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Paradox on the Playa: 
Uncovering the Contradictions Embedded in Burning Man

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Abstract

This project examines the contradictions embedded in the stated goals and organizational structure of Burning Man. Burning Man is something that is portrayed as positive in an alternative community; but in reality has its own hegemony and hierarchal bureaucracy. Through a discourse analysis and participant observation, this project shows that the ideologies of the culture are partially liberatory while most of the other aspects of Burning Man are hegemonic. The social contradictions of Burning Man are pointed out through employing theories of ideology, hegemony, place and space, heteronormativity, and subculture theory.

Keywords

Burning Man, Hegemony, Ideology, Heteronormativity, Subculture, Contradiction
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Introduction

Over the past three decades, Burning Man has grown from twenty people gathered on a beach in San Francisco to build and burn an effigy in honor of the summer solstice, to over fifty-six thousand people gathered in the desert of Nevada for a week-long festival dedicated to art, expression, freedom, and fire. It is a celebration of participants’ humanity, uniqueness, and connectedness; oftentimes in ways that challenge social norms and taboos. As the event has grown, so has the community, culture, and the organization behind Burning Man.

The fundamental ideals of the Burning Man event and culture are liberal and supportive of an alternative outlook. However, the hegemonic organization, the hefty cost of a ticket, and other realities of the event show that Burning Man is a living social contradiction. This project examines aspects of Burning Man, pointing out the contradictions that are embedded within it using a combination of participant observation and a theoretical discourse analysis. First, the current research done on Burning Man is looked at. Second, I draw on theories from space and place and subcultures to understand the background of the event, organization, and culture. Lastly, the most important part of this paper is an analysis of contradictory aspects of the Burning Man event and organization that are both hegemonic and liberal such as the principles of the event itself, the ticketing system, the bureaucratic organization, and cultural politics such as race and gender.

In order for any cultural movement, subculture, or radical group to thrive, there must be an organization behind it. The Burning Man organization is no exception. As Katherine Chen, a sociologist who has observed the Burning Man organization for many years, points out “If the Burning Man organization does not provide enough structure for the event, then the ensuing
chaos could overwhelm attendees. On the other hand, if the organization imposes too much structure, the event’s creativity and vitality could suffocate” (Chen, 3). Herein lies the problem: the ideals and public image of the event are so vastly different from the realities of the organization behind it. This contradiction must be pointed out and interrogated. Burning Man is a place where “bohemian modes of sociability meet bureaucratic forms of organization” (Chen, 6). One can find social contradictions in all types of movements and subcultures around the world. The aim of this paper is to bring readers awareness of contradictions that can exist even in the most liberal-seeming of places through the examples found in Burning Man.

What is Burning Man? Many people say that trying to explain Burning Man to someone who has never been there is like trying to explain colors to a blind person. It is important to first make clear what exactly Burning Man is (or is popularly viewed as) by defining the lingo of the culture in order to have a conceptual background. “Burning Man: an experiment in temporary community” is the official headline of the event. It takes place once a year during the last week of August in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert. This part of the desert is called Black Rock City. The city is constructed by tens of thousands of participants and then taken down after one week each year, and is dedicated to community, art, self-expression, and self-reliance. After the event takes place, thousands of people depart the desert having “left no trace.” Everything is taken out at the end of the event, including peoples trash, leaving a barren desert the rest of the year. Nothing lives in this part of the desert, so everything that takes place at the event happens because someone worked to get it there.

Black Rock City is an actual city, with its own post office, hospital, radio station, etcetera. The playa is the name of the ancient lakebed area where the event takes place. Art
cars, art installations, music stages, food, bicycles, toys, drugs, and crazy costumes fill the *playa*. The entire space where the event takes place is mapped out like a clock. The event looks like a compass from a bird’s eye view. Spread throughout the entire *playa* are hundreds of camps, each with different themes of their own. Figure one shows a map of Burning Man.

*Burners* are people who attend Burning Man and/or participate in the Burning Man community. The term “default world” is coined by Burners to mean the world outside of Burning Man. This is the rest of society and people that are not on the *playa*, both physically and in an ideological mindset. A major part of attending Burning Man is to ideally be able to implement the event’s “Ten Principles” and values in the “default world,” and have some sort of *radical* impact. This paper discusses Burning Man as a *community/culture*, Burning Man as an *event*, and Burning Man as an *organization*. The Burning Man organization is also referred to as the BMorg or *BORG*. It is important to keep in mind that these three terms are separate from each other and mean different things.

Coupled with scholarly critiques and commentaries on Burning Man, key concepts from cultural studies are used to analyze this project including; subculture theory, place and space, hegemony, ideology, and heteronormativity. Knowledge on subcultures is deployed in this project for the analysis of the foundation of the Burning Man organization. A subculture is a
group of people within a culture who differentiate themselves from the larger dominant culture to which they belong. The culture of Burning Man started as a subculture in that it had highly differentiated itself from mainstream society. However, the realities of the hegemonic organization no longer coincide with the ideologies of the subculture, aiding in the revelation of the social contradictions embedded in Burning Man.

Hegemony is defined by the process through which dominant culture maintains its dominant position as ruling over the majority of people, which is the way that the BORG is in control over all of the Burning Man participants. Hegemonic aspects that are discussed in this project are the ticketing system, the BORG, the Department of Public Works, law enforcement, and issues of race and gender.

The aspects of Burning Man that are partially anti-hegemonic are all ideological. Ideology "provides a conceptual framework through which we interpret and make sense of our lived, material conditions. Ideology therefore produces our culture, as well as our consciousness of who and what we are" (Sardar, 46). The theory of ideology is applied to this project because so much of what is exceptionally liberatory about Burning Man exists ideologically in the public image. The public image that is created about the culture through the organization is what is seen as countering hegemony.

One such ideological aspect that is liberatory is gender freedom at Burning Man; the freedom to express one's gender in any way that they desire. However, this can be seen as both hegemonic and anti-hegemonic. This contradiction can be exposed through the use of the theory of heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is the societal standard that lays out how people fall into distinct and complementary gender categories; male and female, with 'natural' roles in life.
Compulsory heterosexuality is the cultural assumption that both males and females are biologically predisposed to heterosexuality. At Burning Man, there is plenty of room for the freedom of one to express their gender, sex, or sexuality in whichever way that they choose. However, this *performance* of gender is not necessarily only liberatory. Queer theorist Judith Butler’s view on gender theory is useful in this project to illuminate how a ‘performance’ of gender is just a *copy* of what is available to us within heteronormativity and shows how we are all constantly ‘performing’ in every day life.

**Methodology**

The research method for this paper draws on an assessment of the organizational structure of Burning Man through an analysis of the official Burning Man website, www.burningman.com. The website is controlled by the Burning Man Organization, therefore slanting how the company wants the public to view Burning Man. The source materials from this analysis are drawn from an official online publication of the organization. It provides a history of the event, stories, pictures, maps, important individuals, frequently asked questions, ticket procedures, and so on. The official website also provides information on the ten principles the event is based on. These principles are followed and taken very seriously in the Burning Man culture.

In contrast to sites that are run by the *organization*, this project also references user-generated blogs for up-to-date information on the discourses that exist within the community. For example, www.Burners.Me has posts from people with a range of academic and non-academic backgrounds in the Burning Man community, commenting on different aspects of the
event and culture. This is an excellent source to gather information from the perspective of participants. From the site’s about section,

Burners.Me is a site for the global (and galactic) subculture of Burners. We are not affiliated in any way with Burningman.com, BMorg, ePlaya, Burners Without Borders, Blackrock Arts Foundation, or any of the other various “official” Burning Man groups. We are affiliated with the people that make the party. The Burners! Without them, a party is just a bunch of people drinking and listening to music. With them, consciousness expands, people reinvent themselves, the world changes. We are for the Burners, not the bureaucracy. Freedom for Burners forever! (Burner.Me admins)

It is obvious from this quote that the site wants nothing to do with the organization of Burning Man, which will further be referred to as BORG in this paper. It is intended to be only written by participants of the event; and the critiques and commentaries are to be seen ideally as trusted and unbiased. I analyze the blogs and the patterns found later on in this paper in order to find a discourse that is in some ways counter to that which is produced by the BORG. This aids in seeing the contradictions embedded in Burning Man.

Another online presence that is unaffiliated with the BORG is The Burning Mind Project, www.burningmindproject.org. This is an academic online community that was established by Nicole M. Radzwill and Morgan Benton to explore how the ten principles of Burning Man can be applied in the outside world of education and discourse. Everything on the website is written by Radzwill and Benton and there is also room for anyone else to publicly post a response to the writings. As Radzwill and Benton write, “The mission of the Burning Mind Project is to operationalize the gift economy in higher education through the systematic application of the Ten Principles” (Benton, Radzwill). This is where the scholars of Burning Man expand the positive ideologies, applying it to a wider cultural context. The discourse that is produced by the people
of *The Burning Mind Project* is applied to the aspects of Burning Man that partially counter hegemony and are supportive of a revolutionary alternative lifestyle.

My own personal position within the object of study is utilized alongside the theoretical framework and the discourse analysis that this projects employs. I have personally been involved with the Burning Man community for the past three years. Along with going to the actual event, I have participated in a multitude of Burner events and parties in Chicago and California. In 2012, I was at the site of the event in the desert for a couple weeks prior to and after the Burn.\(^1\) This provided me with insider-observations on the individuals that run the event, the ones ‘behind the curtain’ so to speak. I became more interested in the organizational structure because it seemed not to fall in line with the liberal ideals that had been *ingrained* in me ever since my first Burning Man event. Contradictions throughout the spectrum of Burning Man became apparent as more and more research on the organization was conducted. My methodology lastly explores critiques and commentaries made by note-worthy scholars of Burning Man.

**Sociological Studies of Burning Man**

This project first interrogates already existing scholarship about Burning Man before the organization, culture, and event are theoretically analyzed. In the book, *Enabling Creative Chaos: The Organization Behind the Burning Man Event*, Katherine Chen provides a sociological analysis of Burning Man specifically about what happens when “bohemian modes

\(^1\) Volunteering for Burning Man gave me a more insiders perspective on what takes place to make the event run. My time was spent meticulously cleaning up a certain area of the playa and seeing what privileges the workers for the organization actually have such as their private showers, internet cafe, and blatant sense of entitlement.
of sociability meet bureaucratic forms of organization” (Chen, 7). Chen means that the
construction of Burning Man is that of a traditional corporation. However, it is run by people
that have so-called ‘radical’ and ‘counter-cultural’ ideals. This book examines how the event
transformed itself from a small group to a ten-million-dollar corporation.

Chen’s insight describes a social structure within the organization and discusses how the
unorthodox character of the community has been protected while interacting with conservative
and conformist entities such as the federal authorities. Chen analyzes the event in terms of the
organizers, the people ‘behind the curtain’ who control how the event is run, and what is and is
not allowed. This is an excellent resource for this project to see the development of the
organization from a first-hand perspective.

Moving towards a more theoretical perspective of Burning Man, *Beyond Belief: The Cults of Burning Man* by Erik Davis is deployed in this paper. Davis explores and compares
aspects of Burning Man such as the experience, the mild-altering substances, the juxtapositions,
and what he calls the “cult of meaningless chaos” (Davis, 2). This “meaningless chaos” refers to
a creative chaos that the the Burning Man event embodies. The disarray of crazy happenings on
the playa are organized in a way that can give people their ‘profound’ experience. Davis’s
critique is useful in this project as another perspective on the culture. He sees Burning Man as
representing the “ultimate attention economy; what participants exchange are the willingness,
and the opportunities to submit to new experience. These experiences in turn create stories,
which become the coin of the realm, fetishes traded over the fire” (Davis, 6). Davis interprets
the chaos of Burning Man as both destructive and creative. The take away message from Davis
is that Burning Man would be nothing without the participants and Burners would be nothing without the event.

Denise Nicole Green’s *From Ephemeral to Everyday Costuming: Negotiations in Masculine Identities at the Burning Man Project* explores social, spatial, and aesthetic processes of identity negotiation focusing on how masculinity is “re-conceptualized” at Burning Man. This dissertation is helpful for this project in that it looks at one of the ways in which aspects of Burning Man are liberatory; through the freedom of gender and identity expression.

**Burning Man: Background on the Event, Organization, and Culture**

There exists a sort of *cliché* of Black Rock City that one cannot say anything very insightful about Burning Man because its “diversity and contradictions undermine any generalizations you might be tempted to make” (Davis, 1). In order to study this culture, one must look beyond the notion of impossible generalizations to see and keep the event free from being trapped in interpretation and explanation. However, we cannot *refuse* that there is meaning. We must look beyond the labels and categories that exist to understand a complex human experience like Burning Man.

It is important for this project to look at the place and space of the Burning Man event because it sets up the environment for how people act and relate to one another. Theories of place and space describe the way in which geographic locations are socially constructed. The goal is also to show how these spaces allow for certain cultural practices and therefore prohibit others.
A Global Sense of Place by Doreen Massey, argues that the advancement in technology results in a rising uncertainty about what we mean by “place” and how we relate to “places” by examining what the effect of the environment has on the way people relate to one another. For instance,

Many hold an idealized notion of a past era when places were supposedly inhabited by coherent and homogeneous communities that contrast sharply with the current fragmentation and disruption. The counterposition is anyway dubious, of course; 'place' and 'community' have only rarely been coterminous. But the occasional longing for such coherence is nonetheless a sign of the geographical fragmentation, the spatial disruption, of our times. (Massey, 1)

Burning Man is a place in which community and place are linked together. The place of the event is based on community, a main intention of being there is to build community. Massey claims that seeking after a sense of place has come to be seen by some as necessarily reactionary, meaning it is merely a response to the ideologies of that place. The culture of Burning Man exemplifies this; the first thing one reads when entering Burning Man is “Welcome Home.”

There is frequent usage of the term home within the Burning Man culture. The domestic nature of our understanding of home is traditionally the place where one can feel safe, comfortable, and able to be themselves. This space of Burning Man being characterized as home is what ideologically sets up the atmosphere for Burners to be able to express themselves freely, which therefore gives them the opportunity to manifest their identity and gender in whatever way they see fit.

The discourse surrounding being at “home” for Burners is important to look at for studying the space and place of the Burning Man event. Interrogating the Geographies of the Familiar: Domesticating Nature and Constructing the Autonomy of the Modern Home by Maria Kaika introduces the idea that the modern home is the “space of individual freedom” (Kaika, 19).
Similarly, the space of Burning Man ideally promotes free self-expression. Having a sense of home creates a space of belonging for Burners; which is a common element for a subculture to have in order to thrive.

I draw from theories on place and space in order to analyze the set up of the Burning Man event to see what goes into making the place so encouraging of “radical self-expression.” The sense of freedom that the space provides is formed through the public image, or ideology, of Burning Man. The ideology can be seen in many elements that create the discourse of home and through the non-hegemonic aspects of the Burning Man event. It accounts for how attendees make sense of their experience.

According to popular belief and the Burning Man website, people go to Burning Man to find themselves, letting go of their past and of insecurities; becoming stronger in who they are and more secure in themselves. I asked a first-time Burner how he felt upon arrival. He responded by saying, “I feel like I am home, like this has been my home my entire life but I am just now getting here.”

He is not coming home in the literal sense of the word. He is able to express part of his inner and unconscious self in ways he never felt comfortable to do before. This causes him to feel “at home” because he is finally comfortable in who he truly is on the inside. The freedom of self-expression really makes Burners feel at “home” because home is the place where you can be completely yourself. No matter what your personality or how you behave, the feeling of home comes in to play when entering an environment of personal freedom. Home is leisure, a fortress, a social need, a safe haven, and a source of identity. Black Rock City is home, but just for eight days out of the year.
Burning Man, the event, does not exist in a vacuum. It has its own social context that has both differences and similarities to “default” society. Subjectivity, the process of subjects being formed, is brought to Burning Man, which aids in understanding the way in which individuals are a part of their contexts. One’s subjectivity is formed through his or her social and cultural upbringing, including not just family but also social institutions. Our ideas, values, and beliefs are socially and culturally constructed to form our identity. These identities are not just chucked away when individuals enter the playa; they are carried through and have an impact, whether discussed or not, on the formation of their experience. Therefore, beliefs and behaviors from “default” society are brought into the Burning Man escapade.

The ideologies and the public image of Burning Man as an event come through the experiences of Burners and the stories that are later told from those said experiences. Burning Man stirs up one sense of beliefs, slogans, recurrent memories, contradictory plans, and perceptual maps. It is common for Burners to claim as a discourse that it takes the entire year following the event to process all that has happened within that one week. The experience can often be thought of as life-changing. However, that depends on what kind of cultural context the individual Burner has already acquired in their lives pre-Burn.

To be an attendee at Burning Man, one ideally needs to have a lot of endurance; hard-work is required on the playa. Supreme preparation is needed for anyone to attend Burning Man because of the extreme weather conditions on the playa. Temperatures during the day can get as high as one hundred degrees and drop as low as thirty-five degrees at night. There is a strong possibility of dust storms from high winds, and even rain is possible. The principle of “radical
self-reliance” stems from mandatory preparation for the event. Goggles, a dust mask, and boots are three must-haves on the playa.

From a satirical blog-post titled, *Burning Man Sucks! 10 Reasons to Stay home*, “The fact is that the playa is a howling wilderness that will make you monstrously uncomfortable if you’re not prepared, could change your life in ways you haven’t anticipated and aren’t ready for, and just might maim you or kill you deader than a very dead thing” (Whatsblem the Pro). The desert of Black Rock City was chosen mainly because of its isolation from civilization. It was picked by the people who created Burning Man, who now make up the members of the BORG.

**Building the BORG and the Community of Burning Man**

As Burning Man’s public image, community, and ideologies of the event are explained, some history of the *organization* is needed. From 1986 to 1989, Larry Harvey, well-known creator of the event, and his friends met on Baker Beach in San Francisco, California to mark the summer solstice each year where they burned an effigy. The gathering in 1990 was stopped by authorities in light of there being a non-permitted fire hazard. The group was still allowed to erect the forty-foot sculpture, but there was a large amount of disappointment among them caused by the authority’s halt of the yearly fire show. At this point, Harvey decided to move the celebration elsewhere. During the same time, the “Cacophony Society” from Los Angeles were meeting and hosting “Zone Trips” out in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada.² Harvey and his followers joined this group and burned their effigy in the desert around the time of Labor Day weekend, and they have returned every year since to do the same thing. Year by year, the

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² The Cacophony society began in 1986 with the original intention as a “randomly gathered networks of free spirits united in the pursuit of experiences beyond the pale of mainstream society” (Cacophony.org).
celebration grew into a week-long festival with the burning of the “man” becoming a ritual on the second to last night of the event. The discourse that the official Burning Man website produces is that the “Cacophony Society” joined Larry Harvey. In reality, it was actually Larry Harvey who joined them (Doherty, 47). However, it seems much more fitting to construct the former idea so that it is in accordance with Burners highly-held radical inclusion principle. This is important to point out because it is part of the ‘myth’ of Burning Man; Larry Harvey is seen as this great visionary that created a free-expression event. The event already existed; Harvey just brought more people to it and gave it a copyrighted name.

The event has grown since 1990, having eight-hundred participants at that time. The Burn in 2011 had a recorded over 55,000 participants, and that was the first year the event sold out (official Burning Man website). The event selling out in 2011 led to a new, and confusing to most, system of ticketing in 2012 which will be discussed later on in this paper. As the event’s participants have been growing in numbers, so has the community.

Burning Man would not and could not happen without the participation of everyone involved, or at least this is the discourse that is produced about it. There are rules out there; they just differ from the rules of the “default world.” It is up to each participant to decide how they will contribute and what they will give to this community. The community aspect of Burning Man is immensely important. Every camp has an open-door policy throughout the day. Being a part of Burning Man is to be a part of something bigger than yourself. The principles of “radical inclusion” and “communal effort” come from being a part of the community. There is no “Burning Man” without the community part of it. Since everything that encompasses Black
Rock City is produced by participants, the communal effort of everyone involved is extremely important and held in high regard.

**Burning Man as a Subculture**

Burning Man's culture is outside of the larger culture of the United States; it is therefore considered a subculture. A subculture is defined by a group of people within a culture who differentiate themselves from the larger culture to which they belong. *Resistance through Ritual* by Stuart Hall provides applicable commentary on what it means to be a subculture. Hall describes subcultures “in terms of their relation to the wider class-cultural networks of which they form a distinctive part,” and they are best “analyzed in terms of their relation to the dominant culture - the overall disposition of cultural power in the society as a whole” (Hall, 13). The “default world” is considered the dominant culture, where as Burning Man is the subculture. According to Dick Hebdige in *Subculture: The Meaning Of Style*, a sub-culture is a subversion of normalcy through style. Style includes types of clothing, ways of communicating, decorating, dancing, etcetera. There is a distinct style to the participants of Burning Man such as their crazy costumes, weird dancing, and frequent screaming at each other across the playa.

It is pertinent to study subcultures for this project because Burning Man did *originate* as a social movement and brought about a subculture of its own. One cannot really say that an event that costs hundreds of dollars for a ticket is a “social movement,” but it did start out that way. It first began as *anti-establishment*. Larry Harvey (executive producer of Burning Man) and his friends were upset that the police stopped their yearly burning rituals, and wanted to prove that
they could still perform this act in a place where there was ideally “no rules.” I am arguing that Burning man is not a social movement; it is a subculture through it’s subversion of normalcy.

One of the first big signs of a “subculture” is if it has names for the members and a lingo that most other people do not know about (Hall, 10). For Burning Man, this includes the lingo described in the introduction to this paper. Burning Man has a theme to each year’s event, which produces a discourse that theoretically encourages a common bond to help tie each individual’s contributions together in a meaningful way. Participants are encouraged to find a way to help make the theme come alive, whether it is through a large scale art-installation, a theme camp, gifts brought to be given to other individuals (no money is ever exchanged on the playa, the only thing ever sold for money is ice and coffee), or any other medium that one comes up with. Burning Man is also an ever-expanding year-round culture based on the “ten principles,” meaning that there are many events all over the world that Burning Man participants produce, run, and attend.

There are ten principles that structure Burning Man. As noted by Burning Man scholar Miriam Fathalla in her groundwork paper titled Cultural Sustainability and Burning Man,

The Ten principles are heralded by many (mostly newish) members of the Burning Man community as holy tenants, but although they were brought back from a big sandy place by a guy with a beard, the principles are not commandments for acceptable behavior for community members, though they seem to be believed to be so for many. The Principles are currently the closest thing to a clear, widespread description of what Burning Man is and most importantly they are the ‘official’ line. The Principles were created in 2000, to guide the development of the Regional Network of Burning Man events and are the result of one member of the Burning Man organization’s attempt to describe the commonly underlying elements of a ridiculously diverse group of people and what may be essential to creating a space that would attract ‘Burners.’ (Fathalla, 10)

The ten principles are (in order): radical inclusion, gifting, decommodification, radical self-reliance, radical self-expression, communal effort, civic responsibility, leaving no trace,
participation, and immediacy. These principals are used not only for the event itself, but also for all of the smaller Burner events year-round.

“Radical Inclusion” is the first principle and in some ways the most problematic. It is discussed in the official Burning man website as: “Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community” (Burning Man official website). However, in reality many prerequisites do in fact exist, which will be expanded upon further in a later section of this paper. Ideally, radical inclusion means that Burning Man wants people to join together and make an impact no matter who they are. Yet, as this paper points out, not everyone can be included in reality.

The ten principles are not rules as much as ideological guidelines for Burner’s values. From the people of the Burning Mind Project;

Does failure to adhere to some principles disqualify a person from being a member of the community? Plenty of people participate in communities without engaging in radical self-expression. Indeed, discovering the part of one’s self that needs to be expressed is often a big part of the experience of Burning Man. To state simply, manifesting all ten principles is not a requirement for membership in the community. (Benton, Radzwill)

There is nothing you ideally have to do at Burning Man, given the radical self-expression value. Burning Man originally was seen as an “anti-establishment” social and cultural movement, dedicated to radical art-expression. San Francisco police challenging those gathered on the beach was the first unifying event for them to build a counter-culture around being against the regulatory system of hegemonic control. Therefore, Burning Man started as a counter-culture fighting for anti-establishment and antiauthoritarian values. But as Burning Man has become more and more mainstream, what happens when what Burners believe in becomes the establishment? The answer to this question is broken apart throughout the rest of this paper
as I describe aspects that counter and support hegemony, in order to prove that Burning Man is a living social contradiction.

**Burning Man as a Social Contradiction: Liberation, Hegemony, & Ideology**

The ideologies of the culture and community of Burning Man are aspects that partially counter hegemony, or are in other words liberatory and supportive of an alternative outlook. Hegemony is defined by the processes by which dominant culture maintains its dominant position. Examples of hegemonic characteristics are the use of institutions to formalize power, the employment of a bureaucracy to make power *seem* unattached to any one individual, or the insemination of the populace into the ideals of the controlling group through education, advertising, etcetera. According to well-known theorist Antonio Gramsci, in *Hegemony, Intellectuals, and the State*, hegemony is critical for an understanding of history and the structure of any given society. Hegemony is the combination of force from repressive state apparatus and consent from other subordinate classes to the hand of the ruling class (Gramsci, 79).

The Burning Man Organization is hegemonic because it is in itself a ruling power that maintains control. They conserve the control by maintaining certain restrictions as to what one needs in order to purchase a ticket. One of the ways that the ruling class gets their power is through ideology; misleading people into believing that this is the way things are so there is no point in trying to create social change. Another way of thinking about ideology is as *cultural common sense*. The BORG does the latter as well, creating a sense of what is ‘normal’ at Burning Man, though this sense of ‘normal’ might be different from the “default” world’s definition.
In *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, renowned theorist Louis Althusser defines ideology as, “A ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser, 294). The real conditions of existence are a ruling class and the rest of the population (also known as; the one percent to the ninety nine percent). Society produces representations of the world we live in that often times does not mirror the reality of it. Representations of inequality of how capitalistic societies function does not necessarily reflect reality (Althusser, 298). Ideology also has a material existence which plays out in peoples actions.

The public image created about the culture is what is seen as countering hegemony; meaning that it is the ideology of Burning Man that is supportive of an alternative outlook. Hence, what actually happens at the event varies depending on who the subject is, what his or her subjectivity is, and the personal experiences that he or she has. This public image of Burning Man is how the BORG wants Burning Man to be viewed by others. It is the ideas that participants ‘buy’ into when they purchase a ticket. The official Burning Man website, controlled by the BORG is where the majority of this discourse is produced. These are the parts of the event that people tend to really enjoy, which is shown through blog postings and short documentaries made by Burners. However, ideology also has a material existence so Burners feel that they really experience these ideas in action.

As previously mentioned, the ten principles represent commandments to people for their behavior on the playa or at any Burner-event. Therefore, these principles also represent the ideologies of Burning Man. Some are more important than others in regards to encouraging a sense of freedom and anti-“default” society. These are unpacked to show the ideological aspects
of Burning Man that are seemingly liberatory. However, there are contradictions embedded and
embodied by the principles, so most have a negative side to them.

The “Gifting” Economy & (de)Commodification

The second principle of Burning Man is gifting. Defined as, “devoted to acts of gift
giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange
for something of equal value” (official Burning Man website). One of the easiest ways to
participate in the community is to share a gift or two with someone you meet on the playa. It is
a centerpiece of the culture that each participant gives gifts to one another or to the collective,
with no expectation of a return (Benton, Radzwill). These gifts can be found in the form of
materials, labor, intellectual contributions, or emotional and moral support.

Ideally, one can go to Burning Man without any supplies or food and rely on gifts from
the community, but not everyone can do that. The connotation that comes along with the “gifting
economy” is that money is not important. However, in order to bring or make those gifts,
something was purchased, or the pieces to make the gifts were purchased. Gifting and saying
“Yes!” is part of what gives Burners an ‘open-minded’ attitude. It plays into the “community”
aspect of the discourse that Burning Man produces.

Gifting promotes a belief that everyone possesses a gift that they can share (Benton,
Radzwill). Burners think, ‘We are all special, and unique, and can make an impact if we want
to!’ This ideally makes everyone able to focus on the value of what they can provide to others,
rather than what they can get from participating. This is an ideal way to view oneself in the
Burning Man world, seeing yourself first as helping others rather than being helped. This line of
thought is exceptionally applicable to those who are supportive of liberatory and alternative lifestyles. Burning Man promotes an atmosphere in which goods (other than ice and coffee) are gifted rather than being acquired through money. Breaking away from capitalism in this respect supports the foundational value of being an anti-establishment subculture.

The *economy* of Burning Man can better be described as what Erik Davis calls, "the ultimate attention economy" (Davis, 6). Rather than exchanging money, participants exchange their willingness, values, attributes, or simply exchange the opportunity to have a new experience. Taking away the commodification of objects ideally leaves room to put more value on the self, on expression, and on the community. However, it requires a large amount of money to get to the playa and be a participant in Burning Man’s gifting economy.

As money is absolutely needed for Burning Man, we move towards the principle of “Decommodification.” From the website,

In order to preserve the spirit of gifting, our community seeks to create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising. We stand ready to protect our culture from such exploitation. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience. (official Burning Man website)

No vending is allowed on the playa except ice and coffee. However, one is also free to express themselves in whatever way that they want. For instance, DJ promotions were seen abundantly over the past couple of years in Black Rock City. Although commercialization doesn’t normally happen on-playa, much exists in order to get there. For instance, people commonly stop in the Wal-Mart outside of Fernley, Nevada to purchase their goods for the week. De-commodifying is intended to rid the outside influence of capitalistic control. “But as Burning Man videos take over YouTube and documentarians’ attentions and Wal-Mart turns Burner-
focused selling displays, the question of who is influencing who remains” (Fathalla, 17). In order to have one week that is not commodified, participants need to *hyper-consume*, stocking up and buying supplies from chain stores all across America. Commodification and capital are not necessarily *invisible* on the playa, commerce is merely restructured and thought about differently at Burning Man.

**Radical Self-Expression**

This principle is defined by the BORG as “Radical self-expression arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content. It is offered as a gift to others. In this spirit, the giver should respect the rights and liberties of the recipient” (official Burning Man website).

The community puts heavy value on the unique contributions and participative style of the members, as long as personal expression respects the rights and liberties of others (Benton, Radzwill). This principle acts as a defining factor for how Burners relate to one another; promoting an atmosphere where one can say or do whatever they want without causing harm to others. However, this can be problematic because individuals are separate from their social context.

The specific aim of this principle is to drive *fear* out of the individual. It makes certain that all ideas and contributions of members are given the “psychological space” (Benton, Radzwill) to be expressed and to blossom. Through manifesting a space where radical self-expression is valued and expected, “Everyone who enters the event space agrees to temporarily suspend judgement about how others express themselves” (Benton, Radzwill). This could be a
model for a way to revolutionize the workplace in “default” society, as well as the educational system;

There is a dedication embedded within the Principles to divinely inspired play that helps individuals discover what they’re good at, what they like to do, and what makes them feel vibrant and engaged. If this is all higher education accomplished, it would be highly successful! (Benton, Radzwill)

“Radical self expression” creates a safe space for people to be creative, take risks, and do something that they might have never done before or never thought was possible. It also leads into the playa feeling like “home” for Burners, creating a safe space of belonging. According to Stuart Hall in *Resistance Through Ritual*, a common element of a subculture is “A sense of primary group belonging seen in the use of ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Hall, 11). Another common element according to Hall, is relatively unique values and norms that are specific to the subculture. This unique ideal of the Burning Man subculture feeds into a free expression that “default” society is not typically known to encourage. Expressing oneself freely means not having to subscribe to binaries across all categories: sex, gender, race, political affiliation, etcetera. In “default” society, one needs to pick a side through polarized categories in order to relate to others. Burning Man promotes the ability to not have to subscribe to any binary category in order to express oneself and feel at home, that’s the idea anyways. Burners subvert normalcy of the “default” world through their style of behavior.

“Self-expression” also brings with it all of the participant’s cultural context to the playa. One’s upbringing and societal influence in the “default” world is present in the way that they express themselves at Burning Man. Therefore, issues of the “default” world such as racism and
sexism, are also apparent in Black Rock City. However, these issues are not formally acknowledged because they are just a part of one’s *radical expression*.

**Communal Effort**

The principle of “communal effort” arises in order to bring the creative endeavors of individuals together; thus bringing “radical self-expression” to execution. Communal effort is arguably the most liberal aspect of the Burning Man community because it counteracts individualism. It is defined as “Our community values creative cooperation and collaboration. We strive to produce, promote and protect social networks, public spaces, works of art, and methods of communication that support such interaction” (official Burning Man website). This places an important value on working together, collaborating, and protecting “the commons” (Benton, Radzwill). “The Commons” refers to a new model of socio-economic production in which the creative energy of large numbers of people are coordinated, usually with the aid of the internet, into large, meaningful projects mostly without traditional hierarchical organization.\(^3\)

The community of Burning Man is *ideally* aware of the fact that the best achievements come when people with shared goals and values work together. The advantages of communal effort place the weight of survival, expression, and growth on individuals and smaller groups, rather than large institutions. This ideally gives more freedom to the individual and frees up their emotional energy to *create* and *innovate*. Hegemonic control exists when a combination of force from the repressive state apparatus and consent from the other classes allow the ruling class to

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3 Commons-based peer production is a term coined by Harvard Law School professor Yochai Benkler.
dominate. Burning Man is against hegemonic control in that "communal effort" aims for Burners to work together to create their own society.

There are over two thousand volunteers that work for the Burning Man organization. Many people volunteer their time to work for Burning Man, which doesn’t happen in as much of an abundance in other organizations in mainstream society. These volunteers are not asking for anything in return of their donated time (other than a free ticket, of course). Ideally, after attending Burning Man year after year, one begins to contribute more to the community in hopes of making it better for the next set of "virgins." 

Working together with those around you to help the majority of people is an ideal that is supportive to creating a society in which there is no hierarchy and all citizens are treated equally. “Newbies quickly learn that status and fun are not to be gained through familiar modes of consumption and spectatorship” (Davis, 6). Instead, participation is prized, even if it is something that may have caused one discomfort in the past. An important task that the community strives to work together to achieve is cleaning up after themselves.

**Leaving No Trace**

“Leave no trace” holds the most significance for the event because in order for the event to keep happening, there must not be a single piece of matter left on the playa. MOOP is the term used to describe litter on the playa; it stands for matter out of place, i.e. garbage. This is taken very seriously and it is typical for someone to get scolded by another Burner if they perform any sort of littering or “mooping.” Therefore, not littering has become a dominant

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4 “Virgins” is the term used by Burners to describe people who are attending Burning Man for their first time.
discourse at Burning Man, where Burners police each other, and *ideally* police themselves. In reality, there is a plethora of MOOP left on the playa after the event. The "Playa Restoration Team" is made up of mostly volunteers who work for at least a month after the event to clean up the 'party.' This physically applicable principle is the most highly held by Burners. The producers of the event define it as, "Our community respects the environment. We are committed to leaving no physical trace of our activities wherever we gather. We clean up after ourselves and endeavor, whenever possible, to leave such places in a better state than when we found them" (official Burning Man website).

In the "default" world, the traditional capitalistic system builds more and more, consuming natural space with commodified places. In contrast to that, every structure, art installation, and theme camp at Burning Man is either *burned* or taken down completely. It is opposite to the exuberant nature of commercialization where big buildings are constructed in order to show off that business' wealth. In one way, building everything just to tear it down represents the notion that nothing lasts forever and everything is temporary; a quintessential ideal when it comes to de-commodifying our lives.

On the contrary, burning down a large amount of resources is also a kind of bourgeois ideal. Participants have access to so many resources that they are able to *burn* them. People who live in absolute poverty would presumably think of burning huge installations and buildings as wasteful and upsetting. It is an ideal of the upper class that anything can be torn down because they think, 'we have everything.' It is decommodifying to burn structures, but it is also *wasting*.

The organizing principles of Burning man have had positive ramifications world wide. As the people from the Burning Mind Project put it,
The events and the principles through which people have found others who share their values has resulted in a self-organized network with global ramifications, and regional organizations that support and extend the spirit of the community. This is precisely the kind of grass-roots explosion that would yield lasting institutional transformation. (Benton, Radzwill)

Burning Man has a thirty-year history that has unified people across the world to gather in one place in the pursuit of artistic and experimental progress. This has created a network online for people to discuss ideas, plans, concepts, and anything else revolutionary with like-minded individuals. It is filled with people from different age groups and backgrounds that come together to share expression, experience, and learning.

Though fleeting, the Burning Man event provides a space for experimentation, transgression, and transformation (Benton, Radzwill). The ability to evolve is not hegemonic because it can bring us out of the repressive state apparatus and the ideologies associated with hegemonic control. However, Burning Man is not necessarily about moving beyond capitalism or the police. In fact, it brings us ever more under the surveillance of police, and ever more embedded in capitalist relations.

All of the “ten principles” are ideologically supportive of an alternative lifestyle. They represent the ideals of Burners and the way that they want to live their lives, but they also have negative sides to them. They are far removed from the material reality of existence. The foundational principles mentioned so far are just mere representations of Burning Man ideals. The reality of it is harder to make sense of given that every person has a different experience on the playa because of their subjectivity. The realities of Burning Man can be seen in the organization behind the event. They prove to be purely hegemonic once thoroughly examined. Katherine Chen points out that it is the organization that can directly affect the community;
Organizational conditions can impact members’ desire to contribute. In particular, too little or too much organizing can undermine members’ involvement. Members may overextend themselves to compensate for underorganized conditions, which lack the structure and coordination to retain and use resources effectively. On the other hand, members may become constrained and alienated by overorganizing’s excessive structure and coordination. Organizations thus face a delicate balance: develop sufficient structure and coordination to guide, but not overwhelm, members’ efforts. (Chen, 86)

Hegemony & The Ticketing System

The public image of Burning Man is perceived as a radical and alternative event, however this does not reflect the reality of what takes place within it and within the BORG. Burning Man is popularly viewed as a location where participants are able to break free from hegemonic control of the ruling class in mainstream society. The ruling class is the “repressive state apparatus and ideological state apparatus” (Althusser, 296), they are the one percent. The organizers of Burning Man make up about one percent or less of the Burning Man subculture, yet they are the ones who make all of the decisions on how the event will go. Burning Man produces its own ideology and Burners recognize it and are hailed by the idea of “home,” of free expression, and radical inclusion. Therefore, Burning Man has slightly different cultural common sense, but it is still embedded in a power relation that is hegemonic.

One must have a ticket to get into the Burning Man event. In 2013, the average cost of a Burning Man ticket was three hundred and eighty dollars. This can automatically exclude people who are not middle class or above. Not to mention at least a week of time that would need to be taken off of work for the participants. Along with the price of ticket: there are travel expenses, camping supplies, food, and anything else that one would need to survive in the desert for a week. On average, about one thousand dollars is spent to get the Burning Man experience.
Burning Man did start out ticketless, but as the movement grew and more people found out about it, they started to charge an entry fee. This paper is not trying to argue that Burning Man should be free. In order for any organization and/or movement to sustain itself, it needs to have a structure and continue to make money in order for it to keep on happening. The cost of permits to use the federal land is high and much of the money from ticket sales goes towards that. Nevertheless, the original Burning Man organizers are all millionaires now; they have profited a lot off of the event.

Along with the steep cost ruling people out, the fact that one must have access to a computer leaves out other social classes as well. Up until 2011, the way to get a ticket was to log on to the server and it was on a first-come first-serve basis. In January of 2011, when the tickets went on sale, servers crashed on computers all over the world and people were having to wait ‘in-line’ for up to eighteen hours. This was the monumental first year that Burning Man sold out. This shows that it was gaining popularity at this point, becoming increasingly more a part of the ‘mainstream.’

The Federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) dictates how many tickets are issued to Burning Man each year because of environmental degradation concerns. The BLM increased the allowed occupancy to sixty-thousand for 2012 and the BORG attempted to remain true to their values of “radical inclusion.” They developed a strategy for how to handle the new bombardment of demand for a ticket. Their solution within the limited supply and overwhelming demand was a lottery system; a “random” selection and distribution of tickets.

The lottery system caused a great deal of upset within the Burner community. It was random, so therefore there were individuals who make large contributions to the party that were
not selected in the lottery. The BORG was blamed heavily and criticized immensely across the blogosphere,

In a true self reliant moment, the community stepped forward after BMORG failed us and made the best fucking lemonade ever and offered tons of constructive solutions. BMORG listen to that? No. The people at the helm are responsible for running this off the rails and still the lemmings come to support BMORG for trying. This isn’t Woodstock. There is no angelic Lang nor Kornfeld guiding us with grace through the innocence. This is 2012. Organizing an event this size in 2012 is about as hard as baking bread was in 1200. If it’s difficult, it’s because you have the wrong people. If it’s really difficult it’s because you have the TRAGICALLY wrong people running the show. This shit actually is EASY. (Burners.Me blogger)

People were outraged that so many tickets went to “virgins” (people who’ve never been to Burning Man) and veteran Burners were left out. They wanted it to be fixed right away and were extremely vocal about this concern. The people of the community tried to be heard by the ruling class, also known as the BORG. In short, Burners were not shy about their dislikes of the lottery system.

STEP (secure ticket exchange program) was created a couple months after the lottery debacle with the intention of getting more tickets to people who needed them and to counter-act the scalpers. STEP was a way for the people who bought a ticket and changed their minds to sell it back to the BORG, while losing the handling fee money in the process. Then people who didn’t get a ticket can register for STEP and buy a ticket at face value. This was all the while tickets were going at upwards of one thousand dollars on sites like “Stub-hub” and “Craigslist.”

It was more appealing for scalpers (who were non-Burners) to sell their tickets at higher rates. Also, the STEP program sold out in about seventeen minutes. One needed to register for STEP at exactly noon pacific time and by 12:17 p.m. that day, the registration was closed. Ergo,
demand was much higher than supply for the first seven months of 2012.\footnote{5} STEP was created to counter-act the unfairness of the lottery system.\footnote{6}

What is BORG’s plan for the next year after such harsh criticism? They did ask participants of the community for suggestions on the website. Nevertheless, in January of 2013, the Burning Man organization announced “Burner Profiles.” According to the organization, the Burner Profiles are:

A system to help facilitate the flow of information we regularly collect from Burning Man participants for ticket sales, theme camp and art installation registration, mutant vehicle applications, What Where When submissions, and other things that people do and create for Black Rock City. Initially, the Burner Profile will be used as part of the pre-registration process for ticket sales to Burning Man 2013. (official Burning Man website)

In other words, according to the well-published blog-critic known as “Burnersxxx,” the BORG is saying that “As you gift things to our party at your own expense, we want to remind you that you’re in our service and creating for our benefit, and we want to keep our eyes on you as much as we can” (Burnersxxx). The majority of Burners need to engage in a lot of bureaucracy nowadays.

In what seemed to most like a power trip of “the world’s biggest door bitch” (Burnersxxx), the profiling system in 2013 did turn out much better than the previous years lottery system as far as ticket frustrations go. One had to pre-register with his or her personal information in the beginning of January and then on February 13th, the tickets went on

\footnote{5} Ironically, about two weeks before the event, tickets started to be given away on Craigslist and other such sites. However, there is so much preparation needed for living in the desert that it was hard for many people to decide at the last moment to go.

\footnote{6} I personally didn’t get my response from STEP until about a month before the event at which time I had already been working extremely hard all summer to get a volunteer ticket with the project I was working on.
sale. Similar to the experience in 2011, people were waiting online for up to eighteen hours. Servers crashed all over, people got frustrated, and lost more than half a day of work; it came out more ‘fair’ than the previous year, but at what expense?

There is much conspiracy theory out there in light of the profile system. The BORG, and only the BORG, have the right to use any or all of the personal information in the future. Within the “privacy policy” of the profiling system,

We use the personal information that we receive to operate the website, produce the Burning Man event, and for Burning Man-related projects. Your personal information may be stored on our system and shared among Burning Man affiliates, including but no limited to the Burning Man Project, Black Rock City, LLC, and Black Rocks Arts Foundation. (official Burning Man website)

The definition of who is an “affiliate” or “what is a related project” of Burning Man is unclear and unlimited. The fact that personal data is gathered and stored about a Burner in an ambiguous “location” is odd, even for Burning Man, and it makes sense to cause uneasiness within the community. A valid concern is that keeping a data-set like this will create an opportunity for law enforcement or government subpoena. Citing similar sites like Facebook or Google, it is very possible and possibly inevitable.

Here’s the bottom line; there is so much bureaucratic malarkey to go through in order to just get the piece of paper allowing you to get into the event, which seems so insignificant compared to the ‘experience.’ It is extremely contradictory to the very first principle of Burning Man, “radical inclusion.” There are, “no prerequisites to participate in the community[?]” There is a prerequisite, a ticket; which requires a gigantic amount of its own prerequisites. The BORG has constructed an event that is riddled with ironic contradictions.
The BORG never asked the community if we should have tickets, instead they just asked, *how* it should be. It is the *illusion* of choice that is within our society everywhere, even at a clothing-optional event in the middle of the desert. This illusion is craftily put together by the people behind the scenes, the *BORG*.

**The BORG**

In the earliest years of the event, Burning Man was so small and informal that it did not require a formal organization, nor did it have a formal name. The event's first gathering in 1986 had about twenty participants, feeling like a "family barbeque or picnic" (Chen, 27). It was drawing attention from the media increasingly over the years, growing to over three hundred attendees by 1989. "By 1992, organizers were publicizing the event as the Black Rock Arts Festival, elevating the gathering's legitimacy beyond its bonfire origins. The event's population broke the one-thousand mark by 1993" (Chen, 29).

A subculture commonly has "a hierarchy of social patterns that clarify the criteria for prestige and leadership" (Hall, 11). Larry Harvey and other organizers created the *Black Rock City Limited Liability Company*, also known as the Burning Man organization, or *BORG* in 1997. It does make sense for this to have happened. If a movement is gaining more followers, then some kind of organizing principles must be established in order to control the influx of members. "In short," says Chen, "members sought conditions that enabled creative chaos without debilitating chaos and totalitarianism" (Chen, 6). This is in response to the two extremes that continue to jeopardize feelings of the *Burning Man* event: not providing enough structure for the event and strangling the creativity and vitality of the event with too much structure. The *BORG*
requires an increasing amount of law enforcement presence at Burning Man as the event is growing.

**Law Enforcement**

Another hegemonic aspect of Burning Man is the presence of law enforcement in Black Rock City. This perpetuates the power dynamics of policing citizens, maintaining the authority of officials who were not elected by the public. Every year, the ratio of law enforcement officers to Burners on the playa gets higher. There were some reports that claim that between 2011 and 2012, the number of cops in Black Rock City doubled or tripled. There are at least six different agencies that show their presence at the event: the Federal Bureau of Land Management Rangers, the Pershing County Sheriff’s Office, Washoe County Sheriff’s Office, Nevada State Department of Investigations, Nevada State Health Division, and the Nevada Highway Patrol.

Undercover officers are notoriously abundant on the playa. One could get fined, impact their criminal record, or even go to jail if they are caught with illegal paraphernalia in Black Rock City. Hearsay stories of people being busted by undercover cops is very common at Burning Man. For instance, Burner Randy\(^7\) was sitting in his camp one night when a young 18 year old looking girl came up to him, asking if he had any “rolls.”\(^8\) After some more conversational exchange, Randy went into his trailer to get her something and when he came back out, two other men were standing beside the young girl. Randy was fined about five thousand dollars that night. Not only were they undercover cops, but they were *using* a young girl in order to form an arrest.

\(^7\) Name changed for privacy

\(^8\) ‘Rolls’ is slang for any type of MDMA or MDA substance such as ecstasy.
I am in no way arguing in favor of drug use or distribution. It is clearly illegal for Randy to have offered the drugs to the girl. But, he wasn’t offering them to begin with, he most likely had them for personal use or for the use of his friends, and he did not intend to sell them, just give them away. Furthermore, it seems unethical for the law enforcement to have used this girl in such a way. This example of militaristic powers is perpetuating the fact of hegemonic authority that exists on the playa just as much as in “default society.” The presence of law enforcement at Burning Man shows that the event is increasingly co-opted by the mainstream. The event originally started to get away from the police and now the BORG invites them into the event so that they can get the permit for it to happen. In 1997, the BORG instituted another group to give more structure to the event, called DPW.

**Department of Public Works (DPW)**

As previously mentioned in this paper, the growth of the Burning Man culture has produced its own counter-cultures within it. One mini-culture, created by the organization, is DPW. DPW stands for Department of Public Works; they are “Heroic, determined, hardworking, responsible, creative, interesting, dedicated, unusual, individuals working together for extended periods, in dangerous and hostile conditions, towards a common goal” (official Burning Man website).

This is the official representation of how the BORG wants the public to view the DPW. But, who are they really? They are one of the biggest factors by which hegemonic bureaucracy is apparent within Burning Man. Other than the actual law enforcement that exists on the playa, the DPW is the representation of the ruling class of Burning Man society, and the Burners are the
rest of society that they rule over.

DPW is a group of non-elected individuals who plan, survey, build, and take down the basic infrastructure of Black Rock City. They are on-site a couple months before and after the event, which is what most likely feeds into their elitist (perhaps justified) attitude and sense of entitlement. Basically, they work extremely hard for long hours for days on end in an exceptionally hostile environment just so everyone else can enjoy the ‘party.’

The way that DPW is portrayed by other members of the community is made apparent within the discourse on the user-generated blogs. For example,

Anyone at Burning Man who feels they are entitled should go home (and by home I mean their actual home – not Black Rock City). Many DPW (definitely not all, but definitely many) are at Burning Man for a free ride for 2 months, they live rent free in the desert provided with 3 delicious meals a day, and many are proud they avoid ‘Burning Man’ during the actual burn week. Yes there is hard work involved, but there is hard work involved for hundreds of others setting up sound camps, theme camps, building the temple, creating mind-blowing artwork and countless other projects too numerous to mention. (Buners.me blogger, Andy Brown)

Hearsay stories of unpleasant confrontations with DPW are abundant within the Burning Man community. For example, I experienced DPWs well-known sense of entitlement first-hand as I stayed on playa in 2012 an extra week to be part of the volunteer crew that takes down and cleans up “Center Camp.” Center Camp is the city centre so to speak of Black Rock City, where Burners purchase their ice and/or coffee. It is the biggest camp at Burning Man, as well as the most lucrative for the organization.

One night, DPW allowed volunteers to have access to their ‘precious’ showers. At this shower spot, one DPW member called me and other volunteers out as being “tourists” and “leeches,” and threatened that our tent would be bull-dozed the very next day if we didn’t leave.
We were volunteers, making an actual impact on cleaning up the playa, which is one of the most important aspects to the post-burn weeks and the “leave no trace” principle. However, as soon as the event is over, members of DPW see everyone other than themselves as “tourists.” There is an obvious hierarchy existing within all of the volunteers and workers, and this is what contributes to DPWs “sense of entitlement.” The organizers of the BORG are the ruling class and DPW are the ones that implement the will of the ruling class. The real conditions of existence are not made apparent to the majority of Burners that do not see ‘behind the scenes.’ The people of the community otherwise go on seeing only the mere representations of life on the playa, the public image that the BORG produces.

DPW is a bureaucracy, they are not voted in by the majority of participants, they are chosen by the BORG. They implement the rules and laws that must be followed, the rules participants consent to when they buy a ticket. DPW workers are going against class interest by aligning themselves with the ruling class. The organizers are the ones making the money while most members of DPW are volunteers. DPW represents the BORG on the playa and anger gets misdirected towards them because they are the ones physically present exposing contradictions of the organization. DPW has round the clock access to nice showers and an air-conditioned, Wi-Fi accessible cafeteria in which they commonly use disposable cutlery. This is completely in line with all that one thinks of as part of “default society.” The fact that this group of ‘elitists’ live in this way and are ‘superior’ to the rest that are mostly not living in luxury on the playa, is proof that there exists a Hierarchy within the members of the Burning Man organization.

A subculture clearly can also reproduce elements of the dominant culture. Even aspects of alternative subcultures like Burning Man are not just one dimensional. In Resistance Through
Ritual. Stuart Hall explains that the “relationships of meaning” within a subculture can be limiting because there is a reproduction of the “social existence” that exists from the outside world (Hall, 10). A subculture and the dominant culture that they separate themselves from are both “groups which exist within the same society and share some of the same material and historical conditions no doubt also understand, and to a certain extent share each others’ ‘culture’” (Hall, 11).

As a subculture can produce liberal features, those features still reflect elements of the dominant culture because they both come from the same social and cultural context of their society. Therefore, there are aspects of the Burning Man event that, when thoroughly examined, are in some ways supportive of an alternative outlook, but in other ways are reinforcing a mainstream attitude that is very similar to that of the hegemonic “default world.” Along with commodification, leave no trace, and radical self expression, the question of diversity and the reproduction of gender roles on the playa are two other elements that exude this contradiction.

Diversity?

Diversity of people in Black Rock City is partly a liberatory aspect of Burning Man. This is from the Burners.Me blog by the author known under the alias of *Whatsblem the Pro*:

Yes, there’s a significant political and cultural gradient at Burning Man. Contrary to popular belief, Black Rock City isn’t some kind of neo-Woodstock populated exclusively by contempo-hippies getting groovy and passing their bongs and dreadlocking tips around. Black Rock may be a place for a certain oddly-inclined swathe of humanity, but the swathe Burners cut is quite broad, and thus BRC’s culture has some very real diversity to it in spite of the many qualities that Burners share. (Whatsblem the Pro)
The people that make up Black Rock City are very diverse, including: hippies, ravers, punk-rockers, engineering geeks, anarchists, red necks, pranksters, church-goers, recovering addicts/twelve-steppers, polyamorists, radical femininsts, hedonists, geniuses, blue and white-collar workers, and even some wealthy Republicans. No matter who you are, you can find your place on the playa with other like-minded people.

According to the Black Rock City Census, all ages from babies to the elderly attend the event. More than half of the participants who take the survey hold at least a Bachelors degree, and gender and sex are almost split down the middle. Income is split pretty evenly in the range of ten thousand to one hundred thousand dollars a year. Residents of places all over the world attend the event.

Exuding diversity of backgrounds promotes an atmosphere in which ideas and opinions can come from all sides in order to aid in the creative process. The diversity of peoples’ backgrounds at Burning Man makes it progressive in that sense. But is there a diversity of race? Burning Man is by no means exclusively white, however seeing a person of color in Black Rock City is a rare occurrence. According to the 2011 Black Rock Census only 13% of event attendees consider themselves to be a person of color – noticeably lower than the national population of 28% (official Burning Man website). This is part of the problem of the “radical inclusion” principle; it does not always follow through with its promise.

According to popular Burner blogger, Caveat Magister, the reason for a population that has almost no minorities is that Burning Man is what he refers to as “a white people thing” (Magister). After conducting first-hand research and interviews on the playa, Caveat

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9 The census is a survey conducted annually at Burning Man in which participants fill in their background information, it is not mandatory; only those who choose to participate do it.
came up with four main reasons. The first reason is that Burning Man “requires a sense of security that is not common in American minority communities” (Magister). Historically speaking, white people in America have an assumption that they can go anywhere and be reasonably safe because of white privilege and the hierarchies of race. For people who do not assume that everything is going to be fine, the idea of going in to the middle of the desert where people are playing with fire, can cause concern. The very name of “Burning Man” comes with it very negative connotations of the past for African American individuals because of the amount of lynching that happened to them in the early nineteen hundreds.¹⁰ Minorities tend to be concerned with security whereas the environment of Burning Man is a place where one is ideally not ‘worried’ about anything.

The second reason is that “The sexual mores of minority cultures tend to be significantly more conservative than those of Burners” (Magister). Hispanic, Asian, and African American communities in America tend to be closely tied to churches, and those churches tend to be more conservative. Even among minority non-believers and liberals of faith, sexual values are habitually more buttoned down. Likewise, the nudity at Burning Man can come up as an issue as well as the sexual provocation present at Burning Man. Cavaet recounts a conversation with a African American male Burner friend of his:

Historically, it has been wise for minorities to avoid any sexually charged situations involving white men and women. ‘It’s something we watch out for that you don’t so much,’ I was told. A black male friend of mine referred to it as ‘The Emmett Till effect,’ after the black man who was abducted and lynched in 1955 – and whose killers were acquitted. That history’s hard to shake. ‘Black men, in particular, are not going to feel comfortable in a sexually charged, public environment with flirtly white women and

¹⁰ Lynching refers to any type of public punishment, including being ‘burned at the stake,’ a common punishment for African Americans during the turn of the century in the United States, after slavery became illegal.
overhyped, anarchic white guys,' he told me. 'If somebody's white girlfriend starts being affectionate with me in public, I'm immediately on my guard and watching him to see if he took offense, and checking the eyes of every white male around to see if he got pissed. They may be super liberal at Burning Man, but there are racist liberals too, they just hide it better.' (Magister)

The third reason for what Cavaet Magister calls the "colorless" population is that it would be difficult to get acceptance from one's family and community mainly because of the reasons stated above. This eventually leads to what Magister calls a "self-selection phenomenon;" minorities did not go to Burning Man at the inception and since then they consequentially continue to not go. Support from friends and family is hard to come by for minority Burners.

The fourth reason is simply, "a different history with counter-culture movements" (Magister). In the sixties, "Blacks did civil rights and whites did flower-power" (Magister). Burning Man is seen by minorities as more of a "flower power" thing. Therefore, Burning Man seems more like 'freedom' to white people than it does to minorities. This is clearly an overgeneralization, but it does have some truth embedded in it. Cavaet continues, quoting another minority Burner,

You can see it in the slogans. A civil rights slogan of the 60s: 'I am a Man.' The flower power slogan of the 60s: 'Let your freak flag fly!' It's obvious how Burning Man resembles the second one; it's not clear to me how it descends from the first. Another issue: without the kind of social safety net many whites take for granted ... the legacy of counter-culture sex, drugs, and rock n' roll was far more devastating to minority communities. 'You can romanticize getting wild and getting high and not having any limits, but we saw all the people like us who had this kind of lifestyle destroyed in the 70s. They died or they burned out or they were targeted by the police and the FBI.' (Magister)

As Burning Man prizes diversity in so many ways via the "radical inclusion" principle, it is worth trying to understand the ways in which this message fails to come across to everyone.
According to the official Burning Man website, there is a slight influx every year of minorities in Black Rock City. Hopefully, this will continue to grow. The diversity of people’s backgrounds on the playa shows the event to be progressive, but the lack of diversity of race shows the event to share the same values as “default society.” Along with the question of race, comes the question of gender at Burning Man.

**Gender and Sex Performativity**

Being able to freely express oneself includes expressing one’s gender in any way that he or she wants. At Burning Man, there is plenty of room for sexualities other than heterosexual. The best example of this is the multitude of theme camps that are queer oriented, breaking free from gender stereotypes. However, as they are attempting to transgress beyond stereotypes, they are also falling into the realm of what is available to us within heteronormative behavior.

Heteronormativity is the societal standard that lays out how people fall into distinct and complementary gender categories, male and female, with ‘natural’ roles in life. Queer theorist, Michael Warner coined the term in his essay, *Public and Counterpublics* and describes it as a “culture which conforms to heterosexual standards as the norm” (Warner, 3).

The concept of heteronormativity is that heterosexuality is implied to be the ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ sexual orientation, and that sexual and marital relations are most fitting between a man and a woman. This is helpful in seeing what Burners are ideologically trying to break away from the “default world.” In order for a safe and ‘free’ space to be created, an individual must not feel judged by those around them.
Critics of heteronormativity, such as those offered by Cathy Cohen and Lauren Berlant in *Interrupting Heteronormativity: Toward a Queer Curriculum Theory*, view the rules of heteronormative behavior as oppressive to unorthodox forms of gender and sexuality such as trans-genders, homosexuals, lesbians, bisexuals, and even racial minorities. Subsequently, since heterosexuality is assumed to be the norm, others face discrimination in marriage, employment, and tax codes. Furthermore, individuals who are not heterosexual may be victims of prejudice and subject to laws that aim to suppress their alternate sexuality. These critiques aid in showing how the space of Burning Man ideologically allows for this so-called “deviant” behavior.

I draw on queer theorist Judith Butler and her critiques of heteronormativity to argue that there are heteronormative aspects at Burning Man in reality. Butler argues that sexuality is thought of only within the limits of already constructed social contexts. We are all constantly “performing” according to Judith Butler, and it is through this lens that this paper analyzes *gender blending* on the playa as transgressive in one way but also falling into the realm of what is available to us within heteronormativity.

One example of a theme camp that promotes free gender expression at Burning Man is “Gender Blenders.” ¹¹ They were the first camp at Burning Man that was designed to be a safe home for trans, gender queer, gender variant, and all other non-traditional gender roles. In order to see their intention, I read their official website, [www.genderblenders.org](http://www.genderblenders.org), as well as the Burning Man guidebooks, which lists events from the camp. The Gender Blenders mission statement:

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¹¹ There are over twenty more camps that are queer oriented at Burning Man with a similar intention as Gender Blenders. Some are directed more specifically towards transgendered, lesbians, bisexuals, or polymorists. Camp Gender Blender is the largest one and is therefore used as the focus to study queer activity at Burning Man.
Intended to be a safe space for initiating dialogue about gender with people who are new to questioning or experimenting with gender. Gender Blender is built by a collective of people dedicated to examining and re-defining how gender impacts our lives and then sharing that through hosting educational workshops, play parties, and other awesome events at Burning Man and beyond. We welcome all genders always. (Gender Blenders official website)

Camps, such as Gender Blenders, are constructed by attendees of Burning Man to allow safe places for groups that are stigmatized or oppressed in the “default world.” There are new cultural practices that are formed in this camp as well as many others that set up the space of Burning Man. Having representations of ‘gay’ identities on the playa is supporting liberal values. However, it is imperative to recognize that heterosexual norms reappear within gay identities. Judith Butler explains, “to affirm that gay and lesbian identities are not only structured in part by dominant heterosexual frames, but that they are not for that reason determined by them” (Gender Trouble, 232). Heterosexual framework is not the only decisive factor in the identification of gays and lesbians.

In order to be categorized as queer, one produces commentaries on naturalized gender roles. Therefore, they are resignifying those exact heterosexual structures that are known to be oppressive to the queer community. As Judith Butler puts it in her book Gender Trouble, “The parodic replication and resignification of heterosexual constructs within non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called original, but it shows that heterosexuality only constitutes itself as the original through a convincing act of repetition” (Gender Trouble, 232). The more that “act” is appropriated, the more the heterosexual claim to authenticity is shown as imaginary.
It is as though the camps are putting themselves into an identity category that is turning against the sexuality that the category tries to describe by labeling themselves as gay, queer, etcetera. It is seeking to control the very eroticism that it claims to describe and authorize. This is what Butler is arguing in *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* when she says, “Identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (“Gender Insubordination,” 11). Categorizing promotes the essentialism that you just fit into one box, enforcing the socially constructed stereotypes making it a high possibility to be treated differently and unequally.

However, positive outcomes such as civil rights may not be as possible without labeling or identifying their group. Therefore, it is both a push in the right direction and also a set-back to identify camps as *queer*. Identifying something or someone as part of a category is a way to either libertine or objectify oneself. Another aspect that has both positives and negatives within gender performativity are the events that such queer camps put on at the Burning Man event.

Camp “Gender Blenders” has an event called “Reproducing Drag” in which Burners can come and dress up in drag and share creative ideas with other Burners who like to cross-dress. This party provides a free space of gender expression. In one way, this is enabling of free self-expression and supportive of liberatory ideals. It creates a safe space for people to perform any gender or sex that they want, and feel comfortable about doing so because others are doing it as well.
However, this "performance" is only within the social context that we already have.

According to queer theorist Judith Butler in *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* with regards to performance of sex,

If a regime of sexuality mandates a compulsory performance of sex, then it may be only through that performance that the binary system of gender and the binary system of sex come to have intelligibility at all. It may be that the very categories of sex, of sexual identity, of gender are produced or maintained in the *effects* of this compulsory performance... To engage gender itself as an inevitable fabrication, to fabricate gender in terms which reveal every claim to the origin, the inner, the true, and the real as nothing other than the effect of *drag*, whose subversive possibilities ought to be played and replayed to make the 'sex' of gender into a site of insistent political play. Perhaps this will be a matter of working sexuality *against* identity, even against gender, and of letting that which cannot fully appear in any performance persist in it's disruptive promise. ("Gender Insubordination," 236)

Butler is implying that if a system of sexuality requires a demanded performance of sex,

then it is only through that performance of the *binary* (having only male or female categories) system of gender and the binary system of sex has come to be understood or shown at all. Men dressing up as women is merely just a *copy* of heteronormative behavior in regards to femininity. A man who puts on a suit to go into his office is performing drag just as much as a man who puts on a mini skirt and high heels to get on stage. We are all constantly "performing" in this sense, just "performing" two different sides of the binary opposition; masculinity and femininity.

The categories which we use to classify bodies are all socially and culturally constructed.

This is true even at Burning Man, where one enters the event with their socially and culturally constructed subjectivity. Free gender expression is recognized as part of the discourse that is produced within Burner’s stories.

Promoting free gender expression on the playa allows what we cannot actually see in an identity performance to remain as part of the promise of compulsory heterosexuality. *Imitation*
of gender carries the idea of being a copy of the original, while the queering of compulsory
heterosexuality destabilizes the very institution. Gender bending on the playa is transgressive in
one way, but it is also just falling into the realm of what is available to us within heteronormative
("default") society’s values.

Another aspect that contradicts itself like queer camps and events, is a place called the
“Orgy Dome” at the Burning Man event. The “Orgy Dome” is a well-heard about spot on the
playa, but not many Burners actually go inside and participate. It is shaped like a dome and it is
about the size of half a football field, filled with comfortable couches, cushions, and mattresses.

In order to find it, one looks at the map, goes to the location, and must first go through the
reception area. This is the description of the place from the official Burning Man guidebook;

24 hour air conditioned Orgy Dome where all couples and moresomes can escape the
dust and heat of playa. We are your place for love away from your camp mates to get it
on with your playa friends. Can’t find a place to safe-sex it up on playa? Come to ‘And
Then There’s Only Love!’ We have a fully equipped, environmentally sealed space for
lovers to play day or night! With massage table, mattresses, sheets, supplies, and
surprises you can share. ***Open to couples and moresomes of all genders and
preferences. (official Guidebook)

There are condoms, bottles of lubricant, sex toys, and several signs that present the
guidelines of the space in the entrance to the “Orgy Dome.” The main rules are that anyone who
enters must be with at least one other person, nobody can go in alone, and no “spectators”
allowed. The average person’s imagination would assumedly envision a room with beautiful
naked people all touching and servicing each other, and down tempo electronic music playing in
the background. In reality, the room is filled with all couples, all straight couples, and they are
all paired off, not really interacting with each other. This ‘reality’ is from my own first hand
experience being inside of the Orgy Dome. I was with my girlfriend at the time and we were the
only homosexual couple in there. This is the dominant pattern that I observed and there are clearly exceptions to these stated observations.

While the space of the Orgy Dome exudes sexual freedom, it is also reproduces norms of heterosexual behavior. The people that are in there look very comfortable and pleased that they have the ability to watch other people getting pleased, heightening their sensual experience. For many people, this is a ‘fantasy’ come true; having actual sex with a partner while in the middle of other people having sex, seeing them and hearing them. However, if a gay couple were to go in there, they may not feel as comfortable as the other couples.

Within that small dome space is a representation of couples in “default” society, the majority being heterosexual, and fitting in only if you are straight as well. The heteronormative compulsion is therefore reproduced in the “Orgy Dome,” while at the same time it breaks free of social hegemonic norms because of the free and safe sexual space that is created. It is another element of Burning Man, among many that is embedded with contradictions.

Conclusion

As questioned earlier, Burning Man started as a fight for anti-establishment and a counter to dominant mainstream culture. What happens when what Burners believe in becomes a part of the establishment? Clearly, contradictions are what happens and they have been highlighted in this paper. The event of Burning Man is a week-long festival dedicated to art, radical expression, freedom, and fire. Both the culture of Burning Man and the actual event are partially liberal and supportive of an alternative outlook through its ideologies. These ideological aspects are the gifting economy, radical self-expression, communal effort, volunteering, and concern for leaving
a place better than when you arrive. However, these elements also have hegemonic components to them. As with any subculture that differentiates itself from the mainstream, there exists elements that are liberatory but at the same time reflect hegemony. The other hegemonic and contradictory aspects of Burning Man are the ticketing system, the official organization, DPW, the presence of law enforcement at the event, the question of diversity on the playa, and gender expression.

Following the analysis in this paper, it is made clear that the stated goals and organizational structure of Burning Man are embedded with contradictions. It is important to see these contradictions because many people feel a sense of freedom and liberation but do not know what is behind this ‘illusion.’ Social contradictions can be found in many different groups and subcultures and it is pertinent for readers to be aware of this. We need to figure out ways to organize certain cultural movements that are revolutionary because realistically there still needs to be an organization behind it. However, this organization does not necessarily need to be such a bureaucratic one like that of Burning Man.

The important contradictions examined in this paper that are embedded in Burning Man only skim the surface of studies that can be done surrounding the whole spectrum of Burning Man. There are other kinds of scholarship left to be covered that can be discussed in the future. For instance, we can look at the consequences of having only a man effigy at the event and how that promotes masculine superiority to further the analysis of gender expression.

There is a recent development over the last few years of what Burners call “plug and play camps.” People pay other people to set up their camp, make them food, make their costumes, and they simply show up in a luxurious RV. These camps completely take away from “radical
self-reliance” and promote capitalism explicitly. One can more thoroughly examine commodification verses decommodification on the playa by looking at these ‘tourists’ in Black Rock City that come and pay heaps of money just to watch all the ‘crazy hippies.’ It is interesting to note that I have concerns with DPW calling me a “tourist,” when I am calling other people tourists as well. These layers of belonging are an intriguing point to study on further in the future.

Another aspect of study about Burning Man to be done at a later date is the environmental impact. The majority of people ride around on bicycles in the city and that would be very beneficial to the environment if more societies could live that way. However, the act of burning so many resources is extremely harmful for the environment, yet it continues to happen year after year for ritualistic purposes. Also, thousands of people driving to the event itself, loaded with cargo and consequentially worse gas mileage, is harmful to the environment as well. This is a huge contradiction embedded in Burning Man that could be expanded upon to further my studies of Burning Man being a living social contradiction.

Burning Man strives for being different from “default” society. However, the contradictions that have been pointed out prove many aspects of this ‘alternative’ subculture to be just as hegemonic as the mainstream “default” world. The amount of change that has occurred since the event’s small gathering on the beach is astronomical. It is very likely that as Burning Man becomes more popular and there is an increase of media attention; there will be more contradictions taking the event and culture farther and farther away from it’s foundational principles. The hope lies in the many smaller Burner events around the world whose focus is on the importance of community. More research can be done on these events as well. Since each of
them have less attendees, price of admission is affordable if not free. This allows for full
"radical inclusion" into the community and less formal bureaucratic organizing is required. If
these small groups continue to thrive and stay below the radar, the dream of a pure radically
alternative and non-hegemonic society filled with freedom, art, and love may very well be
possible. However, the ideologies of the culture will most likely never directly reflect the reality
because everyone *experiences* Burning Man in a different way. Burning Man, the event, is a
personal experience. The rest is just a hegemonic means to a somewhat liberal end.
Works Cited


