschild (2009) has argued that because the United States’ conception of democracy is limited to voting in elections, the United States has much farther to go than other countries in supporting collectivist organizations. Nonetheless, organizations can provide bulwarks against convention. For members of several Greek worker collectives, everyday acts, such as deciding how many hours to work versus spend on civic matters, are part of the larger calculus about how to promote a vibrant democracy and defend workers’ time against overwork (Kokkinidis forthcoming). Experiences with participatory practices via such cooperatives and social movement groups may inspire more consideration of alternatives (Manilov 2013; Staggenborg 2015). Furthermore, the development of Internet and wireless communication has also enhanced feedback and connectivity on a scale not imaginable before (e.g., Nielson 2013; Rushkoff 2013).

Transformation beyond the Collectives
The impact of participatory democracies goes beyond their immediate groups, as these collectivities operate within a larger context—typically, a capitalist system. Thus, these groups encounter attempts to import activities that are accepted by larger society but are contrary to their collectives’ values and practices. For example, the media has documented the appearance of what have been dubbed “plug and play” camps at Burning Man. At these “concierge” camps, affluent attendees subcontract paid workers to set up shelter, prepare lavish meals, assemble a wardrobe, curate a schedule of daily activities, and even secure the attention of attractive companions (i.e., professional models) (cf. Ferenstein 2013; Bilton 2014; Bowles 2014; Chase 2014). Such actions show how even temporary utopian efforts are not immune to the influx of taken-for-granted capitalist exchanges, class
stratification, and gender norms of larger society. Among Burners, these practices have provoked online discussion and debate since some feel that these camps violate the principles of radical self-reliance and participation (e.g., Burning Man 2012, 2014b; Berg 2014). Like other dilemmas, discussions about what to do are still ongoing, especially since the principle of inclusions emphasizes welcoming all, including “the stranger.”

Nonetheless, with participatory democracies, participants have a basis from which they can identify and then collectively discuss practices and problems, as well as possibilities for solutions. In other words, participatory democracy exposes for discussion implicit norms and practices. This facilitates close examination of the larger status quo and more importantly, promotes consideration of alternative rather than taken-for-granted actions. To illustrate this, I end with a quote from meta regional representatives Dave Umlas and Marilee Ratcliffe. During a humorously illustrated PowerPoint presentation that explained how they coordinated an art event for an estimated 100,000 visitors in Austin, Texas, Umlas encouraged fellow attendees to “Be the change, Dawg.” In sharing his tips about how to bring Burning Man–inspired events to local communities, Umlas urged his colleagues to traverse the separation between the week-long event and real life, known in Burner parlance as the “default world,” and “make this [Burning Man] the default world.” His conclusion summarized what people all over embrace when they have authentic participation and voice: “accept the responsibility of consciously creating the future” (Observation of Burning Man regional summit, April 2, 2011, San Francisco).

NOTES

1 For more details about methods, see the appendices of Chen (2009).
3 Similarly, cab drivers spread information to passengers about when and where the masses would gather in Egypt (Graeber 2013).
4 Tickets now sell out, as they are subject to a cap of 68,000 persons by the federal Bureau of Land Management (Griffith 2014), which oversees the land where the event is located.
5 As of June 1, 2015, the initially grassroots, volunteer-directed Burners Without Borders is now part of the Burning Man organization’s “Civic Engagement” program (Burning Man 2015).
6 Such fears were not unfounded, given the media’s proclivity to emphasize Burning Man’s deviant aspects such as nudity and drug use (Chen 2009).
7 Readers might recognize the influence of Mary Parker Follett’s ([1925] 1995) emphasis on integrating interests to form communion.
8 Notably, the service did not have “Lost,” as it only matched people with found items.

REFERENCES

Katherine K. Chen

“Plan Your Burn, Burn Your Plan”


