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Book Review by Jonathan Gardner (Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh)

***The Archaeology of Burning Man: The Rise and Fall of Black Rock City.* By Carolyn L. White. *Archaeologies of Landscape in the Americas Series.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2020. Hardback, 288 pp. ISBN 978-0826361332.**

The last sentence of this remarkable book states that '[a]ll cities are temporary, but some are more temporary than others' (p. 233). To understand such cities, Carolyn White demonstrates the great promise of "active site archaeology", using archaeological methods to examine such a site as it is constructed, inhabited and destroyed. Exploring the ephemeral city of Black Rock in the Nevada Desert, the location of the Burning Man festival each year, White documents both the varied experiences of its inhabitants and its complex material and social spaces.

As White admits, examining a temporary city of 75,000 people is no small task, even after almost a decade of fieldwork. Nonetheless, the results presented here are impressive: beyond trying to understand how the spaces of the city are constructed, this is also a book about grappling with the issue of temporariness and its visibility archaeologically. Trying to capture the experience and traces of a temporary happening – whether rite, feast, festival or catastrophe – has long been a source of difficulties for archaeologists and this book's important contribution comes at a time of renewed interest in the archaeology of temporary, transient and short-term events and sites of all periods (for instance, in two recent themes issues of *World Archaeology* – Semple 2018; Sykes *et al.* 2018). In this I must also declare an interest, given that my own research examines what remains after large-scale cultural mega events like the London 2012 Olympic Games. Many others working in historical and contemporary archaeology have also sought to understand recent temporary phenomena, from World's Fairs (Graff 2020) to protest camps (e.g. Dézsi 2018), to the mass movement of refugees and migrants (e.g. De León 2015) and indeed current efforts to document the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g. Perry and Band 2020).

The book begins with a chapter setting out the origins of Burning Man itself and the origins of the research project. White then situates the work in the fields of cultural anthropology and historical and contemporary archaeology. These sections present a brilliantly succinct overview of the origins and development of American historical archaeology and how White sees her work within contemporary archaeology. She particularly highlights her debt to James Deetz's material-culture studies, Lewis Binford's ethnoarchaeology and Bill Rathje's studies of consumption and disposal. The influence of these scholars is particularly clear in the detailed and methodological approach White takes to the varied spatial and social locales of Black Rock throughout the book.

The second chapter sets out the theoretical orientation of the work and draws on theorists of space, movement and connection: Lefebvre, de Certeau, Bataille, De Landa, Deleuze and

Guattari are introduced in turn. In each subsequent chapter, a Lefebvrian exploration of the social construction of space (and particularly the idea of public, private and intermediary spaces) frame the analysis, whilst de Certeau's understanding of the everyday and the operation of 'strategies' and 'tactics' are related to efforts to control and shape the event's 'smooth' and 'striated' spaces (drawing on Deleuze and Guattari).

The bulk of the book presents detailed examinations of the life cycle of the temporary city, beginning with its "birth" each year and followed by examination of its varied infrastructures from fences to portable toilets, water butts to tarpaulins. These sections describe not only the material presence of these quotidian items but also how humans live with them across shifting public, private and intermediate urban domains. White moves at shifting scales in detailed chapters on individual dwellings, camps and then whole 'villages' (these last similar to a more conventional city's districts or suburbs). At each point she presents thick description on city-dwellers' spatial practices, their strategies and tactics of inhabitation and their place in the wider urban sphere. We are permitted access to an amazing array of dwelling spaces and "theme camps" (groups of dwellings whose occupiers follow a particular theme or aesthetic) and witness through detailed descriptions, photography and diagrams how these spaces change year after year. We move from the quotidian of, say, strategies implemented to prevent the desert winds blowing everything away, to locales characterised by the extraordinary and the surreal. One camp comes complete with a fitted kitchen decked out with cabinets, appliances and family photographs, while a whole "village" resembles New Orleans (with French speakeasies and a jazz club). Elsewhere, another camp is named "Troy", and is encountered in the midst of the construction of a huge wooden horse to burn down at the end of the event.

White's skills as an archaeologist and participant observer are among the most enjoyable aspects of this volume, and the rich human and material details she provides are often startling, despite her often having only limited time in which to visit and document the city's spaces. A key theme she returns to throughout is the idea of the mundane or the everyday co-existing with the extraordinary. Whilst to outsiders this might at first glance appear to be an event that is characterised by pure hedonism and alterity, behind this apparent chaos, White finds domesticity, tradition and careful planning.

The book moves to its conclusion with descriptions of the last days of the festival and the ritualistic burning of "The Man" itself (the large figurative installation constructed at the event's centre) along with other set-pieces, before discussing the long process of deconstruction and restoration of the desert floor (the *playa*).

White's epilogue then makes an important contribution to archaeological debates around temporality more broadly, with reflection on the limits of traditional methodologies for understanding such brief events, not to mention the range of human activities that will leave no artefactual traces.

There is little to criticise in such a detailed work of scholarship, and as White herself admits, clearly not everything about such a city or its event could ever be covered in one volume. I did find myself wondering about the place of memory and heritage in the city (though this may stem in part from differences between how the term "heritage" is employed in the USA and Europe). What remains in attendees' and organisers' memories after each year? What souvenirs do they keep? Can we talk of the "intangible cultural heritage" of the city – for example, its organisers' Biblical-sounding "Ten Principles" (including a commitment to self-reliance and to 'leaving no trace' of the event or its participants' activities), the naming of people and places and artefacts past and present ("Rod's Road", "the Golden Spike"), or indeed the carefully structured recurring rituals like the burning of the Man, year after year? I

also wanted to hear a little more about the city's political scene: how its seemingly libertarian ethos intersects with the embattled political situation of America today.

These minor points, however, are not intended to undermine the real contribution of the volume to urban studies and contemporary archaeology. In particular, White's impressive and unwavering commitment to carrying out an archaeology of the present as an "active site", "on the very front edge of history" (p. 22), is one unmatched by any other work of contemporary archaeology that I have read to date. This book presents a challenge to established archaeological methods, an opportunity to rethink how we as archaeologists approach temporary sites and a significant starting point from which to think about what our practice offers in studying transitoriness and longevity and presence and absence.

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