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Author
Orrico, Laura Ann

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Working the Boardwalk:
The Social Life of a Public Marketplace

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

by

Laura Ann Orrico

2015
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Working the Boardwalk:
The Social Life of a Public Marketplace

by
Laura Ann Orrico

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology
University of California, Los Angeles, 2015
Professor Stefan Timmermans, Co-chair
Professor Vilma Ortiz, Co-chair

In this article-based dissertation I present four distinct – but interrelated – articles to expose the social life of a public marketplace. Drawing on over four years of ethnographic data, I present the experience of a group of marginalized entrepreneurs who independently generate income along the Venice Beach Boardwalk. Using an interactionist approach, I reveal the ground level processes through which people turn an otherwise everyday pathway into a place from which to make a living. In the first substantive chapter, I expose the participatory nature of public space regulation, shifting the way we link regulation to democratic participation and how we think about the ‘publicness’ of space. In the second substantive chapter, I locate a process of building, maintaining, and protecting trust in everyday interaction to expose the particular interactional work that trust does to manage workplace needs. In the next chapter, I present three ways of ‘working’ and ‘intoxicating’ – taking a break from work, working to intoxicate, and intoxicating out of work – to demonstrate how these different relationships become interrelated in a social
ecology of work on the Boardwalk. Finally, I uncover the way in which workplace interactions are shaped by situated gender dynamics and expose the way ‘intimacy’ unfolds in this male-dominated marketplace. Throughout the dissertation, my analysis focuses on the importance of daily tensions. In a place known for its diversity, I locate commonality. In a place where homelessness, drug and alcohol dependency, and mental health problems flourish – I show work is sustained. In a place where people talk of suspicion and individualism – I uncover trust. In a space open to all – I reveal inclusion and exclusion. As a site of ongoing conflict and contestation, I show both fragility and endurance. This dissertation therefore highlights the way people make space their own – as they carve out a living, build a community, and live their lives.
The dissertation of Laura Ann Orrico is approved.

Rubén Hernández-León

Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris

Stefan Timmermans, Committee Co-chair

Vilma Ortiz, Committee Co-chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015
DEDICATION

For my family.
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VITA

EDUCATION

2008 M.A., Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles
2006 M.A., Latin American & Caribbean Studies, New York University

EMPLOYMENT

2011-2015 Instructor, Department of Sociology University of California, Los Angeles
2012-2014 Graduate Research Assistant (PI: Stefan Timmermans) University of California, Los Angeles
2011-2012 Teaching Fellow, Undergraduate Education Initiatives University of California, Los Angeles
2008-2011 Teaching Assistant, Department of Sociology University of California, Los Angeles
2007-2008 Graduate Research Assistant (PI: Edward Telles) University of California, Los Angeles

PUBLICATIONS


Orrico, Laura A. "Working the Boardwalk: Trust in an Informal Marketplace." (Conditional Acceptance at *Social Psychology Quarterly*).

SELECTED FELLOWSHIPS, HONORS, AND AWARDS

2014-2015 UCLA Excellence in Teaching Fellow

2014 UCLA Dissertation Year Fellowship ($20,000)
2013    UCLA, Department of Sociology, Summer Grant ($5,000)

2011-2012  UCLA Department of Sociology Award for Excellence in Teaching

2010-2011  UCLA Department of Sociology Award for Excellence in Teaching

2008    Graduate Summer Research Mentorship Award, UCLA ($4,500)

2007    UC Diversity Initiatives for Graduate Study in the Social Sciences Summer Fellowship ($5,000)

2006-2007  UCLA Department of Sociology Fellowship ($20,000)

2002    Phi Beta Kappa

SELECTED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

Session on Culture, Social Psychology & Everyday Practice  
*American Sociological Association*, Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA

2014    Section on Sex and Gender “Gendered Interactions and Gendered Spaces.”  

2014    Section on Sex and Gender “Gendered Interactions and Gendered Spaces.”  

2013    “‘Tales of the (Gendered Field):’ ‘Doing Gender’ in Ethnographic Research”  
15th Annual Chicago Ethnography Conference, University of Chicago

2012    “This is Art, If You Want it to Be: Co-Constructing Expression in Public Space”  
Session on Ethnography/Ethnographic Methods  
*American Sociological Association* Annual Meeting, Denver, Colorado

2011    “Contesting Public Space: An Ethnographic Analysis of Access and Regulation on the Venice Beach Boardwalk”  
Session on Ethnography/Ethnographic Methods *American Sociological Association* Annual Meeting, Las Vegas, Nevada
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Developed in the early twentieth century by real estate developer Abbot Kinney, ‘Venice of America’ grew from a vision of possibility and entertainment. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, however, Kinney’s vision went from a flourishing ‘Coney Island of the Pacific’ to a rundown beach community with abandoned pier and cheap rents (Stanton 1993). In the late 1950s a ‘beat’ subculture developed in the area, followed in later generations by artists seeking cheap studio space (Maynard 1991; Stanton 1993; Deener 2012). Recognizing the appeal of Venice as site of freedom, counterculture, and artistic innovation – and evidenced by the more than 16 million visitors arriving each year – the City of Los Angeles designated the space an official “Free Speech Zone” in the 1990s. As they did, they protected the Boardwalk’s “tradition of performance and free speech” while maintaining a general prohibition on “unregulated vending.” This only furthers the inherent tension between ‘freedom’ and ‘control’ we find in all public spaces, as the city engages in a balancing act between the Boardwalk’s famous ‘spectacle’ and some form of ‘order.’

In addition, the Boardwalk emerged as an informal economy for people marginalized from formal work opportunities (Deener 2012). Global economic forces draw low-skilled immigrants to cities like Los Angeles, many of whom cannot find work in the formal economy and turn instead to make a living selling goods in public spaces (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009; Rosales 2013). Deinstitutionalization and lagging services for veterans leaves a number of people with mental health problems on the street, unable to locate proper care or opportunities for work. In the name of ‘order,’ ongoing legislation attempts to regulate ‘homelessness’ off the
streets and into shelters and rehabilitative programs (Stuart 2014), leaving few options to earn a living. A paltry minimum wage, a dearth of affordable child care, and strict scheduling leads many single parents without viable options in the formal economy and a recent economic recession leaves even more unemployed and underemployed.

With no formal registration process, credentialing, or required contract to work along the Boardwalk, the space provides an opportunity for many marginal social groups to gain income outside the confines of formal employment. And since it is sandwiched between the upscale hotels and wealthy condos of Santa Monica and Marina del Rey, the Venice Beach Boardwalk’s ‘Free Speech and Expression Zone’ emerges as a kind of ‘last bastion’ for people otherwise marginalized from so-called ‘sanitized’ public spaces (Sorkin 1998) and formal work opportunities. Each day the space therefore becomes an economic and social meeting point for African, Black Caribbean, Asian, and Latin American immigrants, as well as Black, White, Latino, and Asian Americans, many of whom differ in their routes to participation, long-term goals, and ideological attachments to the place itself. A large homeless population, people with mental health problems, and many who are drug and alcohol dependent find refuge on the Boardwalk. This dissertation therefore explores the experience of a group of marginalized entrepreneurs who independently generate income from the ‘Free Speech and Expression Zone’ – turning an otherwise everyday pathway into a place from which to make a living and a place from which to live their lives.
UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC SPACE

Most individuals use and pass through public space on a daily basis, as they walk on sidewalks, sit on park benches, and drive along city streets. What defines these spaces as public is their apparent openness and accessibility. In practice, however, it is nearly impossible to locate a case where both openness and accessibility go unrestricted (Low and Smith, 2006; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009; Orum and Neale, 2010). One individual’s right to walk along the sidewalk freely is maintained precisely by limiting another individual’s right to create an obstruction. Individuals continuously struggle for these rights, and over time, certain uses and behaviors become legitimized while others emerge as disorderly and disruptive. As a result, public space is always a site of continuous contestation, conflict, and negotiation.

As public spaces become the meeting points for broader social issues and conflicts, they often engender fear and spark desires to bring order to the contemporary urban experience (Mitchell 2003). Touted in terms of ‘public safety’ and ‘quality of life,’ we find crackdowns on homeless, graffiti, and prostitution, post-9/11 surveillance policies, security by design, rapid growth of gated communities, privately owned shopping centers, and a proliferation of public-private alliances to build Business Improvement Districts (Davis, 1990; Zukin, 1995; Fyfe and Bannister, 1996; Mitchell, 1997; Lofland, 1998; Duneier, 1999; Hoffman, Fainstein, and Judd, 2003; Smith and Low, 2006). The focus on increased regulation and restriction leads many scholars to a discussion and debate over the possible ‘decline,’ ‘erosion,’ and ‘end of public space’ (Davis, 1990; Sorkin, 1992; Mitchell, 1995; Smith, 1996; Low, 1997; Lofland, 1998; Kohn, 2004).

More recently scholars have found this approach too simplistic for its lack of attention to public space as an ongoing construction, one in which conflict and contestation emerge as part of
everyday process (Madden, 2010; Mitchell, 2003; Low and Smith, 2006). Bringing new complexity to prior arguments, Don Mitchell has stated that what makes a space public is not some preordained ‘publicness,’ it is rather a process by which individuals actively take space to make it public (2003; Mitchell and Staeheli, 2006; Trouille 2013). Along similar lines, scholars shift to discuss public space as a constant struggle, a movement towards some utopia that will never be reached (Fraser, 1992; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009). In this sense it becomes important to understand the way people make space public and everyday public spaces offer the ideal laboratories from which to understand how people claim and define space as public.

Public space, however, is not just a site of conflict and contestation, but also a place within which people can carve out a living (Duneier 1999; Venkatesh 2006). Urban ethnography has a history of exposing the often invisible work that people do each day (see Duneier, Kasinitz, and Murphy 2014: 401-522), many of whom have been marginalized from formal employment because of immigration status, lack of education and credentials, criminal records, mental health problems, and dependency issues (Duneier 1999; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Gowan 2010; Contreras 2012). In addition, a desire for flexibility, self-employment, entrepreneurialism, and personally ‘meaningful’ work, may pull people towards the informal sector (Snyder 2004). However, the same opportunity for income generation that comes with a lack of credentialing processes, licensing, and permitting procedures, also brings with it a lack of assurances. We find then that already vulnerable and marginal social groups must confront and manage the uncertainty of “‘working’ without being ‘employed’” (Lozano 1983: 340).
This research is therefore fueled by a desire to understand the lived experience of marginal and economically vulnerable social groups and is informed by an interactionist tradition that pays particular attention to the ways in which people jointly create meanings under conditions of hardship. My dissertation joins work by Mitchell Duneier (1999), Sudhir Venkatesh (2006) and others, and draws from situated interactional data to investigate the daily interactions through which people carve out a living in an everyday public space. My interactionist approach highlights the way people make space public by defining and negotiating its use. My focus, however, is not merely on the economic role the Boardwalk plays in the lives of those working here, but also in the way the Boardwalk becomes a site for people to live their lives.

**INTERVENTION AND GOALS**

Visiting a Venice Neighborhood Council meeting can leave one dizzied by conflicts over just who has a ‘right’ to this ‘Free Speech and Expression Zone.’ Artists pitted against commercial vendors, residents yelling about a haven for homelessness, and merchants arguing about taxpayer rights. At first, these debates seem central to life on the Boardwalk. As people step to the microphone, or yell from their seats, artists emerge as distinct from homeless, hippies from entrepreneurs, and vendors from musicians. But while these distinctions become meaningful in the representational spaces of public debate, we may be too quick to presume that they also become a meaningful part of everyday life. In fact, while these ‘identities’ rise to the surface in public forums, they often settle and blur as they hit the concrete, only bubbling up here and there as people pull from this public discourse to frame their arguments.

Andrew Deener’s (2012) recent work places the Boardwalk within the surrounding community of Venice. One of five ‘neighborhoods,’ Deener’s analysis follows the historical
development of the Boardwalk from a once ‘bohemian enclave’ to a commercially-driven ‘bohemian theme park’ (164-203). Looking at the intersection of economic, social, and political forces over time, Deener offers an excellent history of the development of the Venice Beach Boardwalk and the kinds of conflicts that surround it. Yet, by using ‘bohemia’ as the prism through which to view all social life, Deener’s ‘characters’ become one-dimensional, only understood by how they position their economic activities to some – presumably meaningful – ‘bohemian’ past. Inevitably, what comes into focus is the performative role each person plays in a commercially-driven tourist economy, rather than the way their daily activities are made individually and interactionally meaningful.

Additionally, it is difficult to pin down just where this authentic ‘enclave’ ends and the ‘theme park’ begins. Earlier work by Maynard (1991), for instance, noted that the phenomenon these original Venice ‘beats’ joined was already “an example of something real merging with something fabricated to produce something totally unforeseeable: a new branch of popular culture dedicated to the rejection of popular culture” (13). It therefore becomes moot to disentangle today’s ‘fabricated’ or ‘theme-park’ Boardwalk from some ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ Boardwalk of the past.

In order to understand the Boardwalk as a meaningful place, I argue that we move beyond identifying people by their position in a tourist market to instead dive into the ongoing interactions that provide the texture of everyday life. I therefore focus on the fluidity of social life on the Boardwalk to reveal the ongoing way that people live their lives. I add greater complexity and nuance to people, revealing both the glamour and grit of everyday life. As Duneier (1999) reveals in his study of New York City street vendors, it is the very relationships and interactions of those working on the sidewalk that give the informal marketplace meaning.
On a daily basis – the Boardwalk’s economic zone arises only because people make it happen. They work together and help one another. They allow some people in and keep others out. They make sense of – and act upon – their opportunities and constraints. They learn to accept certain behaviors and limit others. They become inclusive while also developing hierarchies and enacting power dynamics. This is the interactional terrain in which the Boardwalk happens, and as it does, these are the social processes through which the people working here become much more than economic actors – they become a community of *marginalized entrepreneurs* – turning an otherwise everyday pathway into a place from which to make a living and a place to live their lives.

This dissertation therefore explores the vibrancy of the Venice Beach Boardwalk through an analysis of daily tensions. In a place known for its diversity – where are the commonalities? In a place where homelessness, drug and alcohol dependency, and mental health problems flourish – how is work sustained? In a place where people talk of suspicion and individualism – how does trust develop? In a space open and accessible to all – how do inclusion and exclusion unfold? As a site of ongoing conflict and contestation, how do both fragility and endurance emerge? As these tensions play out we learn not only how people carve out a living, but how people carve out spaces within which to live their lives. By understanding such ground level negotiations and complex relationships, this project therefore exposes the formation and maintenance of a rather unlikely community.
METHODS

I moved to Venice in December of 2010 because, simply put, I liked the neighborhood. I ditched my car, bought a bike off of Craigslist, and sublet a small studio apartment from an Indonesia-bound thirty something with sun-bleached hair and a seemingly endless supply of vintage t-shirts. One of the first few days in the apartment I was sitting next to the large picture window overlooking a main intersection just off ‘the Boardwalk.’ A man was standing on a ladder, using a long roller brush to apply a fresh coat of beige paint to cover up a mural. As he painted I watched people walk and bike by, many of whom stopped to ask why he was painting over the mural. I never really heard his response, but as I watched I realized; all of my interest in conflicts over space, private and public interests, and the way people attach meaning to space, was happening under my nose.

On the first morning of my ‘official’ research project, I stepped outside to see an artist unloading his truck on the boardwalk. I introduced myself and told him about my interests. We ended up speaking on the sidewalk for about thirty minutes. We talked about the Boardwalk, his artwork, a book he wanted to write about Venice, and a smattering of social issues. The next day I borrowed a folding chair from the basement of my apartment building, walked over to the artist, and asked if I could sit with him for the day. He accepted, and I sat next to him in the grass just west of the Boardwalk, watching him make ‘sales,’ watching him interact, and making myself visible to others in the space.

At first I attempted to walk up to different people working along the west side of the Boardwalk with similar propositions, but this proved difficult. People were willing to engage in friendly conversation, but few seemed comfortable with my sitting for an entire day just to observe. As a default, I remained with the same artist for a while, a tactic that proved to be the
key to my research. As I remained a consistent presence in one area, I got to know people in the spaces nearby, and little by little, I was able to approach new people who recognized me as a familiar face. I was more successful inching my way up and down the Boardwalk, sitting with people in adjacent spaces, establishing connections for myself and allowing others to place me within the context.

My method took on the style of attaching links in a chain. I couldn’t easily skip around, but rather had to establish myself with certain people in a given space, then with a larger network on a given block. After time, networks became more apparent, and the linearity of the boardwalk broke down somewhat. People had seen my face enough, they could associate me with different Boardwalk users, and some saw me at meetings or walking around the area. After that time I became comfortable moving around, and I got to know people on a variety of blocks.

Throughout most of fieldwork I observed, assisted, and worked alongside the vendors, artists, and performers making their living along the Venice Beach Boardwalk. I jotted notes into a small notebook during the day and returned home in the evening to type up detailed field notes. Though most of my observations and conversations occurred as an observer, where I sat alongside those working and assisted when possible, in 2013 I began to establish myself first as a business partner to one vendor and then as a vendor and artist. In the end, my independent work proved a vital component of data collection, reaffirming much of the processes I had witnessed in previous years while also providing new details of daily practices that could only come through direct interaction with individuals as I personally navigated participation in the marketplace.

Beyond ‘the Boardwalk,’ I have also attended public meetings, served on two neighborhood council committees, visited people to their homes, and traveled to Downtown Los Angeles with
vendors as they purchased merchandise for resale. My ability to speak Spanish also offered increased access to a large Spanish-speaking population on the Boardwalk. Not only could I speak with new arrivals, a number of whom did not speak English, but I could also move more fluidly into and out of casual conversations among Spanish speakers. My gender also greatly influenced the nature of my interactions within the space, which I explain in detail in Chapter Five.

My residence along the Boardwalk meant that I often interacted with people in ways that were not overtly research-based. I stopped to chat on my way out the door, as I purchased coffee in the morning, as I headed to the gym or to ride my bike. I ran into people as I went out for drinks at night or to pick up groceries at the local market. At times my residence in a building along the Boardwalk proved a rewarding way to hear different perspectives of the same issue. While sitting with an artist in front of the residential building, I listened to his interpretation of a conflict with the building landlord. ‘The Wicked Witch of Westminster!’ he would say. While inside the building, I could hear her discuss the same conflict from a very different point of view. ‘He’s rotating homeless people!’ By virtue of living off the Boardwalk I also became accustomed to people’s schedules and patterns. The Craft Guy walks around the corner about 7. Paul stores his cart in this garage and Michelle in that closet. That’s Julio’s voice I overhear and Kahled’s van I see. Harry parks on this block and Tim on that block. My residence therefore revealed the mundane patterns of this social world.

My analysis was also influenced by a type of ‘natural experiment’ that emerged during my individual fieldwork. Data collection spanned three major shifts in ‘the Ordinance’ – Los Angeles Municipal Code 42.15 – which lays out ‘time, place, and manner’ restrictions on the ‘Free Speech and Expression Zone.’ From 2004 – 2010 access to the Boardwalk’s ‘Free Speech
and Expression Zone’ was regulated through a permit program – requiring people to place an ID card into a weekly lottery draw – and merchandise was regulated through the requirement that it be ‘inextricably intertwined’ with the message of a vendor. In October of 2010, however, a federal court granted a temporary injunction that effectively made Ordinance 42.15 null and void. Allocation of space ceased to be determined by the city’s permit program and shifted to a first-come, first-serve policy dictated by users themselves. Because the Ordinance lost its heft, so too did any regulation of merchandise. In 2012, following a period that vendors, artists, and performers often referred to as ‘anything goes,’ the Los Angeles City Council signed a revised version of LAMC 42.15 – ‘the Ordinance,’ which left access as ‘first-come, first-serve’ but shifted from a requirement that merchandise be ‘inextricably intertwined’ with the message of a vendor to a requirement that merchandise have no more than ‘nominal utility.’

These shifts became significant for data collection and analysis because they exposed an ongoing tension between stability and change and revealed the ways people navigate, negotiate, and challenge their conditions to define the use of public space. By following these changes – as well as seasonal transitions, new arrivals, departures, and broader shifts in the economy – I was able to move beyond a ‘snapshot’ of life on the Boardwalk to expose the more durable processes that undergird this social world. In the end, the very regulation that had seemed such a central concern to life on the Boardwalk fizzled into the background, revealing a much more fluid and interactional vision of people making a living and living their lives in an everyday public space.
DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

This dissertation project draws on over four years of ethnographic data along the Venice Beach Boardwalk to expose the social life of an informal workplace. In order to do this I present four distinct but interrelated articles.

In CHAPTER TWO, I explore the participatory nature of public space regulation. In order to shift the way we think of public space regulation in opposition to democratic participation, I highlight the way people make regulation a fluid part of day to day life. Drawing on a ‘natural experiment’ that emerged during fieldwork – allowing for three different periods of regulation – I highlight a ground level process of ‘co-constructing expression.’ My findings link the participatory nature of regulation with degrees of ‘publicness.’

In CHAPTER THREE, I locate trust as a key social mechanism for stability. While many scholars explore the role of trust in informal economic activity through a social capital or network framework, an ethnographic lens allows me to distinguish the interactional work that trust does from the social ties and networks themselves. The diachronic approach to trust allows me to uncover a process of building, maintaining, and protecting trust in everyday interaction. I am able to expose the particular interactional work that trust does to manage workplace needs, like protecting against theft, ensuring access, providing job security, offering ‘sick leave,’ providing protection from policing and law enforcement, and constructing ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders.’ In the end I find that trust emerges as a key mechanism for community formation among an extremely diverse set of individuals and in an unlikely setting. A version of this chapter is currently under review at Social Psychology Quarterly.

CHAPTER FOUR considers the prevalence of drugs and alcohol in the informal workplace. Taking an interactionist approach to intoxication, I present three patterned relationships between
‘working’ and ‘intoxicating’ – *taking a break from work, working to intoxicate*, and *intoxicating out of work*. Each of these emerges on a continuum of acceptability and leads to different social and material consequences for people working in the public marketplace. Throughout the analysis I demonstrate how these different relationships between work and intoxication become interrelated in a social ecology of work on the Boardwalk.

CHAPTER FIVE draws attention to the way in which workplace interactions are shaped by situated gender dynamics. Offering a perspective on gendering processes over time, I use my own experience to expose the way in which ‘intimacy’ unfolds to construct and shape the experience and movement of different types of women in this male-dominated marketplace. Paying particular attention to the ongoing surveillance of women in public space, this chapter also exposes the interactional ways in which women working here manage ‘intimacy’ by both restricting and embracing particular types of movements and interactions as they maintain access, build social ties, establish a sense of ‘safety,’ and achieve economic stability. This article has been published in *Qualitative Research*.

In the CHAPTER SIX, I synthesize the overall findings of this research and draw out my contributions to research on informal work, community, and public space.
REFERENCES


CHAPTER TWO

“THIS IS ART: IF YOU WANT IT TO BE:”

CO-CONSTRUCTING REGULATION IN PUBLIC SPACE

ABSTRACT

This article examines the daily experience of regulation in public space. Drawing from ethnographic data collected over two-and-a-half years along the Venice Beach Boardwalk, a ‘Free Speech & Expression Zone’ in Los Angeles, California, I show how individuals emerge as active participants in the regulation process. I follow three distinct periods of regulation that occurred during my individual fieldwork to expose the way people working in one public marketplace expand and contract the parameters of city regulation. The common link between increased regulation and decreased democratic participation leads the case of Venice Beach to emerge as anomalous. Here, democratic participation occurs from within regulation, making the case to view the two as fluid constructions. Data therefore exposes a process of co-constructing ‘free speech and expression.’
CHAPTER TWO

“THIS IS ART: IF YOU WANT IT TO BE:”

CO-CONSTRUCTING REGULATION IN PUBLIC SPACE

INTRODUCTION

One afternoon I stood in the bare bones meeting room of a local storage facility, just a few blocks east of Los Angeles’s famed Venice Beach. Moments earlier we had adjourned a raucous neighborhood committee meeting set to discuss recent conflicts erupting on Ocean Front Walk, the mile-and-a-half ‘Free Speech & Expression Zone’ known locally as ‘the Boardwalk.’ I stayed back to speak with a man known in this coastal community as Mr. Glitter. Mr. Glitter is a white male in his 50s. At 6’5”, his height is accentuated by an exceedingly thin frame, and he regularly wears an outfit of corduroy pants, suspenders, and a t-shirt proclaiming “Meat is Murder.” His suspenders are packed full of buttons with statements about veganism and animal rights.

Mr. Glitter and I continued to discuss the major topic of the meeting, an ongoing conflict between ‘commercial vending’ and ‘free speech & expression.’ He supports ‘free expression’ activities on the Boardwalk, arguing that commercial vending threatens that very freedom. As we speak, Mr. Glitter reveals his own understanding of the line between ‘expression’ and ‘commercial.’ Probing a little, I pose a question to Mr. Glitter. “Why is a t-shirt with an image of Africa considered ‘commercial’ while a t-shirt stating ‘Meat is Murder’ is ‘expression’?” Mr. Glitter’s eyes nearly pop from his head and I am quite sure I have offended the man. There is a moment of silence, followed by some guttural noises in which he quite clearly communicates ‘you’ve got to be kidding me.’

While the apparent absurdity of my question reveals Mr. Glitter’s personal clarity over the line between ‘expression’ and ‘commercial,’ the practical implementation of such a line is
complicated. It is this implementation, however, that Mr. Glitter is seeking. He is one of many members of the Venice Boardwalk community who attends these meetings in the hope that city regulation will draw and protect a clear line between commercial vending and public expression.

Although the tension at such community meetings is palpable, and anger and frustration runs high, this issue is not new. In his community study of Venice Beach, Deener notes the formulation of the Venice Beach Ordinance in the 1980s as a shift from “regulation without parameters” to “regulation with parameters.” This shift is the pivotal moment in which the city institutionalizes a distinction between commercial vending and public expression (Deener, 2012, p. 193). It is within this context that the city of Los Angeles has tried to strike a balance between maintaining the ‘edgy’ public image that makes this one of Southern California’s most attractive tourist destinations and a desire to protect public safety, limit conflict and competition over available public space, and secure the rights of rent-paying merchants and residents. Over the past few decades the regulation itself contributes to the durability of conflict, and the parameters drawn around ‘expression’ become vulnerable to ground-level strategies of negotiation. As Deener (2012) notes, those working here develop ‘logics of adaptation’ in order to navigate the regulation of ‘expression,’ locating strategies to loosely link anything from commercial sales to homelessness to a “bohemian” history of the Venice Boardwalk (164-203).

My concern is not to tease apart the many voices involved in this debate nor is it to distinguish legitimate ‘expressionists’ from illegitimate ‘vendors’ (for overview see Deener 2012). Rather, I utilize the case of the Venice Beach Boardwalk to push for new ways to think through the fluidity between regulation and democratic participation – and consequently push for new ways to approach degrees of ‘publicness’ in public space.
My data suggests that regulation emerges through an ongoing process of ground-level co-construction, where individuals first locate a space for participation within the parameters set by regulation, and then act to expand and contract those parameters. This continuous dialogue not only exposes the more fluid and participatory characteristics of regulation, but it reveals the processes by which people actively make space public.

REGULATION AND PUBLIC SPACE

Most individuals use and pass through public space on a daily basis, as they walk on sidewalks, sit on park benches, and drive along city streets. What defines these spaces as public is their apparent openness and accessibility. In practice, however, it is nearly impossible to locate a case where both openness and accessibility go unrestricted (Low and Smith, 2006; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009; Orum and Neale, 2010). One individual’s right to walk along the sidewalk freely and unobstructed is maintained precisely by limiting another individual’s right to create an obstruction. Individuals continuously struggle for these rights, and over time, certain uses and behaviors become legitimized while others emerge as disorderly and disruptive. Public space is always a site of continuous contestation, revealing that there is never just one public, but multiple publics. For scholars, understanding the implementation and effects of regulation can shed light on which interests and individuals emerge as legitimate, which become marginalized, and what is at stake.

Over the past few decades, scholarship emerging from sociology and geography has been particularly focused on the growing desire to bring order to the contemporary urban experience. Touted in terms of ‘public safety’ and ‘quality of life,’ we find crackdowns on homeless, graffiti, and prostitution, post-9/11 surveillance policies, security by design, rapid growth of gated
communities, privately owned shopping centers, and a proliferation of public-private alliances to build Business Improvement Districts (Davis, 1990; Zukin, 1995; Fyfe and Bannister, 1996; Mitchell, 1997; Lofland, 1998; Duneier, 1999; Fainstein, Hoffman and Judd, 2003; Smith and Low, 2006). Scholars have been heavily critical of increasing regulation in the name of order, often pointing to the ways in which restrictions disproportionately ignore the needs of already marginalized populations. In spaces with bans on sleeping in public we are cautioned to the ‘annihilation’ of the homeless (Mitchell, 1997). The rapid growth of gated communities, shopping malls, and office parks alert us to the increasing ‘fortification’ of urban space by the wealthy (Davis, 1990; Low, 2003; Kohn, 2004). The private redevelopment of historic seaports, marketplaces, and wharfs into highly planned spaces of consumption suggest a ‘disneyfication’ of once diverse and vibrant public spaces (Sorkin, 1992; Zukin, 1995; 2010). The focus on increased regulation and restriction, at times in the hands of private interests, thereby leads many scholars to a discussion and debate over the possible decline, erosion, and end of public space (Davis, 1990; Sorkin, 1992; Mitchell, 1995; Smith, 1996; Low, 1997; Lofland, 1998; Kohn, 2004) – a process that may even stifle the ability of people to develop skills necessary to address and solve the challenges of everyday life (Sennett 1970)

Such criticism and concern of growing regulation has sparked new ways of thinking about the nature and role of public space, more recently leading scholars to revisit the ‘end of public space’ debate to offer some nuance over its apparent decline (Madden, 2010; Mitchell, 2003; Low and Smith, 2006). In a reformulation of prior arguments, Don Mitchell has stated, what makes a space public is not some preordained publicness, it is rather a process by which individuals actively take space to make it public (2003; Mitchell and Staeheli, 2006). Along similar lines, scholars approach public space as a constant struggle, a movement towards some
utopia that will never be reached (Fraser, 1992; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009). In this sense it becomes important to understand how individuals interact with regulation and restriction to better understand the process by which individuals make space public.

Echoing Lefebvre (1974), scholars approach cases of resistance to reveal that regulation will never fully limit individual participation in an ongoing production of public space. Qualitative research highlights these cases, showing for instance how skateboarders convert park steps into a skate park (Chiu, 2009). Musicians turn a sidewalk into a performance site (Simpson, 2011). Homeless men and women challenge anti-sleeping ordinances through vehicle residency (Wakin, 2008). Book vendors transform a city sidewalk into a space for education and mentorship (Duneier, 1999). In this sense, the interplay between regulation and individual action lead to degrees of ‘publicness’ and public space emerges as a relative construction in a constant state of negotiation (Mitchell, 2003; Kohn, 2004; Calhoun, 2005; Watson, 2006; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009; Madden, 2010).

While this view of public space emphasizes ongoing struggle, analyses often approach individual resistance in stark opposition to regulation rather than as emerging from within the regulation process. Regulation appears static, externally imposed, and inherently anti-democratic, such that individuals must step outside the bounds of regulation in order to make space their own. Shifting the lens to highlight the participatory and democratic space available within regulation will allow for a sharper approach to understanding how degrees of publicness emerge in today’s increasingly regulated environments.

Ethnography continues to be an important tool for understanding how regulation is shaped on the ground and offers insight into the emergence of unintended consequences. Ethnographic analysis of the Venice Beach Boardwalk contributes to this body of work, and offers empirically
grounded evidence that individuals take space, not always in moments of overt resistance, but through daily processes of expanding and contracting the parameters set by regulation. Through an ethnographic approach I was able to move beyond a static snapshot, particularly since regulation shifted three times during fieldwork. In each phase, individuals emerge not as mere subjects of regulation, but as active participants in shaping regulation. By expanding and contracting the parameters of expression, I find that individuals engage in a dialogic process of regulation – co-constructing ‘expression.’

The case of Venice Beach pushes towards a more nuanced understanding of regulation in daily life. In addition, an understanding of how individuals participate in regulation on a daily basis allows for a closer look at how degrees of publicness emerge and crystallize in daily life. By focusing closely on regulation as a ground level process this research contributes to an understanding of how and when regulation allows for democratic participation in constructing legitimacy, thus answering a call to understand what kind of room there will be in order for a democratic process (Mitchell, 2003).

**SETTING AND METHODS**

For decades this beachfront stretch of asphalt and concrete has attracted a diverse set of individuals looking to perform, sell artwork, and vend their wares to a public of passersby. A setting for selling anything from food, to merchandise, entertainment, and art, the space emerged in the early 20th century as a vibrant scene, full of diverse sights, sounds, and smells, and has gained popularity as an entrepreneurial and artistic space (Stanton, 1993). Throughout the 20th century Venice Beach experienced a varied history of development and identity, from wealthy amusement park, to economically depressed community, to a site of cultural resurgence. As a
result, many in the community pull from very different interpretations of an ‘authentic’ Venice in order debate the appropriate uses of the space (Deener 2012).

In the early 1980’s the city of Los Angeles passed a law prohibiting vending on public property, exempting only those individuals protected by first amendment rights, including artists and entertainers seeking only donations. Two decades later the city of Los Angeles moved to officially declare Venice Beach’s Ocean Front Walk a “Free Speech and Expression Zone,” further perpetuating a murky distinction between ‘commercial’ and ‘expression’ (Stanton, 1993; Los Angeles Municipal Code 42.15, 2006; Deener, 2012).

As Deener (2012) shows in his recent account of Venice, while the Boardwalk remains connected to its artistic past, racial and ethnic diversity, and countercultural activism, it also operates as an entrepreneurial and commercial space. The Boardwalk continues to emerge as a site where many community conflicts play out, and as a result it has been regulated, de-regulated, and re-regulated many times (see Deener 2013: 164-203). What I hope to add to this history is a clear understanding of the way ground-level negotiations create degrees of ‘publicness.’

Each morning this mile-and-a-half stretch comes alive with the sights, sounds, and smells of a kind of beachfront carnival. Along the Eastern side of the Boardwalk merchants slide open metal gates to small rental space to offer t-shirts, sunglasses, hats, jewelry, glass pipes, tattoos, piercings, and more. Along the beachside, vendors, performers, and artists set up tables, easels, blankets and umbrellas to access and attract the attention and money of passersby. Tourists and locals pass through, some on skateboards, rollerblades, and bikes, others by foot.

This research draws on ethnographic data gathered since January 2010, during which time I lived as a resident both directly adjacent to the Boardwalk and two blocks east of the Boardwalk. I have spent time getting to know vendors, performers, artists, advocates, merchants, and
residents. In that time I have met individually with Boardwalk personalities to hear their opinions and observe their actions. I have attended numerous public meetings in order to better understand the how individual perspectives of the Boardwalk translate into actions and political debates. I have visited individuals in their homes, traveled to Downtown Los Angeles with vendors as they purchase merchandise for resale, and assisted people in their work along the Boardwalk.

From the beginning, I have utilized modified grounded theory, engaging in ongoing dialogue between empirical data and existing theoretical frameworks (Timmermans and Tavory, 2007). From the onset, I have sought to understand the puzzling coexistence of city regulation, visible enforcement and the ongoing vibrancy and unpredictability of a highly democratic and participatory space. In addition, spending time with individuals through various regulation changes indicated a certain consistency of processes over time and an ease with which individuals made sense of and navigated the regulation. Embedded in the very city that sparked so many discussions of ‘santitization,’ ‘Disneyfication,’ and ‘fortification,’ this space continues to exhibit extraordinary democratic participation. As a result, the story of regulation in Venice Beach emerges as somewhat anomalous. Modified grounded theory therefore guided an analysis driven to locate a better fit for the fluidity of ground level processes I witnessed during fieldwork.

Key to this analysis was a natural experiment that occurred during my data collection: regulation, de-regulation, re-regulation. As a result, I avoid the kind of typology that may distinguish individuals by the kinds of items they sell or how they may present themselves to the public. A multi-phasic approach allowed these distinctions to break down over time, and I opt instead to focus on the processes I witness among a variety of individuals. Important to remember, is that these three phases are only partially able to capture the ongoing nature of
social processes within this space and should be understood within a broader context of continual development. The City of Los Angeles has gone through dozens of versions of regulation and these are merely three phases in a long and ongoing context of shifting regulation (see also Deener 2012). This research supports a need to empirically illustrate the way degrees of publicness emerge as a dialogue between control and participation.

**Beachside Participants**

As mentioned above, although the Boardwalk operates officially as a ‘Free Speech & Expression Zone,’ it emerges on a daily basis as a commercial zone. What is at stake, however, is a matter beyond individual and ideological frustration. Individuals offer merchandise, artwork, handicrafts, and performances to tourists and locals in order to earn vital income through direct sales or donations. For many participants, the Boardwalk provides the opportunity to earn income outside of a formal workplace environment. For some, this ‘lifestyle’ decision grows from a desire to live independently, as an artist, performer, or entrepreneur (Deener 2012). For others, a lack of legal U.S. residency, physical disabilities, mental health issues, dependency, and criminal records act to limit more formal workplace opportunities. Included among those working along the Boardwalk are the unemployed and underemployed, African, Caribbean, Central and South American immigrants, African Americans, Latinos, veterans, and a large homeless population. Income earned on the Boardwalk often boosts various government funds from social security, disability, and unemployment.

For those without such income streams, earnings may provide enough cash for day-to-day survival, often going towards food, cigarettes, the purchase of merchandise, or in some cases to feed alcohol and drug addictions. Some people afford rent in small apartments nearby, or within surrounding Los Angeles communities. Individuals starting out, or in more vulnerable positions,
often share small studio and one-bedroom apartments along the Boardwalk with two or three other individuals. Those in the most vulnerable positions may earn income for day-to-day survival while sleeping in the many alleyways, sidewalks, and hidden spaces in and around nearby garages.

Although the Boardwalk participants vary quite considerably, from well-established artists featured in local and international exhibitions to individuals struggling for day-to-day survival (see Deener 2009), the vast majority of individuals utilize the space as a means to earn a living. As such, regulation takes on an important role in the space, and can have serious social and material consequences.

**CO-CONSTRUCTING EXPRESSION**

In this section I lay out three consecutive phases of regulation that occur between January 2010 and July 2012. In each phase, I examine the practices that emerge as individuals make sense of and interact with regulation in their daily lives. I show how individuals recognize a space for participation within regulation and act to both expand and contract parameters set by regulation. As a result, individuals shape the way regulation, and consequently ‘free speech and expression,’ emerge on the ground. By spanning multiple phases of regulation, I move away from analysis of static implementation and consequence to focus instead on the more fluid and participatory characteristics of regulation in daily life. I argue that it is useful to view daily practices of participation in order to better understand the often fluid role of regulation in daily life and degrees of publicness. From here I offer a contribution to understanding how people make space public through engagement with regulation.

I zoom in on processes that emerge as individuals interact with key regulation along the Boardwalk set by Los Angeles Municipal Code 42.15, or the Venice Beach Ordinance. The
parameters set for ‘free speech and expression’ define and delineate activities exempt from the city-wide ban on public vending. It is important to note that the Ordinance is a living document, and while this analysis focuses on ethnographic data collected over three major phases in regulation, the first phase should not be treated as a starting point, but rather as the result of changes made to prior versions of the Ordinance. Similarly, the third phase should not be viewed as final, but rather ongoing, with possible future developments made as individuals continue to participate on the ground.

With each change in the Ordinance, the parameters of ‘expression’ shift, and new and ongoing processes aimed to expand and contract those shifting parameters rise to the surface. Additionally, enforcement is often discretionary, as officers take it upon themselves to police “the spirit of the law” rather than the written law (see also Deener 2012). At times they advise individual participants of malleability in parameters of ‘expression’ and often express reluctance to ticket on issues that have previously led to court battles. As a result, ‘expression’ never quite translates to the ground in obvious ways, but emerges through an ongoing process of co-construction.

**Phase I: The Permit Program**

The first phase draws from data collected from January 2010 to October 2010, during which time the Boardwalk is regulated by a “Public Expression Permit Program” established to create “time, place, and manner” restrictions and restore “order.” The City divided the open space into 205 ‘designated spaces,’ numbered, delineated by painted lines, and organized into zones with various qualifications for permissible merchandise and activities. Participants were required to pay $25 for a ‘lifetime’ permit and ID card which was utilized in a weekly lottery draw to pre-assign individuals a designated space for the upcoming week and weekend. In its definition of
permissible merchandise, the city Ordinance required that items be ‘inextricably intertwined’ with a vendor’s ‘message.’ Of the entire document, the phrase ‘inextricably intertwined’ gains the most traction on the ground. It travels through conversations, it animates arguments, and it is the butt of jokes. It is ‘inextricably intertwined’ that becomes the ‘fuzziness’ of the regulation, and it is here that vendors locate their opportunity to participate in defining the space’s use.

So They Want a Message

In many cases, individuals expand the parameters of ‘expression’ by drawing links between commercial goods and vague religious or cultural symbols. Andrew Deener has located this as a “logic of adaptation” where individuals “manufacture free expression as a public space business” (2012, p. 180). Many Latino immigrants sell brightly colored bracelets. A large network of African immigrants sell t-shirts with images of Africa and Bob Marley, belts striped in ‘Rasta’ black, red, green, and yellow, and patchwork bags. Some vendors offer peace sign necklaces, incense, and marijuana leaf rings.

Tim is one such vendor who buys manufactured merchandise from Downtown Los Angeles at wholesale prices to sell it on the Boardwalk at about five times the cost. Tim originally came to the Boardwalk to make some money between jobs, and had little interest in producing original artwork or expressive material. Tim makes sense of the regulation in a way that allows him to make space for commercial vending.

Tim says, “They’re making us have ‘a message,’ they’re looking for ‘the message’.” So, he tells me, ‘I’m going to sell these peace necklaces and peace bracelets. Then I’ll have a sign made from that guy down there.’ He points South on the Boardwalk, then opens his arms in a grand gesture and says “Peace, Love, Holy, Incense.” Then Tim laughs a little.
Here Tim engages with the regulation of ‘expression,’ recognizes the parameters within which he must operate, and *expands* those parameters to encompass commercial goods.

Mohammed is an African immigrant who sells hats, bags and t-shirt decorated in Green, Yellow, Red, and Black. As many of the ‘Rasta guys’ on the Boardwalk, he buys all of his items from Downtown Los Angeles. Mohammed often talks about the communicative value of the colors displayed on his items. However, past experience with enforcement tells Mohammed that this is not the kind of ‘message’ the Ordinance intends to support. As a result, Mohammed reluctantly locates the fuzziness in the ‘free speech and expression’ to remain free of fines.

Mohammed walks me over to a hat, picks it up and flips it upside-down. Inside is a small white tag with the word LOVE printed in black. He looks at me and shrugs a little, telling me that if the city wants it to have a message, he’ll sew in a message. He goes over to a few other items and flips them over. A belt has a tag stating PEACE. A bag has a tag with a peace sign. He tells me that as long as he sews these in, they can’t say it is just commercial because it is ‘inextricably intertwined’ with his message.

Mohammed does not alter the purchase of goods, but rather takes small steps to alter the goods themselves. Quite literally, Mohammed *adds* a message to merchandise that, according to city regulators, lacks in communicative value. Similar to Tim, by adding statements like PEACE and LOVE Mohammed preserves elements of ‘free speech and expression.’

In addition to selling items with peace signs the words LOVE, individuals also locate the space for participation in the regulation by reframing the exchange itself. For instance, by framing the exchange of money as a ‘donation,’ individuals can re-write the narrative of ‘vending’ as a vague societal contribution.
As one vendor states, “people have to say, well it’s a donation, but I can’t give it to you without that donation.” Repeatedly customers approach and pick up items, asking the vendor, ‘how much is this?’ To which they may respond, ‘that’s a donation of five dollars.’ At times vendors may be more specific, saying something like, ‘It’s all donation, it goes to help the homeless.’

Through the daily practice of creating a message these vendors expand the parameters of ‘free speech and expression’ such that they make room for the ‘sale’ of commercial goods. These vendors do not act surreptitiously, avoiding visibility by law enforcement. Nor do they fight within a framework of resistance by opposing regulation. Instead they act within regulation, engaging it as a fluid aspect of their daily lives, to reveal that the line between permissible and impermissible operates as a participatory framework. These practices not only protect Tim and Mohammed from formal enforcement and fines, but they actually shape the way ‘free speech and expression’ emerges on the Boardwalk. They work to define the uses of the public space.

Influencing relationships

Those working here demonstrate that participation is not merely about finding a way to expand the parameters of regulation. As commercial goods gain greater presence along the Boardwalk, others seek to contract the regulation. Some artists communicate more challenging circumstances, including a perceived ‘cheapening’ of the market, rising competition for space to display artwork, and the destruction of Venice as an artistic community. Artists therefore locate the participatory space within the ordinance and work to contract the parameters of regulation. Regulation therefore influences the way people relate to one another and the role they perceive one another as playing.

Many times this contraction is framed by artists in terms of morality. For instance, Sara, a painter who often sets up large canvases on easels, locates her own experience on the Boardwalk
as one of self-progression. In opposition to her own narrative, she locates commercial vendors as stagnant individuals, potentially contributing to the exploitation of others.

Sara tells me that vendors are selling commercial goods likely ‘made by an 8 year-old in China.’ “It’s not good for them,” she tells me, “not good for their own soul to sell that stuff. They’re not doing anything to progress themselves.”

Similar to Sara, some artists frame their position in terms of what is best for the community and for the space itself.

One sculptor tells me that “Things are supposed to be homemade of course, not like this Chinatown.” He continues that he would definitely like it to be all artists out, and clarifies, ‘anybody who is doing their own thing.’ He assures me that would be the ‘best use of this space and the best for the energy out here.’

It is common for artists to frame their own behavior and presence as positive for the community as a whole in opposition to commercial vending which hurts the “image of Venice.”

Juan is setting up Randy’s artwork and chimes in, telling Tim that he is totally commercial. Tim says ‘it’s not commercial, it’s inextricably intertwined,’ and asks, ‘who says Venice is all about artwork anyways?’ Juan begins speaking more emphatically, and says “Come on Tim,” what you’ve got there is a “swap meet.” Tim says that his display is not a swap meet, and again, asks Juan, ‘Who says Venice is all about art?’ Juan tells Tim that ‘this is not what Venice is about,’ he’s lived here his whole life and this is supposed to be ‘a place for art.’ Juan continues setting up the paintings, but motions over to Tim’s display and turns to me, saying ‘he’s just commercial and this is about artists.’ Tim gets a little agitated and says ‘nobody comes here for art.’ He poses a rhetorical question, “Why do people come to Venice,” and responds to himself “to buy jewelry.”
This interaction shows how Boardwalk participants also contract the parameters of ‘free speech and expression.’ This kind of contraction appears only through interaction where individuals can frame themselves as a protected public in opposition to an unprotected public.

Building ‘the operation’
We have seen ways in which vendors work to expand the parameters of public expression by creating a message and re-framing the exchange, while artists contract those parameters to define themselves as the protected public and exclude others as inappropriate. In addition to these strategies, we also see how some of those working here play with the individuality of ‘free speech and expression.’ For instance, while designated spaces on the Boardwalk are designed for individual participations – with the exception of some ‘group’ spaces for performers and musicians – some people working along the Boardwalk expand their work into additional spaces.

Dean, Matt and Ricardo express their opposition to vending – Dean often props up a printed sign stating “Venice Beach Artists are an Endangered Species,” urging passersby to help “Stop the Swap Meet.” But Dean also sets up a few spaces and hires individuals to work for commission. On a regular basis, he operates a Henna Tattoo stand and has another person work it. Occasionally he gives people advice on business expansion. For Dean, his participation is protected, allowing him to expand the parameters of ‘free speech and expression.’

Matt is a performer, who most often sings and plays guitar. He is a vocal member of the community and a staunch supporter of first amendment rights. He is involved in legal battles, often travels to City Hall in order to speak in public comment at City Council Meetings, and knows most regular LAPD officers on an individual basis. Matt maintains an identity that is tied to narrow definition of ‘public expression,’ since his performances are live. However, Matt operates a small business enterprise. He makes incense and has a friend set up a display to sell it...
for a commission. Other musicians have called him ‘Mussolini’ for his aggressive ownership over the commercial life of one particular Boardwalk block.

Ricardo sells jewelry, much of it cheap string and leather bracelets purchased downtown. Behind his three tables covered with manufactured goods, Ricardo sits on a stool with a box of leather strips. He often braids the leather, or fastens clasps to the strings, and lays a small section of handmade items among the manufactured ones.

**Phase II: Informal Control & ‘Anything Goes’**

In October 2010, following the success of a lawsuit filed by a group of Boardwalk ‘expressionists,’ a federal court granted a temporary injunction on the Public Expression Permit Program, arguing that particular restrictions were unconstitutional. Though the ‘inextricably intertwined’ standard was not one of the immediate targets for constitutionality, the Ordinance as a whole lost its heft. Law enforcement officers found little support for distributing citations and the Department of Recreation and Parks became all but obsolete, stating in one community meeting, ‘we’ve been instructed to remain hands-off.’ While workers found themselves navigating new parameters of ‘free speech and expression,’ what played out on the ground was a period of ‘anything goes.’

Users took informal control of the Boardwalk, and some used the opportunity to expand the parameters of ‘free speech and expression’ to include even the most egregious forms of commercial vending – from packaged movies to t-shirts with visible logos – vocal community members responded with new vigor. Many residents, merchants, law enforcement agents, artists, and performers reacted to the leniency in regulation and enforcement. Though some fought for the constitutionality of informal control as a public right, many others fought against the
broadened parameters of ‘public expression’ visible in the breadth of commercial activity along the Boardwalk. The result was a new draft of the Ordinance, discussed informally in local committee meetings, written behind closed doors, and passed unanimously by the Los Angeles City Council in January 2012.

Locating new opportunity

Many of the Boardwalk participants I knew became notably excited at the broadened participatory space and the possibility for further expansion of regulation. The victory in the name of First Amendment rights also held new meaning for those already engaged in processes of expansion, as individuals pushing against the constraints of regulation parameters suddenly felt those constraints give way.

Randy walks up to his usual spot next to Tim, he seems full of energy. He yells to Tim, “Did you hear about the ruling?!” in an excited tone. He says, “Now we can do anything!” The two slap hands. Tim speaks excitedly, smiling as he talks. He says, ‘Nobody can tell me what I can and cannot sell.’ He looks around the block where he and Randy usually set up and says “We own this!”

When Tim says, ‘Nobody can tell me what I can and cannot sell,’ he demonstrates an understanding of limited enforcement goes even further to connect the now lenient parameters around ‘free speech and expression’ with an ability to take ‘ownership’ over this public space. This moment provides a vivid picture of how individuals make sense of regulation in daily life. Of course, during this moment the Boardwalk remains regulated by broader city-wide bans on public vending. Additionally, as public space, the Boardwalk is not vulnerable to individual ‘ownership.’ In practice, however, Randy and Tim understand their role in shaping how this new regulation will emerge on the ground.
New partnerships begin to flourish as commercial vendors emerge with new confidence. Individuals set up ‘joint ventures’ in adjacent spaces and some ‘hire’ employees to help work. The ability to act in such a fashion highlights a new ability to push beyond the constraints of prior definitions of ‘free speech and expression.’ The increasing presence of ‘employees’ and joint ventures, pushes ‘expression’ to new limits by detaching the merchandise from any individual vendor. Where prior regulation saw attempts by commercial vendors to draw individual links between themselves, a message, and their merchandise, we now saw the freedom to sell merchandise without any constraints of those links – eliminating any need to even ‘perform’ some notion of ‘free speech and expression.’

With new leniency in regulation, commercial vendors recognize weakened limits of ‘free speech and expression,’ allowing their activities to flourish. Evidence of newly expanded parameters often comes through interaction with law enforcement and other Boardwalk users.

I sit with Natan as he helps set up Randy’s display, and he tells me about the situation with Barbara, a local resident occupying an ocean front apartment across from Randy’s daily space. Natan tells me that Randy was rapping, and imitates him a little bit. Then he motions to the building just across the Boardwalk and says that she came down and called the cops. ‘So then all these cops were here, but they said ‘we can’t do anything lady, because the Ordinance has been lifted.’ ‘So,’ Natan tells me, ‘Randy put it even louder…you know Randy.’

Moments like these reinforce the context of informal control and allow commercial vending to flourish. In addition, the action and inaction of law enforcement acts in dialogue with regulation and individual participation, sparking further confidence in the ability to define the use of this public space. It is also important to recognize the way a shift in regulation worked to muddle
people’s understanding of broader state regulation of public space. At an Ocean Front Walk committee meeting, for instance, LAPD officers fielded overall frustration by residents that they no longer had any recourse for complaints of any kind. Officers had to remind people that noise violations and other infractions still pertained to the Boardwalk – as a public space – regardless of LAMC 42.15 and the ‘free speech and expression zone.’ Still, people working on the Boardwalk pushed in any way possible to define how they could and would use the space.

I walk onto the Boardwalk and notice that people are setting up around 8:45, fifteen minutes prior to the official set-up time. I see Tim rolling his things over and he smiles, ‘we’re setting up early.’ I respond that it’s not even 9am yet, and he says, ‘yeah, the time is another thing we don’t care about any more.’

Vendors continue to sell jewelry and clothing, but the constraints of ‘free speech and expression’ no longer threaten individuals making a living through the sale of commercial merchandise. Within months there is electronic equipment, dog collars, and clothing. Display practices morph in appearance from sidewalk sale into small storefront. Clothes are hung on hangars or draped over mannequins. Jewelry displays are laid out in original packaging. For many commercial vendors, the new context is exciting and profitable.

One can find vendor after vendor selling similar merchandise, following market trends. ‘Rasta’ guys sell bags, t-shirts, hats, and jewelry, sometimes setting up three to one block. Incense, feather hair clips, bracelets, rings, and necklaces appear all along the Boardwalk, dominating the landscape along the western side. Gone are the ‘donation’ signs, by ‘everything $2’ signs. Some people set up small folding tables and display boxes of cheap jewelry still in wholesale packaging, merely marking the items up at five times the cost.
Here we see how the temporary injunction creates fertile ground for commercial vending by eliminating official constraints. The way in which commercial vendors communicate their own understanding of the new context indicates a confidence in their ability to navigate ‘free speech and expression’ without resistance. In addition, the entire period of ‘anything goes’ is understood by those working as created by ‘the public’ through the law.

**Building Coalitions**

As commercial vending flourishes along the Boardwalk, those involved in original creation grow increasingly frustrated by limited space and perceived decrease in profits. Artists and free speech advocates respond by forming coalitions with other Boardwalk users as well as nearby merchants, residents, and community members.

For some Boardwalk users who oppose commercial vending, coalitions among adjacent participants on a given Boardwalk ‘block’ create some informal control. Caroline, a clairvoyant, tells me how her block is making attempts to keep out some of the commercial vending. ‘We can pretty much tell people to leave,’ she tells me of her block of vendors, ‘or we may intimidate them out of the area.’ She mentions that they control the block from commerce, and that if somebody tries to set up with bracelets, ‘they get them to leave.’ Though Caroline does not specify how this occurs, verbal arguments are much more common than physical confrontations when it comes to space distribution. What is importation, however, is that Caroline perceives an ability to resist commercial vending, even when individuals selling manufactured jewelry on her block regularly appear.

During this period of informal control, the Venice Neighborhood Council forms a subcommittee to discuss the issues of concern on the Boardwalk. From its inception, the committee is staunchly anti-commercial. The committee itself is composed of five representative categories of voting members: Performers, Artists, Merchants, Free-Speech Advocates, and
Residents. Upon formation of the committee, ‘commercial vendor’ is not an open category for representation. At one meeting of the Ocean Front Walk Committee community members voice their concerns.

The representative from the Venice Beach Merchant’s Association chimes in and speaks loudly, saying “They’re trying to make a living by opening a business on a public sidewalk,” as he hits the table with his fist a few times. Another community member adds, “These guys are just selling stuff from downtown!” And adds, “Jewelry is just a mess,” and there is “no way to prove whether or not somebody made something!”

Similarly, at a local Venice Beach Task Force meeting community members enter discussion with enforcement agents, including LAPD and Department of Recreation and Parks representatives. One man is yelling about the ‘inextricably intertwined’ wording. He yells, ‘with ‘inextricably intertwined’ anything can be out there…anybody can stick a cross on!’

Here coalitions begin to address the fuzzy nature of expression, arguing that the use of strategies to blur the line between manufactured goods and original artwork have created a context of commercial vending in a non-commercial zone. Argument, therefore, coalesced around the participatory space available within the regulation.

**Phase III: The Nominal Utility Standard**

The major changes made in January 2012 include a shift from the requirement that merchandise be ‘inextricably intertwined’ with the message of a vendor to the requirement that merchandise be original with no more than ‘nominal utility.’ The ‘nominal utility’ standard essentially shifts the participatory space from one surrounding a ‘message’ to one surrounding ‘utility.’ “An item…will be deemed to have more than nominal utility apart from its communication if it has a common and dominant non-expressive purpose” (Los Angeles
Municipal Code 42.15, 2012). To recent arrivals the ‘nominal utility’ standard may have appeared as new, but it is merely an example of regulation come full circle. Such was the standard for merchandise prior to the Phase I’s Permit Program, only to be challenged and overturned by people selling books and other expressive materials. Importantly, the 2012 Ordinance demonstrated a recognition of this fuzziness and listed restricted items, including “housewares, appliances, articles of clothing, sunglasses, auto parts, oils, incense, perfume, crystals, lotions, candles, jewelry, toys and stuffed animals” (Los Angeles Municipal Code 42.15, 2012).

A Protected Public

Following the new regulation, some artists reaffirm their position on the Boardwalk. By reaffirming themselves as the rightful ‘protected’ public, many support the regulation changes for creating a context in which their participation is re-affirmed. These artists participate in new regulation without much alteration of their products. They continue to construct ‘free speech and expression’ through the creation of original products, and they continue to link that expression to individual talent.

I notice Pierre’s artwork ahead and see him sitting in a little square of paintings. I walk over and smile; he gives me a big smile and gets up to give me a hug. I ask how he’s been and he says he just got back from Australia three weeks ago. He says he got back just when everything changed. I ask him how he likes it. He brings his hand to his mouth, kisses his fingers and releases them, and says with a smile, ‘Perfect.’ He says he loves the change.

Pierre’s paintings have not changed in any way since before the regulation changes. Through each time period, Pierre painted. What did affect Pierre has always been the ability of others to
successfully navigate the regulation, thus taking space along the Boardwalk and creating an environment of spatial constraint.

As a way to tell me how much better it is now Pierre recounts an experience he had before the new regulation. He talks about trying to set up over there, motioning north, and having a block ‘owner’ come up to him and tell him he could not set up, that it was ‘his’ spot. Now, he says, ‘there is plenty of space.’

Similarly, Sara is beaming the day after the change. She is all smiles, in a great mood, and says ‘the changes are great!’ Sara is able to set up her paintings in her preferred space, allowing for repeat customers to find her and stable relationships with neighbors.

*Working within Regulation*

For those engaged in newly banned merchandise, the new phase sparks a new process to expand parameters of new regulation. For many, this is again a fluid shift, one that does not incite much confusion or difficulty.

Ricardo tells me that ‘it’s about over for everybody, they are going to kick them out.’ I ask what he will do, looking at the table of jewelry in front of him. He says he’ll paint, he used to paint anyways. ‘It will be more like it used to,’ he says. Recently, ‘people have been selling anything.’

Here Ricardo communicates the experience of new constraints, but does not consider himself at risk. Though he talks to me from behind a commercial jewelry display, he communicates a positive and fluid view of regulation. Interestingly, Ricardo does not begin painting.

Weeks later, after ticketing had caused many commercial vendors to leave, I stopped by Ricardo’s stand again. Just as before, Ricardo sat behind his table with a bucket of leather strips. Only now Ricardo was sitting behind a display of Dream Catchers, using the
leather to cover a metal circle, and using the feathers to hang as decoration. Ricardo told me that he’s been fine, able to adapt, and will keep making the Dream Catchers. While talking with him he did reach into a bin to remove a plastic bag of rings, telling that he would have to find another place to get rid of the old merchandise.

What is important is that Ricardo is successful because he can transfer craftsmanship from one item to another,¹ working again from within the regulation – this time through the phrase ‘no more than nominal utility.’ He can no longer engage in ‘free speech and expression’ through jewelry sales, and so he transfers skills to the sale of Dream Catchers. Similarly, other individuals draw on additional skills sets.

I notice Dean and stop by his stand. I am struck by how markedly different it appears. Gone are the bamboo houses and instruments. Dean is selling art now, paintings on wood panels and skateboards. He has a small easel set up at the back of the space, and boxes of used pains around the concrete. Most of the paintings are scenes of Venice or outdoor motifs like trees and flowers. The colors are bright, and there is a Caribbean feel to them. Dean tells me “I’m doing this now,” and further reassures me, “I can do anything though.” He tells me that the cops already came by and complimented him. He laughs and says “they told people to try and make the stand look like Dean’s.”

Dean’s change is almost seamless. He remains in the same location and continues to set up nearby ventures, but he turns to painting. As he says, ‘I’m doing this now, I can do anything though.’ His success is even evidenced by law enforcement officers, who tell Dean they are using him as a model.

¹ This process is also discussed by Deener (2012) as a “logic of adaptation” (164-203).
For both Ricardo and Dean, individuals engaged in the sale of both commercial and original goods, the new regulation comes with some challenges but does not lead to their departure. Both change their forms of expression and similarly communicate an ease and acceptance with this process.

For some commercial vendors, the shift in regulation provided a mere challenge rather than a departure.

After about a month’s absence I finally saw Tim on a Saturday morning in March, sitting behind his table in his usual spot. As always, a black sheet covered three folding tables arranged in a U, but the table was nearly empty. He only displayed two canvases with printed graphic designs, one a black and white of Marilyn Monroe, the other a sign with the words ‘Venice.’ Tim told me he ‘laid low’ for a while to let things ‘settle,’ and then began purchasing canvases. He tells me that he goes online to a website where he can upload an image, add a little writing with a spray paint effect, and order the image on a canvas. When it comes, he just staples it to the small wood frame. It costs him $9, he’ll sell it for $15.

In addition, where African immigrants like Mohammed often linked manufactured merchandise to vague messages of ‘peace’ and ‘love,’ some shift to make direct and clear links between the merchandise and personal expression.

I am surprised to see one of the ‘Rasta’ displays today. It is a table set up with patchwork bags, belts, and hats, the exact items that have been banned and absent from the space for over a month. This time, however, I notice a printed sign in the middle of the table. The sign states the religious significance behind many of the items, listing the name of a
church. In the center of the sign I see the statement ‘Black is for People. Red is for War. Green is for Land. Gold is for Wealth.’

Here commercial vendors apply some of what they have learned over time, no longer creating vague links to ‘peace’ and ‘love’ but directly and overtly displaying and delineating the link between the merchandise and personal heritage. It is important to note vendors have become accustomed to shifting regulation. The knowledge gained through participation in former phases of regulation provides individuals with a kind of ‘toolkit’ necessary to weather new forms of regulation (see also Deener 2012).

**Spatial Strategies**

The more stringent enforcement of a ban on jewelry does not affect all participants in the same way. Some people committed to the sale of jewelry simply shift how they sell, not what they sell. Here we see evidence that even with strict and specific bans on goods sold, individuals continue to participate in how the regulation plays out on the ground.

I see Billy, the leaf jewelry guy, set up in a little nook by the storefronts on the east side of the Boardwalk. He has a full display, tables and wall mounts, even a sign that he accepts credit cards. I walk over to him and say, ‘so you were able to move over here, huh?’ He says ‘yeah,’ he tried for a while to stay on the west side, but ‘the cops got him.’ He told me that he had everything displayed flat, just leaf pendants, but the cop said he bought a necklace for a his wife just like this, holding up a leaf pendant, telling the man, ‘so I know it’s a necklace.’

Billy said he went to a few meetings, because we are artisans and craftspeople, but they don’t have the money to have a kind of art designator here. Here, it’s just this ‘public expression zone.’ And it’s vague, ‘Are artisans and craftspeople public expression?’ he
asks rhetorically and answers, ‘unquestionably they are. But the problem is that opens up the doors, and then the people who are just out here to make money take advantage.’

Merchants therefore opened up new opportunities by providing small display areas connected to their own store fronts, thus allowing vendors access to spaces already permitted for commercial sales. Billy is not the only jewelry display to shift sides of the Boardwalk, on one block alone three commercial vendors selling manufactured jewelry also cross, creating a new landscape of jewelry outposts along the Eastern side. Michelle moves down south to sell goods from a small ‘closet’ on the eastern edge. Paul begins to set up a table of goods at the entrance to a store front. East side merchants thus also begin participating in the way this new regulation would play out on the ground.

Ed, a commercial vendor who often unapologetically displayed merchandise in its original packaging, is affected in similar ways. He can no longer sell jewelry along the western side of the Boardwalk, but opts to take his jewelry sales in motion.

I walk north and spot Ed. He is walking and I can see him spinning a plastic bracelet around his fingers. From behind I can see him approaching people as they walk, holding up the ‘Rasta’ colored beads and saying ‘two dollars’ each time he approaches. I walk up to him and say hi. I ask how he’s been and if he’s been setting up a table. He says no, ‘I can’t cause of the Ordinance.’ He says he’s ok though, ‘I’m walking and selling.’ And he reiterates ‘I’ve got no competition, so I’ll be ok.’

While Ed remains in violation of the Ordinance – since selling jewelry falls under a general ban on public vending – he has more discretion over who he engages in his sales as he walks. As a result, Ed succeeds at mobile sales, often claiming the new context as positive because of the decrease in competition. While Ed is correct in this newly found monopoly over mobile sales, he
does soon gain competition as additional vendors begin to display and sell jewelry while walking.

UNDERSTANDING REGULATION THROUGH DAILY PRACTICE

One day I approached a group of Boardwalk participants with whom I had formed a close relationship. At the time, they were enjoying more informal control over their activities. With a growing confidence in their ability to shape ‘expression’ from the ground-up, they took to mocking the very division between commercial and expression that city regulation purports to protect. I look at their table, full of jewelry, packaged incense, some oil burners, and a few hats. I had to laugh when I saw a circular piece of wood on their table. One of the men flashed me a big smile as he held it up. On one side it read “This is art” in bold writing. Underneath came a clarification, “if you want it to be.”

Ethnographic research has been particularly successful in exposing how individual adaptation, negotiation, and appropriation, often sparks unintended consequences (Duneier, 1999; Deener, 2012). On the Boardwalk, some of these unintended consequences emerge as individuals use the very parameters set by regulation as a space for democratic participation, indicating that individuals often take space and make it public by acting within regulation.

This article offers an examination of the puzzling coexistence of regulation with a high level of democratic participation. Building from Deener’s (2012, p. 192) research, which notes a pivotal shift from “regulation without parameters” to “regulation with parameters,” I argue that such regulation sparks a process of co-construction, where individuals act within regulation to shape the way it emerges on the ground. By following three periods of regulation that emerged during my individual fieldwork, I am able to draw an important link between our understanding
of regulation in public space and opportunities for democratic participation in public space. The case of Venice Beach therefore offers an ideal setting from which to gain a more nuanced understanding of ‘publicness’ as it plays out each day.

By approaching individuals not as subjects of regulation, but as active participants, I find that the process of co-construction leads to a high degree of democratic participation, and arguably, a high degree of publicness. As scholars have shown, many highly regulated spaces like New York’s Bryant Park, Time’s Square, and Union Square, Boston’s Faneuil Hall, San Francisco’s Cannery, and Santa Monica’s Third Street Promenade, offer versions of public space with differing opportunities for, and challenges to, democratic participation (see Sorkin, 1992; Kohn, 2004; Zukin, 2010). This analysis offers a lens through which to understand how spaces come to differ in their degree of publicness.

The way in which regulation plays out on the ground can not only tell us much about democratic spaces, but also how places become vibrant, where publicness is built from the ground up. In addition, zooming in on the way in which individuals engage regulation can tell of power and inequality, fear and marginalization. There will always be ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in the struggle for public space, as protecting the rights of some works alongside denying the rights of others. Trends towards ‘quality of life’ policing, ‘order-maintenance,’ and private security are concerning in their tendency to disproportionately reestablish and maintain existing inequalities. The move towards such highly regulated environments makes it increasingly important to understand what kind of room there may be in order for democracy (Mitchell, 2003). This research offers a contribution by exposing the ways in which individuals fight for public space from within regulation.
In addition, the Venice Beach Boardwalk suggests an important link between democratic participation and the durability of conflict. The debate over what constitutes ‘free speech and expression’ is ongoing. By further teasing out the relationship between democratic participation, regulation, and ongoing conflict, future research will be able to contribute a great deal to understanding the nature and role of public space today and the degree to which people make space public.
REFERENCES


CHAPTER THREE

WORKING THE BOARDWALK:

TRUST IN A PUBLIC MARKETPLACE

ABSTRACT

This article argues that trust emerges as a key interactional mechanism through which vendors, artists, and performers working in a public marketplace turn daily conditions of uncertainty into enduring stability. Drawing on four years of ethnographic data, I empirically illustrate a process of building, maintaining, and protecting trust. Following trust from the level of one-on-one interaction through to the level of a community, I expose the particular interactional work trust does for different people across different situations. In the end we gain keen insight into the way a social psychological mechanism plays out over time with significant social and material consequences for people working under highly uncertain conditions.
CHAPTER THREE

WORKING THE BOARDWALK:

TRUST IN AN PUBLIC MARKETPLACE

INTRODUCTION

How do people working under conditions of ongoing uncertainty manage to carve out a stable living? In a city that bans public vending, the ‘Free Speech and Expression Zone’ along Los Angeles’ famed Venice Beach Boardwalk offers a rare opportunity for vendors, artists, and performers to earn income outside the confines of formal employment. Here, there is no official registration, credentialing, or licensing required to sell goods, merchandise, and artwork. There is no centralized method for reporting and monitoring transactions and income generated remains largely unreported. Unable to officially reserve space from which to work, vendors, artists, and performers must pull and push carts and wagons piled with folding tables, chairs, and merchandise to face the daily uncertainty of ‘first-come, first-serve’ access. And with only about 200 spaces from which to access more than 16 million visitors that pass through each year, interest often exceeds availability and competition is ongoing. In addition, conflict and contestation over the ‘appropriate’ use of this space causes the sale of goods and services to fall in and out of permissibility, making violations uneasily and unevenly punished and workers consistently wary of fines. Those who do ‘make it’ onto the Boardwalk find themselves working among an extremely diverse set of participants, differing in national origin, race and ethnicity, education, skill set, routes to participation, and ideological attachments to the place (see Deener 2012). Furthermore, the same lack of licensing and permitting that offers a clean slate for individuals otherwise marginalized from formal employment because of immigration status,
criminal records, dependency issues, and/or mental health problems, also infuses interactions with added perceptions of suspicion and unpredictability.

However, in spite of these conditions of uncertainty, those working along the Boardwalk are able to carve out a stable living. Many vendors, artists, and performers occupy the same spaces each day and maintain income across shifting parameters of permissible behavior and competition for access. By all indications these workers have constructed both social and economic stability in a context primed for turnover and change. The public marketplace of the Venice Beach Boardwalk therefore presents an ideal setting from which to explore an interesting empirical puzzle: How do workers confront and manage ongoing conditions of uncertainty to carve out a stable living?

This article argues that trust emerges as a key interactional mechanism through which vendors, artists, and performers turn conditions of uncertainty into enduring stability. In order to make my argument I draw on four years of ethnographic data to present a process of building, maintaining, and protecting trust. This approach builds on what we know about trust as an outcome of interactional processes to contribute a clear empirical illustration of the interactional work trust does to mitigate the uncertainty of making a living in a public marketplace.

My findings first show how an initial form of trust allows those working here to manage the most pressing practical dilemmas of uncertainty in a public marketplace, including protection from theft, a need for cash reserves, and a need to capitalize on every available sale. Next, as workers maintain the positive expectations they form of one another and exchanges become increasingly vague, trust works to informally construct various forms of job security, including food provisions, ongoing access to public concrete, and long-term ‘sick leave.’ Finally, I find that in protecting trust, individuals construct ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ - limiting the negative
effects of law enforcement, restricting access for newcomers, and managing internal ‘threats’ to stability - a process that both forms the contours of a rather unlikely community while it also sparks ongoing exclusion.

The ethnographic data presented is therefore capable of following trust as it moves from one-on-one interaction through to the level of a community, enhancing our understanding of trust as it plays a role in turning conditions of uncertainty into enduring stability. This research therefore provides keen insight into the way a social psychological mechanism plays out in an everyday setting and does the particular work of maintaining the everyday livelihood of people who are largely marginalized from formal employment. In the end, we gain a textured portrait of the way individuals face daily uncertainty as they carve out a living, thus exposing the very way people interactionally locate “private solutions to public problems” (Lozano 1983: 341).

BACKGROUND

Uncertainty as a Condition for Trust

Ethnography has a history of documenting the lives of individuals who work outside the confines of legal wage labor (for review see Duneier, Kasinitz, and Murphy 2014). We recognize a host of barriers to formal employment, including criminal records, lack of education and credentials, immigration status, and mental health problems (Duneier 1999; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2001; Gowan 2010; Contreras 2012). In addition, a paltry minimum wage, regimented schedules, lack of child care, strict authority structures, and/or an inability to locate ‘meaningful’ employment may both push and pull people into unregulated work (see Snyder 2004). Yet, as people choose to work outside of formal employment, they also give up the assurances and protections of routine state regulation, like regular pay, sick leave, and social security benefits.
As a result, many vulnerable and marginal social groups constantly confront and manage the uncertainty of “working without being ‘employed’” (Lozano 1983: 340).

Scholars have documented the way unregulated and informal workers reduce uncertainty and economic vulnerability through a host of strategies. Domestic workers form horizontal network ties to share information and informally collectivize (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994). Gourmet food truck vendors develop trade associations as a way to attain a stable presence, create collective identity, and develop a system of self-governance (Esparza, Walker, and Rossman 2013). Street vendors create organizations to enforce informal property rights (Peña 1999), develop standardization techniques, and provide financial safety nets (Rosales 2013). Traders engage in mutual ‘help arrangements’ to manage the vulnerabilities of public marketplaces (Lyons and Snoxell 2005).

Such conditions of uncertainty — where workers lack legal contracts, lengthy credentialing processes, and regulatory assurances — become fertile ground for the emergence and development of trust (Dunn 1988; Seligman 1998; Cook 2005; Venkatesh 2006; Barbalet 2009). This is because the more interactions and exchanges occur without legal constraints and contracts - the more we require trust (Seligman 1998; Cook 2005; Barbalet 2009). Yet, trust remains an empirically elusive mechanism and warrants greater attention to the way it builds, plays out, and does particular work to produce stability for people working in uncertain conditions.

The Role of Trust in the Informal Sector

Research that offers more precise analytical attention to the role of trust in unregulated and informal work most often emerges within social capital frameworks. Here we gain key insight into the ways informal workers utilize social ties and strategies to manage uncertainty and
vulnerability, reach economic goals, and achieve social mobility (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993, Lyon 2000; Zhou and Lin 2005). Though useful, the concept of social capital tends to bundle interactional processes - i.e. Putnam’s (1993) “networks, norms, and trust” 167) - and we are left unable to disaggregate different social phenomena (Woolcock 1998; Cook 2005).

In addition, the emphasis on networks characterized by homogeneity and co-ethnicity allows such group characteristics to emerge as necessary, or at least highly conducive, to reducing the uncertainty of informal work (see Portes and Zhou 1992; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Portes 1998; Zhou and Lin 2005), thus limiting our understanding of the way trust may play out among an increasingly diverse set of informal workers. Most often we gain insight into the type of outcomes made possible by a group of social mechanisms, but it is less clear what particular work trust is doing to produce stability. Stepping outside of a social capital framework allows for an approach well suited to distinguishing interactional mechanisms, like trust, from the social ties or networks through which they flow (Joeng 2013).

**Trust Building Processes**

Experimental research offers greater attention to trust-building as process and provides encouraging findings related to the relationship between trust, risk, and varying conditions of uncertainty. For instance, in his study on exchange, Kollock (1994) finds that the greater degree of uncertainty, the more actors form committed relations with exchange partners, thus facilitating the emergence and development of trust. Cook et al. (2005) find evidence that the very process of risk-taking performs a crucial role in building trust, particularly in the U.S. context. Evidence also suggests that the more exchanges occur under certain conditions, the less people interpret reciprocation as evidence of trustworthiness (Cheshire, Gerbasi, and Cook 2010).
Though much research focuses on trust itself as an outcome, the overarching role of trust-building processes are linked to material and interpersonal consequences. For instance, Meyerson, Weick, and Kramer (1996) offer the concept of ‘swift trust’ to explain the particular form trust takes within the uncertain context of temporary groups. In doing so, they also offer keen insight into the way trust emerges quickly to facilitate highly consequential outcomes. Building on such work, we may then seek to understand how trust plays out at different levels of interaction, moving from initial one-on-one encounters to the level of a community, leading to different outcomes for different people.

*The Dynamic and Interactional Nature of Trust*

While prior research has widely recognized trust as emerging in and through social interaction, some recent scholars have offered greater theoretical attention to trust as a dynamic process (see Möllering 2001). Lewis and Weigert (2012) emphasize trust as a ‘feedback loop’ and highlight the complexity of causality. Studying informal exchange networks, Khodyakov (2007) argues for attention to temporality, specifically how the past, present, and future influence the trust-building process through the “creation, development, and maintenance of trustworthy relationships” (128). Weber and Carter (2003), build on work by Luhmann (1979), Simmel (1950), and Seligman (1998) to offer an ‘interactional theory of trust,’ and draw on interview data of romantic relationships to illustrate the way trust builds, plays out, dissolves, and can be reconstructed. Building on such theoretical interventions, an ethnographic approach contributes to our understanding of trust as dynamic and interactional by providing data of the situated interactions themselves.
The Study

In this article I draw on a conceptualization of trust offered by Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995: 712) as “the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party.” This conceptualization has the advantage of highlighting actors’ perceptions and enactments of trust and following changes over time. Utilizing ethnographic data, I then present a dynamic process of building, maintaining, and protecting trust. In each of these moments I expose the interactional work trust does to produce stability under conditions of uncertainty. This research therefore puts trust in motion, as it moves from the level of the individual to the level of the community, doing different work for different people and across various situations. What we gain is a better understanding of trust as a dynamic mechanism through which people otherwise marginalized from formal employment interactionally carve out a daily living. Additionally, the dynamic approach reveals that while trust acts as mechanism of social stability for some, it simultaneously becomes a mechanism for instability and exclusion for others, allowing for the ongoing marginalization of already economically vulnerable individuals.

DATA AND METHODS

This article draws on ethnographic data collected between January 2010 and January 2014. During this time I resided adjacent to the Venice Beach Boardwalk and spent time observing, assisting, and working alongside vendors, artists, and performers who sell goods in the marketplace. In addition, I served on two subcommittees of the Venice Neighborhood Council, visited individuals in their homes, and traveled to downtown Los Angeles to purchase
merchandise. Throughout the entirety of my data collection I jotted notes into a small notebook and returned home to type up more detailed field notes. The current analysis therefore draws on approximately 750 pages of typed fieldnotes.

Data collection followed prior conventions in ethnographic research, shifting between periods of intense fieldwork – where I spent an average of 10-20 hours per week on the Boardwalk - and periods of preliminary data analysis (see Bosk 2003). My role in the marketplace also shifted over time. During my first years I most commonly observed and spoke with individual vendors and artists as they worked, sitting alongside them and assisting when necessary. From January to June of 2013 I began to work as a ‘business partner’ to one vendor and then as a vendor and artist myself; a role that offered a vital opportunity to understand daily practices and interactions as I personally navigated participation in the marketplace. My method of data collection allowed for an ‘abductive’ approach to analysis, building on ‘grounded theory’ by moving back and forth between surprising empirical findings and existing sociological theories (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). This approach allowed trust to emerge from the situated interactions I observed, rather than an a priori interest.

I began to locate trust as I focused on the way vendors, artists, and performers experienced the marketplace, how they navigated challenges, and how they constructed the Boardwalk as both socially and materially meaningful. I began to note the many ways in which those participating in the Boardwalk marketplace continuously confronted the uncertainty of working without any guarantees of place or pay and in the face of what many workers perceived as threats to their livelihood, from potential competitors, to opportunistic passersby, to inconsistent law enforcement. I began to analyze the data with explicit attention to the interactional moments in which those working here confronted and managed this uncertainty, focusing on the social and
material consequences of such interactions. In coding the data, I located the ways people addressed many of the challenges of working in the open marketplace by making themselves vulnerable to one another, moments that ended up facilitating their ability to continue making a living. As I sifted through the data, I paid close attention to people at different stages of working on the Boardwalk, from initial entrance to long-time participation. What emerged was therefore a process of trust as it played out for different people across situations, doing different but highly consequential work to construct stability.

ANALYSIS

In what follows I explore the way vendors, artists, and performers confront and manage the uncertainty of working in a public market to carve out a stable living. My data empirically illustrates a process of building trust, maintaining trust, and protecting trust to expose the interactional work trust does for different people across different situations. This analysis provides keen insight into the way a social psychological mechanism builds and plays out over time with significant social and material consequences for people working outside of formal employment and in a public everyday setting.

**Building Trust – The Formation of Expectations**

In this section I show three interactions through which trust builds between individuals who have little to no preexisting relationship: leaving belongings unattended, making change, and procuring continuity of profit. As vendors, artists, and performers arrive on the Boardwalk, they must immediately address practical dilemmas of working in an open and public marketplace – from the possibility of theft while they use the restroom to ensuring no sale is missed. In
assessing risk from visitors and tourists, those working here often engage new ‘colleagues,’ thus making themselves vulnerable to opportunism and/or mistakes by people for whom they have little to no prior information. As they quickly ‘suspend’ (Möllering 2001) a lack of knowledge about one another’s future behavior they gain concrete results like short-term security, cash reserves, and ongoing profit.

Leaving Merchandise Unattended

I am sitting against the closed store fronts on the east side of the Boardwalk, waiting for the 9am set-up time when I can cross the pathway and set up along the western edge. I notice that the block is particularly empty today, even for a weekday. A man walks around the corner, rolling a small cart nearby, and placing it on the east side across from an ‘open’ space across the pathway. He is about 5’8 and seems to have a happy-go-lucky attitude. I’ve never seen him working out here, although I noticed him earlier yelling loudly with a woman in a long dress whom I also did not recognize. Eventually he walks over to tell me that the woman is ‘his ex.’ After meeting in Miami they spent two years together working as vendors. For the past year, they had driven their van across the country and ended up here in Venice. But now, he tells me, they just broke up and ‘she’s got his stuff hostage.’ At 9am Kevin and I both move our belongings to the west side, setting up a couple of spaces away from one another. As I am unpacking he comes over to officially introduce himself. ‘Kevin,’ he says, and I tell him my name in response. He shows me some stones he has recently cut to make into pendants, all the while his ‘ex’ walks by intermittently, yelling that he should return her stuff or she’ll throw his backpack in the dumpster. He tells me ‘she is all drama.’ After she has been gone for a while he comes back over to my space and asks if I’ll watch his things while he goes to
shave. I agree and Kevin walks away leaving all of his belongings sitting in his space.

After about 20 minutes Kevin returns he flashes me a big smile, showing off his newly clean face.

This interaction demonstrates a practical dilemma that Kevin faces shortly after arriving to the Boardwalk; he must use the public restroom and leave his belonging unattended in an openly accessible space. By following Kevin’s behavior it is clear that he assesses some risk of leaving his belongings out in the open. Given the ongoing stream of unknown tourists, visitors, and/or individuals looking to resell stolen goods for quick cash (see Deener 2012: 186-190), Kevin likely assesses a potential threat from passersby, or though this also may include the ‘ex’ with whom he appears to have some ongoing tension. What emerges is a practical dilemma to leave the space, risk theft and consequently economic loss, or engage the help of others. To manage this practical dilemma, Kevin chooses to approach me as a nearby worker, in order to safeguard against theft. This choice, however, is made without any preexisting relationship and despite having no prior knowledge of my own behavior, reputation, or shared interests. Having just arrived, he cannot claim any knowledge of credible sanctions, nor does he have any reason to believe that I perceive there to be any credible sanctions. Yet, as Kevin engages my assistance he acts as if there were some assurance that I will not act opportunistically and steal the goods he is relying on to draw income.

Trust is shaped by the practical needs Kevin faces and the lack of knowledge he has about me and the marketplace. Kevin demonstrates that trust in its emergent form is task-specific, as he sets the parameters for the type of investment he expects – ‘watch over my stuff’ – and the time frame – ‘while I go shave.’ This type of interaction is representative of one of the most commonly occurring exchanges between vendors, and one which arises only shortly after arrival
to the Boardwalk marketplace. Trust here emerges precisely in response to a practical problem of working in an open public space over long stretches of time. In this case, trust emerges to facilitate an immediate exchange, leading only to short term benefits.

Making Change

Ricardo, a Latino man in his 30s, is standing up by his table making a sale when he turns to see if I have a ten dollar bill. I do not and I hold up my open palms to motion that I’m out. Umar, an Egyptian immigrant in his 50s, sees this, steps up, and hands a ten dollar bill across the table. After providing the customer with change, Ricardo leaves from behind his table and jogs across the pathway to the nearby merchant. He quickly returns and walks over to Umar’s table, handing him a ten dollar bill.

In this moment Ricardo faces the practical need to complete each available sale or garner all potential profit even if he does not have the spare cash from which to produce change for customers. This is common, since the high volume of tourists means that many customers carry fifty-dollar or one-hundred-dollar bills with which to purchase two and five-dollar items, leaving workers in an ongoing struggle to keep a stock of cash on hand. Here Ricardo chooses to engage Umar in an exchange, one that also requires an investment from Umar and a signal that he does in fact have cash on hand.

Making change thus forms part of building trust specifically by constructing an opportunity for actors to place uncertainty aside, make themselves vulnerable to one another regardless of how little they know about one another, and form initial expectations that others will act in a way that does not harm them or take advantage of them. In addition, this practice moves trust further by requiring effort and resources, while also demonstrating the way such practices begin to foster collective behavior.
Similar to ‘leaving merchandise unattended, ‘making change’ addresses a pressing practical need; the need to garner profit from each potential sale. Since each bill has a defined monetary value, the parameters of exchange are rather well-defined, allowing for mutual clarity on the terms of reciprocity. While change can be made immediately, as in the exchange of a ten-dollar bill for two fives, it may also require the vendor who requests cash to make new change in order to pay the lender. As with ‘leaving merchandise unattended,’ the gains made by ‘making change’ are immediate and short-term. However, ‘making change’ pushes the trust building process by requiring the investment of money by other colleagues and by forging collective action among otherwise autonomous workers.

Procuring Continuity of Profit

I met Paul through another longtime vendor but we had yet to engage in a direct exchange. Paul had been working along the Venice Boardwalk on and off for over five years and after only a few days of working next to Paul, he stood up and walked over to my table. ‘Come with me,’ he said walking the couple of feet over to his own table. I stood next to him as he began pointing, quickly rattling off prices. ‘These are four dollars, these ten, these twenty-five, these over here are seven, these ten. I’ll be right back.’

Here Paul confronts the practical need to leave his space to use the restroom and capitalize on each potential sale, thus sparking interactions to ensure that profit making can continue in one’s absence. This interaction requires even greater investment of time, effort, and resources while opening individuals up to greater vulnerability. In fact, though I occasionally sold merchandise here and there for Paul, he remained vulnerable not only to opportunism but to mistakes. Paul’s table is full of a diverse set of items, from jewelry to statues to artwork, many of which vary in
size and material. At one point, for instance, I handed him $5 for a small figurine I had sold in his absence, the price he had quoted me for similar items. What I had failed to realize was the difference in weight and material of the figurine I sold, which he had valued at $20. He expressed his disappointment, but shirked it off, smiling rather than getting angry. In fact, when I later vacated my spot for about ten minutes I turned to Paul to say simply that I’d ‘be right back.’ Upon my return he handed me $25, the full amount for which I sold my items. Given my correct intentions, the gaffe did not disrupt the process of building trust, as evidenced by Paul’s continued reciprocation.

This demonstrates the way in which ‘procuring continuity of profit’ pushes the trust building process further, as those working here make themselves increasingly vulnerable to theft, opportunism, or mistakes by colleagues, who could either pocket goods, money exchanged for goods, or simply misquote prices to the detriment of the vendor or artist. In addition, such a practice moves the trust building process forward by requiring additional time, effort, and resources, thus fostering a greater sense of collective action and cohesion among autonomous workers.

One day Randy, an African American artist in his early 40s, confronts an immediate need to secure long-term profit in his absence. For months Randy worked with Tony, a lanky white man in his 30s who suffered from alcohol dependency. Tony, however, took things too far when he began to scream racial slurs at Randy. After breaking his ties from Tony, Randy had to make a quick decision and chose to entrust Jorge, a 40-something Latino man who also admitted to and engaged in frequent drinking, with the sale of his belongings while he spent time away from the Boardwalk. This is representative of the many in ways in which conditions on the Boardwalk require quick decisions.
I talk with Jorge, who’s been working for Randy since Tony was ‘fired.’ Jorge says he’s been averaging $100 day with Randy’s stuff. ‘Randy was really between a rock and a hard place,’ he tells me. ‘He had 12 hours to make a decision after Tony got drunk and started yelling the N-word.’ Jorge recounts Randy’s decision. ‘He asked me if he could trust me and I said yes. You could ask anybody on the boardwalk.’ Jorge tells me the job was somewhat of a surprise, ‘Normally I’ve only hung out here,’ saying ‘Randy didn’t really know me.’

Here Jorge discusses the way in which Randy’s decision emerged from a pressing practical need to secure ongoing profit. This interaction forms a part of a process of building trust specifically because it moves Randy and Jorge from having no expectations of one another into a relationship in which expectations become embedded. Though Jorge is paid a small commission for his effort, there is no contract, no credentialing, and no way to establish official knowledge of his identity or home address. In addition, Jorge also considers himself to be alcohol dependent, and frequently drinks during the day and through the night. This particular form of uncertainty constructs their relationship as one based on trust rather than assurance, where Randy must choose to interact as if Jorge will not steal his goods, pocket his profit, or make harmful mistakes. Over the following months this decision would prove positive, and Randy talked about the initial decision as a kind of ‘gift,’ saying that after Tony, Randy needed ‘God’ to send him a ‘clean employee,’ and he ‘got Jorge.’

In this section I have empirically illustrated the way in which trust, in its emergent form, does the work of facilitating three practices: ‘leaving merchandise unattended,’ ‘exchanging cash,’ and ‘procuring continuity of profit.’ Each of these practices occurs as those working along the
Boardwalk manage the pressing practical needs of work in a setting where there is a constant flow of strangers, possibility of theft, and a need to vacate one’s belongings without missing a sale. By choosing to place themselves vulnerable to other workers, with whom they have little to no prior relationship, trust becomes the safeguard against ongoing uncertainty. In these initial interactions trust plays out through direct one-on-one exchange, where the focus is less on the relationship itself than the task at hand. As a result, trust garners only immediate and practical results, but importantly, these are the ongoing exchanges that become the precedent for the formation of positive expectations among social ties.

**Maintaining Trust – Cultivating Expectations**

In this section I show three interactions through which trust is cultivated and maintained: exchanging food, organizing the block, and providing a safety net. These interactions highlight the way workers construct routinized interactions among known social ties to allow for ongoing exchange with increasingly vague parameters. These interactions have the effect of pushing expectations further into the future and garnering more long-term results among increasingly connected social ties.

**Exchanging Food**

I sat with Kahled one afternoon when he told me he would be going to grab lunch. He returned with three cups of soup from a nearby store, taking one for himself and offering one to me and the other to a Paul. He told me that Paul had purchased a few lunches in a row, so it was important for him to get lunch today. As he leaned over his table, spooning out clam chowder, he smiled at me. ‘It’ll come back. I don’t know what it will be or when it will come, but you just watch.’ Hours later I returned from a break to find him eating from a large pile of peanuts. He looked at me and said, ‘See. What did I tell you?’
Here we see how through the practice of exchanging food, trust moves beyond addressing a mere practical necessity, since vendors could conceivably bring food with them to the workplace. The unstated expectations of reciprocity work to push those expectations further into the future. We see Kahled note his own understanding of the expectations at hand, stating that it is ‘important’ for him to purchase food since it has been provided for him multiple times without reciprocation. Yet, quite different from practices like ‘making change,’ where the amount of the loan is clear and there is mutual clarity on reciprocity, the terms of exchange here become increasingly vague, since the value of food is unclear and the time period in which reciprocity must occur is left unstated. Notably, the vendor states that the exchange is not about the type of food, the cost of the food, or even where it is coming from. He states, ‘I don’t know what it will be or when it will come,’ demonstrating that it is the expectation itself which is the significant aspect of this social interaction and indicating a belief in a general and ongoing flow of food at the group level. He speaks comfortably about the uncertain time frame in which this expectation will be met, and nearly relishes in this uncertainty, thus pushing expectations into the future and presuming a greater degree of ongoing interaction. When his expectation is met, the vendor does not focus on the value or time frame, so much as his ability to count on the expectation itself. ‘See. What did I tell you?’ he says.

This common and ongoing flow of food helps to build and cultivate expectations among social ties, increasingly weaving a web of connected trust relationships. A result of this practice is also to construct a type of ‘lunch break,’ thus showing how the investment of one’s time, money, and effort to purchase food for others fosters cohesion and a collective experience in an otherwise atomized and unstructured workplace.
Organizing ‘the Block’

It is 7:30 in the morning as I walk passed a rather quiet coffee shop and turn the corner onto the Boardwalk. The block is empty, but along the western edge each ‘designated space’ is marked with a cardboard box. The space I have been setting up on recently is marked with a gray paint can. I drop my stool next to the can, placing it in the sand behind the space, and walk south to get the cart from storage, running into Juan, who tells me that he and Ricardo ‘saved the spaces’ last night. At 8:00 am Paul comes around the corner pushing his cart, piled high with bins and canvasses, and places them in front of Mr. Park’s store. ‘Are you here?’ he asks me, pointing to the paint can. I tell him I’ll go there, but I don’t really care which one I take today. He agrees I should go there, pointing to the paint can and my stool. ‘I’ll go here,’ he says pointing to an adjacent space in which Umar typically works, and ‘Ricardo will go there,’ he says pointing just south of my own space. Within about 30 minutes Ricardo arrives, wheeling his own cart to the eastern edge. ‘Is this me?’ he says, pointing to the space where Paul has now placed some of his own plastic bins. ‘Yes,’ he says, repeating the roster of people lined up for the day. Soon afterwards Leia, a Latina woman who works with her ‘husband’ Manuel, walks onto the Boardwalk, setting a chair down against the store front just north of us. She walks over to Paul and me to say hello. She looks across to the west side and comments that Paul gets to be next to her today, since Umar is not coming until next week. At 9am we all walk west and begin sweeping up the sand on the concrete, setting up tables and chairs, and unpacking merchandise.
By following individuals as they ‘organize the block,’ we see how those working here not only build positive expectations of one another through ongoing interaction but also come to interpret and anticipate one another’s expectations and future cooperation, thus allowing trust to do the work of constructing more long-term economic stability. Paul states ‘Ricardo will go there,’ as he surveys the spaces available, illustrating his own expectation of Ricardo’s future cooperation. Ricardo’s behavior illustrates his own set of expectations of the group since he arrives and verifies with Paul, ‘is this me?’ Ricardo approaches and is happy to oblige, further allowing block organization to emerge as a communal act. It is clear that upon arrival that particular expectations are already in place, and what unfolds is an expression and meeting of those expectations.

The consequences of such interactions become both interpersonally and materially significant, since a practice like ‘organizing the block’ builds a foundation for interaction to become routinized in a workplace premised on potential turnover. Maintaining trust hereby does the work of establishing a foundation from which these workers can not only invest time, effort, and resources in maintaining social ties, but they can be sure that those investments will garner long-term results, since expectations are not merely embedded in just any social ties but in social ties that remain nearby and thus accessible on a daily basis. By predicting and interpreting one another’s expectations, this collective act turns a ‘first-come, first-serve’ policy in a ‘first-come, many-served’ policy.

*Providing a Safety Net*

One day I noticed that Umar has not been at work in a few days. Leia had mentioned he would not be working the past weekend, but come Tuesday he had still not returned. As I
watched Leia unpacking her own merchandise I saw her begin to set up Umar’s artwork as well, using about ¾ of the table for his goods and 1/3 to display her own. I asked Leia what was going on and she told me that Umar was quite sick, but at least this way he could continue to make some money.

Here we can see how Leia and Umar push expectations further into the long term, requiring even greater investment of time, effort, and resources. They make themselves vulnerable to one another, allowing trust to do the work of garnering increasingly significant benefits of durable social and economic stability. In fact, due to Leia’s assistance, Umar, who supports his wife, two teenage children, and pays $2,000 monthly rent for a house over an hour away from Venice, was able to recuperate, maintain a basic flow of income, and return to work as before. Together, Leia and Umar’s actions do the work of granting Umar a type of informal ‘sick leave.’ By working together to enhance one another’s long-term profit, such interactions also indicate the production of a sense of collective interests and behavior.

When Kahled, an African American vendor, was arrested one morning, I watched people begin to act in ways that made trust both real and highly consequential. Soon after his arrest, a man that I had never seen working on the Boardwalk approached me, handing me Kahled’s belongings - a small bag with his wallet, identification, some clothes, and a couple of cell phones - to see if I could ‘keep them safe.’ While in jail, two nearby merchants also located me to hand me letters that Kahled had sent them, allowing him to relay messages. Interestingly, both Paul and I struggled to receive information about Kahled during this time, since we became aware that none of us knew his legal name. The closest we ever came was in talking with Sheila, who had known Kahled for years. “About ten years ago he got hit in the head real bad,” Sheila told me, “and in his state of delusion he told me his full name. I can’t remember it though.” Eventually I
did check his state-issued ID and found his official name to be nothing close to anything he went by on the Boardwalk. Yet, however little people really knew of Kahled, it was because of their effort that he returned from over a month in jail and was able to seamlessly continue his work.

In both the case of Umar and Kahled, the expectations cultivated through ongoing interaction and exchange are mobilized in times of unanticipated emergency. In the case of illness and arrest, both Umar and Kahled utilize social ties to continue continuity in profit and preserve a symbolic presence on ‘the block,’ highly significant in a context with ongoing potential for turnover each day and competitors who might try to stake a claim. What shines through, particularly in the case of Kahled’s arrest, is that social ties along the Boardwalk are not rooted in acquiring any official knowledge of one another, neither legal names nor addresses. Trust, after all, is not all encompassing, but emerges from the specific context of the Boardwalk marketplace to do the work of constructing stability and ongoing profit.

The practices that comprise a process of ‘maintaining trust’ move beyond interactions that address the most pressing practical dilemmas workers face on the Boardwalk to instead build and cultivate a set of connected social ties as trust relationships, thus allowing for increasingly long-term benefits of social and economic stability. As individuals invest more resources, time, and effort their own vulnerability also increases, allowing the potential for others to act in opportunistic ways for longer periods of time or to take advantage of one another’s assistance by holding off on reciprocation. Yet, trust in the context of this uncertainty is able to garner even more significant results. By exchanging food, workers invest in one another without clear terms of exchange or reciprocity. Here we see workers create communal ‘lunch breaks’ in an otherwise atomized workplace. They create block communities to allow for routinized interaction, and moving from merely building expectations to interpreting and predicting one another’s
expectations. They invest in one another’s long term security, establishing a type of ‘sick-leave’
to ensure more durable economic stability. Trust garners increasingly long term results and can
be mobilized in times of emergency. Moving beyond the mere one-on-one interaction that is
task-specific and immediate, here trust spills over into a broader web of connected social ties to
generate job stability.

*Protecting Trust – Constructing ‘Insiders’ and ‘Outsiders’*

Building and maintaining trust become key social processes to produce familiarity and bring
durability to ongoing material benefits, economic security, and a sense of a collective experience.
How then will these economic actors protect the social and economic stability they have forged?
Here I show how those working here interactionally construct boundaries between ‘insiders’ and
‘outsiders’ in order to protect trust on the Boardwalk, subsequently constructing a sense of
collective belonging to a cohesive community and allowing for strategies of reorganization that
maintain a dynamic stability.

*Buffering from the LAPD*

Paul turned to tell me that ‘the cops’ were walking up the Boardwalk with video cameras
to ask us questions. Sure enough, a few police officers soon approach Paul’s table and
begin to ask his name, questioning the jewelry he claimed to be merely ‘display’ and
reminding him that such items were no longer permissible to sell. After they passed by
my own table I heard Paul speaking on the phone, telling the person on the other line that
“the cops are making their way up,” and warning to get rid of some items. Afterwards I
asked Paul if he had called Michelle, an African immigrant who works about four blocks north and often includes jewelry in her display. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I just called her.’

Given vague and consistently shifting restrictions on permissible behavior as well as hefty citations for minor offenses like oversized umbrellas and cigarette smoking, LAPD emerges as a major predator for those working on the Boardwalk. Warnings of police presence become a common and important practice to maintain familiarity. In working with a vendor I was quickly told to ‘keep an eye out’ for officers, and ‘always let us know,’ demonstrating the pervasive perception of possible fines. Paul draws on the linearity of the Boardwalk as an important tool to push trust beyond the confines of ‘the block’ and protect Michelle from the economic shock that comes with hefty fines. Paul thus invests in the ongoing development of collective goals and positive expectations at the level of the community, from which he will also benefit. Protecting trust thus occurs as workers provide unsolicited and proactive assistance, both demonstrating and fostering collective goals.

Following a shift in a local ordinance that newly banned the sale of ‘jewelry’ in the marketplace; I sat next to Paul. Paul had walked away to use the bathroom and upon noting heavy police presence he had stayed away from his table. In a flash I saw Manuel run over to Paul’s table and gather up piles of necklaces, rings, and bracelets, sweeping them off into piles and putting them in one of Paul’s nearby bins. ‘What’s going on?’ I asked, sensing urgency. ‘The cops,’ he said, ‘get rid of the jewelry.’

Manuel’s willingness to invest his own time and effort in saving Paul from a fine cannot merely be explained in terms of a clear expectation of reciprocation. As an artist, Manuel belongs to the group of workers who are regularly depicted in city regulation as the ‘ideal’ participant. As a result, he will likely never be in the same vulnerable position of Paul when it
comes to receiving fines for the sale ‘impermissible’ goods and merchandise. Yet while public debate often pits artists against vendors (see also Deener 2012), in everyday practice workers on the Boardwalk often join forces. The development of expectations that those working here will protect ‘insiders’ from predators constructs a sense of collective experience and goals, even when artists and vendors do not share the same type of vulnerability. Thus, the willingness to invest effort and time to provide job security and economic stability for ‘insiders,’ pushes trust towards the level of a broader, and rather unlikely, community.

**Constructing ‘Outsiders’**

At 7am I walked up to the store front, pulling my cart of merchandise and supplies. Manuel and Leia said hello as I placed my cart against the east side store fronts. They told me I would be working in ‘that spot’ and Manuel pointed to one of the spaces across the Boardwalk, all of which were marked with empty cardboard boxes. They recounted an interaction with a man they had met earlier that morning. ‘We came at 5am,’ they told me, ‘and had to fight that guy off.’ They continued, ‘He said he’d been working here all week, we told him it was full!’

I later discover the man they ‘fought off’ was Kevin, who I had met the week prior [see first vignette]. Kevin had set up successfully on the block from Monday through Friday, during a particularly slow week in which more than a few spaces were available for him to work. While he interacted through face-to-face contact, setting terms for immediate exchanges and favors, his initial process of building trust was cut short when Manuel and Leia, who have long engaged in ongoing processes of maintaining trust, enacted their own strategy to protect that trust.
Since the city designated the Boardwalk a “Free Speech and Expression Zone,” it has purported ‘open’ access as a desirable feature of the space and the city often laments any attempts at informal ‘ownership’ or monopolization of spaces (LAMC 42.15). Yet, the city’s desire for openness, contradicts the desire for stability among those working, and we see how workers informally protect their own access. What emerges is a clear tension between a newcomer and long-time participant’s reading of the ‘first-come, first-serve’ policy and this interaction demonstrates the way in which social organization on the Boardwalk reproduces and shapes the type of change that is possible. As Manuel and Leia interactionally draw boundaries between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders,’ they protect the trust they have formed on their block. As they do, however, they exclude Kevin and any other potential newcomer.

In addition, a desire to protect trust relationships by maintaining familiarity can emerge as a collective goal beyond the block to the larger community of workers. Again recall Benson, a trusted African-American odd-job worker most often responsible for removing and returning merchandise to a small storage space at the start and end of the workday.

I pack up the cart and begin to secure it with a blue tarp and bungee cord. As I am making the final adjustments a man approaches me. He is White, probably in his late 30s, though his skin has taken on a red leather quality from repeated exposure to the sun. His brown hair is short and messy and he has a nervous energy. ‘Can I help you move your cart?’ he says, making a clear effort to concentrate as he speaks. ‘No, I’m ok,’ I respond. ‘You don’t need help?’ he asks again. At that moment Ricardo, who is working nearby, stands and walks over. ‘Benson moves this cart,’ he says matter-of-factly. Frustrated by the lack of available work, the man says, ‘Oh, Benson moves every cart. He has this
whole Boardwalk.’ Ricardo seems to want to end any back-and-forth, saying quite aggressively, ‘Well, Benson moves this cart.’ The man walks away.

Given the prevalence of drug and alcohol use among groups of tourists, transients, and a large homeless population, there is a constant follow of willing odd-job workers desiring quick cash. Yet, rather than accept services from the lowest bidder, Ricardo’s decision to interject and aggressively decline this man indicates the importance of protecting already established workers with dependable reputations. Securing such jobs, therefore, is not always as easy as offering one’s services for a cheap fee. Here, Ricardo ensures the ongoing presence of a man with whom many of those working here maintain trust, further constructing a web of connected social ties as ‘insiders.’

Interactionally constructing ‘outsiders’ thus informally shifts control over access into the hands of those already working here, limiting availability of spaces for new arrivals. As people erect added boundaries for newcomers, they construct a collective threat, further building a communal experience to limit turnover and change. The process of constructing outsiders thus protects existing processes of maintaining trust, ensuring the continuation of routinized interaction and allowing for long-term benefits and ongoing expectations. As these interactions protect the collective experience of ‘insiders,’ however, they simultaneously reveal the way in which trust can contribute to exclusion and further marginalization of people who may already be economically vulnerable. Here, we begin to see the dark side of trust.

_Making ‘Outsiders’ out of ‘Insiders’_

I am walking down the street at 5am towards the Boardwalk, choosing to walk in the middle of the street rather than the cramped sidewalk. It is dark, and I see a figure
walking towards me covered from head to toe in a large blanket. Though startled at first, Kahled eventually reveals himself and laughs, telling me he likes to reserve his space ‘incognito,’ thereby giving everybody the illusion that he is always present.

Kahled’s omnipresence was not received well by ‘the block’ on which he worked, and others began to see Kahled as taking too much discretion of space allotment. A group of nearby artists and residents joined together to officially charge him with ‘extortion’ and he was arrested and jailed for over a year. Although those involved discussed the charge as a mere strategy to get him in the system and allow – what they thought were – ‘a stack of priors’ to keep him from returning, the charge itself proved temporary, though highly consequential. Over the course of that year, Kahled lost all of his belongings. Though some of his social ties tried to keep things going for a while, he eventually lost his van (where he had been living), his belongings, and his merchandise.

Protecting trust does the work of maintaining familiarity, allowing for consistency of interaction, and stability of access and profit. When ‘insiders,’ however, begin to threaten community goals like economic stability, they too can become ‘outsiders.’ Although those working along the Boardwalk often protect one another from LAPD officers, such a breach of conduct and a perceived threat to the informal system of access, caused vendors to engage authorities and take legal action, resulting in life-changing consequences for those involved. Here we see that ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ status can be fluid, not emerging merely on the basis of who one is on the Boardwalk, but the interactional role one plays. In this case, LAPD officers may also work to protect trust, thus showing how boundaries between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ are interactionally relevant and fluid rather than static.
Protecting trust can be characterized by interactions that work to define ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders,’ thus creating, as it maintains, a sense of community. Interestingly, protecting trust can be characterized by turning outward, to limit threats from encroaching newcomers and law enforcement officials, as well as inward, to construct ‘outsiders’ from former ‘insiders’ and spark change. ‘Protecting trust’ along the Boardwalk thus draws the contours of an unlikely community and allows for dynamic reorganization. Through these practices vendors, artists, and performers create the opportunity for routinized and familiar interactions, bringing added durability to social and economic stability.

CONCLUSION

In this article I argue that trust is a key interactional mechanism through which individuals confront and manage the uncertainty of working in a public marketplace to carve out a stable living. Drawing on four years of ethnographic data that follows vendors, artists, and performers working along the Venice Beach Boardwalk, I present a process of building, maintaining, and protecting trust. This processual approach exposes the particular interactional work trust does to turn conditions of uncertainty into enduring stability. What we gain is keen insight into the way a social psychological mechanism builds and plays out with significant social and material consequences for a diverse group of people largely marginalized from formal employment, and in so doing, this research provides a textured portrait of the way people locate “private solutions to public problems” (Lozano 1983: 341).

My findings show that in its emergent form, trust allows those working here to manage the most pressing practical dilemmas of uncertainty in a public marketplace, including protection from theft, a need for cash reserves, and a need to capitalize on every available sale. Next, as
workers maintain the positive expectations they form of one another and exchanges become increasingly vague, trust works to informally construct various forms of job security, including food provisions, ongoing access to public concrete, and long-term ‘sick leave.’ Finally, I find that in protecting trust among a set of connected social ties, individuals construct ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders,’ limiting the negative effects of law enforcement, restricting access for newcomers, and managing internal threats to stability, a process that forms the contours of an unlikely community and allows for change.

The findings presented build on prior scholarship of trust as an ingredient in social capital (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993) by disaggregating interactional variables to pay particular attention to the interactional work that trust does to manage uncertainty. In addition, while social capital frameworks have been particularly helpful to address the experience of co-ethnic networks, adding to what we know about the tendency of people to trust in others who share characteristics like national origin (Misztal 1996), this research captures the social mechanisms key to the formation of collective behavior and community where solidarity, shared national origin, and shared histories are absent or unclear.

The article also offers a complement to experimental findings that link trust-building processes to risk (Cook et al. 2005) and ongoing exchange in conditions of uncertainty (Kollock 1994). The interactional data presented confirms the role of initial and ongoing risk-taking as well as the important ways that ongoing exchange can cultivate more robust trust relationships over time. By following a group of vendors, artists, and performers working in an everyday setting over time, we gain insight into the significant social and material consequences of trust for day-to-day economic survival. In addition, the ethnographic approach allows for situated interactional data of different people across varying situations, adding empirical illustration of
the dynamic nature of trust (Mollering 2001; Weber and Carter 2002; Lewis and Weigert 2012) as it builds, dissolves, and has differing effects for different people. I show that as trust acts to produce stability for some, it may simultaneously emerge as a mechanism for instability and further marginalization for others. So although the Boardwalk is purportedly ‘open to all,’ we see that ‘getting on the Boardwalk’ remains a challenge and newcomers continue to face an array of informal obstacles. Trust, in the end, has a dark side.

While this study is able to locate trust as a key interactional mechanism to turn conditions of uncertainty into stability within the spatial and social confines of the Boardwalk, one of the limitations of this research is that it may overlook the many different ways trust that emerges on the Boardwalk to play a significant role in the lives workers off the Boardwalk. In addition, it may miss additional processes to build and cultivate trust as they take place in other settings. A more thorough understanding of the interactional work trust does beyond the marketplace would offer even more insight into the role trust plays in carving out stability for otherwise vulnerable and marginal social groups.

Finally, the way trust emerges and plays out on the Boardwalk is influenced directly by the local conditions of uncertainty that characterize this open and public marketplace. It remains an open question as to how durable these trust relationships will be in the future. In February of 2015 I returned home to my Venice apartment to find a six-page pamphlet rolled up in my mailbox. It read “Venice Beach Solutions: An Action Plan for a Safe, Clean, and Vibrant Venice Beach.” In it L.A. City Councilmember Mike Bonin proposes a plan to solve “two big problems – homelessness and crime.” Among the many action plans proposed, Bonin suggests “a strict permit system” for those working along the Boardwalk. In what ways will this change the way
trust emerges and plays out? In what ways will it influence the type of interactional work trust does?
REFERENCES


CHAPTER FOUR

‘WORKING’ AND ‘INTOXICATING:’

A SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF WORK IN A PUBLIC MARKETPLACE

ABSTRACT

Drawing on four years of interactional data of people who carve out a living on Los Angeles’s Venice Beach Boardwalk, this article addresses the ongoing visibility of alcohol, marijuana, and drugs use in the informal marketplace. I present three different relationships between ‘working’ and ‘intoxicating’ – taking a break from work, working to intoxicate, and intoxicating out of work – to show how each of these relationships become interrelated in a social ecology of work. Data demonstrate how ‘working’ – earning money in the public marketplace – and ‘intoxicating’ – drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana, and doing drugs – emerge on a continuum of acceptability and lead to different social and material consequences. Ultimately, I expose intoxication as a complex social practice, rather than individual action, made meaningful in the everyday experience of informal work.

Keywords: alcohol, drug use, intoxication, informal work, ethnography
‘WORKING’ AND ‘INTOXICATING:’
A SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF WORK IN A PUBLIC MARKETPLACE

INTRODUCTION

One day I sat talking with a couple that had just moved to Venice from Brooklyn, NY. Excited to live in a beachfront neighborhood, they discussed some initial surprise on their first morning walk along the Boardwalk. ‘We weren’t expecting a scene from The Walking Dead,’ they laughed, referencing a popular television show set in a post-apocalyptic world inhabited by zombies. This was not the first time I had heard a visitor alarmed by the Boardwalk’s early morning scene. During the day, the space is energetic and vibrant, where vendors, artists, performers, merchants, residents, tourists, and visitors can mask many of the underlying social issues. Through the night and into the early morning hours, however, these layers of activity retreat and the alcohol dependency, drug use, poverty, and homelessness sharpen into focus.

For people working and living on the Boardwalk, such issues are often discussed in terms of unifying characteristics of the Boardwalk experience. Kahled, a vendor and artist on the Venice Beach Boardwalk, tells me ‘everybody out here ends up here because of some issue…they end up here because there is nowhere else to go.’ Motioning to the ocean, he reiterates, ‘this is the end.’ Jerry, a long-time resident, says to me ‘this is Venice Beach – where the debris hits the sea.’ While talking with Patrick, an odd-job worker on the Boardwalk, explains to me ‘it’s like somebody tipped the earth,’ making a motion with his hands as if holding a flat disc and tilting it to one side, ‘and all the freaks just rolled right here.’

As a beachfront tourist destination with a long history of countercultural activity, the Venice Beach Boardwalk is a site of many ongoing tensions (see also Deener 2012). Alcohol, marijuana, and drug use are commonplace. Yet, the ‘Free Speech and Expression Zone’ is also a space
where many people earn income to support themselves and their families, arriving each day to sell merchandise, artwork, and services to the multitude of visitors. While work and intoxication are typically perceived as incompatible, here work and intoxication become fluid.

In this article I explore intoxication as part of a social ecology of work in an informal marketplace. I present three relationships between ‘working’ and ‘intoxicating:’ taking a break from work, working to intoxicate, and intoxicating out of work. I show how these different relationships become interrelated, how they emerge on a continuum of acceptability, and how each relationship leads to different social and material consequences. Rather than examining distinctions between individual people, I highlight the way that the social world of this community allows people to move in and out of different cycles of working and intoxicating. Finally, I illuminate intoxication as a social practice made meaningful in the everyday experience of an informal marketplace.

**WORK AND INTOXICATION**

Drinking alcohol and doing drugs becomes problematic particularly when it threatens social control and disrupts the functioning of groups and organizations (Trice and Sonnenstuhl 1988). Since modern industrial capitalism carved out clear boundaries between ‘work’ and ‘leisure’ time, the activity of intoxicating and the bodily response to alcohol and drugs necessitate control and monitoring to ensure they are kept out of the workplace. Work organizations were therefore not only a major driving force behind the eighteenth amendment, which effectively prohibited alcoholic beverages, but have also remained largely restrictive of alcohol after its repeal (Staudenmeier 1985).
Today, workplace prohibition policies are widely supported in the United States, particularly through Employment Assistance Programs and employee drug testing (White 2003). The spatial and temporal constructs of the ‘workplace’ and the ‘workday’ continue to be defined as necessitating reliability, productivity, and efficiency, a context within which alcohol and drug use is constructed as ‘impairment’ (White 2003; Frone and Brown 2010) and intoxication is an ‘escape’ from work (Husch 1991; Jayne, Holloway, and Valentine 2006).

Typically, scholars approach behaviors like drinking alcohol and doing drugs at the individual level – making connections to work as people either bring their own problems of drug and alcohol use to the workplace or develop drinking and drug use problems to cope with workplace conditions (Tice and Sonnestuhl 1988). The relationship between work and intoxication, however, also emerges within a social culture of the workplace; both workplace social norms and informal control measures will have a greater impact on individual behavior than formal policies (Berger: Ames and Janes 1992; Trice and Sonnenstuhl 1989). Informal and unregulated work can provide greater fluidity between work and intoxicating, precisely because there are fewer formal policies to monitor and restrict such behavior. Yet, research shows that even in informal work rules of intoxication still emerge to draw distinctions between ‘responsible’ and ‘irresponsible’ behavior (see Bourgois 2003: 82-87).

INTOXICATION AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

A growing literature explores intoxication – drinking alcohol, smoking marijuana, and doing drugs – as meaningful social practices (Becker 1973; Bourgois, Lettiere, and Quesada 1997; Kelly et al. 2011). Such work emphasizes that while physiological and behavioral responses to alcohol and drugs may occur within the individual body, the way these responses are
experienced and interpreted is social and cultural (Alasuutari 1985; Lyons et al. 2014). How intoxication gains meaning will therefore depend on the “context, environment, space, and place in which people are located” (Lyons et al. 2014: 274).

Approaching intoxication as a situated social practice provides a lens through which to understand group organization, identity, and interaction. People communicate identity and group membership by making choices of how to intoxicate – eg. needles vs. pills – (Slavin 2004). Drinking alcohol and doing drugs may also construct an interactional space within which people transgress, challenge, or reinforce gender identities (Lyons and Willott 2008; Peralta 2008) or excuse previously ‘unacceptable’ actions like violence (Tryggvesson 2004) and increased sexual freedom (Cohen and Lederman 1998). Gay men establish and interpret racial and ethnic group boundaries through preferences of intoxicating substances (McKay et al. 2012). As public spaces become the focus of conflicts over morality and decency (Dixon 2006; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009), drinking behaviors in parks and sidewalks can become important ways for marginalized groups to lay claim to physical space, socialize, and share advice (Anderson 1978; Britton 2008; Trouille 2013).

In addition, the meaning of drinking and doing drugs can often be negotiated through situated interactions. Law enforcement officers interactionally negotiate the meaning of drinking behaviors with ‘offenders,’ as Adler and Adler (1983) demonstrate by showing how officers in a ‘dry’ state utilized ‘the wink’ to communicate acceptance of otherwise unacceptable activities. Even as people discuss street drinking as a ‘morally offensive activity,’ on the ground they engage more subtle negotiations of meaning-making on the basis of who, where, when, and how people are drinking (Dixon 2006: 201-202). In her study of San Francisco recyclers, Theresa Gowan (2010) shows that in informal work settings people connect drinking, drug use, and work
in nuanced ways, the particular constellation of which allows them to navigate and negotiate stigma and identity (161).

Considering intoxication as a social practice made meaningful through situated interactions, I explore an informal marketplace where ‘working’ and ‘intoxicating’ become fluid. Drawing on four years of ethnographic data, I locate three relationships between ‘intoxicating’ and ‘working’ — *taking a break from work*, *working to intoxicate*, and *intoxicating out of work* — to expose how each become interrelated in a social ecology of work. This analysis reveals the way intoxicating emerges along a continuum of acceptability in a public marketplace and leads to different social and material consequences for people working here.

**METHODS & SETTING**

For decades this beachfront stretch of asphalt and concrete has attracted a diverse set of individuals looking to perform, sell artwork, and vend their wares to a public of passersby. Bordered by the expensive hotels and homes of Santa Monica to the North and Marina Del Rey to the South, Ocean Front Walk, or the Venice Boardwalk, stands out for its seemingly chaotic and eclectic social world. The space emerged in the early 20th Century as a vibrant scene where vendors sold anything from food and merchandise to entertainment and art. Such diverse sights, sounds, and smells, garnered the boardwalk a public identity as space of artistic creativity, free speech, and counterculture (Stanton, 1993; Deener 2012).

In the early 1980’s the city of Los Angeles passed a law prohibiting vending on public property. Only those individuals protected by first amendment rights — including artists and entertainers seeking donations — were exempted. A decade later the city of Los Angeles moved to officially declare Venice Beach’s Ocean Front Walk a “Free Speech Zone” (Stanton, 1993;
Los Angeles Municipal Code 42.15; Deener, 2012). In his recent book, Andrew Deener (2012) follows these multifaceted developments to show how the Venice Beach Boardwalk emerges today as a site where artists, entrepreneurs, vendors, immigrants, a homeless population, and people using drugs and alcohol can become performatively linked to the Boardwalk’s “bohemian” past. The beachfront location as a site of ‘leisure,’ the ongoing flow of visitors and vacationers, and the presence of marijuana dispensaries and smoke shops along the east side of the Boardwalk, further contextualize the way intoxication gains meaning in the space. Building on what we know about the history of the Boardwalk, and the way it emerges as a public site of counterculture, I dive into the daily interactions through which intoxication becomes a meaningful social practice.

In this article I draw on four years of ethnographic data collected between January 2010 and January 2014 and some additional follow-up with people through January 2015. During this time I spent time observing, assisting, and working alongside vendors, artists, and performers who sell goods and services in the marketplace. In addition, during this period I resided in three different apartments adjacent to the Venice Beach Boardwalk, which allowed me a chance to become a visible member of the community and afforded me a variety of observations spanning different times of day and days of the week. I also served on two subcommittees of the Venice Neighborhood Council, the Ocean Front Walk Committee and the Health and Safety Committee, and visited vendors and artists in their homes and traveled to downtown Los Angeles to purchase merchandise. Throughout the entirety of my data collection I jotted notes into a small notebook and returned home to type up more detailed field notes.

Data collection followed conventions in ethnographic research, as I shifted between periods of intense fieldwork – during which I spent an average of 10-20 hours per week on the
Boardwalk – and periods of preliminary data analysis (see Bosk 2003). My role in the marketplace also shifted over time. During my first years I most commonly observed and spoke with individual vendors and artists as they worked, sitting alongside them and assisting when necessary. From January to June of 2013 I worked as a ‘business partner’ to one vendor and then as a vendor and artist myself – a role that offered a vital opportunity to understand daily practices and interactions as I personally navigated participation in the marketplace.

Throughout data collection, the practices of drinking alcohol and smoking marijuana that I witnessed, as well as the various states of drug and alcohol-induced intoxication I encountered, seemed merely inconsequential background activity. Yet, by following an ‘abductive’ approach to data analysis – moving back and forth between surprising empirical findings and existing sociological theories (Timmermans and Tavory 2012) – I came to see intoxication as an ongoing and significant part of social life on the Boardwalk.

ANALYSIS

In this section I lay out three relationships between ‘working’ and ‘intoxicating’ in the public marketplace: taking a break from work, working to intoxicate, and intoxicating out of work. Drawing on situated interactional data I show how each of these relationships becomes constructed on a continuum of acceptability and leads to different social and material consequences. Throughout the analysis I expose the way these three different relationships between work and intoxication become interrelated in a social ecology of work on the Boardwalk.
**Intoxicating as a Break from Work**

In this first section I present one of three relationships between ‘working’ and ‘intoxicating:’ *intoxicating as a break from work.* For many of the vendors, artists, and performers working along the Boardwalk, the marketplace provides a space from which to earn a stable, albeit modest, living. They frame their participation in the Boardwalk ‘free speech and expression zone’ as work, and arrive each day with a focus on gaining income to support themselves and their families. They use profits to pay rent and make car payments. They discuss savings, and note moments when they have a little ‘extra’ spending money. Kahled talks about earning enough to purchase a car or stay a few nights in a motel. Umar tells me he supports his wife and two children through his art sales. Katie supports herself and her son, noting that her work on the Boardwalk offers greater income potential than a minimum wage job. Michelle talks about missing her family in Europe, and says she has saved enough to pay for a plane ticket for her mother to visit her from France, though not enough to return home with her head held high. Ricardo earns enough to pay for a van and rent an apartment, and also saves income to rent stands at festivals around the country or throw the occasional party at his home.

For these people the Boardwalk emerges as a space from which to construct economic stability – a place where work leads to income that can then be used to maintain cars, apartments, schooling, childcare, and further invest in work. Many of those working to make a living on the Boardwalk – like Katie, Michelle, and Umar – do not engage in intoxication. But for those who do – like Kahled and Ricardo – intoxication emerges as a process of *taking a break* from work.

Along the Boardwalk, there is no formal monitoring of workplace behavior or interaction. While the LAPD is tasked with policing the marketplace as a ‘public space,’ it is not tasked with policing the Boardwalk as a ‘workplace,’ therefore allowing some opportunity for behaviors that are made private during the workday. The informality of the Boardwalk marketplace allows
people working here the freedom to carve out their own workday, their schedules, and their interactions. Many arrive early to claim spaces from which to work, but how they use those spaces, and the ‘private’ nooks and crannies created from tables, table covers, bins, and blankets, is up to them. Once a space is ‘marked,’ it is up to vendors, artists, and performers how much they want to engage customers and when. As a result, there emerges an opportunity for fluidity between time working and time off and between public actions and private experiences.

Ricardo typically stands or sits on a stool alone behind his tables, actively working on the many crafts he sells on the Boardwalk. He is a man with a calm demeanor who works long hours and most days of the week. He does not drink alcohol alone, but alcohol almost always accompanies the presence of his friends, who come to sit with him during the day and assist him here and there. Ricardo’s own way of ‘doing intoxication’ emerges as ‘taking a break’ because it constructs a temporary social barrier between himself and the workplace.

Ricardo stands up at his table working on his crafts, noting all of the people passing by without purchasing any of his goods. He keeps his head down and says ‘Sí pases sin comprar, sigues pasando,’ [if you walk by without buying anything, keep on walking] turning to his friends and me with a smirk and a chuckle. Later, while a few friends sit on folding chairs and drink from paper and Styrofoam cups, Ricardo stands and begins to move his body to the music playing from the speakers across the pathway. ‘This is my favorite,’ he says, drawing laughter from his friends as he mimics a traditional indigenous fight dance.

Ricardo demonstrates the way he interactionally constructs a social barrier between workers on the western edge of the Boardwalk and the workplace. Though each passing customer can at times feel like a loss of vital income, this boundary allows him and his friends to use the passing
public for enjoyment and turn the lack of a sale into a comical social interaction. In addition, by creating this barrier, Ricardo is able to draw amusement from the more mundane aspects of daily work on the Boardwalk, like music projected from east side store fronts on an ongoing loop. Ricardo uses the music – and his intimate knowledge of the beat – as an entertaining performance for his audience. This barrier is therefore ‘a break’ from the workplace and the workday, but it does not disturb his overall sense of work as his main role on the Boardwalk.

Ricardo shows up late and is in a rather happy mood. He goes and grabs some beers and puts them under the table. Quickly a few of his friends, Roberto and Juan come around and sit nearby, sharing the beers by pouring them into paper and Styrofoam cups. They are having a good time, speaking mostly Spanish, talking about dancing, women, and drinking. Ricardo says he got here late so he’s not worried about working as much today, telling me that tomorrow he’ll work. I notice that his table looks almost bare and I ask if that’s just because his leathers are not set up. He says ‘no, everything is out, but this weekend was really good for him.’

While Ricardo’s presence clearly leaves an opportunity for work, should a customer approach, he indicates that he does not interpret the day’s activity as work. Stating, ‘I’ll work tomorrow,’ Ricardo demonstrates his own understanding of his activity as a ‘break’ from work, redefining the meaning of being present and ‘set up’ in the workplace.

For Kahled, his own way of ‘doing intoxication’ can similarly construct a temporary barrier between himself and his customers – allowing him a ‘break’ from his ongoing work on the Boardwalk.
Kahled skates in and out while I set up the tables, mentioning breakfast but not returning with it. After a while I have set up the tables and begin to cover them with the new cloths, pinning them down with clamps to stop the wind from moving them. I step away for a few minutes and return to see that Kahled has set up two sticks of incense in the back of the table, telling me that ‘he loves his incense.’ Eventually Kahled leaves to go grab his breakfast. He returns, eats energetically, and then begins to smoke a joint again. I watch his energy deplete and he recedes under the table and onto the ground for a nap. Throughout the day Kahled continues this pattern, smoking a small joint under the table and falling asleep for a nap.

In another instance, Kahled’s way of ‘doing intoxication’ constructs a boundary around himself and the environment.

I stop by Kahled’s stand but notice that he is standing there, eyes closed, earplugs in his ears, and a little smile on his face. He has an unlit cigarette in his hand and is rocking just slightly forward and backward. I park my bike behind him and wait for a second, wondering if he will come out of it. After 30 seconds or so I feel a little uncomfortable, and realize that if he is this ‘out of it’ I should just catch him later. I make my way to leave and he opens his eyes, turning slowly to me. He smiles, ‘was that you the whole time?’ I say ‘yes,’ and he turns to me. He looks like he was in another world, which makes me slightly uncomfortable, but there are a lot of people around, including some looking at his merchandise, which he doesn’t seem to care about at all.

Though physically present and able to work, Kahled constructs a barrier between himself and his work, thus allowing for a personal moment that blurs the boundaries of work. Kahled and Ricardo use intoxication to construct a social barrier between themselves and the workplace. It
provides a way to cope with a long workday, work week, and some of the more mundane aspects of working on the Boardwalk – like being ‘stuck’ in one space, the constant flow of people, and the repetitive music.

‘Doing intoxication’ as a break in the workday emerges as an acceptable behavior in the public marketplace, evidenced most clearly by the way law enforcement negotiates with workers to support their ongoing presence on the Boardwalk.

I ask Kahled about his relationship with ‘the cops.’ He tells me the stocky brunette and him are ‘cool,’ and that she ‘watches out’ for him. She’s told him not to ‘mess with’ certain women on the Boardwalk, like he was trying to ‘mess with’ a woman over by the liquor store and the cop was like ‘no, she’s no good.’ He continues to explain how she ‘watches out’ for him, saying that ‘the other day she passed by and I was smoking a bong’ and she yelled to him ‘You’re going to make it so obvious?’ So he tells me that he smiled and yelled back, ‘I’m not smoking pot, it’s not pot!’ He reiterates, ‘yeah, she’s cool.’

Kahled and the LAPD officer work together to interactionally negotiate where ‘smoking a bong’ lies along the boundary of permissibility. Here we see that it is not the activity that raises the officers eye but rather Kahled’s choice to make it obvious in a public space. The officer, however, chooses to negotiate with Kahled by asking a question, ‘you’re going to make it so obvious?’ This allows an opportunity for Kahled to redefine the activity for the officers by playing on the ‘invisibility’ of the substance itself, stating ‘it’s not pot!’

This interaction demonstrates the way that intoxication can become acceptable, not only for people working together in the marketplace, but for law enforcement tasked with policing the
marketplace as a public space. By highlighting the officer as being ‘cool,’ Kahled demonstrates the way he and the officer have negotiated the meaning of acceptable behavior and constructed a supportive relationship. In essence, the only formal authority to which Kahled must answer chooses to ‘go along’ with his behavior – allowing it to emerge as an appropriate part of the workplace. This comes with material consequences, since Kahled is able to continue working without a hefty fine or arrest.

Therefore, Kahled and Ricardo demonstrate the way intoxication can emerge as taking a break from work; intoxication becomes compatible with ongoing income, relationships with colleagues, and supportive relationships with law enforcement. This relationship between ‘working’ and ‘intoxicating’ enters into a social ecology of work on the Boardwalk precisely because the people working the Boardwalk as a main source of income, support, and savings – can employ others for whom quick cash is not merely income, but a vital resource to support intoxication.

**Working to Intoxicate**

In this section I show how taking a break from work links to a second relationship between ‘working’ and ‘intoxicating:’ working to intoxicate. I then show how working to intoxicate leads to different levels of acceptability and comes with different social and material consequences.

As vendors, artists, and performers arrive each day to set up in ‘first-come, first-serve’ spaces along the western edge of the Boardwalk, they must carry bins and boxes from cars and storage units. They roll carts piled high with merchandise, tables, fabric, and umbrellas. They sweep sand to clear spaces from a night of heavy wind. They must find parking spaces or leave cars in ‘access’ points while they unload. They must unpack bins in the morning and pack them up
again at night. These daily tasks offer an opportunity for odd-job workers in need of quick cash and populations with dependency issues can frequently emerge to fill these needs (see also Deener 2012; Bourgios; Gowan 2010). Dependency to alcohol and drugs emerges to create an unending supply of willing odd-job workers, and the Boardwalk economy runs on a need for people who are, in many ways, ‘bottoming out.’ Here is where taking a break and working to intoxicate become interrelated in a social ecology of work.

Kahled, Michelle, and Sarah pay Benson move their items to and from a storage unit each morning and evening. Benson is such a dependable worker, that many speak about his work with confidence. For instance, one day I had not been able to find Benson to let him know I was leaving for the day. I turned to Paul for his advice about leaving the cart unattended without a face-to-face confirmation from Benson that he would come to retrieve it and place it safely in the storage unit. Paul looks at me and says definitively, ‘If he said he’ll get it. He’ll get it.’

Yet, Kahled talks about the balance between Benson’s work and his drug use. ‘He gets paid pretty well by everybody, but he’s always taking care of himself, he just has a crack problem. People know it, and every now and then you’ll see him all cracked out, and it’s no judgment, we know that’s his thing and it’s cool.’ Kahled makes the point that people out here simply ‘can’t judge, you just let people be people.’ Here Kahled shows how he makes sense of Benson’s ‘doing intoxication’ in the workplace, emerging as part of a collective effort to ‘let people be people.’ Benson – who sleeps in the storage unit in which he stores the carts – maintains a living on the Boardwalk, though does not earn enough to support a life beyond the Boardwalk. Instead, he remains in an ongoing cycle between work and his ‘crack problem’ – a cycle that does not impede the ongoing trust others place in him to help maintain their own livelihoods.

This demonstrates the way work and intoxication can become an ongoing and stable cycle of finding employment, earning cash, and intoxicating. Within the social ecology of work on the
Boardwalk, this type of relationship between ‘working’ and ‘intoxicating’ is generally unproblematic.

Chuck works odd jobs and continues to drink throughout the day, but for those who pay him for immediate tasks, his behavior is quite acceptable.

Ricardo tells me that Chuck has ‘always been calm,’ and that ‘he doesn’t really start any trouble.’ He goes on to tell me he’s really a ‘good guy’ because ‘if he gets drunk he just passes out on the grass, he’s pretty even.’ Seen by Ricardo as unproblematic behavior for the workplace, he continues to engage in workplace relationships with Chuck, paying him to set up his tables or unpack goods.

Kahled also found Chuck’s behavior rather unproblematic.

One day I am sitting with Kahled as Chuck walks up to us, standing and staring in a daze for well over 30 seconds. ‘Do you know where you are right now?’ Kahled says with a smile to Chuck. Chuck smirks and walks slowly towards the grass. ‘It takes him a while to process things,’ Kahled tells me as he passes.

Since Chuck performs odd jobs and is paid for immediate tasks, his ongoing intoxication is rather unproblematic. It does, however, form an important part of the social ecology of work since he is available to be ‘hired’ by others working to support lives beyond the Boardwalk. At times, these interrelated experiences can also be framed in terms of support.

I ask Tim about Chuck, and he tells me he’s been working for him, and that he is a great employee. Tim says he’s given him housing, pays him, and feeds him. Knowing the subtleties of these statements, I ask him to explain. Tim tells me he gives Chuck a table for shelter, and his yoga mat to sleep on…and then through a combination of stuffed animals and blankets, he basically has a little shelter on the boardwalk at night. Then he
feeds him in the morning and pays him. Tim says he just found out Chuck drinks a lot though, so now he’s got to ‘get him off of that.’ ‘And RJ too,’ he adds. Tim recalls two recent deaths of odd-job workers we knew well, ‘They found out Anthony died of cirrhosis and Bill of ‘alcoholism,’ so Tim says he’s ‘got to tell Chuck that he’s going to ruin himself.’

Tim expresses his employment of odd-job workers specifically in relation to intoxication – framing the relationship as a supportive role that even extends beyond the immediate exchange of cash for services and into a rehabilitative role to get his employees ‘off’ of alcohol. As he does this, he provides men like RJ and Chuck with a steady source of cash.

At times this allows for an ongoing cycle, though others are able to break from this pattern and find a way off the Boardwalk.

Jorge worked with Randy for about a year, setting up his artwork and selling for him. One day though, he stopped showing up. The next I saw of Jorge he was waving to me from the passenger side window of a large van – looking thin and happy, his hair neatly cut and face newly shaven. He eventually caught up with me on the Boardwalk, telling me that he had ‘gotten sober’ and found a job in construction. He told me how happy he was to have a place to live, have some money to pay for bills and expenses, and be working a regular job. Happy to see me, he asked to purchase one of my watercolor paintings, and when I told him I would give him one as a gift, he insisted on paying the full $10. Jorge told me that since he’s been living in his place he likes to collect artwork from everybody working on the Boardwalk. For over two years Jorge has remained in construction work, coming around now and then to say hello and catch up with some of his friends.
The prior two sections therefore demonstrate the important relationship between people working to make a living— for whom intoxication is a *break from work* - and those living in a cycle of dependency – or *working to intoxicate*. As people enact different relationships to their work, their intoxication, and to one another, they maintain and support an acceptable fluidity between working and intoxicating on the Boardwalk.

**Intoxicating out of Work**

While the prior two sections discuss the ongoing interrelatedness between working each day to support a life beyond the Boardwalk and working each day in a cycle of dependency, there are also ways in which intoxication pushes the boundaries of the workplace and it can become a rotating door between the Boardwalk and jail – limiting the ability to gain income through work or maintain any savings – or a permanent exit off the Boardwalk.

In the morning I see Rennie walking towards me holding a guitar in one hand and a cigarette in the other. The little extra bounce in his step tells me to hold back a bit, it’s too early for Rennie to be this energized. ‘Laura!’ he says, as he approaches. I ask how he’s doing, how he made it through the cold night. ‘I’m trashed already,’ he says, slightly excited, slightly disappointed. He hands me his guitar, ‘Hold this a sec.’ I grab the guitar from him. The wood is rough and beaten, but the strings all seem intact. Rennie uses both hands to shield his cigarette and match from the air, lighting it up again, and blowing smoke into the cool air.

Rennie spends most of the day drinking alcohol or locating the funds to purchase alcohol. Yet, while he often held up cardboard signs soliciting money from tourists and visitors with
humorous statements like ‘Out of work supermodel’ and ‘Need a cold fuck’en beer,’ Rennie begins to redefine the activity of soliciting money for alcohol as vending.

Rennie comes over and gives me a hug, asking how I’ve been doing. He asks if I am teaching right now, and I tell him I won’t be teaching this year. I ask how he’s been and he says fine, but adds ‘fine for being a homeless guy on the street.’ I smile and say, ‘well I’m glad to hear you’re fine, considering.’ I mention that things seem pretty stable for him, his ‘operation’ has become more ‘legit’ over the past six months, and after finding some crayons his signs are now done in color, with clear writing, and each is displayed well. He even has a sign advertising his signs that states ‘Bum Signs,’ with a price for $2 per sign and $1 for a photo of the signs.

By opting to stay stationary in a ‘designated space’ of the ‘Free Speech and Expression Zone’ and sell the signs typically used to solicit donations, Rennie interactionally converts the ‘non-work’ of ‘begging’ into the ‘work’ of art vending. Importantly, this ‘operation’ begins to incorporate larger groups of people looking for cash with which to intoxicate.

One day I pass by and Rennie is sitting with Chuck, I see him holding a large handle of what appears to be tequila, putting it back underneath the cover over the table to conceal it. I talk a little to Rennie, not really sure yet if I should commit to a conversation given his state. He is clearly drunk, but not angry, and is speaking about the signs they make. He tells me ‘that’s the art department,’ pointing back to the small tent on the grass behind him. A woman emerges, she is holding up loose jeans with one hand as she walks around to the display of signs and grabs a few of them, strategically picking up signs from various places. Rennie says, ‘she’s robbing us,’ with the overdramatized bluntness of

2 Deener (2012) discusses this process as one “logic of adaptation,” where homelessness becomes redefined in terms of ‘counterculture’ (chapter 5).
sarcasm. He laughs and says ‘those are the ones she did.’ The woman returns with her signs to the tent.

Here we see Rennie sitting and drinking a large handle of alcohol during the ‘workday,’ selling signs, and drawing a larger group of people he frames as ‘the art department.’ Rennie himself talks about his ongoing work on the Boardwalk.

I’m talking to Rennie and I mention the election. Rennie says, ‘Obama won?’ I say ‘yeah,’ but he seems uninterested. He squints a little and says bruskly, ‘it doesn’t matter, whatever. I don’t really care, what’s the difference?’ Rennie then mentions he was talking to his parole officer, and she said ‘So, you live in beachfront property, you don’t pay rent, you spend your whole day drinking vodka and playing music? I quit.’ Rennie laughs, and says ‘hell yeah, and I just have to sell a few signs.’ He is sitting back, looking like he’s basking in the greatness of it all, but then he rubs his face again. ‘Yeah, but there’s a lot of hardship that comes with all this.’ I nod in agreement. Rennie looks around at the bench behind him, still populated with a group of men. He tells me, ‘I need a sip of vodka,’ and begins to walk away. I say ‘ok, ‘and tell Rennie ‘I’ll see you later.’

Here Rennie expresses the tension between his activities as blurring the lines between work, leisure, and dependency. He recounts a conversation with his parole officer, reiterating to me that he ‘just has to sell a few signs’ in order to ‘live in beachfront property’ and spend the day ‘drinking vodka and playing music.’ However, he quickly notes that such a rosy picture of a work/leisure balance quickly blurs into hardship.

It is precisely the way Rennie moves between work and intoxication that pushes the limits.
Eventually everybody is ‘breaking down,’ piling things up and a few people want to have a drink. At one point I am sitting on the grass near Rennie, who is drinking from a Gatorade bottle. Two female cops roll by on LAPD segways, one of whom is Dowling. Dowling stops and walks up to Rennie and says, give me that bottle. She smells it and tells him to get out of here or she is taking him in. She says ‘you saw me and still drank from it anyway, so now everybody needs to get out of here.’ I stand and start to move the folding chair off the grass, not really sure where we are going.

The act of drinking alcohol in public and the shared knowledge that one is publically drinking alcohol emerge as less problematic than the interactional meaning created once the officer sees Rennie seeing her and still chooses to drink. Although Rennie is drinking from a ‘permissible’ container, he violates the officer’s way of negotiating the boundary of permissibility. In this moment, Rennie breaches the delicate performance of privacy and redefines the relationship between himself and the officer as one of law enforcement and offender.

Significantly, Rennie’s breach of this performance is not only personally experienced. The officer states, ‘you saw me and still drank from it anyway, so now everybody needs to get out of here.’ By failing to appropriately navigate intoxicating in a public space, Rennie and the officer effectively redefine an entire social scene as problematic. Here, we see these negotiations as socially and materially consequential, since the officer now limits any potential to make money for the day. These patterns become ongoing and increasingly problematic.

Rennie tells me he’s fine, but sick of going to jail, they keep getting him on an open container violation. He says they ‘target people,’ and he is one of them. ‘A tourist could walk along with a beer in one hand and a joint in the other, but I’m sitting on the grass drinking a beer, and they’ll take me in.’ He tells me the most recent was last week.
Rennie highlights his frustration that it is not the public part of intoxication the cops find issue with, but of who is publically intoxicating. Importantly, he understands his own inability to successfully enter into a negotiation with the officers only by juxtaposing it with the negotiations he observes between officers and tourists. It is specifically this comparison that leads Rennie to an understanding of his own experience with officers as ‘targeting’ rather than law enforcement. His behavior, however, becomes problematic in the space in that it leads him to push the limits and enter into the ‘revolving door’ of the Boardwalk and jail.

The way men like Rennie, Chuck, and Harold ‘do intoxication’ in the workplace therefore comes with material consequences. For instance, after both Rennie and Harold were arrested, they reluctantly left Chuck responsible for sales. Upon their return from jail, they lamented the results. “Chuck is the most irresponsible person to leave in charge,” Rennie tells me. “He made money and then got totally trashed.” Rennie says, ‘normally somebody has to watch him’ but this time ‘they got both of us.’ Rennie says that it was Harold who first got approached by the cops, and tells me ‘I saw him get hemmed up, and I thought it was just him. But then the guy said, Mr. Smith?’ Rennie then mimics his response, “Aw, you’ve got to be kidding me. So we both got hemmed up and leave Chuck out here.”

‘Doing intoxication’ in the workplace becomes materially consequential for Rennie and Harold, as they fail to maintain the ‘appropriate’ balance between work and intoxication, drawing attention to themselves from law enforcement, getting arrested, and leaving Chuck in charge of their sales. Yet, like many others making a living on the street (see Duneier 1999; Gowan 2010), Rennie and Harold survive each day as they navigate this relationship between ‘working’ and ‘intoxicating.’ And as they do, such a cycle becomes an important part of the social ecology of work on the Boardwalk.
In the later afternoon a cop car is down by Rennie and the guys. It rolls by us going north and I can see Chuck and Rennie in the back, but Chuck looks to be almost laughing. I tell Kahled the two of them are in the car and he says ‘they’ll be out tomorrow.’ Soon after, Harold walks by energetically. ‘They took both of them’ he says, almost laughing. ‘They wanted to take all three of us but I was like, I’m not going.’ He smiles, ‘Rennie and I flipped a coin.’ Kahled, Paul, Harold and I all laugh. It seems like a big joke at this point. Kahled says ‘it’s ridiculous, basically you might as well do whatever you want out here, smoke, whatever, because those guys are magnets.’ He says, ‘you could be right here smoking and they won’t even see you, they’ll be looking over you at those guys. They basically work for the cops at this point. They get money for each of them that they lock up, so sometimes they just come around and are like – ‘can we take you in?’ Kahled mimics their reluctant responses, sighing and saying in a drawn-out speech ‘uuuuuhh, ooooook.’

As different people navigate enforcement of intoxication, they effectively shape the way others experience the space – again become an important part of the social ecology of work on the Boardwalk. Kahled comes to understand the officers’ desire to make an arrest, alongside Rennie, Chuck, and Harold’s complacency in being arrested, as a type of symbiotic relationship. For Kahled, this allows guys like Rennie, Chuck, and Harold to emerge as a public distraction, allowing Kahled an opportunity for greater fluidity between his own ‘working’ and ‘intoxicating.’

Rennie and Harold’s relationship between work and intoxication, however, is understood as pushing the limits of acceptability because there becomes only ‘one way out.’
Kahled and I talk about the way people ‘drink alcohol’ on the Boardwalk, and he mentions that ‘alcohol is poison,’ saying that ‘they are killing themselves and just don’t want to do it, so they are doing it slowly.’ Kahled gets serious, noting matter-of-factly as he gestures south, ‘These guys’ll die out here. Rennie will die like this, Harold will die like this.’ He notes some of the distinctions between people, ‘Some of these other guys are in transition, like a purgatory, between the street and the shelter. Some will make it out. But addiction is hard, they need it.’ Again Kahled reiterates the cycle of dependency for Rennie and Harold, ‘Every sign those guys sell goes to a 4-loko, they sell a sign, they buy a 4-loko.’ Kahled goes on to tell me that one day he got off the bus on Washington, where the bus from downtown often drops off, and as he is walking by the liquor store one morning and sees a guy ‘from the Boardwalk.’ He tells me that he asked what the guy was doing ‘up here’ and the guy responded, ‘getting breakfast.’ Kahled asks rhetorically, ‘A beer for breakfast?’ furrowing his brow and tilting his head.

Similarly, Jorge expresses his own interpretation of men like Rennie and Harold.

Healthy and newly employed in construction, Jorge looked around at Rennie, Chuck, and Harold on the grass nearby. He told me how happy he was to be sober, working, and have savings, but he said he’d have nothing to offer these guys. These guys are ‘too far gone’ he said.

Kahled and Jorge’s understanding of intoxication on the Boardwalk demonstrates the important differences between the way people either support a life beyond the Boardwalk, maintain a cycle of dependency on the Boardwalk, or intoxicate themselves off the Boardwalk. For guys like Rennie and Harold, their biography will likely end with the latter.
One morning in 2014 I saw Rennie sitting on a ledge against a storefront just off the Boardwalk. He told me he had been ‘kicked off’ by the cops for ‘too many open container violations’ – and now he is ‘not allowed’ to set foot on the Boardwalk. After a month or so of hanging around just off the Boardwalk, Rennie disappeared. Months later I spotted him in a nearby alleyway, looking visibly thin. He told me he went ‘up north’ for a while but is back now, and is still ‘not allowed’ on the Boardwalk though. Today I catch up with him here and there, sitting on curbs and sidewalks in the area, asking for change or food.

The other way to stop the rotating door in and out of jail – and on and off the Boardwalk – is much more final. Anthony was a man with a huge smile and an energetic spirit. He often did odd jobs, both for people working in the ‘free speech and expression zone,’ and merchants, at times holding up a sign to advertise a nearby pizza shop. He used his sense of humor as he worked, ‘Legalize pizza!’ he would yell to play off of the marijuana dispensaries. He drank regularly, slept in the street, and seemed to pour every dollar he earned back into alcohol. He rotated in and out of jail, unable to pay the fines. One day, however, I walked outside to the news that ‘they’ had found his body on Lincoln – a main boulevard about a mile east of the Boardwalk. ‘Cirrhosis,’ Tim told me. He emphasized, however, that nobody could really be sure how long he had been there.

This final section demonstrates the third relationship between ‘working’ and ‘intoxicating’ on the Boardwalk: *intoxicating out of work*. Here we see the way people move beyond the cycle of *working to intoxicate* because they push the limits of acceptability, getting wrapped up in a rotating door in and out of jail and on and off the Boardwalk. This comes with significant material, social, and biographical consequences, as people attract police, are arrested, lose income, lose access, and die.
CONCLUSION

This article presents three different relationships between ‘working’ and ‘intoxicating’ in an informal marketplace: taking a break from work, working to intoxicate, and intoxicating out of work. The data show that each relationship becomes an interrelated part of the social ecology of work on the Boardwalk. I have demonstrated how each relationship emerges along a continuum of acceptability – both among others working in the space and in relation to law enforcement – and therefore garners different social and material consequences. As some people gain opportunities to negotiate with law enforcement and freedom to move fluidly between working and intoxicating, others end up in and out of jail or lose access to the Boardwalk altogether.

By shifting the focus of intoxication from the individual to the social world, I move beyond the construction of intoxication as individual ‘impairment’ in the workplace. Here, we see that ‘working’ and ‘intoxicating’ become compatible, and the way people move between the two becomes socially meaningful for workplace interaction and experience. This account supplements individual-level, public health, and public policy perspectives are often ill-equipped to understand the way people make sense of, and experience, everyday intoxication. In addition, this contributes to literature aimed at understanding the links between intoxication and public space – showing how a landscape of intoxication emerges each day.
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CHAPTER FIVE

‘DOING INTIMACY’ IN A PUBLIC MARKET:
HOW THE GENDERED EXPERIENCE OF ETHNOGRAPHY REVEALS SITUATED
SOCIAL DYNAMICS

ABSTRACT

This article considers the way in which gender gains significance during ethnographic research to reveal situated social dynamics. As a female ethnographer in a male-dominated setting, I map my own movement and interaction through the field setting over time to show how my ‘practice of ethnography’ becomes, as it also reveals, a ‘practice of intimacy.’ I pay critical attention to the physical realities of the field setting as they structure patterns of interaction, such that three seemingly simple actions, ‘hollering,’ ‘kicking it,’ and ‘walking,’ emerge as highly consequential practices through which people construct, experience, and protect intimacy in public space. Following the ‘ethnography’ into the ‘discovery,’ this article pushes the potential of reflexivity to illuminate the way in which multiple gendering processes unfold and become interrelated.
‘DOING INTIMACY’ IN A PUBLIC MARKET: HOW THE GENDERED EXPERIENCE OF ETHNORAPHY REVEALS SITUATED SOCIAL DYNAMICS

INTRODUCTION

I waited in line at the tiny coffee shop just off the Boardwalk, a mile-and-a-half beachfront pathway along Los Angeles’ Pacific Coast. Ahead of me was Tommy, a man I befriended a few years earlier when I sublet a studio apartment in his building prior to beginning fieldwork. As I stepped out of the shop into the chilly morning air, Tommy was standing against the building, and he asked if I’d like to go stand in the patch of sun that had formed a tiny oasis on the grass across the Boardwalk. Together the two of us walked west, crossing the concrete pathway and walking onto the grassy mound just beyond it. After chatting for several minutes, we decided to leave, again crossing the Boardwalk towards the abutting street. This time, a male vendor I knew well was in the pathway and I said hello as I passed. Tommy, however, did not, sparking a flurry of angry remarks about respect and a rather disengaged dialogue about who had never said hello to whom. Upon returning to the shop, I asked Tommy what this was about. “That’s their turf,” he told me, “and you’re a prized commodity out here.”

It was during interactions like this that I became aware of my ethnography as an embodied practice, one which would not only influence and define my own movement through space as a woman, but which would reveal to me the very gendered social dynamics of the setting. As Coffey (1999: 60) notes, “The interaction, language and discipline of the body form the very essence of fieldwork. The sexualized and gendered body affects both our own experiences of fieldwork and the nature of the data we collect.” Gender and sexuality continue to have a significant impact on both what we see and how we come to see it (Lumsden 2009; May and Patillo-McCoy 2000; McCorkel and Myers 2003; Walby 2010).
Based on three years of research as a female ethnographer in a male-dominated public market, this article maps my own movements and interactions in the field setting to draw critical attention to the way gender emerges and gains significance through space and over time. In so doing, I show how my ‘practice of ethnography’ unfolds to become as it reveals a situated ‘practice of intimacy.’ Using my own experience as the vehicle, I therefore illustrate how three ‘practices of intimacy,’ ‘hollering,’ ‘kicking it,’ and ‘walking,’ emerge spatially and interactionally to “create a sense of a close and special quality of a relationship between people” (Jamieson 2011: para 1.2), further shaping the gendered experience of this public setting. By following the ‘ethnography’ into the ‘discovery’ this article demonstrates how multiple gendering processes unfold and become interrelated.

GENDER, THE PRACTICE OF ETHNOGRAPHY, AND INTIMACY IN PUBLIC

By rendering the researcher visible, a feminist epistemology opened space to explore the role of gender and sexuality in shaping the qualitative research experience, making explicit that men and women experience the field in different ways (see Abu-Lughod 1990; Bell et al. 1993; DeVault 1999; Golde 1970; Kulick and Wilson 1995; McKeeganey and Bloor 1991; Warren 1988; Warren and Rasmussen 1977; Whitehead and Conaway 1986; Wolf 1996). Accounts of female researchers in male-dominated settings argued that alongside challenges there are certain ‘advantages’ of female subordination and marginalization in the field, either facilitating access based on stereotypes of women as ‘unthreatening’ or ‘good listeners’ (Easterday et al. 1977; Grenz 2005; Pini 2005; Warren and Rasmussen 1977) or by offering detached insight as perpetual ‘outsiders’ (Bucerius 2013; Gurney 1985). Many discussed a need to endure or navigate what Gurney (1985) termed “sexual hustling,” including sexual overtures, jokes, or
harassment by men during research (Lumsden 2009; Sampson and Thomas 2003) and others a need to endure treatment of incompetence despite their own presentation as an “educated researcher” (Pierce 1995).

Building from constructivist approaches to gender (West and Zimmerman 1987), female researchers have suggested that rather than accept treatment dictated by local gender roles, they may be able to negotiate gender identity by resisting locally-defined “feminine tasks” (Sampson and Thomas, 2003) or deemphasizing their femininity (Hunt 1984). Yet, the task of downplaying gender in research encounters is problematic at best. The responsibility remains overwhelmingly on female researchers to promote a “fiction of a genderless self,” and in so doing further perpetuates the invisibility of the heterosexual male in research encounters (Moreno 1995: 186). In addition, research encounters are dialogic and gender is often collectively created (Sallee and Harris III 2011; Scott et al. 2012). As a result, identity negotiations may not always lead to intended results. In her fieldwork for instance, Bucerius (2013: 705) found that donning “unfeminine” clothing worked to center her appearance as a subject of interest, “ironically triggering the very conversations [she] wanted to avoid.”

Such varied experiences highlight that how gender emerges and gains significance during the research process will largely be influenced by the field settings themselves (Belur 2014; Bruni 2006; Phillips and Johns 2012; Roberts and Sanders 2005; Soni-Sinha 2008). In their comparative account of fieldwork, Mazzei and O’Brien (2009: 363) showed how the social “scripts” particular to the field setting “differentially determine which of the field researcher attributes matter most.” As researchers negotiate and “deploy” identities to gain access and rapport, “field settings socially construct the researcher’s identity” (2009: 363; emphasis in original). Sampson and Thomas (2003) also showed that gender took on particular significance,
not only because of the hierarchical organization of the male seafarers they studied but also because of the isolated setting of the ship. Given that women’s presence in public space does not remain untroubled (Wesely and Gaarder 2004), research taking place in and across public settings may also enhance the need to conform to local gender roles (Berik 1996) or lead to ongoing harassment and surveillance. Research therefore suggests the important role of the physical setting in influencing the way gender gains significance during qualitative research.

In addition, the significance of time in gendering the research process deserves greater attention. For some female researchers, gender differences during data collection may become less salient over time, as attributes like class and status emerge to structure the research encounter (Belur 2014). Moreno (1995), however, showed how prolonged interaction within a highly gendered social terrain led a male research participant to reinterpret the research encounter as an ongoing intimate relationship, ending in his violent attempt to reassert control. Soyer (2013) and Twyman et al. (1999) show how pregnancy and motherhood during fieldwork shifted the character of research interactions and influenced the nature of the data collected over time.

Such a body of reflexive scholarship emerges precisely because the research encounter is itself an intimate one (Maclean 2012; Phillips and Johns 2012; Takeda 2013). Gender gains significance as ethnographers build rapport, empathy, trust, and respect with research participants. This process, however, unfolds through the very spaces and physical structures that pattern interaction (Fine 2012) and these interactions develop and take shape often over long stretches of time. Paying greater attention to such spatial and temporal considerations of a public setting, the ‘practice of ethnography’ can tell us something about a situated ‘practice of
intimacy,’ offering an opportunity to understand the way in which multiple gendering processes unfold and become interrelated.

Attention to intimacy in public settings furthers an interdisciplinary agenda to challenge the hegemonic and heteronormative ‘private/public’ divide that often centers ‘the family’ and ‘home’ as exclusive spaces of intimacy (see Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Valentine 2008; Weeks et al. 2001). Linking intimacy to such “conventional spaces presuppose[s] a structural differentiation of ‘personal life’ from work, politics, and the public sphere” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 553) and ignores the everyday practices through which individuals differentiate space to construct private niches in public worlds (Marks 1994). For instance, scholars have shown that people continuously carve out ‘private’ moments in ‘public’ spaces like bathhouses (Berubé 1996) and automobiles (Ashford 2012). Kaplan (2005) argued that heterosexual men often construct intimacy with one another through talk and joking, additionally showing that when joking occurs in public, the discursive practices that hide meanings to ‘outsiders’ further bond the men as intimate ‘insiders.’ As Jamieson (2011: para 1.2) noted, it is through these ‘practices of intimacy’ that individuals “cumulatively and in combination enable, create and sustain a sense of a close and special quality of a relationship between people.” How intimacy emerges therefore depends on the everyday ways in which people use and appropriate different settings to construct and protect a sense of closeness.

In what follows I offer three situated ‘practices of intimacy’ in a public market, ‘hollering,’ ‘kicking it,’ and ‘walking.’ Remaining highly visible throughout the text, each of these practices unfolds as I move and interact in, and through, a gendered public terrain. By following the ‘ethnography’ into the ‘discovery,’ I argue for increased attention to the role of the setting in gendering the research process and I offer an empirical account of the way individuals construct
and protect intimacy in an everyday public space. Taken in its totality, this article illustrates how multiple *gendering processes* unfold and become interrelated.

**SETTING AND METHOD**

*The Boardwalk*

Situated along the Pacific Coastline of Los Angeles, the Venice Beach Boardwalk gained much of its popular eclectic character during the mid-twentieth century, when the Boardwalk began to draw beatniks, artists, political activists, and counterculture enthusiasts to utilize the mile-and-a-half concrete pathway as a space to perform, advocate, and sell artwork to a multitude of passersby (Deener 2012; Maynard 1991; Stanton 2005). Institutionalizing this historic character, the Boardwalk operates today as an official ‘Free Speech and Expression Zone,’ affording a rare opportunity to sell and distribute goods in a city that otherwise bans public vending (Deener 2012; Los Angeles Municipal Code 42.15). Racial and ethnic diversity, immigration, the availability of affordable rental space, and an overall public resistance to corporate ownership continue to define the space, creating a unique, complex, and diverse public market that draws over 16 million visitors each year from both within the U.S. and across the globe (see Deener 2012).

The Boardwalk’s linearity is an important feature of the space, shaping the way in which social interaction unfolds. Each morning the Boardwalk comes alive, as merchants lining the Eastern side of the Boardwalk slide open metal gates to small rental spaces, selling t-shirts, sunglasses, hats, jewelry, glass pipes, tattoos, piercings, and medical marijuana. Along the western edge, vendors, performers, and artists set up tables, easels, blankets, and umbrellas in just over 200 ‘designated spaces’ painted along the concrete. On busy days, the space is teeming with people, as vendors, artists, and performers line the pathway and large crowds of visitors
walk up and down with friends and family. A woman in bare feet and a bikini dances freely in front of a performing band. An impromptu drum circle erupts into a jam session. Men and women rollerblade and run, sit and chat, take photos, play instruments, and enjoy cigarettes, marijuana, and alcohol. This is a space that hits every sense, often supplying a dizzying cacophony of sights, sounds, and smells.

The Ethnography Project
This article is based on an ongoing ethnography project which I began in January 2010 to explore the experience and social organization of those individuals working in this vibrant informal economic zone. During this time I observed, assisted, and worked alongside vendors, artists, and performers in the public market of the Venice Beach Boardwalk, also residing in a few different locations just adjacent to the Boardwalk. Conversations mainly focused on personal histories, issues of access to the Boardwalk, ways of navigating regulations, and ways of maintaining stability in the workplace. Building on grounded theory, I analyzed data throughout my research practice using an ‘abductive’ approach, moving back and forth between surprising empirical data and existing sociological theories (Timmermans and Tavory 2012). This process helped me reflect not only on what I came to see along the Boardwalk but how I came to see it. As a result, this paper addresses my own experience of ethnography as I built relationships with vendors and artists in this public market.

Many of the interactions that unfold involve the perspectives of men, mostly because this is a male-dominated setting where approximately twice as many men work than women, but also because it was through my own interactions with these men that they came to tell me how they saw things. However, as my own practice of ethnography revealed a way of ‘doing intimacy’, I began to notice and explore the ways in which other women experienced, discussed, and
navigated intimacy in the setting, revealing that much of my experience unfolded as it did specifically because I experienced what it was like to be a woman in this setting.

As a note, the practices of intimacy described here should not be taken as a comprehensive account of all the ways of ‘doing intimacy’ on the Boardwalk. As a young heterosexual female ‘doing ethnography’ in a public space, I came to see intimacy in a particular way. In addition, I do not believe that my gender emerged with interactional relevance at the expense of other personal attributes. Rather, I find that among other attributes, my social class, race, ethnicity, age, appearance, and marital status became articulated through my gendered body. As a result, my interactions and movements within the field setting were most often understood through the lens of my ‘being a woman’, and my practice of ethnography emerged as highly gendered. In the end, my personal experience of ‘doing gender’ (West and Zimmerman 1987) while ‘doing ethnography’ became the very vehicle through which I came to see a local practice of ‘doing intimacy’ in a public market.

‘DOING INTIMACY’ ON THE BOARDWALK

In this section I show how the physical and interactional feature of ethnographic fieldwork operated such that my own gendered experience of ethnography became the vehicle to expose ‘doing intimacy’ in this public market. I divide the section into three key practices, ‘hollering,’ ‘kicking it,’ and ‘walking,’ each of which tells a story of how people construct, experience, and protect intimacy in a public setting. This section therefore illustrates multiple gendering processes as they influence, and are influenced by, local social dynamics, the physical setting, and the significance of time.
'Hollering: Making Research Contacts

When I began my ethnography project my first contact was with a male artist, who initiated a conversation by telling me that he ‘liked my toes,’ which were adorned with polish and visible in my flip flops. While rather benign, this type of ‘hollering’ emerged as a form of flirtation and a commonplace practice on the Boardwalk to communicate romantic desire and provide an opening for further contact. Still, in this instant I took the opportunity to shift the conversation to his work on the Boardwalk. Randy, an artist in his early 40s, became a key contact, and sitting with Randy allowed me to gain some familiarity and meet additional contacts. Believing that through association with other vendors I would gain easier access to others, I inched my way up and down the Boardwalk, getting to know people in adjacent spaces and building relationships as if attaching links in a chain.

In the setting, it was not uncommon for men to call out to women walking by, generally providing statements about physical appearance and sexual desirability. On a personal level, my instinct was to avoid interactions with men who made such gestures, but as a researcher, my instinct was to form new relationships. This often involved immediately turning initial conversations to research and trying to avoid framing my physical approach as an expression of romantic interest. In addition, I believed my presence with existing contacts would establish me as an ‘insider’ and lessen these interactions over time. I noticed, however, that my continued presence alongside different male vendors also had the potential to shield me from additional contacts.

For example, while talking with a male vendor one day another man approached to join the conversation. The vendor aggressively told the other man that he was being disrespectful. This emerged as somewhat puzzling, since people regularly step in and out of conversation on the
Boardwalk. Instead, though we stood in open public space, the vendor’s actions drew an artificial boundary around him and me. On another occasion while speaking with Dean, a male artist, he referenced having seen me with multiple men in the space and told me quite directly ‘I want to holler at you, but I don’t want to step on anybody’s toes.’ His comment communicated a need to understand whose ‘territory’ he might be encroaching on by engaging in a conversation with me.

In this sense, my practice of ethnography necessitated building multiple relationships, yet the way in which individuals protected and maintained intimacy in this public setting made multiple interactions with men challenging. Once my research contacts had established my ‘association’ with certain men, others avoided behavior that could be construed as hollering and thereby interpreted by male colleagues as disrespectful. I began to take notice of how some men with whom I had become friendly would blatantly avoid my greetings if another man was present. At times men physically removed themselves from the space when another male was present or they simply acted reluctant to join in on conversations.

The rules which limit simultaneous hollering by multiple men, however, merely work to protect intimate relationships or desires among those within the Boardwalk community. The boundary of such protection is evident when placed in comparison to treatment of men outside of the Boardwalk community. For instance, when Kahled, a man in his 40s with whom I spent a great deal of time during various points in my fieldwork, learned of my relationship with a man who neither lived nor worked on the Boardwalk, he offered no concession. Rather, Kahled threatened that if this man were to approach him, he would tell him outright, ‘If she keeps hollering at me, I’m going to keep hollering back at her!’ Kahled thus clarifies that our research encounters, characterized by my persistent physical presence and his continued participation, structured our relationship as an ongoing expression of companionship. Yet, in differentially
applying the ‘rules’ of hollering, Kahled also draws a practical line between Boardwalk insiders and outsiders, making clear that my so-called ‘taken’ identity with an ‘outsider’ did little to limit the potential for companionship within the community.

Adding greater complexity to how people differentially practice intimacy, my experiences led me to understand distinct ways of interpreting and constructing working women and visiting women by attaching different meanings to movement and presence. Over the course of fieldwork I experienced and witnessed many men verbally yell comments at female visitors and tourists to attract their attention, often with blatantly casual and sexual undertones. Most often, women provided coy smiles and laughter as they passed. Never did I witness a female vendor verbally yell to a passing male. On the other hand, women who engaged in hollering did so through their physical approach and presence, requiring these women to be physically mobile. For instance, when I asked one male vendor about his romantic relationships, he recounted that a woman had begun to ‘holler’ at him, explaining that ‘she comes around to say hello and gives me hugs.’

On one occasion a man yelled comments about my appearance while I walked by, only to superficially disarm the initiation by laughing and saying, ‘I’m just kidding, I know you’re a local, but come say hi.’ Mobility therefore structures the interaction of men and women in different ways, but it also constructs different types of women. Here, a distinction emerges between what it meant to interact with a female ‘visitor’ and what it meant to interact with a female ‘local.’ My own position as a woman ‘at work’ while remaining physically mobile emerged as a somewhat liminal status. In making research contacts as a woman in a male-dominated setting, my own practice of ‘doing ethnography’ became, as it also revealed, this ‘practice of intimacy.’
‘Kicking It:’ Building Relationships and Observing Daily Life

At the beginning of my dissertation research I embarked on ethnographic fieldwork with a mental image of ethnographers like Mitch Duneier (1999), sitting on a milk crate along New York City’s 6th Avenue to eventually become part of the daily fabric of an informal economic zone. I assumed that continued presence as ‘a researcher’ would eventually ease me into the community as a member rather than potential romantic partner. Over time, however, I learned that as a woman, sitting alongside male vendors emerged as a practice of ‘kicking it,’ structuring my physical presence in terms of leisure, companionship, and personal choice.

When I first began sitting with Randy I brought a folding chair and placed it next to him, spending a few weeks watching him work and interact. As I became friendly with a small group of men in adjacent spaces, I moved around a bit, eventually finding a consistent home with Tim, a male vendor in his early 40s who often had an extra chair for me. Though he made some initial romantic gestures, he seemed to understand my research project and appeared satisfied that my presence came with academic motivations. This group of individuals became a hub for me, and at times I helped with sales and managed Tim’s table or Randy’s artwork in their absence. I also began to move around from that hub, sitting with a few other individuals on adjacent blocks. Kahled later offered his space as another hub and also brought an additional chair for me. As I became more aware of networks along the Boardwalk, I moved back and forth among these different groups of individuals, most of whom were men, expanding my contacts with rather naïve ease.

The gendered implications of my ethnographic approach emerged as I drew confusion and questions from other men along the boardwalk. Why was I sitting all day with Tim? Why was I sitting with Kahled? Initially I shrugged off these questions, telling people with a smile that I did
not have a ‘boyfriend’ on the Boardwalk and that I was ‘doing research,’ not yet aware of how consequential such moments of interpretation would be. However, the persistence of such questioning revealed that although I presented myself as a graduate student, often took notes, and framed my interactions in terms of research, my continued physical presence allowed others to frame me within a practice of ‘doing intimacy.’ Kahled, for instance, recounted how he saw my move from sitting in Tim’s space to his own, telling me blatantly, ‘I talked to Tim about that, and he agreed I could have you.’

In fact, my professed lack of attachment began to take shape as a kind of deviant behavior within a gender social order that required me to have some form of male association. Who was I ‘attached to?’ Multiple men would jokingly call the other my ‘boyfriend,’ trying casually to understand my availability. ‘I thought you were with Tim.’ ‘I thought you were with Kahled.’ As previously mentioned, such behavior motivated Dean’s approach, who stated plainly, ‘You are confusing me. I don’t want to step on anybody’s toes. Who are you with?’ When I responded ‘nobody,’ he smiled and began to chat about us ‘kicking it’ some time.

I began to take note of how the men with whom I had become friendly engaged in ‘doing intimacy’ with other women. During one summer, Tim ‘hosted’ three different women at his space, offering portions of his table for their own artwork. These women were on extended trips, testing their hand in the informal economy. They spent time sitting with Tim throughout the day, and Tim communicated to me that such ‘hosting’ efforts were in pursuit of romantic partnerships. Two of these women, Tim lamented, left without having developed any romantic interest. One, however, did remain to establish a brief companionship before leaving Venice. Often I witnessed these kinds of relationships between male contacts and visiting women, some of whom returned daily for a few days or weeks. Frequently, the brief relationship was followed
by lamentations of female ‘drama,’ although most men continued to speak with hope about meeting a woman on the Boardwalk.

After declining multiple advances from Kahled over time, he became increasingly infuriated with me and continued to argue that in addition to my research goals, my time spent with him should have led to romantic partnership by this point. He even indicated I must have been romantically involved with the other men I had spent time with, and grew increasingly frustrated that I would not do the same with him. Though Kahled knew of my research, often said he was ‘helping’ me, and had even viewed my graduate student profile explaining my ethnography project, he became angry that it was me who came to see him, that I clearly wanted to be with him, and that some inability to ‘stop working’ and ‘just relax,’ must be inhibiting me from acting on my feelings. When I reminded him that I was conducting research, he told me that I should just ‘get on with it already’ and stop ‘hanging around.’ Quite clearly, the prolonged passage of time had allowed Kahled to remove research from the overarching reason for my presence to reframe it in terms of ‘kicking it.’

My mobility acted as a certain signal for romantic possibility, constructing me differently than other ‘women at work,’ but my ongoing presence placed me as a consistent member of the community, further necessitating a need for male ‘association.’ In many ways, my gendered and sexualized body had imbued my movements, physical presence, and conversations with situated meaning as my own research practices became indistinguishable from a practice of intimacy. As a woman, what it meant to spend time sitting, observing, and talking with men in their own ‘personal,’ though public, space, could not be disentangled from the very practice of ‘kicking it.’ Though men knew of my research, the companionship of practicing ethnography had become
indistinguishable from the companionship of ‘kicking it,’ and time had merely operated to enhance the role of gender in constructing these encounters as a form of intimacy.

‘Walking:’ Performing the Ethnographic ‘Go-along’

At various times during my practice of ethnography, I walked the linear market with male vendors and artists, often at the suggestion of the men themselves. On one hand, personal information flowed during ‘walks,’ as men discussed their histories, some problems they faced, and the good and bad of daily life. ‘Walks’ also provided an interesting glimpse into the social networks that overlaid the linear space. By walking with individuals I saw their relationships unfold, their knowledge and interpretation of the space, and their interactions with different areas and individuals. ‘He runs this block,’ I learned from one vendor. ‘I like it up here because there is more art,’ another vendor stated as we walked north. ‘We don’t have the drama they have down there,’ one vendor said. As a result, I found that walks acted as a brief ethnographic ‘go-along’ (Kusenbach 2003).

Yet there were differences in who suggested and offered to walk, most notably along gender lines. Men often asked me to accompany them on a walk or for permission to join me as I walked. Never did a female vendor ask or make such a request. As I walked with men, they often spoke to individual vendors, saying hello, at times introducing me to people I did not know. Other men often made comments suggesting a romantic undertone to our companionship, like ‘I’d be happy too if I were with a woman.’ Once, while walking with one male vendor, more than three individuals made comments suggestive of our being romantically involved. When I told the man that he should correct these individuals, he told me this would be more difficult than ‘playing along.’ Over time, it became clear to me that ‘walking’ acted as communication of
intimacy between me and my companion, upping the ante by taking the relationship from a stationary space and into motion along the public pathway.

In addition to acting as communication of relationships, ‘walking’ provided empirical data on how individuals spatially constructed intimacy. Early during fieldwork I walked with Kahled, passing the point where the commercial zone of the Venice Boardwalk ends and joins up with a pedestrian and bicycle path in bordering Santa Monica, a wealthy coastal city just to the north. While walking he told me much of his history, difficulties with his family, challenges he experienced in life, and hopes he still had for the future. After almost three years of knowing Kahled, and many similar discussions, he continued to refer to ‘our walk’ as evidence that we had begun a romantic companionship, in addition to whatever research interests I may also be pursuing on the Boardwalk.

In another example, one day I approached a male vendor who I had known for over two years. We exchanged hellos and as I explained that I was walking to clear my head from writing, he asked if he could join. We spoke about regulation and his pending court cases and he even offered to go over the paperwork with me for my research project. At one point we reached what I now realize was a socio-spatial crossroads, the southern boundary of the Boardwalk’s commercial zone where it transforms into a wealthy residential area.

He stopped rather abruptly and asked how far I intended to go. I replied that I had no definite plan. He smirked and tilted his head, ‘Are we trippin’?,’ he asked. I remember being taken by his unfamiliar use of the term ‘trippin,’ so I did not reply, but likely looked confused. He continued without a response, ‘I’ve always wanted to trip with you. I mean, I always thought you were cute.’ Following this he immediately continued his discussion of regulation on the Boardwalk, a
topic I was interested in learning more about. A few minutes later we slowed to a near halt and agreed to turn around. Upon returning to his ‘spot’ he told me that we should go to dinner.

On another occasion almost three years into fieldwork, I was speaking with a male vendor an hour before the official ‘break down’ time when vendors must pack up and leave. I told him I was working on an additional research project and had to go do some interviews. He told me he would pack up and walk that way also. He piled his merchandise in plastic bins, placed the bins and tables on a rolling cart, and rolled his merchandise down the Boardwalk as I walked next to him. I remember feeling the gaze from other male vendors, making me so uncomfortable that I fell back a little bit. As we walked, Randy, my initial contact with whom I had continued to maintain a friendship, began shaking his head. When I asked why, he responded ‘I know I’m not seeing what I’m seeing.’ I asked, ‘what exactly are you seeing?’ He continued to shake his head, repeating ‘I know I’m not seeing what I’m seeing.’ It was quite clear that my walking had been interpreted by Randy as a ‘practice of intimacy,’ but in addition, my companion later told me that by falling back to respond to Randy’s comment, I had communicated personal shame at being perceived as romantically involved and had therefore been disrespectful. Walking takes on particular meanings in this linear space. As men and women walk the promenade, relationships are communicated to individuals and can therefore be defined and protected by those working along the Boardwalk.

The social significance of walking also emerged when Kahled, who had by then made clear that he viewed our time together as both research and companionship, discussed my relationship with another man outside of the Boardwalk community. Kahled said that I had ‘been seen’ with another man along the boardwalk, and warned that my walking with this man near his ‘turf’ would be a public disrespect, signaling that I was ‘cheating’ on him. When I retorted that this
was ‘incorrect,’ Kahled noted that this detail was inconsequential. After all, Kahled informed me, that whether I liked it or not, people on the Boardwalk had been calling me his ‘baby mama,’ and ‘rooting for us’ because they ‘liked a happy ending.’ Kahled therefore demanded that I ‘keep my boyfriend on the south end’ of the Boardwalk, a point where the space shifts from a public marketplace into a recreation area. When I refused, Kahled was faced with a decision on how to reformulate our narrative to be compatible with the existing social dynamic. Initially, Kahled reframed my public behavior as promiscuity. Enraged, he said that he would spread the word about my sexual availability, warning me that while I may get some ‘takers,’ ‘what doesn’t kill you will make you stronger.’ He told me bluntly, ‘It’s time for you to get your Venice hoe stamp!’

Days later Kahled opted for another strategy, reframing our narrative so my public presence with other men would not be viewed as disrespect, but the result of Kahled’s own actions. He assured me he did not ‘smut my name’ on Boardwalk, but rather had communicated to other men that he himself had ‘messed up’ our relationship. In this move Kahled not only reconstructed me as the victim, but also reframed my practice of walking with other men, not as disrespect or promiscuity, but as a woman reluctantly ‘moving on.’ Not only did ‘walking’ construct and communicate intimacy, but the surveillance of women as they walk provided a way to protect and police that intimacy. Such a process is highly consequential for the way women move and interact in the space. Only by getting ‘wrapped up’ in the social dynamics of the Boardwalk, as I moved about the space and interacted over time, did I learn the power of such a social dynamic.

COMING TO SEE SITUATED SOCIAL DYNAMICS

Through my own embodied practice of ethnography, hollering, kicking it, and walking, emerged as three distinct but interrelated ‘practices of intimacy.’ My personal attempt to frame
initial contact with male vendors as research encounters was often interpreted through the lens of my being a woman who had chosen to physically approach and engage in conversation. Long work hours and physical attachment to one’s space, set up a context in which the stationary nature of those working contrasted with the ongoing mobility of visitors. My own mobility and interest in building relationships with male vendors and artists had led me to approach men in their own ‘private’ spaces, constructing me as a female ‘visitor’ and potential intimate companion. I thus experienced the way in which ongoing physical proximity established intimacy between men and women on the Boardwalk, and how men, in turn, protected that intimacy among ‘insiders.’ Over time, my ‘association’ with certain men influenced my ability to develop additional relationships and my growing awareness of this powerful gender dynamic shaped the way in which I would move through the space and interact.

As I spent prolonged time with men, I came to see that my own behavior could not be disentangled from a process of ‘kicking it’ with male vendors, since performing research did in fact play out as companionship. My belief that my ‘researcher identity’ would shield me from being constructed as a potential romantic partner emerged as quite naïve, as did my subsequent attempt to adopt a ‘taken’ identity through partnership with a man outside of the community. Prolonged time in the space did not diminish my potential as a romantic partner, but fostered the development of multiple identities, constructing me as both a ‘female researcher’ and a ‘female companion.’ As a woman, the time spent with men in their own ‘private’ space, talking, sharing stories, self-disclosing, acted to build a ‘subjective sense of closeness’ (Jamieson 2011: para 2.1) where the research encounter itself became a practice of intimacy.

Better understanding the long hours spent sitting in one’s space, often alone, I came to see the luxury of small breaks as much appreciated moments of freedom. This freedom was supported
by the reciprocal support of adjacent vendors, who will often ‘keep an eye out’ to ensure the
safety of belongings, children, or vouch for each other if a police officer questions their
whereabouts. To ‘take a walk’ is therefore a decision that alerts, as it activates, nearby support
networks. Along the pathway, walking acted as a way to introduce others to a new
companionship, marking individuals as an intimate pair. In addition, through interactions in
which my own behavior and presence came under surveillance, it became clear that breaches of
‘doing intimacy’ within the community would be noted and communicated. Walking therefore
illuminated the way in which individuals not only spatially *constructed* intimacy along the
Boardwalk but also spatially *protected* intimacy along the Boardwalk, differentially influencing
the way in which men and women, visitors and workers, moved about, experienced the space,
and interacted with one another.

As my ‘practice of ethnography’ *became* a ‘practice of intimacy’ I came to feel greater
constraint in my movements and interactions over time, a process that further delineated for me
the experience of women working in this public space. One day I ran into Katie, a vendor and
single mother in her late 30s, on a side street just *off* the Boardwalk. By this time, Katie knew
that Kahled and I had a strained relationship, and she told me that being seen with me would be
problematic, since it could implicate her in the ‘drama’. As we spoke she looked west towards
the Boardwalk, ‘They’re probably watching right now,’ she said, ‘they’re always watching.’ I
reflected back on Katie’s rather insular disposition during my fieldwork, which for years I took
as a sign of being unfriendly or uninterested in participating in research. In this conversation,
however, I learned that much of Katie’s demeanor had developed as a tactic to navigate intimacy
in this public space. She told me in reference to men on the Boardwalk, ‘I don’t talk to anybody
first.’ ‘If they talk to me, I’ll respond, but this way nobody can say it was me.’
Though Katie had opted for a rather insular disposition, others opted for close association with
men, setting up side-by-side with ‘husbands’ or ‘boyfriends.’ Caroline told me that she had ‘put in
her time’ to secure her continued access to the Boardwalk. The comment included a gesture to the
man adjacent to her as she added the qualification that she had ‘dated Mark’ for four years, so she
‘deserved to be here.’ ‘Now,’ she told me as she gestured to the male vendor on her other side, she
was with Freddy. Being cued into the interactional and spatial experience of gender I saw the choice
of many women working here, isolation or association. The seemingly simple way in which intimacy
played out on the Boardwalk is therefore highly consequential, as it differentially influences the way
different ‘types’ of men and women use and experience the public setting.

CONCLUSION

Reflexive accounts of ethnographic fieldwork have made clear that exactly who we are as
researchers matters (Belur 2014; DeVault 1999; Scott et al. 2012). Gender continues to influence the
way in which research unfolds and the kind of data we collect (Soyer 2013; Walby 2010), but just
how this gendering process unfolds will always differ by situation, context, and setting (Grenz 2005;
Mazzei and O’Brien 2009; Roberts and Sanders 2005; Sallee and Harris III 2011). The practices
ethnographers often take for granted, collecting data as they sit, stand, walk, talk, and listen, can be
highly consequential as they play out within particularly gendered public terrains. In a public field
setting interactions are visible and contingent, ‘drama’ travels, and interpretations are ongoing. As
Moreno (1995: 186) states: ‘In the field the false division between time and space between the
“professional” and the “private” that underpins the supposedly “genderneutral” identity of the
anthropologist collapses completely.’ Paying greater attention to the role of space and time in
shaping the way gender emerges and gains significance, these findings add complexity and nuance to
the way in which qualitative research becomes, as it also reveals, a practice of intimacy.
As Marks (1994: 846) noted, people construct intimacy outside of the ‘home’ by differentiating the settings that comprise the ‘public world’ into ‘segregated, private niches.’ Shaped by the linearity of the space, the physical requirements of the job, and the ongoing mobility and transience of those visiting, ‘hollering,’ ‘kicking it,’ and ‘walking,’ emerge to construct, experience, and protect intimacy in a public space. For individuals largely living their lives in this chaotic public setting, these three seemingly simple practices become highly consequential as they spatially and interactionally carve out private intimacy and differentially shape the experience of public space for different men and women. By following the ‘ethnography’ into the ‘discovery’ I therefore illustrate how multiple *gendering processes* unfold and become interrelated in space and over time.
REFERENCES


CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

This dissertation project has drawn on over four years of ethnographic data along the Venice Beach Boardwalk to expose the social life of an informal workplace. Global economic forces that draw low-skilled immigrants to cities like Los Angeles, leave many without work in the formal economy and turning instead to make a living selling goods in public spaces (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009; Rosales 2013). Deinstitutionalization and lagging services for veterans leaves a number of people with mental health problems on the street, unable to locate proper care or opportunities for work. Homeless populations are left with few options for survival, often legislated out of public spaces and into shelters and rehabilitative programs (Stuart 2014). A paltry minimum wage, a dearth of affordable child care, and strict scheduling leads many single parents without viable options in the formal economy and a recent economic recession leaves even more unemployed and underemployed.

With no formal registration process, credentialing, or required contract to work along the Boardwalk, the space provides an opportunity for people to earn income outside the confines of formal employment. Each day the space becomes a meeting point for African, Black Caribbean, Asian, and Latin American immigrants, as well as Black, White, Latino, and Asian Americans, many of whom differ in their routes to participation, long-term goals, and attachments to the place itself. The presence of homelessness, transience, drug and alcohol use, mental health problems, inconsistent regulation, and discretionary policing also constructs an ongoing potential for instability and leads to perceptions of suspicion and opportunism. Beyond a general Los Angeles Police Department presence, there is no visibly active organization distributing limited resources, managing conflict, or providing sanctions. As a result, the Boardwalk has offered an
ideal site from which to study the way people together navigate and negotiate the opportunities and limitations of working in a public space. Here, single parents, people unemployed or underemployed, immigrants, people with mental health problems, and people with dependency issues survive each day. As they do, these marginalized entrepreneurs turn an otherwise everyday pathway into a place from which to make a living and from which to live their lives.

This dissertation laid out four distinct but interrelated studies, each contributing to what we know about how marginal social groups eke out a stable living and form everyday community in public space. The first study – Chapter Two – explored the participatory nature of public space regulation, shifting the way we link regulation to democratic participation by demonstrating the way people co-construct regulation in daily life. The second study – Chapter Three – located a process of building, maintaining, and protecting trust in everyday interaction to expose the particular interactional work that trust does to manage workplace needs. I showed how trust emerged as a mechanism to protect against theft, ensure access, provide job security, offering ‘sick leave,’ provide protection from policing and law enforcement, and construct ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders.’ Chapter Four presented three ways of ‘working’ and ‘intoxicating’ – taking a break from work, working to intoxicate, and intoxicating out of work – to demonstrate how these different relationships become interrelated in a social ecology of work on the Boardwalk. In the final study – Chapter Five – I drew attention to the way in which workplace interactions are shaped by situated gender dynamics and exposed the way ‘intimacy’ unfolds in this male-dominated marketplace.

Throughout the dissertation we see how people build relationships and do important work for one another. We see how they form partnerships, work together, share key information to navigate restrictions, and in the process, create opportunities for social and economic stability. I
show how people become accepting of one another, how they negotiate meanings of appropriate behavior, and in the process construct an inclusive space for people otherwise marginalized. Yet, as some strive to break into the Boardwalk economy, we see others protect the access they have worked so hard to gain. As a result, my interactionist approach has exposed the very tensions that make the place vibrant.

Though an extremely diverse set of people work here, I find commonalities. In the face of ongoing suspicion and individualism, I uncover trust. As people drink alcohol, smoke marijuana, and do drugs, I expose the way work is sustained. In a space open and accessible to all, I locate inclusion and exclusion. A site of ongoing conflict and contestation, I unveil both fragility and endurance. We find levity and moments of enjoyment, alongside hardship, poverty, and death. This project has therefore been able to show both how a marketplace emerges each day as well as how a rather unlikely community forms. It is precisely from these interactions that we see the texture of social life unfold in an everyday public space.

This dissertation offers new contributions to existing research on street vending. Typically, analyses of informal vending emphasize networks characterized by homogeneity and co-ethnicity, characteristics that emerge as necessary, or at least highly conducive, to reducing the uncertainty of informal work (see Portes and Zhou 1992; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Portes 1998; Zhou and Lin 2005). Yet, recent scholarship shows that in the past few decades there has been a global expansion of informal sector employment and that much of this employment is opportunity driven and entrepreneurial in nature, leading to increasingly diverse routes to participation and economic goals (Williams and Nadin 2010; Snyder 2004; Cross 1998). Reflective of this change, many of the people working along the Boardwalk do not share in racial or ethnic background, national origin, language, education or skill-set. This sheer diversity has
therefore offered an opportunity to expose the way people build commonalities, navigate opportunities and challenges together, and informally construct boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

Spaces like the Boardwalk, made public through the actions of people working and living here each day, can therefore become important sites of survival for marginal social groups. The ‘publicness’ of a space will be defined by the extent to which individuals actively take space to make it public (Mitchell 2003; Mitchell and Staeheli, 2006; Trouille 2013) and it becomes important to understand the ground level interactions through which this ongoing struggle unfolds (Fraser 1992; Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht 2009). I find that the Boardwalk emerges as a space within which people can design and define their own schedules, access, interaction, and income. For many of those making a living on the Boardwalk, the formal economy does not provide opportunity for survival, and the Boardwalk provides a necessary platform to survive, develop skills, balance work and childcare, build businesses, and in the process, build a vibrant community.

Yet, as a space where many marginal social groups meet, the Boardwalk also risks pushing the limits of control. In February of 2015 I returned home to my Venice apartment to find a six-page pamphlet rolled up in my mailbox. It read “Venice Beach Solutions: An Action Plan for a Safe, Clean, and Vibrant Venice Beach.” In it L.A. City Councilmember Mike Bonin proposes a plan to solve “two big problems – homelessness and crime.” Among the many action plans proposed, Bonin suggests “a strict permit system” for those working along the Boardwalk, referencing highly regulated pedestrian malls like Santa Monica’s Third Street Promenade, as a key model. Though people working here have fought such stringent regulation in the past, it is unclear what the future holds for the social life of the Boardwalk. While new regulation may
‘sweep’ away the poverty, homelessness, and dependency, it also risks taking with it the textured interactions and negotiations that build trust and bind communities.
REFERENCES


