

Performing Gender and Neoliberal Desire(s) in the Desert Anthropocene: An Ecofeminist Perspective on Burning Man

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores how Burning Man's ethos of Radical Self-expression and communal experimentation intersects with the neoliberal dynamics of experience consumption, bodily autonomy, and managed transgression. It analyzes how the event both stages and negotiates gendered identities within the broader context of late-capitalist cultural logics. Mobilizing ecofeminist critiques of the Anthropocene, the study interrogates whether Burning Man genuinely challenges masculinized and commodified environmental imaginaries or, conversely, reproduces them under the guise of countercultural freedom. Particular attention is given to how gender and sexual identities are enacted, negotiated, and regulated within this ephemeral desert environment, and how these performances may simultaneously unsettle and sustain heteronormative and gendered hierarchies. Ultimately, the paper considers Burning Man as a potential neoliberal safety valve: a site where seemingly radical performances of dissent both disrupt and reaffirm dominant cultural and ecological orders.

KEYWORDS: Ecofeminism; Desert Anthropocene; Burning Man; Gender Performance; Neoliberalism; Managed Transgression

Introduction

In recent decades, the rise of large-scale, immersive festivals around the world has marked a significant shift in the ways contemporary societies engage with leisure, creativity, and collective identity. Events such as Coachella, Tomorrowland, and Glastonbury exemplify this trend, offering spaces where aesthetic, musical, and social performances have become life changing experiences for some, prepackaged consumable experiences for others. Within this

expanding event economy, Burning Man occupies a distinctive, though increasingly ambiguous, position. Initially conceived as a countercultural gathering rejecting consumerism, commodification, and social conformity, Burning Man has evolved into one of the most visible and mythologized events of the planet. Often described as one of the world's most "wild" festivals¹ (Scanlan 2019), this week-long artistic gathering is held each August in Nevada's Desert Black Rock City, a temporary city built specifically for the event by the participants, called "Burners". Monetary transactions are prohibited, and all exchanges are governed by a gift economy, enabling a unique form of hospitality (Gauthier 2015). According to long term participants, Burning Man should not be mistaken for a "utopian movement" but should be considered as "very early prototype," a "non-dogmatic" "human experience." It can also be seen as a "self-service cult where you wash your own brain" (Caveat Magister 2019, p.4–6).

The event constitutes a temporary, ephemeral community structured around a social experiment whose founding principles are: Radical Inclusion, Gifting, Decommodification, Radical Self-Reliance, Radical Self-Expression, Communal Effort, Civic Responsibility, Leaving No Trace, Participation, and Immediacy. Even if some participants report forms of sexual violence during the event (DunnTue 2025, Karlis 2019) or among the organizers (Muguet 2025, p.177), Black Rock City is organized around art, mutual aid, solidarity, consent, personal and sexual freedom.

A recurrent expression shared by participants is "Welcome Home", fostering a sense of familiarity, warmth, and collective belonging. The event presents itself as a space where participants are invited to transcend traditional social barriers, including those of class, gender, and ethnicity. Conceived as an experimental project aimed at crafting a temporary society in which individuals care for one another, the event has a central public space, called the Playa which functions as a shared commons where collective encounters and artistic

¹ Note on the terminology: while the word "festival" is contentious for Burning Man, I have decided to avoid its use as much as possible but to use it to avoid repetition and for clarity purposes. Likewise, the word "utopian" is highly controversial (see below), but I have decided to use them on rare occasions for practical purposes.

performances unfold. In order to be self-sustainable, each participant joins a camp that must provide for the community for free; it can go anywhere from serving pizza to organizing giant communal baths. While Burning Man officially promotes principles of Radical Self-Expression, Communal Care, and Civic Responsibility, the event is also characterized by widespread consumption of alcohol and psychoactive substances. This atmosphere of pervasive intoxication both as a personal and collective ritual, plays a central role in shaping social interactions, performances of identity, and altered states of consciousness on the Playa. It is also accompanied by an explicit and constant emphasis on the principle of consent, that some refer to as the eleventh principle. This dual dynamic —the normalization of substance use alongside a hyper-visible discourse of consent —reveals the complex negotiation between individual freedom, collective responsibility, and the management of risk within a temporary, self-regulating community. It also points to the ways in which Burning Man negotiates the paradoxes of libertarian ethos and communal ethics. Framed by a philosophy of radical self-expression, communal participation, and environmental responsibility, self-invention exists in uneasy tension with the logics of late capitalism. While Burning Man markets itself as an autonomous zone free from the strictures of mainstream society, critics have highlighted the increasingly artificial nature of its transgressions and the commodification of its cultural practices (Kozinets 2002).

Research Question

This study centers on a critical question: To what extent does the ephemeral space of Burning Man meaningfully disrupt masculinized and commodified environmental imaginaries, and how does it, despite its emancipatory rhetoric, ultimately reproduce exclusionary hierarchies of privilege and power under the guise of radical liberation? Its goal is to interrogate how Radical Self-Expression is shaped, constrained, and sometimes co-opted by broader socio-economic logics. Drawing on ecofeminist critiques of environmental spectacle with performance, space, and affect, this paper examines how bodies at Burning Man are celebrated, commodified, and regulated. By situating Burning Man within broader debates about the politics of temporary utopias and neoliberal consumption, the study

contributes to ongoing discussions about the gendered and sexualized dimensions of contemporary environmental and cultural imaginaries while also reflecting on the limits of ephemeral spaces as incubators of social transformation in the context of increasingly commodified forms of dissent.

State of the Art

Scholarly work on Burning Man has grown substantially over the past two decades, treating it as both a cultural phenomenon and a laboratory for examining contemporary forms of sociality, organization, and subjectivity. Rather than a stable object of study, Burning Man has been approached as a shifting assemblage where countercultural imaginaries, institutional logics, and experimental practices intersect. Early contributions framed the event as a countercultural space where alternative social arrangements temporarily suspend dominant socio-economic norms and enable new forms of collective experimentation (Gilmore and Van Proyen 2005). Building on this, Chen (2009) emphasized that the event's apparent spontaneity is in fact underpinned by sophisticated organizational infrastructures, making Burning Man a case study in large-scale temporary coordination and distributed governance. A substantial strand of scholarship situates Burning Man within broader cultural and political economies of creativity and performance. Turner (2009) shows how countercultural values circulate between Burning Man and Silicon Valley, revealing their mutual reinforcement within contemporary innovation cultures. In a related vein, ritual and performative dimensions have been central to anthropological interpretations, with the festival often described through concepts such as liminality, heterotopia, and secular pilgrimage (Bowditch 2010). Rather than treating these as fixed categories, such work highlights Burning Man as a site where ritual is actively produced and continuously reconfigured. Several authors extend this analysis. Jones (2011) demonstrates how participation goes beyond the desert through activist initiatives such as Burners Without Borders, suggesting that Burning Man functions less as a bounded event than as a dispersed social movement. Similarly, St John (2009; 2017) and Gauthier and St John (2015) conceptualize it within global "technomadic" cultures, emphasizing gift economies, neo-tribal formations, and transgressive communitas. Recent

research also documents the diffusion of Burning Man-inspired festivals in Europe, underscoring its broader cultural circulation (Vitos, St John and Gauthier 2022). A recurring critical concern is Burning Man's ambivalent relationship with capitalism. While often framed as anti-market, studies show how gift economies coexist with branding practices, lifestyle consumption, and elite cultural capital (Kozinets 2002). In this sense, Burning Man can be understood as both a critique of and a participant in late capitalist cultural logics, where anti-commercial discourse is frequently absorbed into commodified experience economies. More recent theoretical work has sought to synthesize these tensions. St John (2020) conceptualizes Burning Man as an "evental heterotopia," drawing on Foucault and Turner to describe it as a liminal space that simultaneously mirrors, disrupts, and reproduces normative social orders.

In parallel, Radziwill and Benton (2013) have reinterpreted Deming's 14 Points for Management through Burning Man's Ten Principles, showing how the festival models a participatory, ethical, and collaborative approach to innovation that bridges individual transformation. Similarly, Crockett et al. (2022) argue that such large-scale secular gatherings foster collective effervescence, prosocial behavior, and enduring psychological change, generating feelings of universal connectedness. Psychological research complements these perspectives by examining how the event shapes emotional regulation and identity work. Studies by McRae et al. (2008; 2011) and Snyder et al. (2013) show that the festival's permissive environment facilitates adaptive emotion-regulation strategies, including cognitive reappraisal and expressive release, often associated with perceived personal transformation and long-term self-reflection. Finally, emerging work addresses embodiment, intimacy, and sexuality. Data from the Black Rock City Census (Burning Man Project 2024) and analyses such as Beaulieu-Prévost et al. (2019) indicate that participants often report consensual and meaningful sexual and relational experiences. Together, these findings suggest that Burning Man functions as a space where norms of intimacy and identity are temporarily destabilized and renegotiated. Across these literatures, Burning Man emerges as a paradoxical formation: simultaneously a site of experimentation and a product of the very cultural and economic systems it appears to suspend. Despite extensive scholarship on

organization, ritual, affect, and critique, less attention has been paid to how gendered and sexual practices intersect with environmental and neoliberal imaginaries. Addressing this gap requires integrating ecofeminist perspectives with existing sociological and psychological approaches to better understand how embodied experience, ecological discourse, and governance logics co-produce the event.

Methods

This theoretical and exploratory study advances an understanding of the complex dynamics at play within this ephemeral cultural space in order to better understand how gender, desire, and ecological imaginaries are performed at Burning Man. Drawing on existing empirical studies and publicly available materials, which include the analysis of Burning Man media, online discourse, visual documentation, festival principles and participant narratives, this article is also informed by my attendance at the 2019 Burning Man event. While this visit does not constitute long-term ethnographic immersion, it offered an embodied, affective, and spatial understanding of the event's dynamics. Rather than aiming for empirical generalization, I draw on this experience reflexively, combining it with an extensive body of secondary sources. This article should therefore be understood as a theoretical and exploratory contribution rather than a fully developed ethnographic study. Its purpose is to propose interpretive avenues and critical reflections that may inform future empirical research, rather than to claim definitive conclusions.² This combination allows for a nuanced examination of how Burning Man's celebration of bodily freedom and transgression simultaneously challenges and reproduces dominant power structures, particularly those related to class and environmental imaginaries.

The following discussion is divided into three parts. First, I examine Burning Man's ethos and its entanglement with the neoliberal experience economy, highlighting how the festival's

² Its limitations should also be acknowledged. First, it is based on a limited period of field exposure and does not claim comprehensive representation of participant experiences. Second, the analysis relies primarily on reflexive observation and secondary literature. As such, the arguments developed here are exploratory rather than confirmatory, intended to open analytical perspectives. Future research would benefit from more sustained fieldwork and mixed-method empirical approaches to further substantiate and refine the propositions advanced in this article.

self-styled radicalism has been (re)shaped by market logics. Second, I turn to ecofeminist critiques of environmental and symbolic imaginaries to show how Burning Man unsettles gendered and ecological representations. Finally, I reflect on post-dual alternatives and the politics of privilege on the Playa, drawing on ecofeminist thought to interrogate attempts at decentering the human while recognizing how class homogeneity constrains the scope of these experiments.

I. Burning Man's Ethos and the Neoliberal Experience Economy

The Architecture of a Temporary Society

Initially conceived in 1986 as a small countercultural gathering on San Francisco's Baker Beach, Burning Man has since evolved into a highly organized and intricate festival dedicated to art, performance, and alternative modes of sociality. Now overseen by the nonprofit Burning Man Project, the event gives rise each year to Black Rock City where large-scale art installations, and communal living are guided by a codified ethos, the Ten Principles, formulated by founder Larry Harvey in 2004. He envisioned Burning Man as a movement to restore community and creative expression in a time of homogenized mass culture and social anomie (Witt 2018).

Among these principles, Radical Inclusion proclaims that anyone may take part in Burning Man, while Radical Self-Expression encourages participants to manifest their inner creativity without external constraint. Radical Self-Reliance promotes autonomy and adaptability within the desert's demanding environment, and Communal Effort foregrounds cooperation, mutual aid, and collective labor in constructing and maintaining Black Rock City. Importantly, participants are conceived not as spectators but as co-creators of an ephemeral social world. What began as an informal gathering of some twenty people has grown into a week-long event attracting tens of thousands of participants. Its design actively seeks to embody anti-consumerist ideals: traditional economic exchange is replaced by a gift economy, in which goods and services circulate freely without money- except for limited official sales such as ice or coffee. The principle of Leaving No Trace, reiterated throughout the event,

enshrines an environmental ethic that forces participants to remove every physical trace of their presence from the desert landscape.

Another defining dimension is sexual freedom, understood as an extension of creative Self-Expression. Sex-positive camps and “playa dungeons” provide spaces for erotic experimentation grounded in the principle of consent, which is not only encouraged but ritualized through workshops, signage, and peer-led initiatives. Consent is thus framed as both a cultural and ethical cornerstone, distinguishing liberation from coercion. Yet, critical perspectives underscore persistent tensions: while Burning Man celebrates a discourse of radical consent and egalitarian participation, the actual experiences of attendees may reproduce broader social hierarchies, particularly those linked to class and privilege.

Neoliberalism at Play

Geographer David Harvey describes neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (Harvey 2005, p.2). Originally conceived as an anti-establishment gathering centered on Radical Self-Expression and community, Burning Man has undergone significant transformation over the past three decades. Largely considered a countercultural, transgressive event, Burning Man has been increasingly commodified as its scale and institutionalization have attracted growing involvement from Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, technology executives, and affluent individuals seeking both creative freedom and social capital (Turner 2009). This demographic shift has been accompanied by the emergence of luxury “plug-and-play” camps, where high-net-worth attendees can enjoy prefabricated accommodations, creating exclusive enclaves that contrast with the festival’s foundational ethos of Radical Self-Reliance and egalitarian participation. The existence of branded camps illustrates a tension between ideals of inclusivity. The so-called Sherpagate scandal has also highlighted the contradictions between the event’s official principles and the neoliberal logics that increasingly shape it (St John 2022).

In 2014, reports emerged of ultra-wealthy participants importing low-wage “sherpas”³ to erect their luxury “plug-and-play” camps, prepare meals, and manage schedules, effectively outsourcing the core practice of Radical Self-Reliance. These arrangements blatantly clashed with Burning Man’s ethos of Communal Effort and Decommodification, triggering widespread backlash within the community. It not only undermined the participatory spirit of the event but also made visible deepening class divides and the entrenchment of privilege within an ostensibly egalitarian cultural space. From a theoretical standpoint, the term “Sherpagate” has been used by both scholars and participants to epitomize how neoliberal polarization has infiltrated countercultural settings through commodification and the outsourcing of labor. “Commodification” is used here in a relational sense, referring not to the organizational status of the Burning Man Project, but to the broader infiltration of market logics into participation through outsourcing, service stratification, and differentiated access to experiences. The “sherpas” embodied the precarious, often invisible service economy that sustains the comfort of elites, echoing wider patterns in late capitalist societies where cultural experiences have become stratified. In particular, the core principles of “Radical Inclusion” and “Radical Self-Reliance” are hollowed out, reconfigured into spectacles of exclusivity that mimic corporate logics of branding, status display, and consumer distinction.

Sherpagate can be regarded as a symptom of broader capitalist rationalities at play: efficiency, outsourcing, and the monetization of participation. At a symbolic level, the controversy illustrates the tension between the utopian rhetoric of Burning Man and the practical realities of neoliberal governance. The festival organization publicly condemned exploitative practices and attempted to regulate luxury camps, yet the persistence of such enclaves demonstrates the resilience of market logics in reshaping even spaces founded on anti-capitalist ideals (St John 2022). Thus, Sherpagate scandal interrogates how neoliberalism commodifies culture, reconfigures labor relations, and reshapes collective imaginaries - even

³ Sherpas are an ethnic group from Nepal's Himalayas working as high-altitude guides and porters on Western-led expeditions. Most are invisibilized while their White counterparts are put into the spotlight. While the term may be seen as racializing, this comparison also highlights the sherpas hard work for their white and privileged clients

in spaces imagined as temporary escapes from capitalism. Rather than constituting an exceptional disruption of an otherwise coherent utopian space, Sherpagate can be understood as an illustrative case of a well-documented dynamic in alternative cultural settings where heterotopian ideals are continuously negotiated through the coexistence of utopian imaginaries and the material reproduction of neoliberal labor and consumption structures. The persistence of luxury enclaves and plug-and-play camps suggests that the neoliberalization of Burning Man should not be understood as a linear or uncontested process. Rather, it emerges through ongoing struggles over the meaning of participation and community.

While the Burning Man Project has repeatedly denounced turnkey camps and reaffirmed its commitment to Decommodification and Radical Self-Reliance (Berg 2014), affluent participants continue to outsource labor, purchase curated experiences, and reproduce forms of exclusivity associated with luxury tourism. These practices have generated significant controversy among Burners, many of whom view them as betrayals of the founding ethos. The resulting tensions reveal competing visions of Burning Man: one grounded in collective participation, Gifting, and Self-Sufficiency, and another increasingly shaped by market logics, convenience, and social distinction. Seen from this perspective, Burning Man constitutes a contested cultural arena in which capitalist values are not simply imposed but continuously resisted and reconfigured by various actors.

Furthermore, and although Burning Man may function as a transformative rite of passage for some, for others (particularly influencers and social-media-savvy attendees) it seems to have become a pretext for a highly visible performance of lifestyle and status, reinforcing the very structures of exclusivity, and consumption it originally sought to resist. Gendered and sexualized performances that both challenge and reproduce normative social hierarchies have become entangled with what seems to have become another “must-do” experience. Yet, they unfold within a broader context shaped by neoliberal consumer logics, that commodify identity and stage it as spectacle.

Although the event cultivates spaces for alternative gender and sexual performances, it can sometimes reflect and reproduce enduring class dynamics as its social and spatial arrangements often mirror broader societal hierarchies, privileging predominantly White participants. According to Burning Man's own 2024 census, around 80% of Burning Man participants identify as White, a proportion that has remained relatively stable over recent years (even if it has shifted slightly for the year 2024). The 2024 Burning Man population reflects a highly educated, economically privileged group. Over time, the event has attracted an increasing number of participants from upper-income brackets, especially those earning \$150,000 and above, while participation from lower-income individuals has noticeably declined (Black Rock City Census, 2024). The predominance of certain aesthetic styles, the high financial cost of participation, transportation, equipment, and camp dues, create barriers to full inclusion for groups from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. That being said, the organization has been trying to reaffirm its principle of Radical Inclusion through its Ticket Aid Program in the face of ongoing criticism that consider that Burning Man has become increasingly inaccessible and has been taken over by wealthy participants. In an effort to preserve economic diversity, the program issues at a fraction of the regular price (\$250) to people with limited financial means who can demonstrate economic need. Higher-priced tickets subsidize low-income admissions, a mechanism of redistribution that is an institutional attempt to offset the exclusionary effects of rising participation costs.

Beyond demographics, Burning Man's celebration of freedom and transgression can be read through neoliberal logics that privilege individual choice, self-optimization, happiness, and personal transformation. Drawing on Eva Illouz and Edgar Cabanas's analysis of the cultural imperative of happiness (2019), these values can resonate with Burning Man's ethos and practices. Many participants describe the event as a profoundly life-changing experience, emphasizing its transformative potential, the intensity of the emotions it generates, and the sense that the event offers something extraordinary or even cathartic. In many encounters, participants openly shared personal histories of trauma, abuse, loss, or emotional rupture, presenting their journey to the Playa as part of a search for healing, release, and reinvention. For some, it seems to be a space of catharsis, where ritualized excess, radical Self-Expression,

and temporary community make forms of emotional repair possible – forms of repair that they felt might have been unavailable in everyday life and/or with regular people. These experiences were often framed through individualized narratives of self-transformation and personal responsibility which aligns with what Illouz and Cabanas describe as the neoliberal injunction to pursue happiness and optimization as personal projects: healing becomes an individual task, and transformation a form of self-management. In this sense, the cathartic promise may reproduce neoliberal logics by turning emotional repair into a privatized responsibility rather than a social or political question.

During the 2019 Burning Man event, a woman took the stage to share her personal history of abuse and trauma publicly before addressing her experiences with mental health treatment. Speaking to a large audience of strangers, yet one clearly receptive to vulnerability and radical honesty, she openly discussed her use of illegal drugs in a notably non-stigmatizing way, treating MDMA not as a moral failure but as part of a genuine, if ultimately unsuccessful, search for healing. She explained that, after initially seeking recovery through extensive MDMA use (which she described as financially and emotionally damaging, eventually leading to dependency and instability), she later found more sustainable forms of support through therapy and antidepressants, despite having previously resisted them. Her speech explicitly challenged the romanticization of illegal substances as paths to liberation, advocating instead for mental health care and long-term therapeutic support. This moment illustrates the emancipatory potential of the Burning Man's culture of self-disclosure and self-help: her testimony used the event's visibility and influence offered by the event to destigmatize mental health treatment and encourage collective reflection on healing and vulnerability.

Gig Economies of Desire and the Commodification of Femininity

A “sparkle pony” is generally understood to be a young female attendee who does not materially contribute to the event's ethos of Self-Reliance and is often sponsored by an older male participant. The figure of the “sparkle pony” offers an interesting illustration of how neoliberal logics manifest through gendered economies of exchange. As Quinn Larrabee

observes in their analysis of the “sparkle pony recession,” many of these participants are sustained by older, wealthier male sponsors, revealing that being a “sparkle pony” is, “in fact, a job” (Larrabee 2023). This formulation exposes the emergence of what could be termed a “gig economy of desire or desirability” or an economic system in which individuals mobilize and monetize embodied forms of attractiveness, intimacy, and emotional labor through short-term and highly individualized exchanges. Much like workers in the gig economy, participants are encouraged to continuously cultivate and market desirable selves in order to accumulate social, symbolic, and economic capital.

Femininity, visibility, and affective labor are therefore rendered marketable commodities that circulate within Burning Man's social and economic networks. In this context, “sparkle ponies” operate as flexible workers in an informal economy of intimacy, compensated not with wages but with access, luxury, and symbolic capital. It reveals the persistence of gendered power relations, even as they are reframed through neoliberal discourses of empowerment, self-management, and consumption. By curating their bodies and performances as aestheticized assets, “sparkle ponies” align with neoliberal subjectivities that reduce identity to brand value, while simultaneously reproducing longstanding gendered asymmetries of power. This is particularly evident in the elite infrastructures where “sparkle ponies” are hosted and showcased, serving as resources that enhance the camp's prestige and visibility. For example, the high-profile Robot Heart camp, famed for its exclusivity seems to have become a privileged site where “sparkle ponies” function as both social ornaments and symbolic capital, reinforcing the camp's aura of desirability and its alignment with the logics of spectacle. As one of the invited attendees explains, “I had two RVs at two different camps and a hepa filter AC yurt at another camp for my mushroom journeys (...) I got paid to show up at each of the camps because my aesthetic helps build their brand and better compete with Robot Heart for IG (Instagram) exposure ». (Larrabee 2023) Within these spaces, the spectacle of female desirability seems to be commodified in ways that blur the line between leisure and labor, consumption and performance. Women's presence becomes a curated display, aesthetic labor is converted into symbolic currency, and patriarchal sponsorship structures persist under the guise of playful self-expression. Although

“sparkle ponies” may be seen as renegotiating certain gender hierarchies, they are key to understanding the entanglement of spectacle, commodification, and gendered economies within Burning Man, revealing how neoliberalism at play is sustained through intimate economies of visibility, desire, and exchange. “Sparkle ponies” are usually frowned upon (observation) as they go against the core progressive ambitions of Burning Man. They tend to convey a form of gender commodification and reassert women’s role in a patriarchal society as having been submitted to male desire. The “sparkle pony” becomes a form of visible and ridiculed symbol of dependency, while elite participants control the material conditions producing that dependency. But this aesthetic and intimate labor remains highly ambiguous: depending on the way it is done, it can involve exploitation or reciprocal exchange.

Sherpagate and « sparkle ponies » reveal opposite sides of the same system. While the “Sherpas” represent invisibilized labor, the “sparkle ponies” represent hypervisible femininity. Both sustain Self-Reliance, but neither occupies the position of the supposedly autonomous subject. It could also be argued that while the former embodies a form of class exploitation, the latter embodies a form of gender exploitation. But despite its commodified aspects, Burning Man also enables performative explorations of gender and sexuality that subvert conventional norms.

II. (Eco)feminist Critiques of Environmental and Symbolic Imaginaries

At Burning Man, gendered and sexual performances are enacted through repetitive acts that both embody and challenge normative gender and sexual identities, aligning closely with Judith Butler’s concept of performativity. For Butler, gender is not innate but the result of a social construct that has been materialized through the accumulation of everyday embodied acts. They showed how these performances are never complete or fixed, but open to resignification, which creates the potential for subversion within the very norms they appear to reiterate (Butler 1990).

Queering the Playa? Performing Gender in a Desert “Utopia”

At Burning Man, Radical Self-Expression and performative fluidity around gender and sexuality are celebrated, creating space for alternative identities and non-normative bodies to be visible and experientially validated in a nonjudgmental environment. All forms of LGBTQIA+ identities and different forms of sexuality are not only tolerated but also welcome, with a primary emphasis placed on consent. This dynamic is particularly visible in several ways.

First, the event's temporary infrastructures, altered social codes, and emphasis on creative expression provide a stage on which gendered and sexual identities can be reiterated, exaggerated, or even queered. The Playa thus functions as a site where the performative nature of identity can become actively experimented with, making visible both the constraints of normative scripts and the possibilities for their subversion. Another example is the very existence of dedicated queer zones that intend to subvert dominant gender and sexual norms. To name only one camp, "Gender Blender" defines itself as a camp for "trans, gender queer, gender variant, gender nonconforming, queens, kings, and those of us that are shape-shifting the gender binary" ("Gender Blender"). Such camps further amplify these performative acts by providing environments in which non-normative gender expressions and sexualities are not only visible but actively affirmed, contesting dominant heteronormative frameworks.

Second, gender identities and desires are not only enacted but actively renegotiated through clothing, costumes, and bodily adornment. Outfits become more than decorative as they can serve as tools for experimenting with masculinities, femininities, and queer self-expression, destabilizing normative codes of dress and appearance (Green and Kaiser 2011). Yet, this performance is not confined to the temporality of the event. The embodied practices cultivated in the desert frequently spill over into everyday life, influencing how participants present themselves in professional, social, and intimate contexts. Indeed, this continuity underscores how Burning Man functions as both a site of experimentation and a catalyst for broader transformations in gendered self-styling within neoliberal cultures of individuality and self-optimization (Green and Kaiser 2011).

Third, nudity is a widespread and normalized practice (personal observation), functioning as a deliberate disruption of conventional bodily norms. One revealing example from the 2019 edition was a large theme camp that organized what participants called a “DJ party shower,” an immersive collective shower experience combining music, nudity, and radical consent. The camp offered festivalgoers the opportunity to shower while listening to live electronic music played by a DJ, transforming an ordinary act of hygiene into a communal, playful, and environmentally conscious ritual. Before entering, participants were carefully briefed on consent, which was treated as the central principle of the entire experience. The emphasis was not simply on showering together, but on ensuring that everyone felt comfortable, respected, and safe in a space where nudity was normalized rather than sexualized. Clear discussions of boundaries, mutual respect, and personal comfort preceded entry, creating an atmosphere of trust from the very beginning. The experience itself unfolded through a series of tents, almost like moving through an interactive installation. In the main area, participants would undress and then move forward in small groups, queuing in a way reminiscent of an amusement-park attraction. They first passed through a tent where water gently sprinkled from above rather than pouring heavily, creating a light mist-like shower designed to minimize water waste and reflect Burning Man’s broader environmental ethos. This subtle spray allowed participants to rinse off while music filled the space and the DJ maintained a festive atmosphere. From there, they entered another section where they were covered in foam, adding a playful and collective dimension to the experience. Farther along, another light rinse allowed participants to wash away the foam before reaching the final area, where they could dry off, get dressed, and rejoin the camp. What stood out most was how nudity and consent structured the entire atmosphere: bodies were visible, but the environment was neither voyeuristic nor uncomfortable. Instead, it fostered laughter, collective ease and trust. Nudity became desexualized and ordinary, simply part of a shared experience of care and participation. By the end, participants left not with embarrassment, but with the feeling of having shared a joyful, liberating, and surprisingly mundane moment of collective wellbeing: everyone seemed to have felt respected, safe, and ultimately had a genuinely good time.

Furthermore, erotic camps serve as intentional spaces where participants experiment with and reconfigure normative scripts around desire and embodiment, revealing the fluidity and constructed nature of sexual identities. There are numerous erotic micro events or workshops of all kinds, including an orgy dome where participants can come and leave freely. To give but a few examples of the 2019 edition, workshops included “BDSM Safety Basics of Kinky Play”, a “Slut Celebration Play Party” or even a “Pheromone Tindr” during which one can “sniff out a new mate”. By making erotic expression highly visible, these zones challenge the implicit heterosexual and presumably monogamous order of mainstream culture and emphasize that sexual and gender identities are not only fluid but also socially and collectively constructed, aligning with Judith Butler’s theory of performativity. Performance art leverages costumes, rituals, and embodied acts to expose the reiterative process through which different sexual identities are formed and destabilized, highlighting the possibility of subversion within performativity itself. These staged performances underscore the festival’s role as a site where gender and sexuality are not fixed categories but ongoing, negotiated processes enacted through collective and individual bodies. This fluidity of identity and embodiment opens the door to broader critiques, particularly those that interrogate the intersection of ecological consciousness and feminist thought.

The Environmental Paradox

From an ecofeminist perspective, Burning Man’s environmental contradictions extend far beyond its carbon footprint. Ecofeminist scholars have long argued that the domination of nature is inseparable from systems of patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, and anthropocentrism that frame the nonhuman world as a resource to be appropriated, transformed, and consumed (Plumwood 1993; Warren 2000; Gaard 2011). Although Burning Man promotes ecological responsibility through its celebrated Leave No Trace principle, this ethic obscures the considerable ecological costs required to construct and sustain Black Rock City. Tens of thousands of participants travel to the remote Nevada desert, primarily by private vehicles or long-distance flights, while luxury recreational vehicles, diesel generators, propane-fueled art installations, extensive logistics, and continuous deliveries of water, food,

fuel, and waste-removal services generate a substantial carbon footprint. The contradiction becomes particularly visible in the proliferation of increasingly elaborate camps, many equipped with air conditioning, flush toilets, and generators constantly working, revealing how ecological ideals coexist with patterns of close to near constant consumption. Climate activists have likewise criticized Burning Man for embodying what they describe as a form of “green capitalism” (Lhooq 2023) pointing to the growing use of private jets, fossil-fuel-dependent infrastructure, and luxury amenities that disproportionately serve affluent participants while the event continues to market itself as environmentally responsible. The cardinal principle of Leave No Trace crystallizes a perpetual tension between the organization’s stated ecological ideals and the actual material practices on the ground. This absolute environmental demand inevitably clashes with the significant carbon footprint and waste production generated by an ephemeral city of this scale (Muguet 2025, 266).

It can be argued that technological solutions and carbon-offsetting schemes cannot compensate for the systemic inequalities embedded in the festival's organization. A politics of climate justice and degrowth rather than ecological modernization could be among the solutions. From an ecofeminist standpoint, these tensions expose how the temporary occupation of the desert reproduces a logic of mastery over nature: the Playa is transformed into a spectacular landscape for human self-expression, while the material and ecological costs of constructing this ephemeral city remain largely displaced from participants’ experience.

Ecofeminist theory offers a particularly productive lens for analyzing contemporary festival cultures in the context of the Anthropocene, by interrogating the interconnections among environmental degradation, the commodification of nature, and the regulation of bodies.

The Symbolic Aesthetics of the Desert

Val Plumwood critiques the dualistic logics underpinning Western thought stating that “contrasting concepts (for example, masculine and feminine gender identities or the hierarchies of culture/nature,) are formed by domination and subordination and constructed

as oppositional and exclusive” (Plumwood 1993, 31). She considers that these logics have historically justified both the domination of nature and the marginalization of women and other subordinated groups. This framework proves valuable for interpreting the spatial and symbolic dynamics of Burning Man, which, while positioning itself as a countercultural experiment sometimes reproduces the very hierarchies it seeks to subvert. Ecofeminists strive for inclusivity (Gaard 1993, vii–10) and challenge dominant Western dualisms, such as culture/nature and male/female, that often underpin environmental imaginaries, revealing how nature is frequently romanticized and instrumentalized in ways that reproduce existing social hierarchies. In this sense, ecofeminism not only critiques the aestheticization of nature and the neoliberal co-optation of countercultural spaces but also proposes an alternative ethics for inhabiting the Anthropocene: one based on interdependence, multispecies justice, and the deconstruction of hierarchical dualisms. Applied to Burning Man, this perspective reveals the different tensions between environmental care and the use of nature for entertainment, as well as between genuine collectivity and the commodification of subcultural practices. If Burning Man raises ecological contradictions it is because despite its core principles, it remains a fossil-fueled art. The burning of the Man, which is a giant bonfire near the end of the festival, also raises questions about the carbon emissions produced in an otherwise relatively pollution-free desert. While the Leave No Trace principle is central to Burning Man’s environmental discourse, its implementation nevertheless relies on extensive post-event cleanup operations and infrastructural labor that can take up to six weeks for the desert to become spotless again (Turner 2009, p.89). The point is therefore not the duration of the cleanup itself, but rather the tension between the rhetoric of ecological disappearance and the material processes required to restore the desert. If participants truly left no trace, such extensive post-event intervention would not be necessary. In this sense, Leave No Trace highlights the gap between the festival’s environmental ideals and the practical realities of hosting a temporary city of tens of thousands of people in a fragile desert ecosystem. The desert setting, where the harsh, fragile ecosystem is both celebrated and commodified as part of the immersive experience, contributes to the festival’s unique aesthetic of environmental concern. Artistic installations and ritual performances frequently engage with

themes of nature, transformation, and impermanence, creating a sensory environment that aestheticizes environmental values while simultaneously catering to consumerist desires for authentic, transformative experiences (Turner 2009).

It should be noted that the Net Zero Black Rock City is Burning Man Project's core initiative to transition Black Rock City off of fossil fuels. It aims at "empowering camps and participants to reduce our collective emissions (...) (efforts were made to) integrate batteries into power grids, piloted R99 diesel and renewable propane, expanded solar infrastructure, deployed solar light towers, and more" ("Burning Man Project"). Rather than dismissing these practices, the aim here is to highlight the tensions between ecological ideals, aesthetic performance, and the environmental contradictions inherent in constructing a temporary city in the desert which can be seen as a form of reproduction of settler colonial temporalities and territorial erasure.

The Desert Frontier as Imaginary: Colonial Power, Possession, and the Western Myth

Despite its countercultural ethos, it can be argued that Burning Man rearticulates certain masculinized environmental imaginaries such as autonomy in wilderness or the conquest of the desert, an untamed environment. Indeed, the symbolic use of the Black Rock Desert can be considered twofold.

First, the desert imaginary at Burning Man operates as a symbolic and material landscape that enables a fantasy of rugged individualism entrenched in the American West self-reliance, aligned with masculinist environmental ideals rooted in conquest, control, and endurance. Reminiscent of the 19th century Turner's frontier, Burners tend to valorize Self-Reliance (a Burning Man principle), bodily endurance (such as heat and dust storms), DIY, survivalism as well as technophilia (gear, solar rigs, art cars etc.). These aspects mirror the masculinist ideals of stoicism, control over the environment but also colonial masculinities embodied by the "man versus nature" paradigm. These aspects resonate with cultural ideals historically associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, R. W. 2005), including self-reliance, physical endurance, risk-taking, and the ability to exert control over

challenging environments. At Burning Man, such performances are visible in narratives celebrating survival in the harsh conditions of the Black Rock Desert, participation in physically demanding artistic and technological projects, and the valorization of resilience in the face of environmental adversity. The desert is thus not merely a backdrop but an active stage on which competence, autonomy, and mastery are publicly performed and recognized. This symbolic relationship to the desert also draws upon longstanding frontier imaginaries in the American cultural imagination (Slotkin 1998). The Black Rock Desert is frequently represented as a remote, empty, and transformative wilderness that enables reinvention and self-discovery. Such representations risk reproducing settler-colonial understandings of land as an unoccupied space available for human projection and experimentation, obscuring both the historical presence of Indigenous peoples and the social and political histories embedded in the landscape. Whether Burners want it or not, the desert is not a neutral environment but a culturally produced space whose meanings are shaped by broader narratives of conquest, exploration, and individual freedom. The evocation of the desert as an empty, timeless space enables not only the performance of alternative identities but also the reproduction of dominant spatial logics. In that regard, the ritual of the “Golden Spike” is quite telling.

Weeks before the beginning of the event, around 150 organizers of the Department of Public Works meet in the desert to delimitate the surroundings of the future Black Rock City. The first action is to plant a “golden spike” that marks the spot where the Man will be erected and burnt. It functions as a foundational act of territorial appropriation and symbolic social ordering. By driving this first marker into the heart of the Playa, the organization reactivates the American myth of the wild frontier to be conquered mapping out both a sacred geography and a new social order (Muguet 2025, 79–99). The frontier, recast as a playground for experimentation, implicitly carries masculinist connotations of conquest, endurance, and transcendence, which continue to inform both the aesthetic and performative dimensions of the event.

Second, Burning Man's environmental and spatial imaginaries are deeply entangled with gendered, racialized, and colonial legacies that shape who can claim belonging and freedom within the festival's boundaries. The desert landscape, celebrated as a site of radical autonomy and ecological purity, tends to obscure the ongoing colonial histories and Indigenous dispossession, aligning with a racialized spatial politics that privileges predominantly White, affluent participants. This interpretation should, however, be situated alongside the Burning Man Project's efforts to address questions of racial inequality and exclusion. Since 2021, the organization has promoted its Radical Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity (R.I.D.E.) initiative, describing Burning Man as a "multicultural, open, inviting, and inclusive community" ("Burning Man Project") and committing itself to expanding the participation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) people through anti-racist policies, targeted outreach, revised ticket allocation strategies, dedicated support for BIPOC artists and camp leaders, and institutional reforms designed to embed diversity and equity throughout the organization. These commitments acknowledge that the demographic composition of Black Rock City has historically failed to reflect the diversity of the broader population and represent a significant institutional attempt to confront these disparities.

Nevertheless, the existence of such initiatives does not in itself resolve the structural inequalities that continue to shape access to the event. The high financial, logistical, and cultural barriers associated with participation may continue to privilege relatively affluent and predominantly White participants despite these reforms. R.I.D.E. does represent an important development while arguing that its effectiveness in transforming patterns of participation, belonging, and racialized spatial experience remains an empirical question requiring sustained scholarly investigation.⁴

In addition, gender dynamics also operate within this framework, as masculinized modes of environmental mastery and technological intervention often underwrite the festival's ethos,

⁴ R.I.D.E. remains an important institutional development but its long-term impact on participation, belonging, and the reproduction of social inequalities needs to be critically assessed through future empirical research. A comprehensive evaluation of whether these policies effectively transform the demographic composition and lived experiences of participants lies beyond the scope of the present study but represents a promising avenue for future scholarship.

despite the visibility of queer and feminist performances. These dynamics are also visible in the spatial organization of camps, where highly resourced, expensive large-scale theme camps coexist with smaller, more familial or low-budget camps, thereby reproducing distinctions in economic capital and, more broadly, patterns of social stratification within the event. Thus, the event's aspirations must be critically interrogated within the context of entrenched social inequalities and historical injustices that continue to shape its environmental and experiential landscape.

This performance site thus functions not as a neutral stage but as a highly charged terrain where gendered, racialized, and ecological histories are both relatively obscured and reactivated through symbolic practices and spatial narratives. In the desert, post-gender and post-nature imaginaries seem to collide.

III. Post-Dual Alternatives and Privilege on the Playa: Ecofeminist Reflections on Decentering the Human and Class in the Desert

Building on Plumwood (1993), Greta Gaard's *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (1993) advances an intersectional analysis of how patriarchal capitalism systematically interlinks the oppression of women, animals, queer and racialized bodies, and the natural environment. Gaard's work is especially pertinent for the Anthropocene, as it foregrounds the ways in which the ecological crisis is also a crisis of social justice, shaped by intersecting forms of domination (1993, xvii – 10). Drawing on ecofeminist theories of care and relationality, which emphasize the interdependence of bodies, environments, and social structures, the tensions between Burning Man's communal and ecological ideals and the inequalities turn out to be embedded in its material organization.⁵ Ecofeminist scholars have long argued that ethics should be grounded not in autonomy and domination, but in relations of care, vulnerability, and ecological interconnectedness (Gaard 1993, i; Stephanie Lahar in Gaard 1993, 111; Federici 2012, 2–3), or in what Warren calls a "care sensitive ethic" (Warren 2000). More specifically, ecofeminist ethics of care and relationality offer a framework to interrogate the

⁵ For a very recent and thorough examination of organization behind Burning Man, see the PhD thesis of Flore Muguet.

uneven access to resources, visibility, and agency within the festival space, and to examine how alternative, solidaristic practices of mutual aid and environmental accountability might resist or be subsumed within neoliberal cultural logic.

Decentering the Human at Burning Man: Post-Dual Alternatives?

The Burning Man Project has made significant efforts to embody more sustainable and accountable posthuman practices. Among others, they include the Leave No Trace principle which is rigorously enforced on-site, ongoing environmental restoration of the Black Rock Desert, and increasing collaboration with local Indigenous communities, particularly the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe, to acknowledge the historical and cultural significance of the land (Burning Man Project, "Pyramid Lake"). From an ecofeminist standpoint, these gestures represent more than mere mitigation, as they can be regarded as a shift toward an ethic of care that decenters the liberal human subject while centering reciprocal relationships with place, community, and nonhuman life.

However, this ethic of care uneasily coexists with the event's symbolic and performative production of the desert as an "empty," transformative wilderness, which continues to draw on frontier imaginaries that historically depend on the erasure of Indigenous presence in order to sustain narratives of radical freedom and self-reinvention. Tensions between forms of Indigenous acknowledgment and environmental responsibility continue to exist. Thus, an ecofeminist reading of posthumanism at Burning Man cannot dismiss the project's genuine ambitions but would push further insisting that aesthetic and technological hybridity be matched by more sustained, embodied commitments to ecological justice and decolonial solidarity. As a posthumanist event, Burning Man can be read as a site of post-dual alternatives: an experimental space where conventional binaries such as human/nature, technology/organicism, and self/other are both blurred and reimagined. This dismantling of dualisms aligns with ecofeminist calls for moving beyond hierarchical, oppositional thinking

toward more relational, embodied modes of being. At the heart of this shift is the principle of care, which not only informs Burning Man's core ethos, most notably through its radical self-reliance balanced by communal responsibility but also echoes a deepening attentiveness to the desert as a living, more-than-human environment. In this context, care becomes an active expression of compassion and empathy, not merely toward other participants but toward the fragile ecology of the Black Rock Desert itself. Burning Man's increasing engagement with "feminine" attributes of care (put forward by ecofeminist thinkers) —such as nurturance, receptivity, and attentiveness —signals a revaluation of qualities often marginalized in patriarchal and technocentric cultures, yet crucial to sustainable, posthuman futures. A recent longitudinal study found that transformative experiences at Burning Man and similar secular mass gatherings significantly enhanced feelings of universal connectedness, expanded participants' "circle of moral regard" over time, and produced enduring increases in prosocial attitudes and generosity for up to six months after attendance (Crockett et al 2022).

Initiatives that encourage a better understanding of the local environment further exemplify a care-centered ethic. Rather than seeing the desert as a mere blank canvas for cultural expression, the evolving vision of Burning Man suggests a reciprocal relationship with place, one grounded not in domination or escape, but in humility and responsibility. Such a vision constitutes heterotopias (St John, 2020) which resonate deeply with ecofeminist posthumanism and which insists that ethical transformation begins with how we live, relate, and care in the world, especially in spaces where boundaries dissolve and new forms of being together emerge. But Burning Man's ethos and efforts have been undermined by structural barriers that both limit access and shape participants' experiences.

The Desert as a Stage for Classed Performances of Privilege

As it has been explained, despite its ethos of radical inclusion and egalitarianism, Burning Man does reproduce social and more specifically class hierarchies. Its remote desert location and the expectation of radical self-reliance necessitate substantial financial and logistical resources, effectively limiting participation to those with considerable economic means.

Yet, the organization has acknowledged these disparities and introduced initiatives such as the Radical Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity (R.I.D.E.) program. While these commitments signal an institutional awareness of exclusionary dynamics, their actual impact on participation patterns and access remains an open question that warrants further empirical investigation. Rather than resolving structural inequalities, such initiatives may be understood as attempting to address them within a broader socio-economic framework that continues to shape who is able to attend the event in the first place: ticket pricing, which has progressively increased over the years, functions as a significant gatekeeping mechanism, privileging individuals with greater economic means and reinforcing socioeconomic stratifications within the event.

At Burning Man, bodily freedom, erotic play, and identity performance are central to the event's appeal, yet these expressions are simultaneously commodified and repackaged as experiences tailored to affluent consumers. The ethos of Radical Self-Expression often intersects with the neoliberal experience economy, wherein participants' acts of nudity, erotic camps, and queer performances become marketable spectacles as highly resourced camps and curated experiences gain visibility and symbolic value within the festival, particularly among participants with higher levels of economic and cultural capital. Sexual behaviors and gender performances are not only sites of liberation but also arenas in which norms are negotiated, often within boundaries shaped by economic capital and social privilege. The emphasis on consent and inclusivity, while progressive, operates in a context where access is mediated by costly tickets and exclusive camps, producing a "commodified freedom" as part of an immersive spectacle that aligns with broader neoliberal values of choice and self-optimization. The promise of bodily and sexual liberation is therefore both a performative enactment and a commodified experience shaped by market logics and social stratification. All in all, Burning Man does offer fleeting spaces of autonomy and subversion but its cost of entry seems to reflect and reproduce broader social inequalities.

Challenging and Reenacting Neoliberal Social Hierarchies

Even if performances of identity, gender, and sexuality can create spaces for experimentation and transgression, these practices operate alongside, rather than outside of, capitalist structures. For example, according to anthropologist Flore Muguet, the transgressive performances of the women of the Department of Public Work, the organizational entity goes beyond simple aesthetic subversion. By disrupting traditional codes, their behavior serves as a powerful indicator of the implicit heteronormative expectations and gender stereotypes that Burners unconsciously project onto femininity, proving that the “utopia” is not immune to patriarchal constructs (Muguet 2025, 231).

Within neoliberal cultural economies, practices of dissent and subversion are frequently co-opted, repackaged, and neutralized as forms of commodified expression, thereby blunting their radical potential. This commercialization and branding of the Burning Man experience reflect broader neoliberal cultural dynamics, where countercultural forms have become, like many others, commodified and integrated into mainstream capitalist consumption patterns (Heath and Potter 2004). The original anti-consumerist principles paradoxically coexist with a booming secondary market for tickets, luxury services, and branded outfits, signaling a form of co-optation of what was once a much more radical social experiment.

Conclusion

By situating Burning Man within ecofeminist critiques of the Anthropocene, this study has interrogated how such spaces offer meaningful alternatives to masculinized, commodified environmental imaginaries, while also reinforcing exclusionary hierarchies of class and ecological entitlement. It does so as the festival often mobilizes frontier aesthetics large-scale spectacles (like massive art burns) that echo masculinist performances of survival, conquest, control, and mastery over nature: the desert has become a site where settler colonial and patriarchal imaginaries can become reactivated. The Playa may be understood as a symbolic “blank canvas” onto which some predominantly White and affluent participants project narratives of radical self-discovery, renewal, and reinvention, although such experiences remain shaped by broader inequalities related to race, class, and access within festival culture.

However, Burning Man does not entirely reproduce these ideals, as it also creates multiple spaces for the subversion of normative gender roles, queer performances, and experimental identities. Through nudity, embodied expression, noncommodified interactions, radical inclusivity and erotic experimentation, participants often challenge dominant scripts of sexuality, identity, and desire —making the event a contradictory but generative site for rethinking the gendered and affective politics of the Anthropocene. While Burning Man creates spaces that enable subversion of normative identities and foster alternative modes of sociality, it simultaneously reproduces inequalities through the presence of privileged enclaves, and the subtle enforcement of neoliberal norms such as the market logic, namely through exorbitant ticket prices. Such immersive events are deeply ambivalent as they function as sites of authentic communal experimentation while reinforcing capitalist modes of symbolic domination and exclusion. Indeed, from an ecofeminist perspective, Burning Man's performative ecology that is to say its claims to sustainability and environmental stewardship, remains entangled with contradictions of consumption and privilege, challenging simplistic notions of environmental justice.

Through initiatives such as the Ticket Aid Program, land acknowledgements and dialogue with Indigenous communities, and diversity, equity and inclusion programs, the organization has worked to align its practices with its stated principles of Radical Inclusion and Civic Responsibility. Of course, the efficacy of these measures is a matter of debate. Yet, they do indicate that the governance of the festival is one that is carefully crafted and proactive in terms of anticipating, acknowledging and mitigating the social inequalities and exclusions that the event brings with it. Thus, in the current context of the Anthropocene, Burning Man emerges as an ambivalent political object. It operates simultaneously as a site of social experimentation and as a space where the very power relations it claims to dismantle tend to be reproduced.

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