
**At Home in the Big Empty:
Burning Man and the Playa Sublime***

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Abstract

Burning Man is an artistic community event that has been dis/assembled in Nevada's Black Rock Desert every summer since 1990. The location of this event in this desert has had a shaping impact on Burning Man as a gathering, a city, an organization, and a transnational cultural movement. A unique facet of what is known as Black Rock City is not simply that it is dis/assembled in a desert region, but that it recurs on a playa, the *ne plus ultra* of deserts. The Black Rock playa has obtained a special significance for participants (i.e. burners), for whom this liminal space is recognized, paradoxically, as 'home'. This uniquely sublime no-place contextualizes a familial encounter experience shaping on-playa identity over three decades of event-going. Informed by Emily Brady's study of paradox in natural sublimity, the writings of poet-geographer of the 'Big Empty' William L. Fox, and the author's experience of Black Rock City in seven cycles from 2003, three qualities of *playaspace* (otherworldly, ephemeral, limitless) are addressed, each implicated in its unique potential for a transformational community that has fashioned a homeland on the frontiers of the sublime.

Keywords

Sublimity, desert, playa, space, art, fire, dust, Burning Man, festival

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Playaspace

Pushing beyond exhaustion, I am enveloped by a cloud of white dust loosened from the flat expanse beneath my pedals. Visibility is severely reduced. My head is wrapped in goggles and bandana—the mask *de rigueur* in this blasted carnival on the edge of the known. Hitched on opposite sides of my utility belt are items of equal weight, albeit of disparate utility: an aluminum corkwood water bottle and a pink toy vacuum cleaner. Suddenly, through the thick dusty curtain of this reverie there appears another rider, likewise begoggled, and blanketed in fine alkaline particulates. Encountering another self, we share an unspoken revelation: ‘Unto dust we shall return’.

A cumulus of such encounters—some pragmatic, others absurd—give account to our coordinates: the Black Rock Desert, 110 miles from Reno, Nevada. More decisively, we are in this desert’s 200-square-mile salt pan, or *playa*. Intimacy with this extraordinary space—being *on-playa*—enhances the perception of boundary dissolution, the blurring of outlines, a sensation mediated by the powdery surface dust animated, even under a gentle breeze, into a pervading white noise. This tangible fuzziness is familiar to denizens of Black Rock City (BRC), the annual gathering known as Burning Man. When I first arrived in BRC in 2003, there were clear signs of habitation. Occupied by hardened volunteers on location for weeks building the event, it also exhibited the labors of stalwarts dis/assembling a city, co-creating epic works of art, and more than often reducing them to ash, on this remote interstice over Labor Day week since 1990. The event had moved that year from San Francisco’s Baker Beach, where Larry Harvey, Jerry James, and a handful of onlookers first torched a statue on summer solstice 1986.

In its recurrent occupation, this desert was, then, already hallowed by many who identify as ‘burners’, a significant population among them calling the *playa* ‘home’.¹ But what is ‘home’ is perplexing here, given that Burning Man is an enigmatic phenomenon that enjoys a fierce capacity to resist classification. Invoking this ‘phantasm, this folly, this force field, this vortex, [that] becomes at once a glorious accident, a bacchanal, a biennale, a destination and a phenomenon’, Jennifer Raiser (2014: 15) ventures a valiant effort. Implicit to the problem is that Burning

1. The percentage of participants surveyed in the annual Black Rock Census between 2013–2016 indicating Black Rock City is their ‘only home’ hovered at just under 5%, while approximately 10% indicated it is their ‘main home’, and 50% stated it is their ‘second home’. Only 10–15% of participants responded ‘No’ to the question, ‘Do you consider Black Rock City to be your home?’ See: <https://burningman.org/event/volunteering/teams/census/>.

Man is at once a site (in Nevada's Black Rock playa), a festive fire-arts gathering, a temporary city (that by 2017 had a total population of near 80,000²), an organization (with a three-decade legacy that evolved into the non-profit Burning Man Project), a global cultural movement (a regional network with affiliates in over 35 countries), and a land steward (in 2016, the BMP purchased the 3,800-acre Fly Ranch, Nevada), among other characteristics. In this article, I focus on the first of these characteristics—i.e., *playaspace*—through a discussion of the dimensions of the playa integral to Burning Man's status as 'transformational'. Three natural qualities—i.e., the playa's otherworldliness, ephemerality, and limitlessness—are explored in a discussion informed by the study of paradox in natural sublimity (Brady 2013), the writings of poet-geographer and playa-phile William L. Fox (e.g. 2002), along with the author's experience of BRC in seven cycles from 2003.

While classing Burning Man an 'event' is fraught by the complexities posed by the life it leads beyond the playa, the event that manifests annually in the Black Rock Desert is centripetal to a movement consisting of more than 85 Regional Events (a growing corolla of 'petals' that have sometimes blown far from the calyx). This is an event of striking contrasts and contradictions, as perhaps most evident in its life as a *cyclical* (seasonally recurrent), *augmentative* (progressively optimizable), and *replicable* (modulated and mutable) phenomenon. While a seasonal gathering host to signature fire ceremonies (principally Burn Night which culminates in the incineration of an effigy called 'the Man', and Temple Burn, the fiery destruction of an elaborate Temple), Burning Man is also a frontier settlement home to a pioneering spirit rooted in the American imagination. A Promethean sensibility is alive in the founding ideas of an event invested with utopian potential—variously imagined as a tabula rasa, petri-dish, proto-community, novelty engine, experimental civilization, etc. As these ideas and metaphors connote abundance, possibility, and transformative potential, they reveal a founding paradox: Burning Man is propagated in one of the driest, most featureless, expanses in North America—a 200-square-mile playa existing within the 1,000-square mile Black Rock Desert High Rock Canyon Emigrant Trails National Conservation Area, Northern Nevada.

Despite the popular attention that Burning Man—widely recognized as prototypically *transformational*—has received within academia and the media,³ the role of locale in this transformativity has enjoyed surprisingly

2. The reported figure was 79,379, including staff, volunteers, and public health and safety personnel (Burning Man 2017).

3. The 'transformational festival' concept was promulgated by documentary filmmaker Jeet-Kei Leung, first in a 2010 TEDx talk, and later popularized in *The Bloom*

little attention. The relative absence of attention to space is striking given how the playa holds such a shaping influence on the total Burning Man phenomenon. In light of this recognition, an exploration of the human encounter with the Black Rock Desert playa is integral to comprehending Burning Man. In her study of ways Burning Man has developed as a 'sacred space' of unique proportions, the enquiries tendered by Sarah Pike remain pertinent. 'What is it about this festival that produces such powerful impressions in participants?' 'How does Burning Man come to be imagined and experienced as such a different place from the world outside?' (Pike 2001: 157). Various reasons for this sacralization are given, not least that the event is imagined as 'a blank canvas, a frontier of possibilities and unrealized potential' (2001: 159). While the event's remote location is reckoned pivotal to its potency, the distinct qualities of this location, and the human relationship with it, remain under-explored. Burning Man is not only constructed as a *place* apart, it has evolved in an extraordinary *space*, an absolute blank space, a no-place at once life-threatening and life-affirming. This paradox affords sublimity without parallel in the world of festivals, and is indeed among the reasons why spokespersons for the BMP are assiduous in their declarations that Burning Man is 'not a festival' (Caveat Magister 2012). Following an introduction to the Black Rock playa in the next section, the article will navigate a triad of sublime spatio-temporal qualities—otherworldly, ephemeral, limitless—shaping the transformative potential of Burning Man.

The Playa Sublime

Absent vegetation, wildlife, and virtually insect-free, the desolate expanse of Nevada's Black Rock Desert holds traces of a massive ancient inland sea. Covering most of present-day Nevada for about two million years, the Pleistocene epoch Lake Lahonton has long since vanished, though it has flooded the imagination of humans ranging into the region some 12,000 years after its desiccation: 'That was a world thousands of years removed from our own', imagines Stewart Harvey, 'but you can still feel its presence in the shifting playa sand and the timeless wind' (S. Harvey 2014: 47).⁴ Seasonal waters return as runoff from the Calico and

webseries (Leung and Chan 2014), in which Burning Man features as a prominent exemplar. Within scholarship, Lee Gilmore (2006, 2008) has provided substantial input on Burning Man as a transformational ritual phenomenon. Deploying the concept of 'heterotopia', the transformative complexity of Burning Man is explored elsewhere (St John 2020).

4. While the Black Rock—High Rock region has been occupied for at least 10,000 years by peoples whose descendants include the Southern Paiutes to the southeast,

Jackson mountain ranges, forming a shallow lake that normally evaporates by August, exposing an impossible plane of encrusted alkali dust, its surface sun-cracked in hexagonal patterns. During the building, operation, and dismantling of the event, conditions are scorching by day (with highs soaring to 120 degrees Fahrenheit), and not uncommonly freezing at night (Gillies 2014: 47). Given the possibility of rapid dehydration in these corrosive conditions, the playa commands respect among seasoned travellers populating a parched void uncovered like the fine sands of a beach at the lowest ebb of an annual tide.

While 'playa' is a geographic term referring to 'the flat-floored bottom of an undrained desert basin that becomes at times a shallow lake' (Merriam-Webster Dictionary), that it also means 'beach' (in Spanish) is fitting, since a beach is a most liminal space. Between land and sea, a beach is a space neither land nor sea. Having relocated from an ocean beach (Baker Beach) in San Francisco to the desert, the liminal sensibility of Burning Man is legion. The in-between character and transformational possibilities of the Black Rock Desert were recognized in the inaugural Nevada outing, held over Labor Day weekend, September 1–3, 1990, in collusion with a San Francisco Cacophony Society 'Zone Trip', announced in the September 1990 edition (issue #48) of Cacophony Society newsletter, *Rough Draft*, as 'Bad Day at Black Rock (Zone Trip #4)'. As it was announced: 'This excursion is an opportunity to leave your old self and be reborn through the cleansing fires of the trackless, pure desert'.⁵ Rooted in the Dada-inspired events of the San Francisco Suicide Club, Zone Trips were like surrealist rites of passage 'beyond normal time and place'. Cacophonist and Burning Man co-founder John Law has dubbed these sojourns 'pataphysical tourism' (Scaruffi 2015a), an idea taking cues from French Symbolist writer Alfred Jarry. As a philosophy dedicated to studying that which 'lies beyond metaphysics', and typically expressed in nonsensical language, Jarry's 'pataphysics' made a mockery of scientific theory and method. For misfits, outcasts, and non-conformists tumbling onto this remote apron, the playa provided the perfect stage to act 'as if the world had already ended', to repeat the maxim of the Suicide Club (Evans, Galbraith, and Law 2013).

As these early participants tramped their surrealist circus out into the unknown, the sensory impact of being in a place that is among nature's most severe expressions of austerity was undeniable. So austere, that

the Goshutes and the Shoshones to the east, and Northern Paiute to the northwest, this article focuses on these recent visitors.

5. All editions of *Rough Draft* are available at <https://archive.org/details/roughdraftoffici1171vari>.

words like ‘place’ or ‘landscape’ are problematic. When several dozen proto-burners exited their vehicles to join hands and step across a physical line drawn in the dust, as they did in 1990 beyond the ‘shoreline’, they were transported beyond the familiarity of place into a space inspiring metaphysical speculation. Geographer and playa-phile, William L. Fox, has written that in such spaces, ‘you can feel as if, by being radically diminished in size, you are more properly scaled to the planet. It seems as if your mind expands to fill the space around you, an eerie and very nearly hallucinogenic experience.’ This disorienting experience, he adds, is ‘probably related to why so many religions, in particular monotheisms, were birthed in the deserts of the Middle East’ (Fox 2002: 18). In his vivid photographic testament, *Playa Fire: Spirit and Soul at Burning Man* (2017), brother of co-founder Larry, Stewart Harvey, reflects on his maiden exposure to this ‘otherworldly and familiar’ space in 1990. ‘We stopped at the roadside entry and gazed at tire tracks that splayed outward and then seemed to vanish in the glare of the afternoon sun. The playa appeared to be little more than a lifeless expanse of parched crust punctuated by cracks, wheel ruts, and windrows of powdered alkali. It looked like a place people go to vanish.’ As it turned out, the vanishing point was an epic threshold on the path to a new homeland. ‘The desert opened itself to us in 1990, and we succumbed to its sprawling embrace’ (S. Harvey 2017: 4). Confirming the impact of epic capitulation in the preface to their illustrated volume *Black Rock*, Goin and Starrs state that while the region can render its human visitors diminutive, it is ‘a place of singular heart that enlarges its beholders’ (Goin and Starrs 2005: xv).

That Cacophony Society Zone Trips were partly inspired by Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1979 film *Stalker*—an adaption of the novel *Roadside Picnic* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky—sheds light on the grip that the Black Rock playa would come to have on temporary-yet-recurrent denizens. For podcasting *Weird Studies* philosophers Phil Ford and J.F. Martel, The Zone holds appeal precisely because it is a paradox, a physical puzzle that challenges the human endeavor to survive. As Ford clarifies in an observation applicable to the playa, while a place of impossible beauty inimical to human life, The Zone is ‘the only place where the Stalker can be happy, the only place where he can truly be a human being’ (Ford and Martel 2018a). As Ford moves on to suggest, ‘it becomes clear throughout the film that the Zone is the only place on earth where [the Stalker] feels understood, where he feels welcome, where he feels at home’. And while Stalkers are skilled at traversing the Zone, they cannot linger nor permanently inhabit the space. This, claims Ford, is also true for art. ‘Every true artwork is a little Zone unto itself... You can visit but

you can't live there.' It is not possible to live in Parzival, in an opera by Bach, or in the Sistine Chapel (Ford and Martel 2018b), an impossibility that extends to the world's most evanescent city. 'You can't stay up on the roof forever', wrote author of the *Temporary Autonomous Zone* (1991), Hakim Bey. And yet while the attribute of all zones is that they can be entered but not squatted, habitués periodically return to these spaces. Becoming reacquainted with their strange topography, growing familiar with their otherness, they become something, or someone, other, a process of identity transformation shared with recurrent habitués. As Ford also suggests, if you did remain in the Zone, 'it wouldn't be you any more'. Just as the beautiful impossibility of the Zone holds gravitas for rootless Stalkers, the playa feels like home to burners. Growing attached to a topos consisting of cracked dust for miles in all directions, habitués are free to jettison all pretensions. Enveloped by dust, they are reminded of their ephemerality.

For artists, there was cause to marvel at what was beheld out beyond the town of Gerlach, Nevada, where one confronts the staggering magnitude of the space. As these early pioneers realized, the genuine value of the alkaline flats lay not in salt, minerals, or precious metals, nor in the testing of experimental weapons. From the first Zone Trip, the location became an experimental site for mining the imagination. In this *other* Nevada Test Site (i.e. not the site of 928 nuclear tests 360 miles to the south), the surreal met the sublime, pataphysics collided with metaphysics, and a direct confrontation *sub specie aeternitatis* offered something of a new frontier for culture *sub specie ludi* (Huizinga 1944: 5). In the uncertain union of these elements, impacted by adverse conditions necessitating a scrapper's resourcefulness, remote region diplomacy, coordinated planning, and ecologically sustainable practices, the playa became a natural canvas for an event that permitted its participants to travel from the sublime to the ridiculous in no time at all.

From its advent as a Zone Trip, the perceived transformational potential of Burning Man is proportionate to the void-like spatio-temporal boundlessness of the playa. As a most remote place that is at the same time a most in-between space and time, the desert of the Black Rock can be recognized as a quintessential 'realm of pure possibility' (Turner 1967: 97), the concept spun in Victor Turner's definitive weave on 'liminality', from the Latin *limen* ('threshold'). Inspired by Van Gennep's (1960 [1909]) rites of passage model, for Turner, navigation across the threshold enables transition, for individual participants (e.g. in initiation rituals) and for whole societies (e.g. in seasonal festivals). For Turner, the *limen* appears to be at its most potent when arising at the margins, at sites where liminars are more likely to be in the grip of 'existential

communitas'. Turner explained the potency of social liminality in marginal spaces by way of a defense of the concept of 'antistructure', which is: 'not structure with its signs reversed, minuses instead of pluses, but rather the *fons et origo* of all structures and, at the same time, their critique. For its very existence puts all social structural rules in question and suggests new possibilities' (Turner 1973: 216). The Black Rock playa seems to provide firm ground for such a marginal-liminal space of possibility, a space like that afforded metaphysical potency in what Spariosu (2015) calls 'radical liminality'. This concept derives from the study of exilic-utopian conditions and expressions, in particular a 'literature of counterexile', wherein exiled poets, writes Claudio Guillén (1990: 265), are able to 'transcend the original condition' of their previous homelands. While Spariosu focuses on one medium for the exilic-utopian imagination—i.e. literature—could its transcendent spirit be traced through other art forms, like those fiery dis/assemblages integral to an intentional event flowering in a desert in Nevada? Can Burning Man, the quintessential 'transformational' event, be traced to an exilic prototype located in 'the Cynic–Stoic view of exile as cosmic freedom'? Greek biographer Plutarch observed that 'cosmic freedom' originates in the 'philosophical contemplation of the sun, the stars, and the other heavenly bodies, which allows individual gazers to detach themselves from their immediate historical and political circumstances and become at one with the cosmos, converted into a universal, all-embracing home' (Spariosu 2015: 31). Any attempt to draw parallels with Burning Man must proceed with caution. As critics muse in response to popularization, the longer Burning Man has operated, the more it has grown to appear like the 'new American holiday' (Sterling 1996), a 'business bacchanalia' (Bowles 2014), or an experiment in radical leisure soundscaped by an over-hyped DJ, than a space of exile. One cannot ignore, all the same, the significance of what playa-goers know as *Immediacy*, the principle that evokes a desire to overcome barriers that separate humans, from our inner self, other humans, and the natural world. Taking its place among the 'Ten Principles'⁶ that participants must learn to negotiate while navigating playaspace, *Immediacy* approximates the form of empowerment enabled by exilic space. In such spaces, the detached, and perhaps, emptied-out, individual is permitted, as Spariosu continues, to

6. The Ten Principles are *Radical Inclusion, Gifting, Decommodification, Radical Self-Reliance, Radical Self-Expression, Communal Effort, Civic Responsibility, Leaving No Trace, Participation, and Immediacy*. For an explanation of each, see 'Burning Man's Ten Principles'. Online: <https://burningman.org/culture/philosophical-center/10-principles>. In this article, all principles are capitalized and italicized.

imagine 'alternative worlds that are not governed by power, but by other grounding principles, such as universal love, human brotherhood, and a planetary, or even a cosmic, home' (2015: 31). The questions then arise: What qualities must such a 'space' possess to enable such permissions? And how could one possibly eke out a 'home' in such a radically liminal space?

The 'grounding principles' concerning Spariosu harbor a quality of the sublime that appears to be dealt in spades on the playa. I will return to Spariosu later, but for a closer understanding of what I mean by the sublime, and more specifically, the playa sublime, I turn to philosopher of environmental ethics Emily Brady, whose position in *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature* aids comprehension of the potency of this space. Imposing, overwhelming, provoking admiration, inciting gratitude, the playa is consistent with Brady's approach to the natural sublime, where, for example, great waterfalls, the star-filled night sky, and great deserts instill a 'distinctive kind of aesthetic-moral relationship with the environment'.

This type of appreciation is deeply comparative, as we feel insignificant, humbled by the greatness of nature rather than masterful over it. The admiration we feel in the sublime, as well as a perspectival shift of self, can feed into new forms of self-knowledge and potentially ground respect for nature, not in spite of, but very much because of nature's irresistible scale and power. (Brady 2013: 8)

As pivotal to her case for the power of the natural sublime (over artifactual sublimity), Brady traces an 'anxious aesthetic' in the human response to nature—and especially that received as infinite and limitless (e.g. vast featureless deserts) and/or dynamic (e.g. a raging storm)—in various philosophical works representative of German Idealism and British Romanticism. For nature to be sublime, it must be immediate and challenging, an experience in which one may feel at once defeated and exalted, an 'admixture of negative and positive feeling' (Brady 2013: 41). The 'mixed emotion' provoked by certain natural events is evident in the 'astonishment' that Burke, in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, understood to be a mix of delight and terror, an experience where the mind, transfixed by natural forces, 'is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it' (1759: 39, in Brady 2013: 23). The aesthetic impact is evident in the paradox of 'attraction and repulsion' implicit to what Kant called the 'negative pleasures' that are the human response to the challenges of formlessness and irregularity in nature, a response that potentially expands the

imagination (in Brady 2013: 57). Gathering his thoughts on the sublime (by contrast to the beautiful), in *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer conveyed how the ‘agitated forces of nature on a large scale’ can ‘annihilate’ the ‘feeble phenomenon of the will’. In cases where ‘the storm howls, the sea roars, the lightning flashes from black clouds, and thunder-claps drown the noise of storm and sea’, the individual becomes ‘abandoned to chance, a vanishing nothing in the face of stupendous forces’. And in this overwhelmed state, the afflicted ‘feels himself as the eternal, serene subject of knowing’ (1969: 204-205).

In the case made for the development of an ‘aesthetic sensibility’ of the sublime with moral implications, Brady specifically refers to the complex emotional response to desert landscapes, the ‘never-ending reaches’ of which elicit ‘a mix of feelings and thoughts related to death—the searing heat and sun; a threatening, empty space appearing devoid of life—and a more exhilarating feeling from the open and endless expanse’ (Brady 2013: 201). Long-time participants of Burning Man have drunk deep from such a mixed cocktail of experience. They have cultivated an anxious kinship with a topos of possibility upon which they have taken risks, become vulnerable, made sacrifices, and collaborated to forge a fragile home. The human relationship with the natural sublime may be cultivated where humans, as Brady continues, ‘pursue the sublime and place ourselves in situations where we can expect to experience it, attuning ourselves to sublime qualities and becoming more perceptive of them’ (2013: 201). As a recurrent ‘home’, *playaspace* is an experiment notable as a natural ‘canvas’ purposed for epic works of art—and moreover, works designed to be destroyed by fire on a grand scale. As the *project* of Burning Man sparked the evolution of fire as an art form, the *playa* became an epic stage purposed to the cultivation of sublimity. Two modes of labor are identifiable in this cyclical project. First, there is the artifactual manifestation, the making, the building, and the crafting; and then there is disassemblage and restoration, practices purposed to return the *playa* to its native state. These interrelated practices are integral to an overall design. With this background in mind, I now address the three spatiotemporal qualities of the *playa* that have shaped Burning Man as a prototypically transformational event.

Otherworldly

Growing intimate with the *playa*, intrepids identifying as burners have acquired, as Brady has it, an ‘aesthetic interest in this landscape, in and for itself’ (2013: 202). Our comprehension of the distinct character of such a relationship is aided by Fox, who suggests that BRC is an expression of

the possibilities provoked by ‘cognitive dissonance in isotropic spaces’—i.e., spaces with features uniformly distributed in all directions. Director of the Center for Art & Environment at Nevada Museum of Art in Reno, Fox is an authority on the geography, geomorphology, and cultural history of playas. For my purposes, his expertise is conveyed not only in an aesthetic steeped in an experience with playas of the American west, but through the fact that Fox has been a participant of Burning Man. For a species that has evolved in temperate forests and savannas, where humans, writes Fox, ‘developed a sense of scale based on the size and spacing of trees relative to their own size’, the ‘*ne plus ultra* of deserts’ distorts hard-wired perceptual expectations (Fox 2014: 48). ‘As a species’, Fox explains in *The Black Rock Desert*, ‘we have no ingrained mental templates to help us gauge how large or small we are in the space we occupy, how far it is to water or even to the next person. What looks like a car a mile away turns out to be a tin can resting on its side. What looks like an hour’s walk is more than a day off. Light comes from every angle’ (Fox and Klett 2002: 9). Transiting onto North America’s Big Empty is like being transported to another dimension. The bleak flats of this and surrounding playas of The Great Basin are known to have disoriented travelers of the Nevada emigrant trail for whom the Black Rock, a four-hundred-foot high promontory of dark sedimentary and volcanic rocks, would become a distinctive landmark. John C. Frémont, on his 1843–44 expedition to the Black Rock Desert in search of the mythical San Buenaventura River, called the country ‘a perfect barren’. For Frémont, ‘the appearance of the country was so forbidding, that I was afraid to enter it’ (Fox 2002: 9). ‘Cognitive dissonance’ is arguably more dramatic today given that sojourners will more commonly arrive direct from the bustling urban chaos in which they subsist—though these more recent travelers are less inclined to trek across the expanse in pursuit of prosperity and a future than to linger upon it in pursuit of immediate pleasures.

Combined with the moisture-sapping heat, ‘cognitive dissonance’ is treacherous, which partly accounts for a condition of entry issued to Burning Man participants printed on event tickets: ‘You voluntarily assume the risk of serious injury or death by attending’.⁷ But if extreme environments like this can cause navigational challenges, existential despair, and even contribute to one’s own demise, they can also ‘foster awe at the sublime scale of the universe’ (Fox 2014: 49). Although Fox makes no formal contribution to the philosophy of the sublime in its ‘mathematical’ or ‘dynamic’ qualities, his observations on the ‘beautiful

7. In the past, this warning was printed on the front of the ticket in capital letters in larger type than the name of the event.

but dangerous' paradox of 'isotropic spaces' illuminate the anxious pleasures long understood to be associated with human engagement with (vast and wild) nature—i.e., in spaces where the imagination is incited by an immediate visceral confrontation with physical limits. These ideas assist explanation of the sensation of the 'ungraspable' that is integral to the aesthetic response Brady regards as central to sublimity, where exposure to great natural phenomena instills admiration and humility in proximity to that which is ultimately unknowable.

Covering the extremes to which playas have been used in the American west—from military to extraction industries and aesthetic interventions—the paradox of playas is expertly narrated in *Playa Works: The Myth of the Empty* (Fox 2002). While recognizing that no two playas are the same, their commonality is located: 'If we suffer in our contact with them from a cognitive dissonance that can kill us, the dislocation of our senses in deserts also provides an opportunity to experience a different way of relating to the world' (2002: 18). These insights illuminate the status of Burning Man as a prototypically 'transformational' event. 'Putting ourselves in a beautiful place that is hazardous to our health', Fox suggests, conjoins 'disparate circumstances that can produce new emotions, beliefs or ideas'. Attending Burning Man for the first time 'takes someone to a new mental space', compelling Fox to submit that Burning Man is 'a cognitive neurophysical event: it has literally changed the minds of many of its participants' (Fox 2014: 51). As 'physically overpowering and psychically disorienting', one's encounter with the playa may be eligible as a form of 'exceptional human experience' (Krippner 2002), an extraordinary and potentially transpersonal experience that has impacted multitudes who have been pulled into its orbit, a uniquely commanding field of innovation where artists, and entire cohorts who may not identify as 'artists', have been challenged and provoked in novel ways. 'The absolute absence of familiar surroundings, the lack of earthly constraints', Fox writes, 'allows for and encourages people to experience the planet in a profoundly different manner'.

Some people temporarily lose their social restraints during the gathering, while others make up fresh rules; marriages fall apart, but new relationships form; people change their mind, their career, their religion during Burning Man, and it's mostly the result not of artificial chemical alterations but of the underappreciated yet overwhelming influence upon them of a geography so extreme they're knocked out of customary notions of space and time. (Fox 2002: 9-10)

From the outset, the austere character of this alien topography took a firm hold on the imagination of pioneering artists, not least of all Zone Trip enthusiasts and others frying their minds on the dramatic surreality

native to the space. Among the pioneers who recognized the extraordinary potential of this space is jazz musician and photographer William Binzen. 'It's often said that the playa is already altered, that we don't need substances of any kind', writes Binzen. While the event is hardly a domain of pious abstention, he continued 'The fact is that just walking around with open eyes is sufficient to transport one into an altered something. I think of this as "desert trance". The heat, light, dust, vast space and hive-mind of endless activity and relentless socializing produce altered states naturally' (Binzen n.d.a). Various commentators report on the ambiguity of any human-nature boundary in this environment. Meditating on the omnipresence of its powdery dust, for Brian Doherty, 'the playa leaves nothing untouched... It permeates your tongue, eyes, pores and mindset, moment by moment.' Once the surface crust is broken, 'you become within minutes a creature no longer simply human, but a playa-human chimera, a new skin of pale chalky white settling and attaching and growing over you. And it doesn't just take over your surface; your every breath takes in an endlessly refilled air-and-playa dust cocktail that invades your lungs and nasal passages' (Doherty 2014 [2004]: 53). While dust is a key trope deployed by philosophers (e.g. Marder 2016) in the exploration of human limits (our otherness), dust is no simple trope on-playa, where one may literally be served dust on a plate.

Buffeted by gales, mired in instant clay, scorched by the sun, and blanketed in dust, these extreme conditions that vary from year-to-year and day-to-day pose challenges for a population making fixed seasonal migration to the Black Rock Desert. Fox reports on the early exodus in 2000, when conditions—overnight lows in the mid-40s and wind gusts reported at 69.5 mph—caused mud and havoc. A thousand campers reportedly fled the scene even before the effigy burn: 'Their tents have blown out, or they didn't bring enough warm clothes, or it's all just too much trouble'. It was an occasion that seemed to separate pretenders from the more than 20,000 participants remaining. For Fox, these conditions are 'exactly what defines the Black Rock Desert, cycles of sun and wind and rain relentlessly burnishing the floor of the basin down to a mirror upon which we watch ourselves walk'. The resilient burners were 'not seeing this place as a static stage but as a process through which we're living' (Fox 2002: 187). While controversy rages around 'VIP camps' where privileged clients outsource hardships and principles to 'burnerpreneurs' (Roberts 2011; St John 2017)—with such clients arguably estranged from the playa even while camping on it—the playa-acculturated identify more as stewards than customers.

Ephemeral

The distinct appeal of this outer-space relies upon the seasonal renewal of its surface. While in the wet season the basin fills with shallow water, by August evaporation exposes a vast encrusted plane, an annual cycle that performs a *tabular rasa* effect. Fox explains the process by which nature acts to re-create a 'blank canvas'. The cycle is reliable: each year, 'rains will fill in the cracks and tracks, and wind will push around thin sheets of water, 10 by 40 miles in extent, that will polish the basin floor. Freeze-and-thaw cycles will puff up the surface into soft clumps that the wind and water will again break down into mud, then dust, further erasing our passage' (Fox and Klett 2002: 41). A seasonally refreshed *playascape* has given shape to an evanescent community cultivating a unique relationship with the ephemeral. 'Deserts are places that attract artists', Fox elaborates, 'because they offer a relatively blank slate upon which to work, spaces where time and the elements tend to erase previous traces of human presence. You can create an ephemeral installation or event again and again at the same spot in a desert and it's always new' (Fox 2016). As experiments with fire-art in this location became integral to BRC's evanescence, the accretion of builds and erasures has amounted to what has been dubbed an 'ephemeropolis' (Black 2011 [2006]).

William Binzen is among the noted artists skilled in techniques of working with and capturing the ephemerality of the region. Together with Judy West, Binzen was founder of Desert Siteworks, an experimental arts community dedicated to site-specific art-making at different hot springs located on the eastern edge of the playa over the summer solstice before Burning Man between 1992 and 1994. These experiments had a considerable influence on Burning Man. Reflecting on the temporary desert communities that sprung up at Black Rock Spring (1992), Trego (1993), and Bordello Springs (aka Frog Pond, 1994), where these pioneers 'worked with the topography—sand dunes, arroyos, hot springs, dirt roads and scrub—to establish a harmonious layout respecting the terrain', Binzen explains that participating artists were 'art guerillas at ground zero for the early development of celebratory, earth-based, poly-disciplinary art in the Black Rock' (Binzen n.d.b). Over the course of nearly three decades since Binzen and others began their fleeting resettlements, Burning Man became an experiment in the arts of dwelling in an impermanent landscape. Washing up on the shores of this desolation, human flotsam and jetsam are incited towards a moral response expressed through dutiful performance. The seasonal re-making of BRC requires that the playa be restored to its pre-event status, a recurrent practice faithfully dedicated to removing all traces of

human presence. This immaculate experiment has necessitated a unique relationship with this environment and with the federal governing agency that oversees its use, i.e. the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which is required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to conduct environmental impact analyses for any project it permits on federal land. The BLM has traditionally conducted post-event silt inspections by sampling randomly selected transects and comparing levels of contamination (the BLM's standard is that residue debris should not exceed an average of one square foot per acre during the BLM inspection).⁸ Passing every post-event inspection, Burning Man has cooperated with the BLM to fulfill its obligation to restore the playa to its pre-event conditions. As Burning Man's Playa Restoration Manager, Dominic 'DA' Tinio, relates, Burning Man has routinely achieved a near impossible '99.998% cleanliness' per acre over 3,600 acres (or 156 million square feet) to gain BLM approval and obtain a Special Recreation Permit (SRP). 'We're not aware of another event or operation in a National Conservation Area that is held to a similar standard' (DA 2019). Despite this unique accomplishment, in response to an application for a ten-year SRP (2019–2028), the Burning Man organization was confronted in March 2019 with a controversial BLM Draft Environmental Impact Statement. This DEIS was roundly criticized within the community not only for the BLM's 'aggressive', 'capricious', and 'untenable' series of operational requirements and mitigations (Burning Man 2019), but for ignoring the BMP's outstanding track record in meeting the BLM's own 'Leave No Trace' standards.⁹ While playagoers had been required to 'pack it in and pack it out' since 1990, borrowing from the BLM, the United States Forest Service, and the National Park Service, in 1998 Burning Man adopted this practice, which would later be included as *Leaving No Trace (LNT)* among the Ten Principles announced in 2004.¹⁰ Identified as 'the one

8. The accomplishments of this collection strategy appear to cause frustrations among archeologists, who must adopt new techniques. According to one archeologist who had received the BLM inspection artifacts over many years: 'Because so little remains, the standard collection techniques of the archaeologist are less relevant' (White 2013: 606).

9. Following a massive response from the burner community, the BLM's Final EIS in June 2019 backed away from, at least in the short term, the ecologically catastrophic requirements for dumpsters in, and concrete barriers around, BRC.

10. The severe austerity of these remote conditions has also necessitated the development of principles like *Radical Self-Reliance* and *Communal Effort*. As regionally appropriate commitments to sustainability and mutual support, these principles are echoed in practices of resource use and skill sharing evident throughout the regional network (see tsaasan and Nardi 2018).

principle that is absolutely mandatory' (Hatch 2016), LNT has been understood to approximate a 'rule' more than a guiding principle.¹¹ While the dedication to *Leaving No Trace* on-playa is celebrated, it has been observed that participants fall short on this count during 'exodus'. For example, the annual occurrence of illegal trash dumping on roadsides and around Reno and other cities has been widely reported (see Robertson 2018).¹²

While Burning Man is typically promoted as the 'largest Leave No Trace event in the world',¹³ *Leaving No Trace* has a complex backstory that I will discuss at some length given that each strand in this story influences the relationship with the playa. While LNT signifies an official restoration practice in fulfillment of an ecological obligation, it is also a guerrilla art practice and a purification ritual. According to John Law, the philosophy of leaving a space without a hint of one's presence had been a feature of the pre-Nevada Zone Trips and other Cacophony events. The practice of temporarily occupying a space in a sub-legal context (like scaling the Golden Gate Bridge, post-apocalyptic squat-partying in abandoned bunkers, and exploring disused morgues and subterranean causeways in San Francisco) and then disappearing before the authorities arrive, had been integral to the strange urban *dérives* of the Suicide Club, where 'leave no trace' amounted to a necessary ethos of self-preservation (Evans, Galbraith, and Law 2013: 3). These groups had been living what Hakim Bey called 'poetic terrorism', a guerrilla practice abjuring permanent occupation, and rejecting anything smacking of hierarchy, ideology, and dogma (Bey 1991). In the challenging surreal-meets-sublime context of the playa, the anarchist philosophy of the Temporary Autonomous Zone was put to the test. While Law explains that he and other Cacophonists inculcated the 'leave no trace' ethic from the outset—for example, in 1990 'Larry [Harvey] was throwing his cigarette butts all over the place and we made him pick them up'—he laments how the practice grew to become 'dogma' (in Scaruffi 2015b).¹⁴ This view echoes the absurdity implicit to forging an event that mounts an official (and therefore tightly regulated) re-occupation of the

11. Bardia, July 12, 2016 in thread response to Hatch (2016).

12. That said, the DPW's Highway Cleanup crew reported 'a 30 to 40% reduction in trash on the side of the highway' in 2018 (2018 Afterburn: <https://journal.burningman.org/2018afterburn/#resto>).

13. 'Burning Man Survival Guide'. Online: <https://survival.burningman.org/leave-no-trace>.

14. Though such an ethos competes with another, perhaps best described as the final step in 'A 12-step Program for Aspiring Cacophonists': 'Leave the world a weirder place' (Mangrum 2013: 287).

sublime. Not to mention the presence of a small army of law enforcement officers, and a government agency that seeks ever tighter controls.

It is also worth noting the ambiguous distinction between ecological restoration and devotional observance. The ambiguity is apparent in what burners call 'moop' ('matter out of place') and the associated practice of 'mooping', in which participants are entreated to commit to waste elimination.¹⁵ Since every material and waste product—from metal debris to sawdust, refuse, and greywater—constitutes moop, efforts to avoid, reduce, and remove moop are integral to what the BMP calls 'acculturation'. Such 'greening your burn' practices include 'line sweeping' camp sites and leveling dune formation, grey water evaporation and black water disposal, recycling (including aluminium that can be taken to Recycle Camp), and 'footprint' reduction strategies (e.g. by reducing packaging, sharing resources, and offsetting carbon emissions).¹⁶ Burners are educated on all of these aspects by the Earth Guardians, initiated in 1997 by Marian Goodell and Harley K. Dubois in Reno (Hockett 2004: 50). Among the Earth Guardians are 'LNT gurus' committed to 'inspire, inform and encourage our fellow Black Rock City denizens to apply the Leave No Trace principles to life in our temporary desert home and to leave positive traces'.¹⁷ In consultation with The Fire Art Safety Team, artists proposing to burn art on-playa are required to design a Burn Scar Prevention plan. A dedicated page on the Burning Man website explains that burn scars are 'patches of discolored, hardened playa sediment, caused by the heat and smoke of carelessly constructed bonfires', preventable with adequate burn shields, including decomposed granite used as a 'natural burn blanket to protect the playa surface'.¹⁸ At once personal, communal, and civic, the commitment to eradicating moop is a complex restoration practice, a ritual complex the logics of which go beyond that of simply honoring a contract with the BLM. Effectively restoring the Big Empty to its pre-Burn state, the logics of this ritual complex is hinted at by Fox. Burning Man 'depends on the blankness of the Black Rock, the very quality that fires up the imagination of its participants. It's in their [i.e. burners'] aesthetic and philosophical interests to clean the slate' (Fox and Klett 2002: 42).

15. Moop is explained at: <https://burningman.org/event/preparation/leaving-no-trace/moop/>.

16. 'Greening Your Burn'. Online: <https://burningman.org/event/preparation/leaving-no-trace/greening-your-burn/>.

17. See <http://earthguardians.net/about/>.

18. See <https://burningman.org/event/art-performance/fire-art-guidelines/burn-scar-prevention/>.

Given that every detached sequin, stray woodchip, carpet fiber and flake of dried paint, let alone all city infrastructure, every abandoned bike and all (80,000) humans, must be removed before the post-event BLM site inspections, moop is a cardinal concern. Moop is quite literally never far from the surface (unless it is a rebar stake buried beneath the surface, a commonality that necessitates the use of metal detectors). Though concern is raised by the growing incidence of ‘tourists’ who are more inclined to create ‘moop’, everyday life on the playa is a devotion to demoooping, a meticulous round of ‘detailing’ procedures with serious consequences for the reproduction and continuity of the event. For the purposes of this discussion, I want to address how this commitment to restore the playa amounts to a *restoration of the sublime*, as most evident in the performance of the DPW’s Playa Restoration (or Resto) team. Those volunteering for Resto, who typically remain weeks after ‘exodus’, are assigned to clearing all foreign material from the playa (i.e. all non dust). If the playa is a ‘blank canvas’ at the build’s commencement, Resto are effectively tasked to restoring the canvas, and are akin to guardians who re-affirm the ephemeral status of the playa. Documenting the 2017 restoration process, Aaron Muszalski regards ‘walking the lines’ as ‘an opportunity to experience—and understand—the playa in an entirely new way, with little to distract or draw your attention away from the profound subtleties of Place’ (Muszalski 2017a).

To effectively housekeep the sublime, it must be measured, or at least color-coded. This is the endeavor of the MOOP Map, which was created in 2006 and has since been announced to the community annually through online publications and the website. Explained by its creator DA, the MOOP Map is a graphic indication of the labor time and resources expended by Resto across all sectors of BRC. Green shows a quick and easy pace, indicating ‘low to no MOOP’. Yellow signifies ‘stop and go, a slower moderate pace’. And red demonstrates a complete stop where significant debris build-up necessitates a serious resource commitment. DA highlighted that, for the purposes of ‘outreach, education, and support’, the MOOP Map is designed to assist offending camps (unnamed on the map, although their co-ordinates are revealed) to ‘better understand what went wrong and to support them in their plans to improve’ (in Muszalski 2017b). The colored-coded evaluation of one’s playa domicile and wider region of responsibility has had a powerful effect on residents. While red and yellow are sources of embarrassment and public scrutiny over one’s ‘moopiness’ (increasing placement frustrations in subsequent years), a green assessment can be likened to the affirmation of moral fitness. Burners will pore over the MOOP Map, comparing camp locations and contrasting the current map with those from previous years.

Such ritualized behaviour reverses the practice of eliminating dust cardinal to our pretense of keeping an orderly life. All that ought to remain in the wake of a successful mobilization to restore the playa...is dust. This annual effort permits participants to meditate on the permanence of impermanence. Burning Man's paeon to impermanence is the Temple, a structure that, like the Man, has become integral to the *playascape* (Pike 2010) since sculptor David Best initiated the tradition in 2000. Witnessed by the city's populace in an atmosphere solemn by contrast to the celebrations accompanying the Man's demise on Saturday night, and with a different design each year, this temporary cathedral of catharsis is reduced to ashes and dust on the final night (Sunday). That it is from dust from which we come, and to dust that we shall return, was a sobering lesson palpable for me in 2016 when hunkering with friends amid the charred remnants of the Temple, my hands gently shifting through the warm blackened dust that likely held the refined remains of countless loved-ones. While this sacred detritus is removed from the playa by the Temple crew, the ashes of the departed, deposited by mourners in the Temple in the week before its desolation, and sent into the atmosphere during Temple Burn in plumes of black smoke, are effectively distributed across the playa. The dead merging with the dust.

As participants grow intimate with recurrent rounds of creation, destruction, and renewal, they acquire a unique understanding of the cycle of life. For sculptor Kate Raudenbush, 'Everyone lives with an acute awareness that the entire city must disappear in one week. And that is what makes so many of our interactions so precious and so fraught, so intense and so appreciated, and ultimately it is what makes it so freeing and so life changing. We bring this existence into being and we also destroy it at the end' (Raiser 2014: 16). In the wake of the passing of Larry Harvey, who died on April 28, 2018, following a stroke, more than one observer has passed comment on the allegory that BRC serves for life itself. For Buck A.E. Down (2019): 'An entire city—with all its noise and bustle and teeming humanity, its monumental works of art, humans being and humans doing—is only in full flower for a week, and then is quickly and anonymously whisked away, an analog for life itself. It's a temporary, albeit noisy blip that gives way to the great nothingness in a relative blink of an eye, barely an interruption geologically speaking'. Long-time burner Patrice Mackey (aka Chef Juke) elaborated the view that Burning Man is a 'monument to impermanence'. It is a perception that was, as Juke acknowledged, long held by Harvey who as early as the second edition of the BMP newsletter *Building / Burning / Man*,

espoused that the Man was a 'monument to transience'.¹⁹ Returning from his first burn in 1994, Juke carried a lesson that for him continues to be compelling:

We have all of these things in our lives, and we act as if they're permanent: our jobs, our relationships, our friends. We go out and about, and expect that when we wake up tomorrow all the stuff and things in our lives are gonna be there. And they're not. And maybe we need to pay more attention to that. So with Burning Man, we come out here to this basic desert. This place is just as a blank canvas. And we build this Man..., we celebrate it, and then we light it on fire, and let it go. And it's a reminder that these things don't last. Our lives, they don't last. And so maybe when we go back to the real world, we'll take a little more stock of the things in our life, and remember that they won't last. Maybe we will, you know, treat things a little differently, and cherish them.²⁰

As the pattern is repeated throughout the years, as seasoned burners return to inscribe and erase works on this stubborn canvas, they are marked for life by lessons born from an intimacy with dust and fire.

Limitless

That the unlimited and uninterrupted magnitude of vast objects are reckoned to possess a causal relationship with the enlargement of the imagination and the 'filling of the soul' was a quality of the natural sublime early discussed by the likes of John Baillie in his 1747 work *An Essay on the Sublime*. The theme has a long pedigree. Experienced as a boundless topos, the Black Rock playa became an experimental staging ground for the imagination, a land of opportunity, a circumstance indebted to the utopian spirit rooted in the American character, where pioneers have sought ever newer frontiers upon which to strike ground, make home, perform identity, form community, build civilization. Those returning over three decades in an annual cycle have not simply returned to the same space, nor repeated the same rituals and projects. They have augmented an event that has expanded in size and population over successive years, becoming a city of rituals without dogma (Gilmore 2010), an 'enabling organization' with dozens of sub-departments (Chen 2009), a utopian performance (Bowditch 2010), a sublime city. The iteration of the prototype in successive versions is a circumstance, as chronicler Stewart Harvey has commented, compelled by the conditions

19. *Building / Burning / Man* (June 1992). Online https://z9hbb3mwou383x1930ve0ugl-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/BBM_1992.pdf.

20. Patrice Mackey (aka Chef Juke), interviewed by the author, August 27, 2017.

of the playa: 'The event succeeds because an enormous primitive space encourages limitless creativity and unrestricted scale. Build it bigger, build it bolder, build it better—the desert seems to say' (S. Harvey 2014: 45).

Founders saw great potential in this 'primitive space'. For Law, it permitted freedoms unavailable anywhere else: 'All the experience you could create there was held in bold relief by the complete starkness and emptiness of the environment. It was absolutely brilliant, because everything you did jumped right out. You couldn't avoid it.' Further, 'the freedom of that place was monumental. It was shocking... It was a blank slate that insisted on creativity. It demanded it' (Scaruffi 2015a). Former 'Minister of Propaganda' and editor-in-chief for newsletter *Jack Rabbit Speaks*, Will Chase, bore witness to a no-man's land of opportunity.

[S]omething *happens* to you when you first set foot on the impossibly flat expanse of absofreakinglutely nothing that is the Black Rock Desert—especially when you're the only one's out there. It's like your cells...shift. Your bearings go as flat as the horizon line. There's nothing to break your line of sight, no visual punctuation to get hung up on, nothing to take in. And at the same time there's *everything*... It's the fear you feel first. It comes on you like a constriction in your chest because you've never felt this kind of infinity before. You've never actually stood on a blank slate of truly limitless possibility and had to face WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO DO WITH IT. This is Kurtz-in-the-Congo territory... [S]uddenly you can be anything. And that really messes with your head—and you're involuntarily and inexplicable and permanently transformed. (Chase 2014: 9)

That the playa is an open-ended stage where the imagination is as boundless as the terrain is a theme that motivated Larry Harvey. Once stating that the playa is 'a place that is no place at all apart from what we choose to make of it', Harvey counseled participants to regard the space 'as a sort of movie screen upon which every citizen of Black Rock City is encouraged to project some aspect of their inner selves. This novel use of nothingness elicits a superabundant production of spectacle. But it is spectacle with a difference. We have, in fact, reversed the process of spectation by inviting every citizen to create a vision and contribute it to a public environment' (L. Harvey 2000). In more stridently utopian terms, Harvey encouraged participants to: 'Imagine a completely abstract space. A world without context, a place that is no place at all apart from what you bring to it. Anyone may enter this arena. Distinctions of race, class, age and wealth are irrelevant here. Participants are free to reinvent their own identities. Reality is what you make it on this ultimate frontier. It is a world wherein the boundary that divides the inner from the outer disappears' (L. Harvey 2011 [2006]). The formal aspects of the playa had

clearly invigorated the utopic imagination from the inception of an event possessing design parallels with historical intentional communities. While the adaptable concentric site plan of BRC (as designed by Rod Garrett) may have been shaped by precursors like Ebenezer Howard's 'garden city' model (Rohrmeier and Starrs 2014), and while recent research suggests BRC is destined to pass from its wild utopian beginnings into a (mild) suburban future if elitist tendencies go unmitigated (Rohrmeier and Bassett 2015), that discussion cannot be pursued further here.

The most respected among BRC artists are those who tend to work *with*, and not simply *on*, this frontier. While playaworks are often considered works of beauty, by virtue of being installed on this natural canvas, installations designed to be contiguous with the playa's uniformity, which are faithful to its ephemerality, and necessitate an active relationship with it, are those that tend to evoke something beyond simple pleasures. Here, the dusty topos is not just a frame, or pedestal, but a material with which artists work, and with which they identify, as collaborators. Among the more astonishing playaworks are large-scale projects that feature indeterminate limits, as with objects designed to appear partially submerged. Artists have taken special advantage of this contrivance on a terrain that is the remnant of a vast lake, and indeed where seasonal waters return. Examples include the *Pier* series constructed by Matthew Schultz and the Pier group. The first of these, *Pier* (2011), was a 300-foot long pier complete with bait shack, fishing poles and rowboats, with a later version (2012) featuring a run-aground Spanish galleon *La Llorona*. While the latter was immobile, other projects, like the 16-foot *La Contessa* and other 'mutant vehicles' have been inspired by a maritime aesthetic early encouraged by The Floating World art theme of 2002. The impact of the experience may be further enhanced if upon the distant horizon one spies from the deck of a playaworthy vessel, a 65-foot tall cluster of angled lighthouses that appear to grow from beneath the playa's surface, as was the effect of the *Black Rock Lighthouse Service* (2016). Other works are overtly motivated by the location to which they attempt to faithfully cohere. Built by The Flux Foundation and a crew of three hundred, *The Temple of Flux* (2010), for example, was inspired by the surrounding Jackson and Calico Mountain ranges. Made from slats of whitewashed wood, the 110 x 200 x 40-foot sculpture had a dune-like appearance and featured a series of passages and recesses likened to caves and canyons.

While BRC is designed to be erased from the surface of the playa year after year, the design is far from temporary. In another comment, Harvey sounds like a founding father whose words are commemorated in stone

on the public lawns of any American city: 'We have discovered a new land; it is a place, a home, a living earth we can possess. And just as surely as our sweat will saturate this soil, it will possess us' (in Pike 2001: 159). Over successive re-occupations, the Big Empty has become invested with significance, and inscribed with limits, in compliance with state and federal agency requirements (including the BLM's population cap), in the development of organizational frameworks, and in the formulation of a set of principles. Might it then be stated that Burning Man has succumbed, as some argue, to the domestication of 'what Anaximander referred to as the apeiron (the boundless) and the Pythagoreans referred to as the "Unlimited"' (Spariosu 2015: 27)? Might it then have failed to transcend the 'mentality of power', to continue in the terms of Spariosu? There are no easy answers, at least none that can be offered here.

Conclusion

Deemed to possess otherworldly, ephemeral, and limitless qualities, the Black Rock playa is an extraordinary event-scape. The alien, cyclical, and frontier character of playaspace animate inhabitants who cultivate the sublime by working with and restoring the playa. In a unique civic artifice evolving over three decades, working with the magnitude of the playa and through meticulous purification rites, the population of BRC could be considered 'a community of sentiment with respect to sublime appreciation' (Brady 2013: 163). Featuring emergency services, medical stations, integrated health and safety measures, a 'survival guide', and an ethos of mutual care, BRC enables event-goers to experience the playa within relatively safe parameters. As Brady conveys, with a position common among philosophers, exposure to sublimity requires 'creating the necessary distance from any real threat that would make aesthetic appreciation, as such, impossible' (Brady 2013: 42). But too much safety threatens the delicate balance. Safety regulations are among the injunctions on experience mocked by event veterans who feel the playa has been domesticated through an incremental elimination of chance, risk, and serious fun. Indeed familiarization and predictability are concomitant with the growth of BRC. According to Fox, 'the normalization of space, the repeated motifs of the artworks, and the increasing number of visitors who are more spectators than participants has begun to erode the dissonance, thus the ability of the event to spark unexpected responses' (Fox 2014: 53). For detractors, the event now caters to a rule-bound population of pleasure seekers whose encounter with the Black Rock Desert has grown remote from a raw encounter with the unknown. Life on-playa enjoyed from the safe confines of a luxury trailer conditions

an appreciation characterized at best by beauty more than sublimity. If one no longer becomes exposed to the playa's naked flame, its transformative potential has diminished. This domestication of experience repudiates for some expatriates the rationale of travelling out to the desert to begin with, and may even be consistent with the modernity from which they sought escape, even if temporarily. After all, the romantic sublime has been fated to disappear under the front wheels of jacked-up modernity—i.e., at the helm of a machine that has left in its wake a trail of catastrophes: colonial violence, native displacement and ecological despoliation (all themselves reckoned sublime: see Shapiro 2018). While the taming of the wild frontier offers a loss-of-innocence tale consistent with the romantic critique of the enlightenment, exposing a population of 80,000 to the playa appears to be an unparalleled experiment in sublimity—the genius of which is a delicate balance of elements cultivating radical hospitality in an extremely inhospitable space. Has the sublimity of the playa *diminished* through domestication of the frontier, or has an experiment encouraging acculturation to a delicate ecology of site-specific principles *expanded* exposure to its negative pleasures?

There are no easy answers, though it does appear that shared intimacy with perilous beauty fosters feelings of belonging to the playa. That this profoundly *other* space dissolves boundaries and encourages familiarity is advantageous. In the afterword to the 2014 edition of *This is Burning Man*, Brian Doherty reflects on 'a strangely powerful place where no one belonged'. Could a locality from which no-one hails permit anyone, from anywhere, to more readily coexist? Such may be the radically liminal possibility of the *atopia*, the absolute nowhere, that Spariosu identifies, not as a 'dead end' but as 'an emotionally neutral liminal space' of opportunity: 'a portal to access alternative worlds or even to start building entirely new ones' (2015: 33). And yet how does this proposition reconcile with the reality that the price of participation is increasingly prohibitive to all but the well-resourced, who are at the same time quite overwhelmingly white? And further yet, if the *playa* is a *home* space, do conditions that restrict domicility to *temporary* sojourns not make for a tenuous kind of 'home'? Such questions notwithstanding, as with any homeland in the memory of the diasporic, the playa fires the imagination of participants as they transpose this space abroad. Collectively representing what BMP CEO Marian Goodell has called 'the Grand Playa' (Burning Man 2014), a network of principled events and communities flourishes today in over 35 countries. Among the many experiments replicating the existential *nowhere* of playaspaces is one of the oldest regional events in Europe, suitably named Nowhere (co-created in the

harsh desert locale of Monegros, northern Spain), whose participants identify as ‘nooners’ or ‘nobodies’. As this and other regional experiments illustrate, the playa has occupied the imagination of inhabitants who have not only returned to the scene of the sublime, but have exported it to the world beyond.

Reflecting on the worldwide culture of dust junkies—some of whom will carry jars of vintage playa dust cracked open in ‘default’ world locations, the bouquet quaffed like an exotic spice—Fox astutely wonders ‘whether a habit of mind borne of cognitive dissonance on a playa is robust enough to survive the transition’ (Fox 2014: 54). While the implication is that Burning Man may become dispossessed of its transformative potency the more distant it has migrated from its sublime origins—a migration that in 2018 found the event showcased in a large-scale exhibit in the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. (Schaefer 2018)—the intrigue of Burning Man lies in its transformation into a global cultural archipelago. The over-population of the playa wilderness is among the reasons compelling the search for world sites in which the qualities of the playa might be free to reproduce, evolve, and mutate. Just how this sublime aesthetic is cultivated and mutates deserves further attention.

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