

Obscene Theming as Strategic Commodification of Public Spaces: Analyzing the Material Outcomes of Staging Sexualized Feminine Bodies in Venice Beach

Alexandre Pires

Université Paris Cité and Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, CNRS, EHESS,
UMR Géographie-cités 8504, F-75013 Paris, France
alexandre.pires@parisgeo.cnrs.fr

Abstract

The provocative display of feminine sexuality is a defining feature of many mainstream tourist destinations. In Venice Beach, such displays adopt a countercultural aesthetic while serving the interests of its private tourist economy. I argue that the sexualized staging of feminine bodies contributes to the obscene theming of public spaces—a mode of spatial production in which capitalist logics aestheticize, commodify, and ultimately privatize public spaces. Obscene theming operates through the aesthetic production of feminine bodies, which are incorporated into tourist imaginaries and fantasies of democratic freedom associated with Venice Beach. Drawing on Lukács's theory of commodification, I contend that this staged obscenity functions to reinforce spatial injustices. It masks the labor involved in producing these embodied aesthetics by framing them as expressions of individual agency, while enabling a normative tourist economy that categorizes, hierarchizes, and regulates embodied performances of aesthetic transgression. I use obscenity as an analytical lens to examine how ludic culture operates within public spaces shaped by the visible stigmas of a maximally unjust urban context.

Keywords

obscenity, public spaces, aesthetic theming, feminine bodies, commodification, embodiments



Introduction

Why did the sight of a topless feminine¹ skateboarder crossing Venice Beach offend the prudish sensibilities of a group of men consuming its landscape, who pointed at her as if she were a spatial anomaly? Tourist places in LA are not particularly known for the discreet and bourgeois elegance of their ludic aesthetics. Central places of LA's tourist economy bear elements of a commercial toponymy which stages a provocative sexualization of these bodies. They develop a playful use of obscenity and participate in a recurring marketing strategy within LA's tourist and commercial places, whether it's "Hustler Hollywood" and "Trashy Lingerie" with its "Park in rear" sign displayed on a woman's butt, Sunset Strip's escort clubs where individuals advertise their OnlyFans, or window-dressing on the pier of Santa Monica showing a man spanking his wife while she's sucking her finger (Figure 1). Venice Beach is not an exception with its lascivious dummies surrounding a baby's onesie where one can read "Bitches love me" and its multiple "boner garage" and "cum dumpster" panties (Figure 2).



Figure 1. Staging provocative representations of sexualized feminine bodies is a recurring strategy to gain visibility in Los Angeles's public spaces (Photos by author, 2022).

¹ I focus on "femininity" rather than "females" or "women" for methodological reasons. This article explores the cultural process of gender identification as spatially contextual and subject to economic strategies (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017) and develops a queer understanding of femininity as stemming from the contextual association of bodily styles with gender expression (McCann 2018). "Feminine bodies" thus corresponds to bodies I identified as feminine during my fieldwork, and to bodies I read as inflected as feminine by merchants and tourists - to bodies with gender expressions conventionally associated with women's bodily styles.



Figure 2. In Venice Beach, items of merchandise displayed along the Boardwalk often contribute to the local ludic atmosphere through representations of feminine bodies that draw on pornographic imagery (Photos by author, 2022).

The use of moral provocation through feminine bodily sexualization is prevalent across American tourist destinations. Yet it serves a distinctive purpose in Venice Beach. Here, it functions as part of spatial marketing strategies that brand Venice with democratic narratives of bodily freedom and expression. Merchants, temporary vendors, artists, tourists, and locals engage with these elements to participate in the cultural economy of the Boardwalk, thereby contributing to the production of its ludic atmosphere.

Yet not all moral and aesthetic provocations are treated equally. Although Venice Beach's public spaces host individuals from highly diverse socioeconomic backgrounds—including many homeless people and drug consumers—their transgressive bodily presence is categorized and governed differently by public and private agents within the tourist economy.

I argue that the obscene theming of public spaces in Venice Beach reinforces distinctions and hierarchies between different forms of aesthetic and moral transgression, ultimately enabling the economic exploitation and sociospatial marginalization of bodies whose transgressions do not align with locally desirable norms. This theming does not operate solely through symbolic influence but carries material implications. It functions as a cultural and moral strategy through which the commodification of femininity, shaped by tourism, contributes to the normative regulation and privatization of public spaces, and the bodies that practice them. My case study of Venice Beach shows how these dynamics unfold within a setting marked by visible and cruel socioeconomic injustices.

For a period, my own experience of Venice Beach led me to disregard the intensity of the social violence occurring in its public spaces. I initially approached Venice Beach's feminine representations through what I traditionally understood as its landscape—the static elements that compose its visual economy. My ethnographic methodology evolved later to include observations and interviews with Boardwalk users, as well as analyses of my own embodied performances in the field. This shift occurred as I recognized how crucial embodiments were to constructing Venice Beach's spatial theming. This realization forced me to reconsider my initial assumptions and examine why I had overlooked these embodied dimensions as constitutive of the relationship between Venice Beach's cultural economy and socioeconomic injustices. As Andrew Deener (2012, 7) has shown, the commercial materiality of the Boardwalk filters the experiences of tourists, masking the signs of stigmatization and injustice:

Filtered through the salty air, a pungent blend of body odor is masked by patchouli oil; flowery incense and coconut suntan lotion mix with marijuana, tobacco, and burning sage; and kettle corn and barbeque smoke blend together with the fumes of urine and sun-rotted garbage overflowing out of trash cans.

Building on Deener's insights, I suggest that the sensory organization of space acts as a screen. Obscene theming, in this sense, conceals social injustices and exploits the labor behind this concealment to enforce spatial production. It produces an affective and spectacular narrative in which moral transgression and bodily freedom are celebrated, while the everyday violence of exclusion, labor exploitation, and poverty is rendered invisible.

My point is that obscene theming extends beyond the symbolic representation of feminine bodies. I build on Lukács' insights on commodification to frame obscenity as a critical tool and analyze how hedonistic and spectacular culture is weaponized by dominant economic agents, through feminine sexualization, to reify core moral and bodily norms underpinning the socioeconomic production of public spaces (Lukács 1971). I specifically elaborate on how ludic spatialities construct cosmetic transgressions that enable socioeconomic reification.

Obscene theming helps reshape public normativity, reinforcing unjust moral hierarchies while simultaneously exploiting the diverse embodiments that emerge from their unjust spatial context. This ultimately contributes to the privatization of public spaces, through the consolidation of a normative, mainstream tourist economy that—under the guise of transgressive marketing—further marginalizes bodies deemed undesirable for the unfolding of its capitalist spatialities.

This article is divided into two sections. Section 1 sets out my theoretical and methodological perspectives on the spatial function of obscene theming by presenting a critical review of the literature and methodologies I mobilized. Section 2 explores how obscene theming contributes to commodifying public spaces by presenting the empirical results of my research. First, I show that the obscene theming of Venice Beach operates through the strategic landscaping of feminine sexuality. I then explore how the public staging of obscenity helps construct the area's cosmetic democratic qualities by concealing the embodied aesthetic labor underpinning its spatial marketing. I argue that this concealment contributes to reifying the socioeconomic conditions underlying such labor, through the

normative production of feminine embodiments in public spaces. Finally, Section 2 reflects on the material outcomes of the normative logics produced by obscene theming, discussing how they help reinforce socioeconomic injustices through the further marginalization of transgressive embodiments.

Building a Critical Geography of Obscenity

Framing Obscenity through Marxist, Queer and Feminist Lenses

My critical engagement with the concept of obscenity illuminates the moral contradictions embedded in Venice Beach's spatial organization. Here, public spaces simultaneously contain bodies marginalized through intersectional systems of domination and a spectacular atmosphere cultivated for tourist consumption. I argue that the enactment of obscene theming by public and private agents—from agents of the local tourist and commercial economy to tourists—facilitates this spatial juxtaposition, allowing the development of a tourist economy within a space visibly bearing the stigmas of a maximally unjust city (Mitchell 2024).

Rather than perpetuating traditional and legal definitions of obscenity that have historically criminalized feminine and queer sexualities as morally deviant, I deliberately appropriate this heavily weighted concept to demonstrate how economic agents exploit feminine sexuality to reinforce unjust socioeconomic structures. I align with scholars who demonstrate that economic strategies shape the moral frameworks governing the spatial display of sexualized feminine bodies in public spaces (Hubbard 2008; Edwards 2010; Crewe and Martin 2017). I draw on Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's idea that narratives around sexuality, though traditionally relegated to the private sphere, help structure public spaces and create hierarchical distinctions between normative and non-normative embodiments (Berlant and Warner 1998). I use obscenity to analyze the moral production of spatial subjectivities as an inherently economic process, reading tourists' and merchants' emotional and embodied responses to provocative solicitations as strategies of positioning within capitalist spaces.

Similarly to Clayton Rosati (2023), I engage with definitions of obscenity beyond sexualized content, characterizing it by its function. I frame obscenity as the discursive process of making feminine sexuality "all-too-visible" (Baudrillard 1988) for unjust purposes. I thus do not characterize pornographic representations of feminine bodies as inherently obscene; instead, I examine how representations making feminine sexualization "all-too-visible" are exploited for their perceived obscenity to enforce capitalist spatial norms through obscene theming.

I argue that Venice Beach's obscene theming fundamentally depends on the circulation of feminine bodily representations and embodiments that some merchants and performers deliberately frame as obscene. These agents craft representations of feminine bodies and strategically position them in space to generate moral provocations they deem economically valuable. The provocative nature of these representations consistently derives from their connection to feminine sexualization borrowed from pornographic imagery—content traditionally considered inappropriate for public display and thus labeled obscene.

I extend Rosati's insights by conceptualizing obscenity as a form of theming—a strategic aestheticization of public spaces that allows the development of a leisure economy and

generates material effects (Sorkin, 1992; Gottdiener 2001), including the production of embodiments in space. I interpret it as a contemporary mechanism of commodification, as theorized by Georg Lukács (1971). I therefore contend that obscene theming serves the reification of socioeconomic conditions of spatial production in Venice Beach through the concealment of their structural and consequent injustices.

I explore the concealing function of obscene theming by showing how it simulates democratic public spaces to advance their privatization. This process contributes to the formation of “necessary illusions” (Chomsky 2003), whereby Venice Beach appears to fulfill its democratic function as a public space by permitting public expressions of socially perceived transgressive representations and embodiments. I argue that producing “necessary illusions” relies on the labor of public and private agents who allow the local tourist economy to unfold while organizing the cosmetic performance of the Boardwalk as a democratic public space (Isaac 1998; Parkinson 2012).

My materialist framework centers the body as a key site through which the semiotics of public spaces are produced—an aspect largely overlooked in existing literature on themed environments. I argue that the obscene theming of Venice Beach regulates and produces feminine bodily representations and embodiments, thereby extending analysis beyond the purely symbolic influence of spatial aesthetics. Growing literature on spatial embodiments enriches my own perspectives, by showing how spatial norms shape subjectivities through spatial organization of embodied enactments (Simonsen 2020). Drawing on neo-Marxist feminist approaches to aesthetics and labor, I explore how obscene theming relies on unpaid emotional, gendered, and bodily labor to conceal socioeconomic injustices and enforce capitalist spatial production (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017).

My focus on Venice Beach and its body-oriented tourist spatiality allows me to construct a case study on aesthetic theming as emerging from embodied practices. Drawing on work that highlights the role of feminine embodiments in shaping tourist gaze and spatialities (Desmond, 2001; Gravari-Barbas, Staszak, and Graburn 2017), I show that the theming of feminine bodies driven by tourism extends beyond the paid labor force.

This case study builds on research largely rooted in queer theory, where the production of space is understood as inseparable from the production of subjectivities and their embodied experiences in and through space (Longhurst 2001; Ahmed 2007). I develop critical insights into the economic function of the dialectic between bodily performances and spatial performances (Gregson and Rose 2000) with particular attention to sexualized narratives and displays, to understand the spatial constructedness of feminine subjectivities and the role of sexuality in their capitalist production (Curtis 2004).

My analysis is further informed by literature on the cultural history of Californian feminine bodies (Devienne 2019) and their influence on both the symbolic and material production of urban space (Currid-Halkett and Scott 2013; Joseph 2016). I use these references to explore the material construction of spectacular spatialities, as studied by scholarship on tourism in Los Angeles and Las Vegas (Joseph 2016; Nédélec 2017).

Focusing on feminine bodies allows me to develop a complex understanding of the relationship between capitalism and space, and of the intersectional forms of domination that allow the reproduction of the tourist economy in Venice Beach. Building on Andrew Deener’s (2012) analysis of socioeconomic diversity in Venice Beach, I argue that obscene theming

operates through the strategic exploitation of narratives of diversity which reinforce racist, heteronormative, body-normative, and classist spatial norms.

I thus critically revisit the claim that democratizing feminine sexuality necessarily leads to democratic feminist politics (McNair 2002), showing instead that the increased visibility of minorities' bodies in public spaces does not always translate into democratic access to public spaces. I build my critique on research that theorizes the material forms of domination enacted by racial capitalism (hooks 1992; Bhattacharyya 2018), hetero-cis-normativity (Ahmed 2007; Hubbard 2008) and patriarchy (McRobbie 2009; Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017). I specifically reflect on the moral limitations of Venice Beach's staged obscenity by examining race and queerness, drawing on literature on pornography that explores the hypersexualization and moralization of marginalized bodies (Shimizu 2007; Scott 2010).

My argument about obscenity and spatial injustices (Harvey 1975) is further supported by scholarship on the spatial management of homelessness, which shows how public spaces are organized to enable cruel forms of exclusion (Mitchell 2024). I argue that obscene theming relies on the embodied labor of marginalized groups to sustain the affective and visual economy of the urban spectacle. While researchers on homelessness have characterized certain performances as "artistic" (Cappelli 2024), I contend that such framings contribute to their economic valorization, reinforcing the gendered and aesthetic dimensions of the oppressions faced by homeless people (Earle-Brown 2022). Observing how merchants, tourists, and public agents categorize different performances of aesthetic and embodied transgressions deepens my critique of obscene theming, which—beneath its democratic veneer—conceals the reification of cruel socioeconomic injustices that hierarchizes bodies on the Boardwalk.

Studying Themed Public Spaces: Methodological Explorations

In March 2023, I spent two months exploring Los Angeles, frequently traveling from Mar Vista to the seashore. Several times a week, I ran or took the bus to Venice Beach, seeking to confront my preconceived notions of LA's beach culture with the materialities of one of its most iconic public spaces. I approached Venice Beach with the curiosity of a newcomer to the United States. At the time, my familiarity with the place came primarily from the French reality TV shows of my childhood, and from my emotional and aesthetic attachment with the kitsch femininities embodied by their characters. Rather than suppress my unfamiliarity, I chose to embrace it—valuing my initial, even naïve, perceptions as a methodological lens to investigate how feminine sexualization materializes in public spaces.

My research approach developed in several connected phases. First, I adopted a tourist gaze that focused on sensory and aesthetic aspects. I created a photographic archive (Cronin 2011; Mung 2015) of images and three-dimensional representations of feminine bodies within Venice Beach's landscape (Rosewarne, 2007; Kalms, 2017; Arnold, 2021).

Following Rose's (2001) methodological insights, I analyzed these materials using content and semiotic approaches. I expanded my research to examine how these visual elements were produced and received by local economic agents. I conducted eighteen semi-structured interviews with tourists and merchants on the Boardwalk, along with numerous informal conversations and a formal interview with a Venice Chamber of Commerce

representative.² During interviews, I used photo-elicitation to explore participants' views on feminine bodies displayed in public spaces.

As I became more familiar with the field, I developed an ethnographic approach focused on how bodies perform on the Boardwalk and how they interact with the landscape. Drawing on Deener's work on Venice Beach's spatial organization of socioeconomic diversity, I examined how economic and cultural structures are lived through everyday spatial practices (2012). This helped me understand aesthetics as a material issue rather than just a symbolic one and showed me how the seemingly static aesthetic elements I first studied perform social functions.

My research approach was inevitably influenced by my own experiences as someone performing femininity in both my fieldwork and everyday life. I remained aware of how my own body was situated in the research context (Browne and Nash 2010; Arnold 2021) and explored the methodological possibilities offered by my feminine performance (Haraway 1988; McCann 2018). I approach everyday queer performances as strategic acts with methodological potential, using my own gendered experience of public spaces as a critical geographic method (Ahmed 2007; Browne and Nash 2010). Conducting my fieldwork sometimes in heels and hotpants helped me gain trust and enthusiastic greetings from some women and queer individuals. This not only shaped the gendered dynamics of my fieldwork but also influenced the friendly tone of the interviews and their potential discursive outcomes.

While my initial interviews included diverse participants, particularly in terms of gender and age, my growing discomfort during my fieldwork gradually narrowed my selection. After experiencing dismissive attitudes and inappropriate behaviors from some male participants, I began to categorize potential interviewees based on how I perceived their likely behavior toward me. These judgments were filtered through my own cultural capital, which I used to assess individuals and protect my emotional and physical wellbeing in the field. As a result, later interviews were more congenial, as I gravitated toward people whose body performance suggested they might be comfortable with my gender expression and research interests—though I recognize these aesthetic and moral judgments were based on my own socially constructed assumptions.

Younger women and queer people constitute most of my interviewees, though I also engaged with a small number of men and older tourists. While most participants were American or visiting from English-speaking countries, I conducted one interview in Spanish. Financial constraints also influenced my fieldwork, as it was self-funded. Several merchants I interviewed implicitly expected compensation, often in the form of a purchase from their store.

My positionality as a researcher, perceived as white, significantly shaped my fieldwork. This became particularly evident after interviewing a representative from the Venice Chamber of Commerce, which prompted me to recognize my prior inattention to the policing and surveillance practices along the Boardwalk. I attribute this oversight to my racial privilege, which allowed me to conduct street interviews and move through space in ways that

² I began by explaining the aims and methods of my research to participants, ensuring they understood the voluntary and anonymous nature of their involvement. I then obtained their informed verbal consent to participate in a brief interview for use in my master's thesis.

disrupted the Boardwalk's normative spatial practices without facing the scrutiny or consequences that researchers with racialized embodiments might experience. Race also played a role in shaping my interviews, though it did not limit the diversity of my interlocutors, who identified with a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds.

My concerns regarding legality only revolved around my perceived queerness. I deliberately avoided engaging with straight couples and families with children, despite their significant presence as tourists in Venice Beach, due to concerns about discussing sexuality-related topics with these demographics. This methodological choice reflects my personal navigation of public spaces—such as gendered bathrooms—where I've repeatedly encountered adults who instrumentalize their children's presence to justify expressing moral condemnation toward my transfeminine appearance. Repeatedly experiencing both spectacular moral celebration and condemnation of my gendered bodily performances on the Boardwalk led me to question how spectacular culture shaped my fieldwork. This positionality ultimately provided me with analytical insights into how obscenity functions in tourist spaces—simultaneously enforcing cis-heteronormativity while producing a cosmetic display that accommodates socioeconomic diversity within Venice Beach's public spaces.

Reproducing pictures that could be represented as offensive in this article aims to illustrate how obscenity unfolds in Venice Beach and to serve its scientific critique. I acknowledge that my own sarcasm could sometimes be interpreted as part of the postmodern mythology of Venice. I think humor has been a way to deal with my own affects in the field and contributed to lighter moments of the sisterhood I was able to share with my interviewees when both mocking and assuming our own corruption regarding the market culture we were criticizing. This use of sarcastic interaction—familiar from my own queer experiences of forging friendships—helped me build emotional connections with tourists and interviewees marginalized by their perceived racial or ethnic background, gender performance, body shape and class.

Obscene Theming as an Unjust Spatial Strategy

Staging Obscenity within the Landscape

Obscene theming is first enforced through the strategic landscaping of sexualized feminine bodies. Through landscape, obscene theming helps Venice Beach become a spectacle of commodification, in which the process of turning sexualized femininity into commercial bait is being consumed. Building on Lukács' insights into commodity fetishism, I show that the landscaping of sexualized femininity reinforces the commodification of Venice Beach's public spaces by staging moral provocation as a spatial spectacle, thereby generating economic value through the aestheticization of normative forms of moral transgression.

The material structure of this landscape is first characterized by a spatial hypervisibility of feminine bodies. They make up 64 percent of the images displayed on commercial storefronts within the boundaries of the Boardwalk, while my observations of non-iconographic displays confirm these insights. The mannequins that horizontally and vertically delimit the Boardwalk—as well as the merchandise they mediate (Figure 3)—predominantly represent feminine bodies. This creates a comprehensive sensory environment where feminine bodies saturate public spaces.



Figure 3. Pictures, mannequins and commodities all contribute to obscene theming by saturating public spaces with sexualized representations of feminine bodies (Photos by author, 2022).

These visible feminine bodies construct and fit into a materially hierarchized landscape where sexualized representations are more visible than others. Their visibility stems from marketing strategies that showcase feminine bodies in ways stereotypical of local and regional star-systems, aimed at national and international tourists, such as Barbie, Kim Kardashian, Pamela Anderson or Marilyn Monroe (Figure 4). Other iconic feminine bodies derive from local and regional fictional imaginaries. Displays showcase mermaids, beach beauties wearing bikinis, blond hippies in charge of weed delivery, and various pornographic categories (pin-ups, playmates, MILFs, and domina) (Figure 5).

These representations appear repeatedly in local advertising media or on the merchandise comprising the shop displays. Merchants strategically deploy sexualized representations—especially those perceived as morally provocative—as commercial bait to attract attention and customers. They are concentrated in the most visible parts of shop windows, where they litter the Boardwalk and are regularly photographed by users. The employees who craft the shop displays organize them strategically to make, as one shop attendant explained, “the best choices [regarding] marketing.”

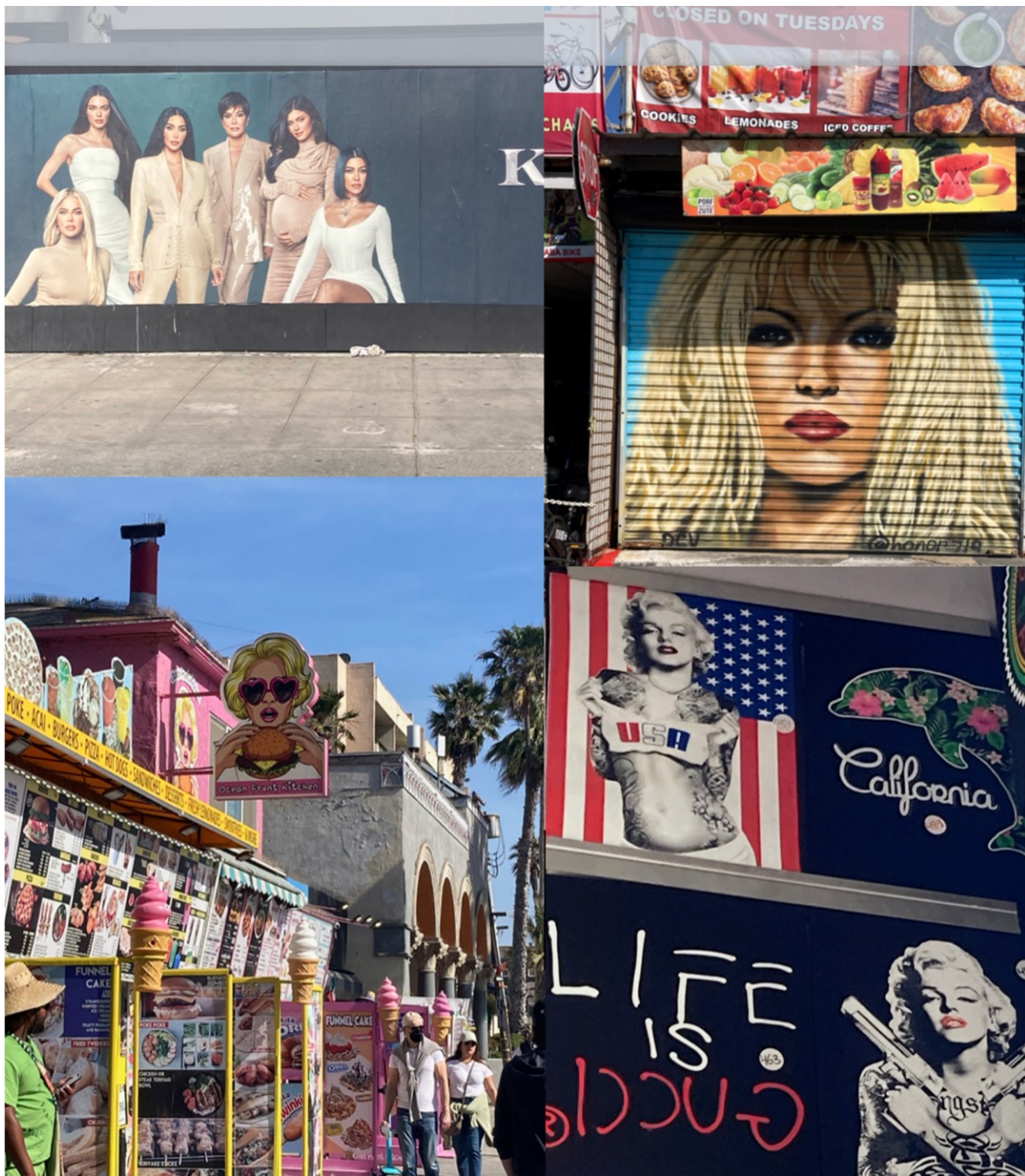


Figure 4. Venice Beach's landscape relies on stereotypical femininities, featuring iconic bodies from LA's star system with enhanced characteristics drawn from American and California beach culture, such as Pamela Anderson, Marilyn Monroe, or Kim Kardashian (Photos by author, 2022).



Figure 5. Fictional feminine stereotypes are also characteristic of Venice Beach's landscape. These representations draw from local beach, cool and new-age culture, as well as from pornographic categories shaped by national and local industries—such as Playboy (Photos by author, 2022).

Obscene theming thus acts as a sensory and spatial strategy which uses sexualized commodities to sexualize spatial production (Curtis 2004). It builds the commodification of public spaces in Venice Beach upon a narrative about the capitalist aesthetics of commodifying feminine bodies. This narrative then constructs a semiotic association between this metanarrative of sexualizing of the commodification process and the space from which this narrative is woven. Postcards or a head-in-the-hole in Venice Beach are indeed saturated with references to stereotypical idiosyncrasies associated with Californian sexualized bodies, such as blonde hair, big breasts, a fit body, and a bikini, and they are highlighted with obvious and multiple toponyms (Figures 6 and 7).

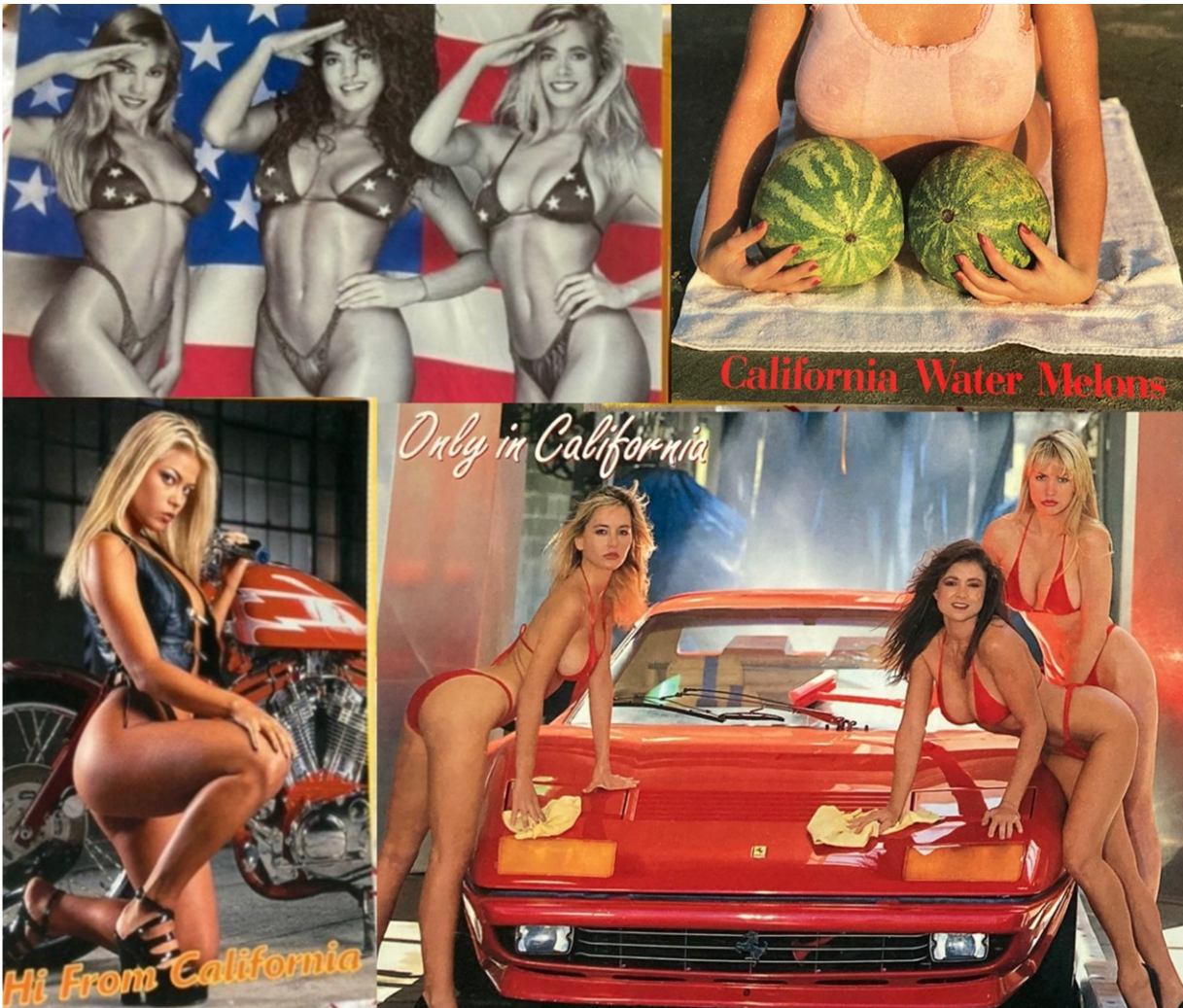


Figure 6. Postcard almost always fetishize feminine bodies to locate Venice Beach within the regional, national and international geography of beauty. California and US Symbols and toponyms are commonly used to spatialize the featured bodies (Photos by author, 2022).

The economic functioning of Venice Beach’s cultural logic relies on producing the ordinary nature of visible obscenity in lived space while constructing narratives about the extraordinary nature of spatial visibility in conceived space. Boardwalk merchants instrumentalize obscenity through provocative displays, crafting stories that position the public visibility of sexualized femininity as morally extraordinary while simultaneously normalizing it as Venice’s characteristic aesthetic (Nédélec 2017).

Space operates as the primary justification for these displays. “Venice” and “LA” function as toponymic explanations—one interviewee travelling from Miami characterized LA as the “Capital of Beautiful,” while one merchant deflected accountability by arguing “That’s what America wants.” Even those expressing disgust or approval toward provocative representations adopted a blasé attitude, signaling their distance from the industry’s expectations of surprised tourist reactions. The interviewee from Miami also noted comparable marketing strategies in her hometown, defining Venice as the “LA version of South Beach.”



Figure 7. This head-in-the-hole invites to roleplay local gendered stereotypes. Grotesque representations of sexualized—and often feminine—stereotypical bodies are characteristic of Venice Beach’s landscape (Photo by author, 2022).

This dialectic characterizes the functioning of obscene theming—constructing performatively morally provocative spatial displays while ensuring their social normalization. Venice emerges as a space where staged obscenity becomes morally normal and ordinary, while simultaneously being identified as an anomaly unique to its geographical provocative identity. Advertisers, merchants and users develop spectacular ordinary narratives about the extraordinary nature of the local landscape, referencing its position within national and global economic spaces of feminine beauty.

Whether justified by location within a beauty “capital,” status as a tourist center, or, in the words of one shop attendant, claims to synthesize “everything about America—freedom,” industrial narratives instrumentalize the visibility of feminine sexuality as spatially extraordinary characteristics to legitimize their presence within public spaces. Economic agents thus brand themselves as responsible for the cultural order of Venice Beach’s public space, whose democratic qualities achieve the national ideal of freedom through displays that stage obscenity to performatively challenge traditional moral norms regarding feminine sexuality.

Despite claims of creative freedom, this landscape remains contained within definite moral boundaries. Venice Beach’s representations of feminine sexuality still operate within

limited legal and moral frameworks, creating just enough provocation while remaining sufficiently conventional to nurture its tourist economy. Meanwhile, sexualized representations of visibly BIPOC³ and queer bodies remain mostly absent from the Boardwalk's landscape. In this way, the landscape strategically avoids challenging traditional notions of obscenity by sidestepping representations that legal frameworks have historically condemned.

The sexualized imagery drawing from pornographic aesthetics focuses exclusively on stereotypical white, thin, cisfeminine and occasionally cismasculine bodies. The exploitation of obscenity depends on careful spatial management of visibility, deliberately avoiding sexualized representations traditionally deemed abject—those beyond whiteness and heterocis-normativity (Shimizu, 2007; Scott, 2010). Several interviewees who identified as queer and Asian critiqued the provocative panties and hotpants displays, characterizing them as products marketed primarily to “white straight tourists.” These participants expressed their disapproval by highlighting how they perceived whiteness as embedded in both the visual presentation and commercial strategy underlying these displays.

The strategic construction of the landscape by merchants and agents of the tourist industry reveals how mainstream tourism shapes public spaces in Venice Beach by setting the norms of its dominant aesthetic theme. The moral production of this landscape functions as mere cosmetic display, constructing a spectacle of democratic qualities central to Venice Beach's marketing while reproducing normative aesthetics that facilitate tourist development. This moral infrastructure underpins the unfolding obscene theming and drives the commodification of public spaces by concealing its normativity beneath a veneer of moral provocations. The spatial staging of feminine sexuality further advances this commodification process, effectively privatizing public spaces while simultaneously generating a democratic spectacle that themes Venice Beach as authentically public.

Concealing the Labor behind Staged Obscenity

In Venice Beach, commodifying feminine bodies functions as a cultural strategy through which economic agents aestheticize sexualization to conceal the conditions that produce the value of material space. This shifts the logic of commodity fetishism toward a secondary layer—a fetishism of commodity fetishism—where not only are the social relations behind commodities concealed, but the labor behind fetishization is itself aestheticized. Drawing on Lukács (1971), I argue that the concealment of the socioeconomic conditions underlying spatial production—driven by commodification—emerges through ludic dynamics that themselves enact forms of socioeconomic reification.

The ludic atmosphere is central to this concealment. It enables Venice Beach's tourist economy to expand through public spaces and further privatize them, while benefiting from the positive cultural associations tied to their supposedly public character. Sexualized and provocative representations of feminine bodies participate in the construction of this ludic culture, employing humorous diversions as standards for representing feminine bodies. The most visible feminine bodies are indeed portrayed in styles ranging from pop art to kitsch. Figure 7 shows a head-in-the-hole board as a ludic activity to Boardwalk users. The showcased

³ Black, Indigenous and people of color

body embraces the commercial aesthetics of Venice, as signified by the emphasis on the physiological characteristics identifying this body with iconic—but grotesque—femininity. The chest and buttocks hypertrophied by the pressure of a Star-Spangled Banner-colored bikini and the platinum blond hair invites tourists to embody a stereotypical Californian woman.

Reiterating these representations and constructing their hypervisibility in public spaces contribute to spatializing this ludic atmosphere and actualizing its obscene theming. Producers and users of the Boardwalk elaborate a narrative about this spatial atmosphere to normalize the influence of this local provocative theme of commodifying feminine bodies. Merchants—as well as users—who did not express moral indignation about sexualized images of feminine bodies referred to the “fun” atmosphere of Venice to justify their moral stance, one of them arguing that Venice was all about “sexuality, creativity, and fun.”

Yet, the visible display of racialized and queer feminine bodies speaks to the instrumentality of feminine sexualization in Venice Beach’s economy. Though less visible than the white and cisgender bodies, their visibility within the landscape is conditioned to their integration within the ludic narrative woven by local economic agents (shops and the tourist industry) or political agents (the municipality) (Mung, 2015). Their occasional sexualization is maintained within moral boundaries, preferring eroticism rather than direct references to pornographic body aesthetics. For instance, exoticized and fantasized representations of Asian and Arab women appear in cartoonish form on the commercial shutters of an “Egyptian Bazaar” selling crystals and hippie merchandise, aligning with the area’s commodified New Age atmosphere (Figure 8). When the nudity of racialized bodies does appear, it is typically confined to ephemeral setups operated by temporary merchants catering to Black customers, such as a durag stand (Figure 8).

Meanwhile, visible references to queer sexualities often avoid representing bodies, opting instead for literal signifiers—such as slogans about “gays” and images of unicorns and rainbows. Their timid integration into the local provocative ludic culture speaks to its moral limitations and normativity. Exclusion from public and mainstream sexualization further reveals the intersectional workings of body normativity on the Boardwalk, where sexualized feminine embodiments are central to the aesthetic theme, yet normative boundaries around gender expression and race are maintained.

Other representations of racialized and queer bodies visible on the Boardwalk remain mostly serious, and exploit minorities’ bodies for branding purposes. The mainstreaming of Venice Beach has increased the presence of ads visible across Los Angeles’s central places, mostly global companies selling luxury goods and entertainment. Global brands like Gucci, Cartier, or Spotify, as well as public authorities willing to be perceived as progressive, represent themselves to the Boardwalk users employing representations of diverse bodies, for instance regarding racial features (Figure 9). These representations typically adopt a more serious tone, featuring unsmiling bodies styled according to traditional, celebrity-driven aesthetic standards (Crockett, 2008). Representations displayed on some municipality-owned mosaics contribute to this narrative by featuring inclusive portrayals of physically diverse bodies, reinforcing the image of Venice Beach as a space shaped by communal agency.



Figure 8. Race is embedded in narratives to serve different economic strategies. The rare representations of non-white bodies are displayed either by esoteric shops, luxury brands, mainstream companies or the municipality. Occasionally, an itinerant salesperson will come and sell products targeting racialized customers (Photos by author, 2022)



Figure 9. The municipality often embeds representing diverse bodies in a narrative showcasing the democratic qualities of Venice Beach's public spaces. Here, on tiles along the Boardwalk, a storytelling about former Venice murals is displayed. The story of the artistic legacy of Venice Beach explains that it was 'where community voices could be expressed' (Photos by author, 2022).

Obscene theming thus frames socioeconomic diversity as evidence of the Boardwalk's public character, while concealing the labor behind its marketing. Whether they were public agents, merchants or tourists from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, interviewees often emphasized its "creativity," "diversity," "eclecticism," and the fact it was welcoming to "eccentric" individuals, portraying these idiosyncrasies as proof of Venice Beach's democratic qualities. This aligns with the dominant racial narrative advertised through the local landscape, reproducing discursive tropes of spectacular humanism that aestheticize inclusion while maintaining normative hierarchies. The rare moments of distancing from this dominant narrative expressed during my interviews emerged amidst ironic interactions developed with some women, queer or racialized individuals. These ironic expressions, characteristic of Venice Beach's themed culture, sometimes even reproduce other socioeconomic stigmas to formulate criticism. The idea that Venice Beach's provocative aesthetics, behind their inclusive marketing, are catered for "white and straight basic people" as expressed by a group of two Asian women and a white gay guy, was echoed by the joke of a Hispanic younger woman who told me that this space was made for "Trevors."⁴

Merchants and users participate in the concealment function of this spatial narrative. A merchant emphasized the sociological eclecticism of the clientele targeted by the provocative underwear displayed in his store. According to him, this clientele would be composed in equal numbers of "men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals." By listing antagonistic sociological characteristics, he aimed to signify the supposedly egalitarian sociology of his clientele. I heard comparable discursive strategies from the representative of the Venice Chamber of Commerce:

The other thing in Venice [...], it's like never Neverland from Peter Pan, like people don't get old here, [...] you don't really have an age barrier here, you know there's all kind of [...] people [...] seventy or eighty that all kind of work out together and play the sports, and that's probably kind of unique here. [...] so you have [...] straight people, gay people, boys, [...] girls, with different races of people etc., and we have all the different ethnics. And that's a very welcoming environment [...].

These discursive constructions participate in a political narrative that morally legitimizes their business practices, since they express positive qualities that do not contribute to reinforcing any explicit forms of social discrimination. They are performed through spectacularized embodiments and voicing that characterize the concealed labor taking place on the Boardwalk. For instance, merchants often stage spectacular masculine characters to sell products. One revealed his strategy as "making women the star of the show"—creating interactions that position women as visual centers within the commercial atmosphere. Though constructed to appear spontaneous, these encounters function like cinematic scenes, enhancing the perceived value of labor through staged authenticity.

Obscene theming thus serves to disguise these performative aspects of spatial embodiments in Venice Beach as genuine rather than labor. Here, this concealment prevents

⁴ She was referring to the character of Grand Theft Auto V, conceived as the caricature of a 'redneck' from rural California.

observers from recognizing how such gendered normative behaviors function deliberately as economic strategies for shaping space and producing its economic value.

Obscene Theming and the Spatial Production of Feminine Embodiments

Obscene theming encourages feminine users of the Boardwalk to elaborate political narratives about their own bodily experiences in public spaces and produce their spatial embodiment to position themselves within this themed spatiality. By doing so, it conceals the aesthetic labor it relies on, thereby contributing to the reification of the unjust spatial conditions that make it possible. Through ludic staging in public spaces, labor is aestheticized as an individual expression of freedom—concealing the fact that these performances are shaped and constrained by the unjust socioeconomic norms sustained by a tourist economy dependent on this aesthetic labor.

The aesthetic theming of feminine embodiments first involves concealing their performance as stemming from labor. Obscene theming inclines feminine users to develop agentive narratives about their own aesthetic spatial performances, especially regarding sexualization. Several feminine interviewees expressed their reflections on Venice's visual economy through comments about how their bodies were perceived in relation to the local market culture. Some expressed discomfort with the overt sexualization of their bodies, describing a sense of spatial marginalization that led them to make conscious efforts to render themselves invisible. One woman exclaimed "not with my body!" when asked if she would wear a bikini on the Boardwalk—pointing to age and body shape as reasons for her choices. A woman from Argentina condemned how these industrial representations sexualized femininity, identifying them as "horrible," "machistas," and "not appropriate in the 21st century." She presented herself as a "feminista" by pointing out how deliberately comfortable and unsexy her outfit was.

Others, by contrast, framed their self-sexualization as a personal and political choice. Rather than rejecting the sexualized norms of Venice Beach outright, they often embraced a provocative tone to articulate a form of agency. A woman in tie-dye yoga leggings, whose professional activities consist of "making stuff with essential oils," denounced the manipulation behind a hypersexualized sushi ad while insisting it was not a moral critique of feminine sexuality. "I am a very sexual person," she said repeatedly, offering a distinction between manufactured sexualization and self-asserted sexuality, with her critique culminating in a desire to rebrand the panties from "Sam's Ass" to "Jennifer's Dick."

More broadly, participants often embodied the ludic atmosphere of the local tourist economy to assert their agency, particularly when acknowledging their own conformity to normative aesthetic standards. One interviewee, for instance, humorously aligned herself with the same ad by exclaiming, "I look like that when I want sushi!"

Strategic embodiments framed these narratives and ensured the visibility of a fiction of agency, a narrative through which they assume individual moral responsibility for how they stage and sexualize their bodies in public spaces (Elias, Gill, and Scharff 2017). Feminine bodies thus build the perceived value of their body by showcasing overt sexualization as the outcome of a deliberate choice. One interviewee staged stereotypical femininity as a deliberate strategy to gain spatial and economic recognition. Adorned with fake eyelashes, long nails, breast forms, and a voluminous wig, they performed a hyperfeminine appearance—

calling out to passersby and barely acknowledging the interview, as if to stage a star-like persona, too busy being seen to be interrupted. "I'm here to make a fashionable statement," they declared, "be noticed, and become famous."

Highlighting the deliberate aspect of personal choice regarding body sexualization is central to how agents and tourists construct the economic value of their embodiment. Feminine street vendors who succeed in gaining visibility often rely on provocative body performances. Younger women frequently sexualize their appearance as a strategy for drawing interest to their goods. For instance, Bianca, a street astrologer, performed in a bikini, with green hair and a fake diamond tiara, dancing energetically to Ariana Grande to capture the attention of tourists. In contrast, an older rice engraver with a larger body adopted a grotesque costume, topped with a jester hat, using aesthetic exaggeration as a form of transgressive visibility that deviated from dominant sexualized feminine norms. Even in spaces mostly practiced by masculine bodies, visibility remains contingent on performing in relation to feminine sexualized aesthetics. The only woman I observed on the basketball courts enacted an ultra-feminine version of athleticism—tanned, blonde, surgically enhanced, and dressed in pink—embodying a hyper-stylized "Barbie" athlete.

During fieldwork, I embodied local norms governing bodily visibility to avoid being perceived as a freak or a potential threat by my interviewees. I adopted behaviors likely to be read as confident, presenting my transfeminine appearance as the result of a deliberate aesthetic choice. This included selecting outfits that sexualized my body while aligning with contemporary fashion trends—signaling that the exposure of my body was not accidental or deviant, but rather part of a self-styled, culturally legible performance. I remember worrying that a bump on my forehead—from walking into a door—might disrupt this calibrated aesthetic strategy. Repeated compliments from tourists confirmed the relative normality of my appearance—in the sense that my body aesthetics remained conforming enough to avoid the spatial policing and avoidance often directed at heavily marginalized bodies.

The aesthetic negotiations behind the construction of my own embodiment reveal how obscene theming not only influences how bodies appear, but also how they are perceived, valued, and granted access to public spaces. It produces a spatial economy where certain bodies—slim, white, youthful, cis-passing—can afford provocative performances to build their economic value in public spaces, while others are spectacularized, pathologized, and categorized as freaks when challenging moral and aesthetic norms and participating in the local spectacular atmosphere.

By pushing feminine users to internalize the responsibility of making themselves legible, obscene theming recasts structural injustices as aesthetic failures or moral shortcomings. This dynamic is not incidental but fundamental to how public space becomes commodified in Venice Beach—the very process of aesthetic labor, when rendered invisible as choice, becomes part of what is being consumed. Bodily visibility and aestheticization become economic strategies that reify racialized, gendered, ableist, and class hierarchies through the very embodiments that seem to celebrate freedom and self-expression. The democratic narrative of Venice Beach as a space of bodily freedom thus becomes the means through which public spaces are privatized and regulated according to their capacity to generate economic value through the commodification of feminine embodiments.

Obscene Theming as Normative Hierarchizing of Transgressive Embodiments

The production of feminine embodiments through obscene theming reveals the selectivity of the celebration of transgressive embodiments in Venice Beach. The same spatial economy that encourages certain bodies to perform provocative femininity simultaneously marginalizes some of the transgressive embodiments it produces. This cosmetic, selective openness exposes how obscene theming functions not as democratic inclusion, but as a normative system that hierarchizes different forms of embodied transgressions—and which transgressions generate spatial exclusion.

This hierarchization becomes visible in the spatial transformation of how Venice Beach manages transgressive embodiments. The influence of obscene theming on spatial embodiments indeed produces unjust conditions that categorize and hierarchize bodies according to their perceived right to enact visible moral transgressions in public spaces. The mainstreaming of Venice Beach's tourist industry has increasingly privatized its public spaces, using obscene theming to marginalize unhoused, disabled, migrant, queer, and racialized bodies. These same bodies are paradoxically mobilized through their aesthetic labor to sustain the spectacular economy and to reinforce the very privatization that excludes them.

A long-time Angeleno told me she used to visit Venice Beach at a time when she felt marginality was more genuinely celebrated and sanctioned. As a Latina who underwent social upliftment through working in the movie industry, she has recently settled in Culver City, a relatively affluent neighborhood of Los Angeles, but told me she still enjoys shopping in the peripheral areas where she used to hang out while growing up. She expressed disappointment at how the growing mainstream tourist economy in Venice Beach has deepened the displacement and marginalization of racial and socioeconomic minorities, and transformed the area's moral openness and countercultural inclusion.

Venice has changed in the last ten years. [...] Venice really was, back in the day, this mixed community of artisans and poor people. It was poor black and brown people and then artists with cheap rent. So it was always very bohemian and cool and open. And then it started to [...] shift a little and become more hip and cool. Then all those people got priced out. And then there was a big tech boom a couple of years ago that brought in a lot of Silicon Valley people. And now, to me, Venice feels like a tourist trap.

The closure of the Freakshow venue in 2017 marked a turning point in how Venice Beach commodified transgressive embodiments. Once a space where "freaks" were employed to transgress aesthetic and moral norms for entertainment, their presence has since been displaced to the peripheries of the Boardwalk or reabsorbed into precarious forms of entrepreneurial self-promotion. Today's freaks—those whose bodies are perceived as undesirable or disturbing by dominant moral and aesthetic norms—are no longer part of the formal spectacle. Instead, they are often stigmatized bodies whose appearances reflect the violence of homelessness, drug consumption, and structural racism. Individuals affected by visible disabilities, behaviors identified as stemming from mental illnesses, or the embodied consequences of long-term drug use are increasingly treated as spatial threats. They were sometimes referred as "freaks" when talking with some Angelenos, one of them once asking me if I was "going to do interviews with those freaks." On the Boardwalk, their presence generates microlocal avoidance practices: tourists alter their movements and gaze to

minimize interactions, subtly reifying their marginalization through patterns of spatial circulation.

When the representative from the Venice Chamber of Commerce addressed the challenges arising from the spatially contiguous presence of homelessness and the commercial and tourist economy in Venice Beach, he referred to the unhoused drug consumers as a “violent mass that’s been created under the idea of ‘let’s be tolerant.’” He shows concerns regarding how the presence of the former affects the safety of the latter, especially women whom he identifies as primarily targets of the social violence generated by homelessness and drug trade and consumption, evoking “rape” as a recurring outcome of “the[m] aiming for sexual experience.” He outlines the paradoxes of the edgy pop culture deployed in Venice, which he imagines as appealing to “girls” while this edginess is rooted in sociospatial contexts which can make public spaces sexually violent to them.

Yet these freaky embodiments—challenging obscenity through performances of illegal nudity—remain central to the voyeuristic culture that underpins Venice Beach’s ludic spatiality. Tourists still discreetly glance at the transgressive embodiments visible on the Boardwalk, like the one of a man dressed as a devil, his spectacular bodybuilder’s body clad only in tight panties. They sometimes exploit these embodiments by turning them into sellable commodities, like local photographs or artists who aestheticize and capitalize on visibility of social injustices in Venice Beach. For instance, one photograph—priced at over \$500—features a locally renowned pianist whose fame is rooted in fetishistic narratives that romanticize his musical talent through the lens of homelessness. Tourists write about him, transforming the bodily stigmas of his socioeconomic condition into an aesthetic narrative that glorifies his individuality.

While his fingers make the music, the gestures in his mouth gravitate between somewhat of a toothless grin and the kind of facial expression that would be expected of someone who is bearing a heavy burden. [...] And yes: it is entirely possible that he doesn’t have a house, but he owns that grand piano. This cannot be a homeless man, he is the Piano Man of Venice Beach. His home is music. (jpimentelc, 2023).

Obscene theming thus conceals marginalized embodiments as aesthetic labor, deepening their socioeconomic and spatial exclusion. The Venice Beach Business Improvement District (BID), through its strategies of aestheticization and surveillance, has increasingly restricted access to public spaces for those who deviate from normative bodily standards. While tourists continue to exploit the aesthetic labor performed—often by racial minorities and individuals marginalized by heteronormative, ableist, and classist norms—the BID plays a central role in gentrifying the Boardwalk. It enforces capitalist and moral order by displacing unhoused individuals to peripheral zones during the day and compelling them to manage the visibility of their bodies in ways deemed morally acceptable to the tourist gaze (Capelli, 2024).

My own experiences of heteronormativity enforced by the agents of mainstream tourism on the Boardwalk confirm these insights about its influence on the spatial marginalization of aesthetically transgressive embodiments. Through deliberate spatial awareness and careful management of my presence in areas where unhoused individuals and people who use drugs frequently congregated, I was largely able to avoid situations I

perceived as posing a risk of gender-based violence—aside from occasional catcalling or unsolicited gestures such as hugs. I avoided the Boardwalk at night and adjusted my movements in response to affective atmospheres I associated with unpredictability and vulnerability in public spaces.

In contrast, most gender-based violence I experienced came from agents tied to the formal tourist economy.⁵ The abnormality of my spatial practices—when judged against the ludic norms promoted by the tourist industry—combined with my transfeminine appearance, rendered me hypervisible to some of its agents. I thus endured transphobic mockery and verbal abuse from tourists, as well as unwanted sexual touching and exorcistic prayers from Evangelical and Scientologist groups. These groups benefit from Venice's mainstream spectacular culture, establishing themselves alongside the "Free Speech Zones" and their creative vendors.

Obscene theming ultimately integrates sexual and transmisogynistic harassment into the spectacular economy of the place, by being normalized through humorous representations displayed within its landscape (Rosewarne, 2007) such as the spanking and molesting of feminine bottoms and breasts that are integrated into pop visual marketing (Figures 1 to 3). Staged spectacular masculine embodiments enact inappropriate behaviors towards feminine bodies, which conform with the local ludic atmosphere to construct the moral acceptability of their gendered spatial practices.

Crucially, obscene theming not only celebrates certain transgressive embodiments but also constructs a normative hierarchy among them, distinguishing between those whose transgressions are curated and commodifiable, and those whose embodied transgressions reflect structural precarity. The injustices lie in how obscene theming rewards those who can frame their transgression as playful or intentional, often through aestheticized performances aligned with the local aesthetic economy, while it stigmatizes those whose transgressions stem from social suffering—such as homelessness, addiction, or disability—and who lack the socioeconomic capital to aestheticize their embodiment and make it valuable in public spaces. In this sense, obscene theming becomes a moral and aesthetic filter, granting valuable visibility and legitimacy to embodied transgression only when it upholds, rather than threatens, the normative spectacle unfolding in public spaces.

Conclusion

Obscene theming in Venice Beach does more than exploit sexualized feminine bodies for symbolic purposes. Its material effects are inscribed in the bodies it produces and stages—through the integration of spatial embodiments into the themed landscape and the cultural logic of commodified public spaces. I argue that this process actively contributes to the privatization of Venice Beach's public spaces and intensifies the spatial injustices that define them.

Obscenity is central to Venice Beach's spatial marketing, presenting aesthetic and moral provocation as evidence of its democratic public character. Through the strategic display and narration of sexualized feminine bodies, obscene theming casts socioeconomic

⁵ Here, "formal" encompasses sanctioned activities associated with the local tourist economy, even when they take place in locations or in ways labeled as informal.

diversity as a form of marketable authenticity. Yet beneath this cosmetic celebration of difference and transgression lies a deepening of the socioeconomic injustices and moral hierarchies it claims to represent. The labor required to produce these aestheticized performances—and the normative frameworks that determine which and how bodies can be seen, celebrated, and consumed—is systematically concealed, as well as the socioeconomic capitals required to perform this aesthetic labor and make one's performance valuable in public spaces.

As the mainstream tourist economy expands, bodies marked as freaky due to socioeconomic stigmatization are increasingly marginalized due to their supposed aesthetic shortcomings, even as their visibility continues to be exploited as part of the area's cultural edginess. Obscenity is thus a crucial concept for geographers to analyze how moral infrastructures operate in spaces where capitalist spectacles thrive on visible injustices. What is truly obscene, then, is not the display of sexualized femininity—but its strategic exploitation in the production of maximally unjust spatialities.

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