

# Unlocking the Girl Lock

## Gender Trouble at Burning Man

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For two weeks after Burning Man, I felt like I was glowing, radiating spirals of energy that warbled just below the visible range. The constant brutality of the state, the frantic pace of life, the social isolation—none of these things could get me down. For years, I had heard about this experimental arts and cultural festival held annually on the playa on the Black Rock Desert in Nevada. I went for the first time this year and look forward to going again.

But stepping back from the sheer joy of the experience, I can look back on it in a more critical mode. During the festival, I asked myself many times whether what was happening was truly radical or not, and I couldn't always come up with a clear answer. I also wondered how much of the head-opening we did out in the desert would make it back to positively alter the trajectories of our lives in what Burners refer to as “the other world.”

After reflection, I can say that the most problematic parts were connected to gender. The racial makeup at the festival certainly could have been more diverse and the same goes for class. But those problems were obvious and everyone was talking about them. Gender issues seemed more intractable and gender inequalities seemed more likely to be accepted as a natural—or even a positive—part of the experience.

The most obvious manifestations appeared around sexual situations. It was my impression that, for whatever reason, many more men than women came to Burning Man single and seeking sex. My own camp, for instance, included some eleven men and six women. However, all but one of the women had come with their lovers. That left a number of guys (including me) who were always, to varying degrees, “on the prowl.” Imagine this dynamic being played out among the 40,000 attendees and it's easy to understand why sexy topless women cruising around on their bikes were constantly asked by single guys to pose for pictures, why they were frequently approached by drunk or completely fucked-up guys, and, in rare but existent incidences, actually raped.

The traditional gender dynamic extended to other situations as well. Many men went around the playa buck naked; however, while there were plenty of topless women, I could probably count the naked ones on the fingers of one hand. This suggested that something—a lingering fear of sexual assault or maybe just shyness about one's own body—affected women more than men even in the supposedly liberated environment of the festival. This became even more pronounced when it came to gay men. I remember one guy in furry red “assless chaps” who was rubbing his exposed buttocks all over a chain-link fence in a truly awesome display of MDMA-fueled exhibition. Sexual orientation doesn't erase the importance of gender here; in other words, the behavior of gay men is still male behavior and relies upon male feelings of safety and autonomy. Meanwhile, women who chose to make sexual displays at Burning Man tended to do so under the protection of a man and to refrain from explicitly raunchy acts like those of the guy in the assless chaps.

The problem with all this was not that women needed to act more like these men, but rather that the differences between male and female behavior at Burning Man strongly echoed the ways in which desire and sexuality were channeled and commodified under capitalism. It reminded me of something I learned in Miami some years ago, when a local friend was taking me on a tour of South Beach's dirty and slutty side. First we went to a straight club, where sleek, elegant women slithered on the bar and the price of a moment of their attention with no more



physical contact than the momentary brush of skin as you slid your bill under her thong—was twenty dollars. Later, we showed up in a notorious gay bar, where muscle-bound, clean-cut men gyrated throughout the crowd in tight-whities. They were willing and ready to grind up against you for a good five minutes, and all for the whopping price of one dollar. I realized something that night about the commodification of sex. Women's sexuality was worth more than men's. Not twice as much, not five times as much, but upwards of twenty times as much per unit of time. Connected to this, although not necessarily by lines of causality, were a host of gender-based problems that dogged the deepest levels of our psychology: seeing women as objects of pursuit while men are pursuing subjects; the reduction of women's identities to their sexualities and therefore their bodies; and the sexual double standards by which men are expected to conquer and women to ensnare.

How can we move beyond these threadbare dynamics? How can we make progress on the gender issue in the counterculture without squashing our wildness, our desires, and our spontaneousness? Simply repressing the aggressive actions of the few might improve safety, but there are deeper, more structural problems that such blunt measures cannot touch. This is why the problem of gender kept reminding me that Burning Man is a microcosm of the broader patriarchal society and that we can't escape the limitations of that society just by participating in a desert festival. Truly radical cultural intervention is never that easy.

On the other hand, it's not impossible, either, and Burning Man would be a good place to set up a safe space where people could experiment with interventions that would complicate or defy the patterns I've identified above. There were lots of camps on the playa where people did outrageous things with sex and gender, but most of them played with or exaggerated existing gender roles instead of reversing or obliterating them. As an example, I present the case of the Girl Lock.

My friend Marcos and I were on our way to see a lecture on efforts to legalize MDMA one bright afternoon, when Marcos's girlfriend Rita began putting up some resistance. She didn't feel like seeing the lecture. She wanted to return to camp instead. Just then we passed the Girl Lock, where a guy was standing by a stack of beige plastic dog cages. "Girlfriend giving you trouble?" he asked. "Check her at the Girl Lock!

We promise to feed and water her at least occasionally." Marcos stepped up and the guy offered him a clipboard with some bogus documents. He signed them and the guy took Rita by the arm. She struggled slightly as he pushed her to her knees and nudged her into one of the cages, feet-first. We could hear her moaning as we walked away.

A few moments later, we were squatting on a dust-covered tarp with two hundred other people. Skinless figures wrapped in auras of pulsating energy stared down at us from a series of paintings by Alex Grey, while the speaker held forth about some MDMA experiments he had conducted legally in Israel. Ten minutes later, I had almost forgotten about Rita in her cage. Then I noticed Marcos twitching beside me.

"I feel so guilty," he whispered.

"Then go get her out," I said.

He shuffled out of the tent and returned a few minutes later, alone.

"What happened?" I asked.

He told me that they wouldn't let her out because he couldn't find his claim ticket. So I followed him back, expecting to see Rita suffering pathetically inside her cage.

Instead, we found her chained to a wall in front of a growing crowd, sighing with pleasure as the Girl-Lock guys applied a temporary tattoo to her left breast and caressed her belly with a long red feather. Marcos demanded that she be set free. They gave him some more fetish paperwork, which he filled out. Then they handed him a children's book called "The Letter D" and suggested that he hold it up for Rita to read from.

"D is for daisy and D is for dwarf!" she read, speaking in a high-pitched, little girl's voice. "D is also for diamonds! I like diamonds. So many words start with D."

Quite a large crowd had assembled to watch by that time, and I asked the guy standing next to me what he thought about the politics of what was happening. He just stared at me, then excused himself from the conversation. He didn't seem to want to talk about it.

I've related this experience without commentary so that readers can have some space in which to make up their own minds. My interpretation was that the exercise appropriated some very old male fantasies about women and turned them into a fetish game. For instance, the Lock implied that women were a burden weighing men down (a

nearby sign advised guys to “check your girl so you can be free to do drugs and chase other girls”). It also compared women to children and animals while simultaneously sexualizing them, a connection with many antecedents in history.

It’s interesting how much women enjoyed embodying these male fantasies. Perhaps acting out a lover’s fantasy is one of the easiest ways to feel sexy yourself. But certain aspects of the experience didn’t settle well in my mind. First, I found that people did not want to discuss what was happening. Others might have had a different experience, but I didn’t see anyone engaging in even the most casual form of discussion. And if we weren’t sharing our interpretations of what was happening, how much could we learn from it? There was also—to my knowledge—no equivalent camp for women to have men act out their fantasies, no “Boy Lock” of any kind. But then, what I really wanted to see were booths in which people were encouraged not just to exaggerate traditional gender roles but to break down, confront, and transcend them.

Burning Man encourages participants to do away with a whole host of oppressive styles of everyday life. No one carries a watch or knows what time it is; homosexuality and bisexuality are so accepted as to almost be the norm; and while people have to spend money in order to participate, they do get a temporary reprieve from cash-mediated exchange. During the festival, the rain clouds of capitalism hang back over the horizon, always within sight but leaving one dry for the time being (unless the need to buy drugs results in a soft summer shower). Meanwhile, a gift economy reigns supreme; you can go to a bar and order a drink or do a host of other things, and you will never be asked to pay.

However, as far as the asymmetries between the two principal genders go, I don’t feel they budged an inch. Why is this important stone left unturned? Perhaps it has to do with the fact that these behaviors, unlike those around race and class, are tied directly to sexual pleasure. This means that the Girl Lock can replicate oppressive gender stereotypes and still be fun, while a similar game playing with racial stereotypes (imagine a Black Lock) would never happen. The connections between gender and pleasure also mean that intervention in these areas—even as a temporary experiment—might be uncomfortable, dangerous, and unsexy, at least at first. But then, it would also be risky and risk can be a very sexy thing. Men might try out roles typically defined as female that they’ve been taught all their lives to reject. Women might try out roles typically defined as male and trust men not to take advantage of that. And, further, it might be possible in the context of a well-designed booth or a game to come up with some new roles that supersede these categories and the narratives of power and control that tend to surround them.

People at Burning Man often talk of “evolution” as if they were shedding the blood-soaked authoritarian skin of their old humanity and stepping into a cleaner hide. But if we’re really evolving out there in the desert, if we’re truly moving forward in some way that’s going to matter, are we going to accept the rules of gender as they operate in patriarchal society as part of our new world? When we’re evolved, will we still have a Girl Lock but no Boy Lock or, for that matter, an Unlock? Will the guys still take all the pictures while the pretty girls pose for them? Will men still come single and walk around naked while women prefer male chaperones?

Burning Man opens doors to all kinds of experimentation and that’s a wonderful thing, especially when it allows for experiences that change us in ways we can take back to “the other world.” I’ll always remember my experience at the Girl Lock as an example of how much pleasure people can get out of a game based on gender oppression. At the same time, a camp or a booth that challenged and intervened on the issue of gender might give us more radical experiences to carry home.

If you’re interested in putting the ideas presented in this article into action at next year’s Burning Man, the author welcomes your input and encourages you to send correspondence to [cookie.orlando](mailto:cookie.orlando@gmail.com) — at- gmail -dot — com



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