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"Summer is ours too"
The Liminal Beach, Totemic Advertising, and the Visual Politics of Disability
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In the summer of 2022, the Spanish Women's Institute and the country's Ministry of Equality launched a campaign image that seemed, at first encounter, to be doing everything a government equality initiative should aspire to do. Five women on a sun-warmed beach, varying in body size, skin tone, and age, posed with unselfconscious ease. The slogan curves above them in playful script: *El verano también es nuestro*, summer is ours too (fig. 1). The campaign carried an apparently simple message: all women's bodies are beach bodies.
The controversy that followed has been widely framed as a story about image rights. Sian Green-Lord, a British amputee model, discovered her posture reproduced in the illustration and her prosthetic leg erased from it; Nyome Nicholas-Williams, a body-positive model and activist, argued that elements of her image had been incorporated into another woman in the campaign illustration; cancer survivor Juliet FitzPatrick identified a figure she believed was based on her (fig. 2). None of the three had been asked, paid, or credited. Spain's Ministry of Equality's official response that it had commissioned "an illustration without the use of any models" (Simpson) and had not known the women were real people was met with scepticism on the side of the people whose likeness was used. The illustrator apologised and offered to share the fee. At the time, the government apologised to FitzPatrick and to no one else.



Fig. 1: The 'El verano también es nuestro' campaign launched in 2022 by the Women's Institute and the Ministry of Equality of the Spanish government.

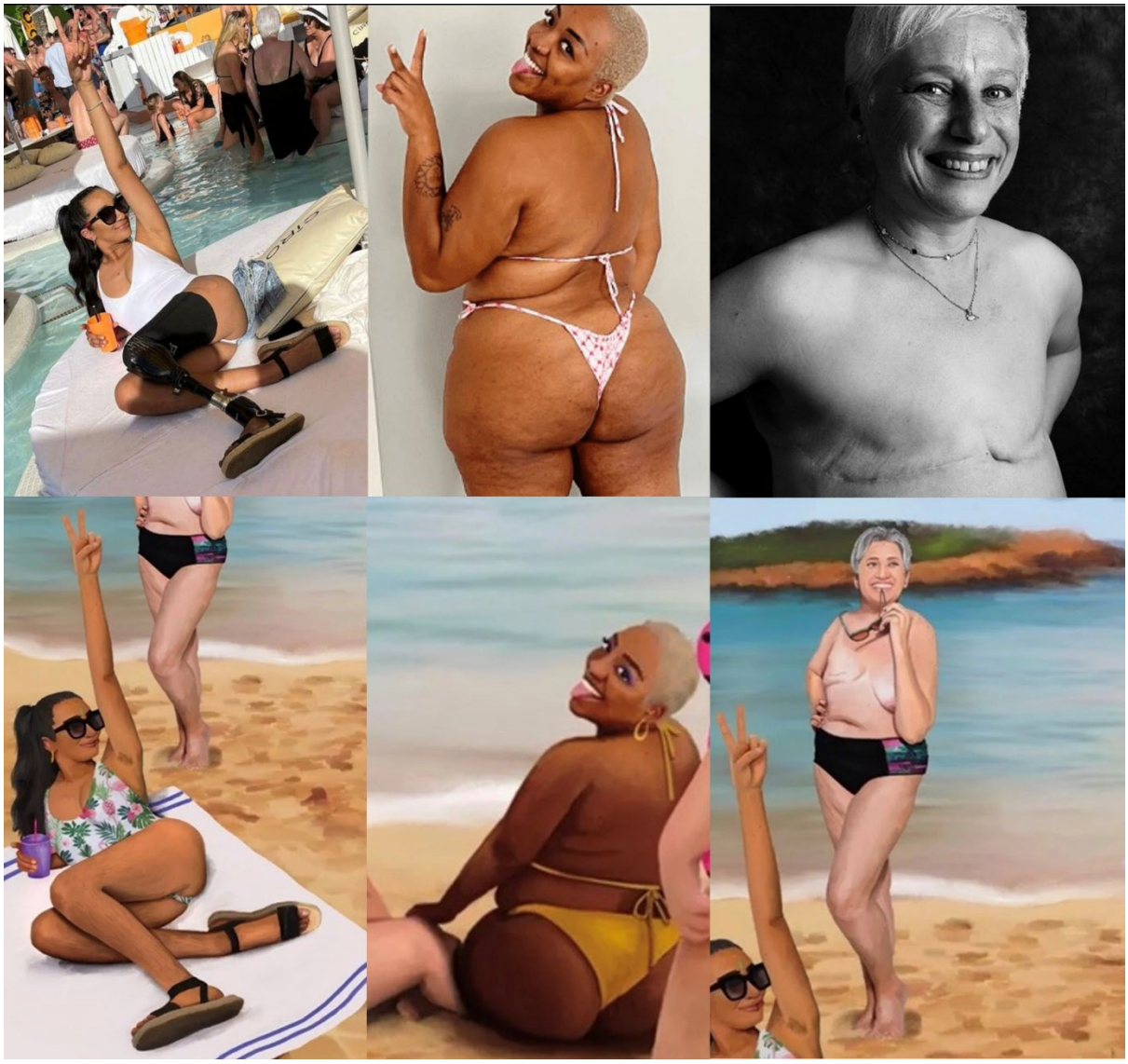


Figure 2: Original photographs associated with Sian Green-Lord (upper left), Nyome Nicholas-Williams (upper middle), and Juliet FitzPatrick (upper right), alongside their apparent incorporation into the 'El verano también es nuestro' campaign illustration. Reproduced here for purposes of critical analysis of the appropriation, alteration, and recombination of these images.

Copyright law describes what rules were broken; however, it does not explain why the campaign failed in the specific ways it did: why the prosthetic leg was erased rather than retained, why real people's bodies were treated as available resources, and why an equality ministry produced an image of inclusion by excluding the actual women whose likenesses it deployed. Existing commentary has reached for frameworks of institutional bad faith, representational adequacy, and image rights compliance, but these leave the structural question untouched. The most substantive scholarly analysis of the case identifies the erasure of Green-Lord's prosthetic as an expression of institutionalised ableism (Otaola Barranquero et al.), a diagnosis that is not in dispute here. What it leaves unexplained is why disability could not be accommodated where other markers of bodily difference remained visible, and why the beach is where this logic played out. Commentary on the cultural meanings of the beach and the visual grammar of consumer advertising has not been brought to bear on this case. This article argues that reading this campaign through all three simultaneously – drawing *inter alia* on Garland-Thomson's work on disability and the visual field, on Fiske, Hodge, and Turner's semiotic reading of the beach, and on Leiss and colleagues' account of

advertising's totemic mode – offers a structural account of the campaign's failures and of why the visual logic it employed made them predictable rather than accidental.
It should be noted that this article reproduces the source images discussed in the controversy in fig. 2 because the analysis depends on identifying the specific visual operations performed on them. Their inclusion is therefore evidentiary rather than illustrative, although that decision necessarily engages some of the same questions of image use and ownership raised by the campaign itself.

The Beach, the Body, and the Totemic Image

To understand why the Women's Institute and the Ministry of Equality placed its figures on a beach, it helps to consider the beach as a cultural choice rather than a neutral backdrop. Fiske, Hodge, and Turner argue in their semiotic reading of Australian popular culture, first published in the late 1980s, that the beach is an ‘anomalous category’, a liminal space occupying the boundary between land and sea and therefore saturated with cultural meanings from both sides: it is "almost 'overloaded' with potential meanings" (60), simultaneously natural and urban, apparently free and heavily regulated, egalitarian in appearance but sharply hierarchical in practice. What makes this relevant here is that the beach is, above all, the cultural space where bodily display is not only permitted but expected. Fiske, Hodge, and Turner state it plainly: "the beach legitimates the display of the body" (63). Placing a body-positive campaign on the beach borrowed this established permission, making the campaign's claim appear self-evident rather than contested; bodily visibility is framed here as healthy and natural.
That claim is, however, far more contested than the beach setting implies. The campaign's visual mode – the way it assembled its figures and organised their meaning – belongs to what Leiss and colleagues identify as the ‘totemic’ mode, in which "product-related images fulfill their totemic potential in becoming emblems for social collectivities, principally by means of their associations with lifestyles" (169). First conceptualised in the mid-1980s, this mode has become a dominant register of institutional image-making well beyond commercial advertising. In it, the depicted persons are not individuals; they are signs assembled to stand for a social group, and crucially "there are no 'causal' connections between the persons and the things represented; rather, the product simply is associated with a highly stylized set of visual images" (154). The *El verano también es nuestro* campaign operates entirely within this logic. The five figures are not presented as individuals with histories but as an emblematic claim for a body-positive collectivity. The beach setting legitimated this emblem by borrowing the beach's established role as a space where bodies are displayed and symbolically organised. "Consumption is meant to be a spectacle, a public enterprise" (Leiss et al. 168), and what the campaign offered as a public enterprise was the image of inclusion; the sign standing in for the practice, the visual claim substituting for the substantive act.
The decision to use illustration rather than photography intensifies this logic. Illustration allows the precise compositional control the totemic mode requires: each figure can be calibrated for maximum emblematic legibility, detached from any direct link to a real photographic subject. But the figures were not invented. The illustrator worked from real source images, sourcing bodies from the social media presence of women who had built their public visibility through deliberate, politically motivated effort. The dynamic Stallybrass and White identify in their analysis of how dominant culture relates to its social margins fits this: they argue that "the low-Other is despised and denied at the level of political organisation and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture" (5). Body-positive and disability activism occupies exactly this position: its work of making non-normative bodies visible in public space is what makes those bodies culturally legible as signs of diversity. The institution reaches for that legibility without the labour, the politics or the people who produced it. Fiske, Hodge, and Turner make the same observation about surfing's absorption into bank and beverages advertising: the culture industry's conventional meanings "not only deradicalise it, but use its potential radicalism ... to support the central institutions and meaning systems of the culture. Its meaning is colonised into

the service of those who should be most threatened by it" (71). The *El verano también es nuestro* campaign is this colonisation, carried out on the beach that body-positive activism had been claiming as its own.

The Normate, the Emblem, and the Erasure

The erasure of Green-Lord's prosthetic leg raises a question the analysis so far does not yet fully answer: why this element, and not others? The answer requires attending to how disability functions in the visual field. As McRuer argues, able-bodiedness often "masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things" (19), making its assumptions difficult to perceive because they appear self-evident. Garland-Thomson's concept of the ‘normate’ provides a way of understanding how that apparent naturalness is organised visually: it is the idealised, unmarked figure of bodily normalcy that shapes what visual culture expects and produces as its default reference. The normate is not a real body; it is the visual convention of a body that does not interrupt the expected field of sight. What matters for the *El verano también es nuestro* campaign is what happens when a body deviates from the normate: it generates staring, which Garland-Thomson describes as "an ocular response to what we don't expect to see" (3), and which functions in public visual culture as a form of stigma assignment, designating those whose bodies "cannot be readily absorbed into the visual status quo" (44). A prosthetic leg in an affirmative government beach campaign cannot be readily absorbed, but that alone does not explain the selectivity of the erasure, particularly given that another figure in the image displays a visible post-mastectomy body. Whether that figure was derived from a particular source image matters less here than the fact that the campaign retained this bodily marker while removing the prosthetic.

The campaign's own framing is instructive here. The illustrator described it as created "as a response to fatphobia, hatred and the questioning of non-normative bodies" (Middleton), a framing drawn explicitly from the vocabulary of body-positive culture, which has developed over the preceding decade a substantial visual lexicon for the post-mastectomy body. Survival photography, post-surgery fashion campaigns, and social media activism have made the mastectomy scar legible within the body-positive register the campaign was deploying. Foster and Pettinicchio, in their analysis of disability representation in commercial fashion, describe this kind of selective normalisation as ‘naïve integration’: disability is increasingly present in promotional imagery, but typically on condition that the most obvious disability markers are retouched so that the representation remains within "industry standards and with what consumers are thought to be most comfortable (with)" (582). The mastectomy scar had undergone this cultural absorption; the prosthetic had not. But there is a further and more structural distinction. The prosthetic leg is a technological artefact attached to the body, and this makes it specifically dissonant with the beach's own cultural logic. Fiske, Hodge, and Turner describe the beach as a space where undress signals the shedding of culture in favour of nature. A mastectomy scar is part of the body itself and fits within the register of naturalised bodily display. A prosthetic leg brings culture back onto the body in a space whose whole visual logic is the movement away from it. Where the scar, within the body-positive register, generates a form of recognition the affirmative image can sustain, the prosthetic generates what Garland-Thomson identifies as the cognitive dissonance provoked by "the sight of a radically unusual body" (166); a form of looking that resists the image's intended mood and cannot be resolved within it.

The totemic mode Leiss et al. describe requires smooth, legible emblems that communicate their social meaning instantly. The normate is, in effect, the visual standard to which the emblem must approximate: a body legible as body-positive without generating the specific, uncomfortable form of visual attention that disability introduces. Green-Lord's prosthetic made her body too individual and too visibly marked to function cleanly as an emblem component. Including it would have disrupted the image's instantaneous readability and introduced a visual complexity the totemic mode cannot accommodate. This is not primarily about the illustrator's attitudes, though attitudes matter, but

about what the image was structurally required to be. Stallybrass and White's formulation captures this: Green-Lord's body was simultaneously "instrumentally constitutive" of the campaign's inclusive imagery and "despised and denied at the level of political organisation" (5); her disability was erased so that her body could serve as an emblem of the bodily inclusion she was being denied.

In an interview, Green-Lord described her frustration: "it's one thing using my image without my permission, but it's another thing editing my body, my body with my prosthetic leg" (Middleton). She is naming two violations, not one: the appropriation of her likeness and the alteration of her body. It is the second that reveals the campaign's logic most clearly. She had been used to represent acceptance for bodily difference while the element most visibly marking her body as different from the normate was quietly removed. The inclusion on offer required her to be, in a precise and specific sense, less disabled. What happened to Green-Lord's prosthetic is the campaign's failure at its most precise.

The Extraction and the Refusal

The conditions of the image's making are as revealing as its content, but they raise a different question: not what the visual logic required, but why the institution felt entitled to the labour it took. Both Green-Lord and Nicholas-Williams had built their public profiles through the deliberate and politically motivated act of making non-normative or disabled bodies visible in a visual culture that routinely marginalised them. That labour of self-making-visible, posting images and building an audience, and claiming public space at real personal cost, produced the photographs the illustrator found and used. Within the totemic framework, the severing of the depicted body from the person behind it is a structural requirement rather than an incidental choice: it places bodies "in an indeterminate relation to the personal activities, interactions, and self-transformations associated with them" (Leiss et al. 153). In this mode, the connection between a body and the political history that made it culturally legible is designed to be severable. An institution reaching for activist imagery does not need, and in the totemic logic does not see, the political work that made the imagery meaningful. It sees available signs. Stallybrass and White's description of the dominant culture's relationship to the low-Other explains why this felt natural rather than transgressive: the marginalised body is expected to be instrumentally constitutive of dominant culture's self-image, and the idea that it might resist this instrumentalisation is genuinely surprising within the logic that produced the campaign. Nicholas-Williams's treatment illustrates the point particularly clearly. The campaign incorporated elements of her image into a new emblematic composition, treating the cultural visibility she had produced through years of labour as a resource available for institutional reuse.

Nicholas-Williams's words locate the specific injury: the campaign "could have been great if they invited us to Spain, did the photoshoot and paid us", but instead the illustrator "put my head on someone else and erase[d] Sian's leg" (Simpson). She is not making a copyright argument. She is naming the difference between inclusion as participation and inclusion as extraction: between being a subject in the making of an image, with agency over its content and compensation for the contribution, and being a source for it, mined for the cultural legibility that one's own labour created and then set aside. The government's defence that it had not known the women were real people is revealing specifically in its sincerity. The institution genuinely expected to find bodies functioning as available signs, detached from the individuals who inhabited them. That the signs had owners, histories, and legal claims was, within the totemic logic the campaign deployed, an unexpected complication.

What the campaign could not anticipate was the refusal introduced by those wronged coming forward publicly, naming the extraction, and demanding accountability. Their refusal to remain inside the emblem has the structure Fiske, Hodge, and Turner describe in the surfer who declines to be domesticated by the culture industry: the figure whose oppositional meaning is supposed to be absorbed and neutralised, but who steps outside the absorption. The beach, that liminal space

where the contest between bodily self-determination and institutional control is perpetually replayed, is the right site for refusal too. When Green-Lord refuted the official statement by Spain's Ministry of Equality, saying she was "not buying it, not at all" (Simpson), she was rejecting not only the government's explanation but the original claim the campaign made on her behalf: that this summer, this shore, this image of belonging was hers. The conditions of the image's making had already contradicted that claim.

Conclusion

The *El verano también es nuestro* campaign failed in ways that image rights law cannot account for. Existing research has identified the erasure of Green-Lord's prosthetic as institutionalised ableism (Otaola Barranquero et al.), and that diagnosis stands. What it does not explain is the structural mechanism: why disability specifically could not be accommodated where other markers of bodily difference were retained, and why the beach was the setting in which this logic became visible.
This article has argued that the campaign's failure was not incidental to its visual logic but produced by it. The same representational system that assembled an image of inclusion transformed bodies into resources for appropriation, alteration, and recombination. The result is a structural incompatibility between the totemic visual mode and genuine inclusion: a system that depends upon bodies as emblematic resources struggles to accommodate the people who inhabit them.
That incompatibility has implications that reach beyond this particular campaign. The totemic mode is not a feature of one poorly designed advertising image, but it is the default visual language that institutions reach for when they want to produce diversity communication. The logic Leiss and colleagues trace from consumer advertising has migrated into governmental, corporate, and civic image-making at scale. If this article's analysis holds, much of the diversity imagery that has proliferated across institutional communication over the past decade is structured to produce the same exclusions it claims to contest; not through malice but through the structural requirements of a visual mode premised on bodies as severable from the people who inhabit them. While the *El verano también es nuestro* campaign is unusually visible, the structure it revealed is not unusual at all. The question this leaves open is whether institutional diversity communication can operate through a visual logic other than the totemic; a mode in which consent and credit are not complications but conditions of the image itself. Nicholas-Williams gestured at what that would look like: invite us, do the photoshoot, pay us. What she described is not simply fairer practice but a fundamentally different relationship to the body as image, one in which inclusion begins before the image is made, because the image cannot do the work of inclusion if the conditions of its making have already enacted exclusion.
While this article has focussed on disability because the campaign's most consequential visual alteration concerned the removal of Green-Lord's prosthetic, other dimensions of the image remain open to investigation. Race, in particular, may reward closer attention. Once the prosthetic is removed, the disability marker that distinguished Green-Lord within the campaign disappears, raising questions about how racial difference functions within an image otherwise organised around visible forms of bodily diversity. Such an analysis would require a different framework from the one developed here, but it may offer additional insight into how inclusion, visibility, and belonging were structured within the image.

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