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Disrupting Spaces: Homelessness and Political Agency in Venice, California

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Abstract

Visual occupation of homelessness in public places disrupts traditional notions of community and space and testifies to the power of personal and political agency of unhoused individuals. This case study examines the public display of homelessness and daily social encounters with encampments in Venice, California. Using photographic images to analyze the social articulation of resistance, agency, and performance, the study contends that homeless performance in public spaces directly resists societal norms and regulations, challenging community expectations. The spectacle and performance of homelessness serve as a subversive political discourse, confronting the audience with the harsh realities of American capitalism. By capturing the performative aspects of homelessness, I demonstrate how these visible acts serve as political statements, evoking a range of emotional responses and prompting a reevaluation of societal attitudes towards poverty and homelessness.

Keywords

Homelessness, Poverty, Spectacle, Politics, Agency, Performativity

1. Introduction

It is 3:30 p.m. on a Thursday at the busy intersection of Pacific Ave. and Rose Ave., a twenty-minute walk from the Santa Monica Pier. Families with children and baby strollers wait for the green pedestrian light to cross the Venice Boardwalk. I am in my car, observing a 30-year-old homeless man camped out at the pedestrian light. His belongings include an empty beer bottle, a reddish blanket, fast food containers, and a black plastic bag. He sees me watching, pulls out a roll of toilet paper, and waves it at me. The light turns green, and he squats to defecate amidst the traffic and passersby.

This unsettling scene exemplifies the confrontation between human defile-

ment and social norms. The public performance of a bodily function in such a context disrupts consumer appetites and societal arrangements (Goffman, 1967; Vollmer, 2013). It is a grotesque spectacle that challenges norms and highlights the harsh realities of homelessness. I contend that examining these performative ruptures is key to understanding performance, agency, and social inequities. Utilizing unaltered photographic images as a core element of ethnographic research, this study captures the lived experiences of unhoused individuals.

The photographs serve as cultural artifacts that challenge societal norms and perceptions, offering an unfiltered account of homelessness. This approach is particularly relevant given the historical evolution of homelessness in the United States. Since the Great Depression, when the majority of the homeless population consisted primarily of elderly White individuals, homelessness has transformed into a multifaceted issue. Presently, due to socioeconomic factors such as inadequate housing and limited resources, homelessness includes not just men and women but also children, who are increasingly visible on the streets (Bassuk & Rosenberg, 1988). Despite fluctuations in the homeless population, homelessness has become a pervasive element of American life (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2022).

The research highlights how unhoused individuals resist societal expectations through their visible presence and occupation of urban spaces. This resistance is deeply intertwined with the stereotypical portrayals of homelessness, which often depict individuals sleeping in public spaces like streets, parks, and subways. Such characterizations reinforce stigmatized views that homeless individuals are responsible for their circumstances and thus unworthy of community support (Phelan, Link, Moore, & Stueve, 1997). However, this study documents the contestation over public and private space usage, emphasizing the strategic survival mechanisms of the homeless. Through visual anthropology, the study builds on pioneering research that uses photography to provide deeper insights into cultural and social phenomena. The images corroborate field notes and testify to the existence and agency of homeless individuals in their daily struggle for survival.

By situating homelessness within the broader context of American capitalism, the study reveals how public displays of homelessness disrupt traditional notions of community and space. This performative spectacle evokes various emotional responses from the public, fostering a deeper understanding of the interplay between the housed and the homeless. The emergence of homelessness as a public policy issue in the United States and globally since the 1980s, driven by widening income disparities and challenges of urbanization, underscores the need for reimagining class structures and institutional responses to poverty (Daiski, 2007). Ultimately, the research calls for reimagining class structures and institutional responses to poverty, emphasizing the need for greater empathy and social change. In addition, the study investigates how the performative actions of homeless individuals in urban spaces challenge societal norms, disrupt traditional notions of community, and highlight the socio-political contestations over public and private space usage.

Objectives

1) To document the lived experiences and social structures of homeless individuals through unaltered photographic images.

2) To analyze how unhoused individuals' visible presence and occupation of urban spaces resist societal expectations.

3) To explore the political and social contestation over the usage of public and private spaces by the homeless.

4) To provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between homelessness, spectacle, and performance in urban spaces.

5) To reimagine class structures and institutional responses to poverty, advocating for greater empathy and social change.

My case study specifically explores the Venice Boardwalk encampments and the movement of homeless people within a three-mile radius between the Venice Boardwalk and the Santa Monica Pier. Through photographic documentation, I examine how homelessness, spectacle, and performance interrupt and reinscribe urban spaces, demonstrating how a community is shaped by all its inhabitants—even those who disrupt and reconfigure community spaces (Howley, 2001; Malovicki-Yaffe et al., 2023). The concept of homelessness has evolved considerably, now encompassing a broader demographic and reflecting complex socioeconomic challenges (Henry et al., 2021). Employing an interdisciplinary approach, I analyze the photographic images to show how homelessness and public space interact to reinforce or subvert larger ideological systems of knowledge.

2. Methodology

Given that written ethnographic analysis often lacks sufficient detail, I photographed hundreds of homeless individuals and encampments to capture how spectacle and performance combine to subvert urban public space. Despite interviewing 50 homeless people between April 2020 and January 2024, photography proved to be a more reliable tool for recording the complexity of human bodies in occupied spaces, with the images becoming artifacts in the interactive process (Perera, 2019; MacDougal, 1997: p. 280).

2.1. Mixed Methods Approach

Photographic images were assembled and uploaded into AtlasTI for visual associations and coding purposes, focusing on performance, place, and agency. Utilizing grounded visual pattern analysis (GVPA), the images were systematically analyzed through an iterative process that combined individual meanings with broader field-level interpretations (Cleland & MacLeod, 2021). GVPA not only highlighted what was present in the images but also paid attention to what was absent, acknowledging the significance of these omissions. Place emerged as one of the visual data collection's first and most crucial coding determinants, essential for understanding how and where a homeless body occupies public space and its relation to personal agency. Behaviors were coded based on their context,

distinguishing between socially suitable actions, such as sitting on a park bench, and socially aberrant behaviors, such as bathing or defecating in public. Sleeping behaviors were particularly challenging to code without first examining the visual grammar and artifacts surrounding the individual. Beer cans, vodka bottles, syringes, and other paraphernalia were coded as indicators of aberrant behavior. The coding process employed inductive coding, generating 36 codes through an iterative approach and reliability tests.

2.2. Study Methods

This study utilized photographic content to explore the dynamics of communicative performativity, social agency, and visibility among homeless individuals. Key research questions included:

1) Location Influence: How does the choice of location by homeless individuals impact consumer behaviors and recreational activities in urban spaces?

2) Challenging Discourses: What representational trends emerge that challenge prevailing narratives about homelessness?

3) Disruption of Public Order: Does the bodily performance of homeless individuals disrupt the established order in public spaces?

4) Perception and Navigation: How do homeless individuals perceive and navigate their visibility and performativity within these public spaces?

5) Underlying Narratives: What personal stories and experiences underpin the behaviors captured in the photographs?

6) Community and Public Interactions: How do interactions within the homeless community and with the broader public shape the occupation and use of urban spaces.

2.3. In-Depth Interviews and Participant Observation

In-depth interviews and participant observations were conducted to complement the photographic analysis. These methods provided context to the visual data, revealing insights into the lived experiences and narratives of homeless individuals. Interviews explored personal histories and daily routines, while observations deepened the understanding of social interactions within encampments and strategies used to navigate public spaces.

2.4. Ethical Consideration in Photographing Vulnerable Populations

Photographing vulnerable populations, such as homeless individuals, poses risks of harm, exploitation, and misrepresentation. The study emphasized participants' dignity, avoiding sensationalism, and used narratives and observations to contextualize the visual data. Informed consent was obtained, with participants' identities protected through anonymization and secure data handling.

2.5. Analytical Framework

In addressing these queries, I recognize that my perspective and "ways of seeing"

a homeless person are subjective and influence the photograph and the interpretation of meaning. The photographic lens acts as the looker attempting to capture the "gaze" of the looked at. For instance, the myriad ways a photograph can be taken in a given moment of time influence what the lens sees and captures and, in turn, affects interpretative meaning (Zakia & Suler, 2018). The image visually documents what is there and the silent absence of what is not. The camera is employed as a "selective confirmation" and "selective sample" of documented reality (Collier, 1967: p. x). Notwithstanding the difficulty of interpretative meaning, the photographic image historically documents the micro-articulations of homeless performativity and the public interaction with communicative performativity. By triangulating data from photographs, interviews, and observations, this mixed-methods approach reinforces the robustness of the findings, providing a more comprehensive understanding of homelessness, performativity, and urban public space.

3. The Evolution of Homelessness in the United States

The early 1980s witnessed the inception of what is now characterized as the modern era of homelessness in the United States. This transformative period was characterized by significant factors, including the gentrification of inner cities, the deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, a high unemployment rate, the emergence of HIV/AIDS, a lack of affordable housing options, and substantial budget cuts to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and social service agencies. All of this was influenced by the nation's most severe recession since the Great Depression (Jones, 2015).

In many American cities, property values increased in downtown areas, which led to the disappearance of Skid Rows. Single-room occupancies (SROs) and rooming houses, once home to thousands of transients, were either demolished or converted into apartments and condominiums. Since the 1980s, rents in metropolitan areas nationwide have risen while wages remained stagnant (Katz, 2006). Recent studies highlight that families experiencing homelessness are more likely to confront persistent poverty and homelessness in the future (Desmond, 2016).

A key factor in the rise of homelessness was the movement to deinstitutionalize the mentally ill, which traces its origins to the civil rights and civil liberties movements of the 1960s that argued for more psychiatric hospitals, new medications, and community-based services. The population of patients in state hospitals significantly decreased from 535,000 in 1960 to 137,000 in 1980—all a result of a lack of funding. California, in particular, witnessed a drastic reduction in state hospital beds from 37,000 in 1955 to 2500 in 1983 (Flynn, 1985). However, the funding allocated for essential housing and community-based services fell short. Consequently, with the disappearance of affordable housing, a considerable number of previously institutionalized individuals with severe and persistent mental illness and periods found themselves on the streets or seeking refuge in

temporary shelters.

The economic downturn in the 1980s also led to significant reductions in the HUD budget, which declined from around $29 billion in 1976 to about $17 billion in 1990. This directly resulted in cuts to the budget authority for housing assistance (reducing from nearly $19 billion in 1976 to approximately $11 billion in 1990) and subsidized housing for impoverished Americans (National Academies of Sciences et al., 2018).

Two policy changes were instrumental in the increase of homelessness during this period. Firstly, reductions in Supplemental Security Income (SSI) in the late 1980s, coupled with a more stringent disability eligibility process (Social Security Act of 1980), negatively impacted mentally ill individuals residing in rooming houses. This led to a subsequent loss of personal income, contributing to homelessness for many of these individuals (Collin & Barry, 1987). The Social Security Disability Benefits Reform Act of 1984 was later enacted to modify certain aspects of the 1980 Social Security Act, aiming to alleviate obstacles faced by individuals experiencing illness and homelessness in pursuing benefits. Secondly, public inebriation was decriminalized in numerous cities, allowing those previously arrested for public drunkenness to evade legal consequences and often seek refuge in shelters or remain on the streets (McCarty et al., 1991).

3.1. Zeroing in on California

Following the broader national context, this section narrows the focus to California, a state that has seen a particularly severe escalation in homelessness. The connection here lies in the idea that the factors identified on a national scale (e.g., lack of affordable housing, mental health issues) have manifested even more dramatically in California. California has harbored one of the nation's most substantial populations of unhoused individuals for several decades. Nevertheless, in recent years, predicaments facing the Golden State have escalated significantly. Between 2014 and 2020, homelessness counts in California surged by 42 percent, in stark contrast to the rest of the country, which witnessed a 9 percent decrease. On any given night, the state grapples with more than 160,000 homeless individuals.

Approximately 70 percent of California's homeless population are unsheltered, residing in tents, public open spaces, or vehicles. This is in sharp contrast to New York, where a mere five percent of the homeless find themselves unsheltered. Diminishing the unsheltered homeless population is complicated. Public debates revolve around the emphasis on constructing permanent housing versus prioritizing shelters, interim housing, and the legality of public encampments.

Another formidable challenge arises from the complex interplay between mental illness, drug addiction, and homelessness. In 2020, around 25 percent of homeless adults in Los Angeles County grappled with severe mental illnesses like psychotic disorders and schizophrenia, while 27 percent struggled with long-term substance use disorders (Streeter, 2022). Additionally, a higher percentage of

those classified as chronically homeless experienced both drug addiction and severe mental illness.

Another challenge lies in the interactions between mental illness, drug addiction, and homelessness. In 2020, about 25 percent of all homeless adults in Los Angeles County had severe mental illnesses such as a psychotic disorder and schizophrenia, and 27 percent had a long-term substance use disorder. Moreover, a higher percentage of so-called chronically homeless have drug addiction, a severe mental illness, or both. Meanwhile, state and local governments have spent billions of dollars to combat homelessness. Between 2018 and 2020, California spent $13 billion on homelessness across nine state agencies through 41 programs (Har, 2021). In 2021, Governor Gavin Newsom signed a $12 billion funding package of bills to tackle the homelessness crisis. In 2023, Newsom signed another law authored by Democratic Senator Susan Eggman to broaden the criteria for involuntary treatment of individuals with untreated mental illness or addiction, aiming to tackle the state's mental health system and homelessness crisis.

This expansion of the definition of "gravely disabled" enables authorities to intervene more effectively, overcoming challenges posed by existing laws that prevent local governments from aiding individuals who refuse assistance. The law complements Newsom's broader mental health reform plan, which includes restructuring county funding and investing $6.3 billion in additional treatment beds. While supported by advocates, concerns persist regarding potential infringements on individual rights, emphasizing the need for involuntary treatment as a last resort (PBS, 2023).

3.2. Venice, California

Homelessness in the geographical zone of Venice, California, is a smaller microcosm of the larger complex homeless situation in the greater Los Angeles Metropolitan area. Economic changes and fluctuations in the larger Los Angeles area, including these regions, have led to income inequality and housing challenges. The development and gentrification of Venice have affected housing affordability, displacing low-income residents and contributing to homelessness (Burt & Aron, 2006).

The availability and effectiveness of social services and policies aimed at addressing homelessness also play a crucial role. Government policies, funding for shelters, and support programs can influence the number of people experiencing homelessness. Additionally, natural disasters such as wildfires and earthquakes in California can displace individuals and families, leading to homelessness.

Individuals facing mental health issues or struggling with substance abuse may be more vulnerable to homelessness. The accessibility of mental health services impacts the support available to those in need. Local communities, nonprofits, and advocacy groups are essential in addressing homelessness through initiatives focused on shelter, support, and advocacy. Government responses, in-

cluding local ordinances and policies, significantly impact the visibility and management of homelessness. Collaboration between local authorities and community organizations is crucial for effective solutions. Areas with tourist attractions, like Santa Monica and Venice, face unique challenges in managing homelessness due to the intersection of tourism and public policies.

4. Theoretical Foundations: Spatial Dynamics and Performance

In recent years, poverty has undergone a significant shift in distribution, no longer solely concentrated in inner-city areas but spreading across a broader geographic spectrum. Large-scale urban redevelopments have transformed inner cities into attractive hubs for middle and upper-middle classes, leading to an out-migration of poor residents to locations farther from city cores (Tong & Kim, 2019). Despite this noteworthy transformation, comprehensive studies analyzing this shift in poverty distribution remain limited, particularly in terms of disaggregated-level investigations, such as census tract-level analyses, which offer a deeper understanding of recent changes (Allard, 2017; Howell & Timberlake, 2014; Kneebone & Nadeau, 2015).

Scholars have increasingly focused on the changing geography of poverty, often comparing central cities with suburbs. Evidence suggests a trend of poverty suburbanization since the 1990s, potentially alleviating economic burdens on central cities while providing greater job opportunities for some relocated poor residents (Covington, 2015). However, this trend has also resulted in new concentrations of poverty in suburban areas, with approximately 40% of the suburban poor residing in low-income neighborhoods (Kneebone & Nadeau, 2015). Consequently, poor residents in low-income suburbs may face heightened challenges due to limited support and services compared to their urban counterparts.

Some scholars argue that a simplistic comparison between urban and suburban poverty overlooks detailed intra-metropolitan spatial patterns of poverty dynamics. Inner-ring suburbs, distinct from other suburban areas, face unique challenges such as aging infrastructure and declining incomes, often neglected by public policy (Cooke, 2010). Studies have observed increasing poverty rates in inner-ring suburbs in metropolitan regions like Atlanta, Cleveland, and Philadelphia (Cooke, 2010; Séguin, Apparicio, & Riva, 2012).

However, poverty rate increases are not confined to inner-ring suburbs alone. Research reveals a clustering of poverty in both inner and middle-ring suburbs, while not all suburban poverty is concentrated in inner-ring areas (Holliday & Dwyer, 2009). Factors influencing poverty dynamics range from globalization and economic restructuring to residential segregation and spatial mismatch between jobs and minority communities (Séguin et al., 2012; Jargowsky, 1997; Massey & Denton, 1993). The dispersion of poverty beyond inner cities may stem from an ecological perspective, yet its recent acceleration remains (Orfield, 2011).

Urban poverty is increasingly influenced by forces clustering wealthier households and displacing poorer ones, raising concerns about growing income segregation and displacement.

4.1. The Criminalization of Poverty

The phenomenon of criminalizing homelessness is substantiated by research that underscores the impact of social structural forces on the surge in homeless populations. Factors such as the scarcity of affordable housing, gentrification, urban renewal, welfare cutbacks, deindustrialization, and global economic restructuring have collectively contributed to this rise. Despite these structural issues, many U.S. cities focus more on addressing the consequences of homelessness than on addressing its root causes (Aguirre Jr. & Brooks, 2001).

In response to concerns about public space utilization and land values, local governments have steadily directed their attention toward the visible manifestation of homelessness in public spaces. This shift has led cities to adopt a strategy of "enacting and enforcing laws that specifically criminalize homeless people" (Brown, 1999). While vagrancy laws have long been embedded in the criminal justice system, newer "public nuisance" laws take aim at activities such as begging, panhandling, loitering, and sleeping in public spaces. Business owners and elected officials often perceive these laws as a means to sanitize streets, facilitate urban gentrification, and prevent potential crime.

The implementation of such laws and corresponding law enforcement tactics have drawn criticism from homeless activists, who characterize these measures as the "criminalization of poverty". The objective, they argue, is to incarcerate individuals considered "undesirable" in society. Notably, these so-called "undesirable" members of society have been found to form their own social structures in response to their circumstances, challenging the perception perpetuated by these laws (Brown, 1999; Aguirre Jr. & Brooks, 2001).

4.2. Photographing Homelessness in Public Spaces

In this case study, I used un-doctored photography as an information-gathering process and an essential part of the ethnographic process and historical narration. By un-doctored, I mean photographic images that have not been touched up, staged or altered. The visual image often speaks more than the written discourse about reality. It can offer a more detailed substantiation of the "irrefutable corpus of facts" as to the knowledge and veracity of a given moment (Perera, 2019). As stated simply by E.H. Man in "A Brief Account of the Nicobar Islands" (1886), "more correct information [can] be obtained from photography than from any verbal description" (quoted in (Pinney, 2011: pp. 14-15)).

I narrate my observations from the field location and, like other researchers, have found that photographs help in the understanding of lived experiences (Hatterseley, 1908; Junod, 1913; Seligmann & Seligmann, 1911; Pink, 2003; Zakia & Suler, 2018). Looking at and observing the homeless population in Venice is a

visual choice as the observation comes before my thoughts, the interpretation, and the "words" themselves (Berger, 2008). Every photo carries with it a "way of seeing" the homeless population in real time and space (Berger, 2008: p. 10). After time has passed, the photo remains testimonial evidence substantiating that something did occur; someone did exist in this moment, in this period of time, in this place. In this way, photos serve as cultural artifacts and social and political facts.

The fieldwork of Margaret Mead, Frances Macgregor, and Gregory Bateson with the *Balinese* incorporated "still photography in anthropology as a means of cultural analysis rather than simply as ethnographic illustration" (Lakoff, 1996: p. 13). Mead became one of the first anthropologists to openly support the use of photography as a viable form of visual discourse in anthropology. For Mead, photographs were another form of cultural production as a "sacred source" of "ethnographic knowledge" (Lakoff, 1996: p. 13). According to Mead, in her letter to Franz Boas, one of the most significant pieces of documentation she brought home from her field research were the photographs that transported her back into the field (Mead, 1977: p. 163). Photographs—as a record of history—are thus open to further analysis. Photos recorded as "partial truths", corroborate a historical discourse and are linked to broader cultural and socio-political contexts of meaning (Bourdieu & Bourdieu, 2004: p. 605). The image becomes part of the discursive documentation, adding to the field notes, information/data, and conversation/interview records necessary for compiling a case study.

Some may argue that the photographic image arrests the articulation of spectacle and bodily performance in time and space, producing more of an aesthetic effect than testimonial evidence of lived experience (Metz, 1985; MacDougal, 1997, Lévi-Strauss, 1961: pp. 17-18). This may be true without considering other evidence to corroborate the image by showing only a "temporary participation in the lives of others" (Wolbert, 2000: pp. 321-322). Alternatively, photographs may also document the "residual" effect of the scene after the event has happened (Bond, 2009: p. 1). In this case study, recorded images speak to other field notes and data, creating a discursive conversation of the historical memory. Photography is another relational scientific tool for documenting the human body and corroborating arguments about homeless performativity, social agency, and visibility in public spaces.

4.3. Reshaping Urban Spaces

Many studies have documented the spatial occupation of homelessness in American public spaces throughout the years; however, much of the literature documents the migration of homeless bodies through private and public spaces (Duncan, 1983). These cartographies of homelessness examine the navigation of homeless people in and out of what society considers prime socio-economic spaces. Homeless bodies are encouraged to continuously be on the move away from spaces established by the social capital attributed to the governing institu-

tions in power. In this migratory movement, we witness homeless individuals being outcasted from prime public spaces as defiled human matter incongruous with the place (Goffman, 1968).

Thus, homeless people claim transitory occupations of space in what has become a politicized contestation over private and public usage. This is especially true in the Santa Monica/Venice area in California, where private and public interests clash over which population has the right to use and enjoyment of the space and whether or not, if at all, they can coexist. In this study, I will support previous findings on how the visual flow of the homeless across this urban landscape centers around the cartography of available homeless shelters, food, and other services (de Certeau, 1984; Takahashi, 1996; Gaber, 1994; Rahimian et al., 1992). Within a six-mile radius between Santa Monica and the Venice Boardwalk, approximately 20 service venues offer services to a homeless population of roughly 2900 people (Garcia, 2021; Ursúa, 2021). Across this space, we can witness what Ruddick (1996) refers to as a "conscious and strategic" articulation of space for "daily survival" (p. 58). The performative articulation of homelessness is often staged within interstitial niches of prime spaces. It can be "viewed in terms of a time-space diagram of regulatory staging, punctuated by nodal service spaces such as hostels and drop-ins, but also by less formal but still regulated places such as parks" (Cloke, May, & Johnson, 2008: p. 242).

The "other's" presence threatens traditional associative meanings of place. (Cresswell, 1996; Mair, 1986). Public displays of homelessness used to be hidden within the "micro-architectures" of the city in untrodden alleyways, abandoned buildings, parking structures, cement berms separating traffic from pedestrians, and other overlooked recesses of the urban landscape (Chang, 2000).

4.4. Spectacle and Performativity

Within the prime geographic location, the homeless choose to be visible and seen as an anomaly to the landscape—something not ordinary to time and location. The performance of the homeless visible being establishes traces of personal agency. Moreover, as Cloke, May, & Johnson (2008) suggest, "such traces can be permanent or transient, visible or largely invisible, solidly connecting with the materialities of particular places, or leaving the merest wisp of a vapour trail" (p. 245). The homeless performer and the on-looking spectator engage in a social interchange between the perceived and the perceiver, whereby boundaries collapse, and the performance becomes a transformative political process. Visceral responses from both the homed and homeless include rage, sadness, hatred, love, sympathy, and compassion.

To feel is to be human. Together for a brief moment, a metamorphosis occurs where the spectator becomes the homeless object, and the homeless object becomes the spectator. For many, this in itself is frightening. Knowing that both observer and observed are connected in their humanity, separated only by a thin veil of materiality, constructs a site of social engagement for cultural under-

standing and resistance (Carlson, 2004: p. 20). In this interpretation, both the housed and the house-less are co-creators of each other's performance—an observation that has deep political and emotional meaning to both parties. One cannot exist without the other. Without the poor, the rich would not exist; without the rich, the poor would not exist. Homeless performance and spectacle enact a dialectical process, which produces ruptures and liminal spaces for society to re-vision and re-imagine class structure and institutionalized poverty.

In the next section of this essay, I will show how the disruption of sense and place demands attention from the "othered" body. The othered confronts society, demanding its visual acknowledgment and participation in its performance. This is what it means for me to be homeless.

5. Homelessness as Civic Engagement

I analyze these photographs as civic experiences where the viewer isn't just a passive recipient but is tasked to actively engage in dialogue with the experience. The visual representation of homelessness becomes more than a passive image but a form of civil engagement that has the power to shape civic responsibilities and rights. Azoulay (2008) describes this as a "civil contract" between the observer and the portrayed. Interaction with the image has ethical-political ramifications in terms of human rights, justice, and social responsibility, prompting the viewer to contemplate how to respond to the textual rhetoric proffered.

5.1. Performance and Enthymematic Rhetoric on the Venice Boardwalk

The Venice Boardwalk in Southern California is a highly visible public space for beach bathers, tourists, surfers, bikers, shoppers, restaurant goers, and homeless people. In the photos taken here, homeless people actively take over the public realm and, in so doing, manifest a sense of resistance, power, and personal agency. Foucault (1975) contends that power dynamics inherently involve the capacity for resistance. By examining the physical installations in **Figures 1-3**, there is an opportunity to investigate the dynamics of these visual articulations and subjectivities and how homeless performance differs in different contexts.

I refer to **Figure 1** as an aesthetic installation of memorabilia and artifacts because each artifact is carefully positioned for the viewer to observe and make meaningful connections that construct an inductive visual argument on American society.

A plastic array of broken beach umbrellas, blue tarps, and sunshades frame the exhibit of displayed items. The blue and white sign of "America" in the lower right-hand corner of the photo suggests the dominant impression—the material reality of a throw-away culture of items. "America" is the composition's focal point, guiding the observer to engage its line of objects counterintuitively from right to left.

Figure 1. Venice Boardwalk.

The unhoused individual is not in the picture. The individuals were not at their encampments for the seven hours I waited for them to show up. When they finally did show up, they agreed to let me photograph their belongings but did not want to be included. "There's enough here for you to figure out," said the man who gave written permission but did not want his identity revealed.

In this case, the owner relies on the audience's ability to fill in the missing pieces, making connections with their own shared knowledge or beliefs. David Hitchcock refers to this as a Rhetorical Enthymematic argument, a form of communication that invites the audience to draw their own inferences, encouraging active engagement and participation in the argumentative process.

The audience is expected to look at the content expressions, connect these points, and recognize the implicit link to homelessness. This rhetorical strategy harnesses the power of suggestion and allows the audience to draw conclusions independently, fostering a deeper connection to the argument's underlying message. For analytical purposes, I've broken this display into four separate parts to address the representational trends.

- Line 1 A. A torn piece of paper, a bag of sand, metal piping, broken ceramic tiles, a bowl of sand with a Jack of Diamonds, a broken yellow frisbee with an unhappy face, and an upside-down American flag.
- Line 1 B. A fan constructed with wooden coat hangers, a shell necklace, a pink and yellow scarf, three rocks to hold it down, and two index cards, one reading "You are love" and the other "Playground".
- Line 1 C. A fake pineapple is framed by wooden coat hangers, and a tennis shoe is attached with shoe strings. A turquoise paint brush, a wooden heart-shaped box, and black scissors frame a white cup that reads, "Cosmic in a Cup".
- Line 1D. A blue castle sand toy, an index card that reads, "You are Still here. Thank you", a dented Michelob can, an empty wine bottle, a book of state parks, a tarot card, an earthenware planter.

Taken as a whole, the representation of everyday items suggests a focus on mundane and disposable elements of American culture. Each part of the display (Line 1 A, B, C, D) contains a mix of objects with potential symbolic meanings. As Sibley (1995) and Foucault (1975) contend, power dynamics operate in spaces such as these that invite potential for contestation and resistance. Contestation is a form of power politics, where alternative narratives and identities challenge dominant cultural norms and global visions (Bettiza & Lewis, 2020).

For example, the upside-down American flag, the fan with the index cards reading "You are love" and "Playground", and the fake pineapple framed by wooden coat hangers with various items attached convey a complex commentary on the intersection of patriotism, human connection, and consumerism within contemporary American society.

The juxtaposition of the inverted flag challenges traditional notions of national pride, while the fan's messages hint at the need for love and playfulness in our daily lives. The artificial pineapple surrounded by coat hangers may symbolize the commodification of natural elements and the disposable nature of consumer goods, prompting viewers to reflect on the often overlooked aspects of their surroundings and the cultural values embedded in them.

Visual references to state parks, tarot cards, earthenware planters, and messages like "You are still here. Thank you" add layers of temporal and cultural dimensions to the display, potentially reflecting aspects of American life and society. The use of such materials commonly associated with public spaces, like beaches or parks, hints at the impact of homelessness on urban landscapes. The installation suggests how the presence of homeless individuals in certain locations influences the perception and use of those spaces by other urban residents, potentially affecting consumer behaviors and recreational activities.

These items question societal norms, values, or perceptions related to homelessness. The intentional arrangement of these artifacts suggests a rhetorical challenge to conventional representations and stereotypes associated with homelessness, urging viewers to reconsider their perspectives.

The torn piece of paper, a bag of sand, and various other objects that seem to reflect a sense of disorder or disarray could indirectly suggest the destabilization of order in the occupation of public space. The use of discarded items and unconventional arrangements might be symbolic of the chaotic nature often associated with homelessness and its impact on the orderliness of public spaces.

The installation directly impacts the viewer's sensibility, making visible what is actually absent—the individual. According to Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1971: p. 116f.), presence is established by what is, in fact, absent. Yet it's something crucial to the argument "by making them more present, to enhance the value of some of the elements of which one has actually been conscious".

5.2. Rhetorical Performance and Agency

Photographic images can simultaneously support and challenge oppressive realities and political subjectivities imposed on the depicted unhoused individuals

(Azoulay, 2015). In the following installation depicted in **Figure 2**, a combination of visual and written rhetoric challenges images of unhoused individuals as submissive and lacking agency in the face of physical insecurity (Snow & Anderson, 1993).

Figure 2. Venice Boardwalk.

This public space on the Venice Boardwalk is located in "Venice Beach", as the round painted trashcan lid declares. This photo has myriad verbal arguments, some of which are not visibly readable in the panoramic photo. The primary articulation is the round painted trash can sign: "The Sanctuary on Venice: Peace Community." This verbal contestation of public place and purpose rebuts the city's position that the public beachfront property is shared between the City of Los Angeles and the State of California. Addressing the passersby, its tripartite appeals to ethos, logos, and pathos intend to influence support in the face of the 2019 Los Angeles County's countdown sweep to remove the approximately 200 tents on the boardwalk.

Rich in visual rhetoric, the space contains boxes, trash, found items, random cardboard-painted posters, sandbags, wooden polls, a large tented living quarters, and two more verbal arguments: one painted on canvas, the other affixed to a wooden A-frame stand.

In the right-hand corner of this installation sits a pink canvas painted with the words "We do Art, Not Drugs", establishing a constructive identity for the homeless community. By asserting a commitment to art, it positions the individuals in the space as contributors to a creative and meaningful endeavor, challenging any negative preconceptions about their character.

Note the unhoused homeless individual is not in the space and chose not to be identified.

The logical appeal lies in the contrast drawn between "Art" and "Drugs". This creates a binary opposition that implies a choice between two paths of action. Choosing art over drugs is framed as a rational decision that aligns with positive

values and contributes to the well-being of both the individuals in the Venice community and the broader society, evoking a sense of hope and a positive emotional response.

The core of the rhetorical proposition is a direct challenge to prevailing stereotypes and pervasive assumptions that associate homelessness with drug-related issues. By explicitly stating "Not Drugs", it confronts and rejects this stereotype, aiming to reshape public perceptions and challenge negative assumptions.

The declaration "We do Art, Not Drugs" goes beyond challenging stereotypes; it actively reframes the identity of the homeless community, suggesting that the individuals in this space define themselves by their commitment to art, emphasizing a sense of purpose and creativity that may be overlooked in conventional narratives. Beyond challenging stereotypes, the statement serves as a form of advocacy for the empowerment of the homeless community. It suggests that the unhoused individuals have agency and are actively choosing a path of creativity and expression. This empowerment narrative contributes to a more nuanced understanding of homelessness, acknowledging the agency and aspirations of those affected.

5.3. Challenging Property Ownership

Unhoused individuals engage in legal and political activism by occupying spaces on the Venice Boardwalk. Leveraging ethical arguments, homeless people highlight the limitations and inequities of current property ownership structures. As seen in **Figure 3**, a rhetorical argument is never isolated; it always exists within the context of human interaction and communication. These challenges often aim to push for a more just and humane approach to housing and property rights.

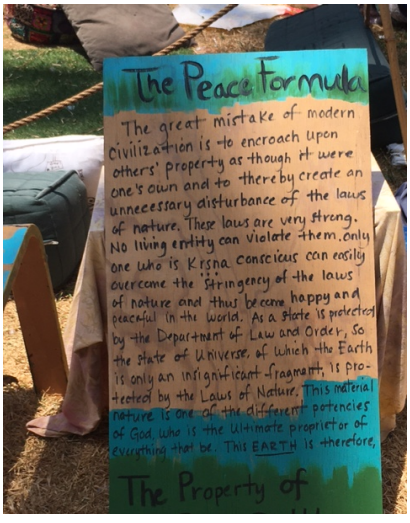


Figure 3. Venice Boardwalk.

Positioned within this space of a homeless encampment, the passage suggests a criticism of modern civilization for encroaching upon others' property, high-

lighting it as a great mistake and deprivation of basic necessities and a sense of home. The manifesto emphasizes that only those who are "Krisna' conscious" can overcome the stringency of natural laws and find happiness, calling for spiritual consciousness or a higher understanding to address the challenges they face.

The declaration that the "Earth is the property of God" emphasizes a spiritual perspective on ownership and a shared responsibility to care for the Earth and its resources. Drawing parallels between protecting a state by law and order and protecting the universe by the laws of nature, it suggests a plea for harmony and adherence to natural laws within the encampment.

5.4. Conspicuous Hoarding

In the context of the next installation, Figure 4, like some of the other encampments, the unhoused individual accumulates a significant amount of belongings that appear disorganized and excessive to outside observers.

Figure 4. Venice Boardwalk.

The artifacts are a striking potpourri of random items, readily displayed to attract attention. What seems like random junk or discarded possessions suggests an element of conspicuous hoarding, a persistent difficulty discarding possessions, even if they have no monetary, survival, or sentimental value. The blue tarp, three umbrellas, water bottle, and file holder (for beverages) are useful for survival on both hot and rainy days. The round white-washed vintage side table with its white vase of blue flowers is not, nor is the random collection of other scavenged items on display but not for sale. This installation of conspicuous consumption of paintings, an empty wine bottle, an outdoor broken lantern, and broken end tables and chairs suggest an often overlooked mental illness amongst the homeless community. Psychological Hoarding behaviors, possibly including diagnosable hoarding disorder, are more common among people with a history of homelessness or unstable housing (Greig et al., 2020). While the text suggests a connection between homelessness and hoarding disorder, it fails to consider the social factors that might contribute to accumulating belongings on the streets. Without access to safe storage or mental health resources, carrying everything one owns is a matter of strategic survival. What is fascinating about all of

these installations is that the unhoused individual was visibly invisible, engaging in spectacle and performance.

5.5. Ken the Recycler

This is the first photo in this series showing a resident named Ted, who traveled from Australia to the United States several years ago, overstayed his visa, and found himself hustling and living on Venice Beach.

As Ted points out, he is a "businessman" and works hard cleaning all the plastic, aluminum, and glass bottles people "leave on the sand", as evidenced in Figure 5 by the several filled hefty bags in front of him. When asked if he makes any money collecting all the recyclables, he said he makes an "average price of 5 cents per pound". This is not why he does it, though "This is my home". Ted lives, sleeps, and works the boardwalk. When he is not searching, pushing his shopping cart, or collecting recyclables, he sits on a recycled dinner chair with a foldable wooden table where he chats it up with other tent dwellers, locals, and visitors.

Figure 5. Ken the Recycler. Venice Boardwalk.

Ted's rhetorical argument is both verbal and visual. He rebuts public perceptions of laziness and recasts himself as a capable and resilient social agent who can resituate himself as an entrepreneur with a legitimate civic identity that contributes to the community's well-being.

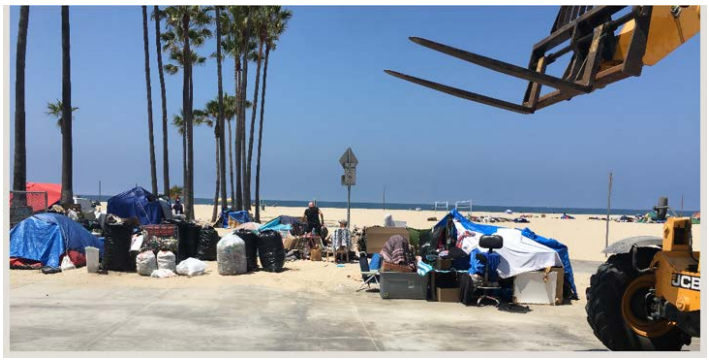
5.6. The Housed Community Speaks Back

In July 2021, the Los Angeles Department of Sanitation, St. Joseph Center, recreation and park workers, and the Los Angeles Police Department joined together to remove 200 homeless encampments on the Venice Boardwalk. 175 people had agreed to be placed in shelters by workers from St. Joseph Center.

The operation was part of a broader strategy by city officials to address the growing homelessness crisis in Los Angeles. The encampments had been a point of contention, with residents and business owners expressing concerns over safety, sanitation, and the impact on tourism.

Following the removal of the encampments, as seen in Figure 6(a) and Figure 6(b), the Venice Boardwalk underwent extensive cleaning and restoration to make it welcoming and safe for visitors and residents alike. However, the city acknowledged that simply moving people from one location to another would not solve the underlying issues. Efforts were made to increase affordable housing availability and provide long-term support for those transitioning out of homelessness.

(a)



(b)

Figure 6. (a) and (b) Venice Boardwalk.

Forced evacuations pushed unhoused individuals to other areas of Venice onto 2nd Street, where camps have been set up for shelter. These forced displacements have not pushed the unhoused into less visible areas but rather into more conspicuous locations, often right in front of people's homes or private businesses.

For the past three summers, outreach teams and Los Angeles police have cleared encampments along Ocean Front Walk between Navy Street and Rose Avenue, often providing temporary housing in the process. Despite this, many displaced individuals choose not to live in shelters due to safety concerns and restrictions, preferring the autonomy of street living.

Some have relocated a few streets off the boardwalk, as seen in Figure 7(a) and Figure 7(b). Unhoused individuals continue occupying nearby neighborhoods, living in parks, under bridges, alongside freeways, and other public spaces.

(a) (b)

Figure 7. (a) and (b) Second street, Venice.

The city and various organizations are working on long-term solutions, including more affordable housing and enhanced mental health services, but homelessness remains a persistent issue influenced by high housing costs, unemployment, and systemic poverty. Community members continue to seek humane and effective solutions, while policy decisions and funding at multiple levels play a critical role in addressing the crisis.

In the meantime, unhoused individuals continue to find places to sleep and rest, as seen in the disturbing images in **Figure 8(a)** and **Figure 8(b)**, where what it means to be unhoused and living on the street is visible for all passersby to see. The individual in the left-hand corner sleeps on the Venice Boardwalk. Although quite visibly disturbing because he takes over the pedestrian space, beachgoers walk around him as if he's not there. The other individual on the right crashed in front of the local supermarket, his belongings by his side. These disruptive occupations are not passive but deliberate acts of performance and agency, reflecting the articulation of spectacle and bodily performance in time and space and highlighting the harsh realities faced by those without stable housing.

(a) (b)

Figure 8. (a) and (b) Venice, California.

In Figure 8(a), a man spreads out on the Ocean Front Walk twenty feet from the trendy Fig Tree Venice Restaurant, where tourists pay twenty-plus dollars for seasonal omelets. People walk around him and, by so doing, normalize the situation—a vivid juxtaposition of wealth and poverty all within a few hundred square feet. Figure 8(b) captures a young, unshaven man passed out on a grey blanket-covered cardboard box in front of a local upscale market on Windward Ave. His belongings surround him, including water bottles, baggies, old tennis shoes, and a pocket knife. Other possessions are in a red shopping cart.

Figure 9 captures Manuel Diego, a Guatemalan-American, rolling a joint and occupying the entryway of a business, surrounded by various items, including smashed beer cans, a McDonald's bag, a bottle of milk, a bag of Oreo cookies, a bag of Frito chips, coins, and a backpack. Manuel has visibly taken over the business space by performing a temporary occupation. His limited possessions are spread across the entrance, positioned in such a way that walking over them makes it impossible to reach the door. The occupation reeks of urine and human feces as the space is also being used as a toilet. His discarded beer cans and his act of rolling a joint suggest substance use as a coping mechanism, highlighting the linking of mental health issues to economic instability. Manuel Diego's occupation is a performance of personal agency, transforming the entryway into a spectacle that demands attention. His presence forces passersby and consumers trying to enter the vintage clothing store to acknowledge his existence, making his occupation an unavoidable statement in the public space.

Figure 9. Man camped in front of business.

The contrast between the unhoused individuals and the patrons of establishments like the Fig Tree Venice Restaurant and the market highlights the severe economic inequalities that exist within close geographical proximity. This juxtaposition serves as a visual and social commentary on the failure of the economic system to provide for all its members. As people walk around and past the unhoused individuals, they may become desensitized to the presence of homelessness. This normalization can lead to a diminished sense of urgency to ad-

dress the root causes of homelessness and may perpetuate a cycle of neglect and inadequate policy responses.

The situation is complicated for both the housed and the unhoused. Property owners may feel a mix of empathy for those experiencing homelessness and frustration over the impacts on their own lives, as there are serious concerns about property values, safety, and the overall quality of life in their neighborhoods. For unhoused individuals, inevitable relocation disrupts any sense of stability and community, exacerbating their vulnerability and isolation. This ongoing cycle of displacement underscores the urgent need for comprehensive and compassionate solutions to address homelessness.

One of the most serious concerns is the outbreak of fires related to homeless encampments, with 24 fires a day happening in Los Angeles County in 2021 (Smith, Queally, & Molina, 2021). According to the Urban Humanities Initiative, this number has increased by 82%, with Venice emerging as one of the epicenters of this fire crisis (Urban Humanities Initiative, 2024). The increase in fires poses significant risks to the individuals living in the encampments and the surrounding community, exacerbating tensions and fears among residents. **Figure 10** features the remains of a two-story building fire set by an unhoused individual who had a makeshift cooking fire. The fire destroyed the attire two-story commercial building and threatened the adjacent apartment building.

Figure 10. Homeless set fire, Venice Boardwalk.

The city's response has been varied, ranging from increased fire patrols to initiatives aimed at providing safer living conditions for the homeless, but the challenge remains substantial and ongoing. The fires often start from makeshift stoves and open flames used for warmth or cooking, making fire safety in these areas particularly difficult to manage. Additionally, the proximity of encampments to brush areas and other flammable materials heightens the danger, lead-

ing to rapid fire spread that can endanger not just the homeless population but also the housed residents and local businesses. Los Angeles Fire Department (n.d.) has implemented targeted outreach programs to educate the homeless about fire safety and distribute fire extinguishers and smoke detectors. Despite these efforts, the resource limitations and the transient nature of the homeless population make sustained fire prevention challenging.

Furthermore, the psychological toll on both the homeless individuals and the housed community is considerable. The constant threat of fire adds to the stress and instability experienced by those living in encampments. For residents, the fear of property damage and personal harm creates an atmosphere of anxiety and resentment, often leading to increased calls for more aggressive policing and clearance of encampments, which can, in turn, displace homeless individuals repeatedly, disrupting any stability they might achieve.

In light of these issues, the city's efforts include exploring long-term solutions such as creating designated safe camping areas with proper fire safety measures, expanding affordable housing options, and improving access to mental health and addiction services. These measures aim to mitigate the immediate fire risks and address the underlying causes of homelessness, thereby reducing the need for encampments and enhancing overall community safety.

6. Research Findings

The research findings indicate that the spectacle of homelessness, particularly in urban spaces like Venice, California, is both a visual and performative phenomenon, which challenges conventional understandings of public space, social agency, and visibility. The documentation of homeless individuals through photography reveals that their occupation of public spaces is not merely about survival but a deliberate act of personal agency that disrupts traditional social norms and engages both the housed and unhoused populations in a powerful dialogue. This performance of homelessness creates a temporary yet significant rupture in the social fabric, highlighting deep-seated economic inequalities and the inadequacies of social services. The research underscores the importance of considering the intersection of mental illness, substance abuse, and homelessness, as well as the role of civic engagement in shaping public perceptions and policy responses.

7. Conclusion

The examination of homelessness through the lens of visual occupation and performance on the Venice Boardwalk reveals the profound impact of public displays of homelessness on societal norms and perceptions. This study highlights how unhoused individuals exercise personal and political agency by occupying and transforming public spaces, challenging traditional notions of community and space. The photographic documentation serves as cultural artifacts that provoke emotional responses and prompt a reevaluation of societal attitudes toward poverty and homelessness. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the

study emphasizes the need for reimagining class structures and institutional responses to poverty, advocating for greater empathy, social change, and comprehensive solutions that address the root causes of homelessness rather than just its visible manifestations.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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