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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

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Mine Ucok Hughes, California State University Los Angeles, USA

Rossen Ventzislavov, Woodbury University, USA

Tony Stovall, Towson University, USA

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Mine Üçok Hughes, California State University Los Angeles, USA

Tony Stovall, Towson University, USA

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INTRODUCTION

O’Henry famously quipped that New York would have made a great city if they finished it. This observation is meant as an exaggeration but it also registers an important truth—cities are works-in-progress. The question of a city’s identity is ultimately one about people—the locals who shape the outlook of a place and the visitors who try to decipher or contest this outlook. In terms of the human factor, however, cities present a modern paradox—they facilitate both quiet anonymity and stark individuality. Ever since the Parisian *flâneur* of the nineteenth century this paradox has driven our perception of our cities and of our own selves. The study of residents’ relation to, valuation of, and identity with the city tends to be rooted in the disciplines of environmental psychology (i.e. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996; Lewicka 2008) and geography (i.e. Molotch 1976; Harvey 1989), while the field of marketing tends to approach the consumption of the city from an overly-general, value-based perspective exercise in place (Rainisto 2003) or destination marketing (Goss 1993) or from a very specific perspective such as an examination of public goods like street art (Visconti, et. al. 2010). Because the various types of value – product value (Sweeney and Souter 2001), service value (Vargo, Maglio and Akaka 2008), and experiential value (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) – can all apply to varying degrees to the city, we situate our study in the realm of consumer culture and propose, that the city, itself, is an object to be consumed.

In this interdisciplinary study drawing from philosophy, geography, environmental psychology, anthropology, and consumer research, we explore the various narratives which make social, cultural, economic and political change intelligible to us, that account for the dynamic personality of a city. The city is not a person, but it lends itself to articulations of personhood similar to those that apply to any urban dweller. Our life stories are thus not merely responsive to the city’s symbolic identity but are also in equal measure constitutive of it.

We look at the relationship between two types of narratives which we label as dominant and emergent and explore the tensions that underpin the confluence of these narratives for city dwellers. Cities invariably give rise to dominant narratives, which include the historical records, urban legends and major branding campaigns. Conversely, cities also inspire and facilitate emergent narratives—stories that capture the personal, the particular and the idiosyncratic, but find resonance beyond the private individual.

In this brief treatment of our thesis we structure our paper as follows: We first introduce the concepts of dominant and emergent narratives and how they clash within the context of the city as a consumed entity. We chose to examine the ways in which food is used as a system of communication to expound on the way narrative modes of thinking and expression contribute to the identity of the city. Los Angeles serves as the context to understand how dominant narratives and emergent ones shape our conceptual understanding of the city. We focus on a particular form of cultural engagement - a series of thematic dining events titled *Los Angeles Eats Itself* (LAEI). LAEI, in particular, is a pertinent example of the productive tension between dominant narratives and emergent ones. We explore this tension through the dinner series that recreates and re-consumes notorious events that shape the narratives of Los Angeles. The real Los Angeles is a notion whose validity hangs in the balance between the two

extremes -- a negotiation between competing narratives, in which the dominant and the emergent narratives conspire to respond to the dynamic nature of the city.

DOMINANT AND EMERGENT NARRATIVES

It is our desire to grasp the city in its totality that accounts for what we have identified as dominant narratives. The city’s identity is, on Certeau’s (1984) reading, not the sum total of such dominant stories. Instead, it is a function of the interplay between them and what we have identified as emergent narratives. We understand the latter as stories of real human lives that implicate the city as a character.

The dominant narrative is defined as a top-down imposition of city branding from historians, politicians, corporations, advertising and marketing professionals. We suggest examples of qualifiers meant to elucidate both the origin of this type of narrative (marketing, branding) and its essential character (overarching, organized, homogenous, dogmatic, totalizing). While the emergent identity represents the unregulated agglomeration of micro-narratives that find resonance upon the symbolic urban fabric. The following qualifying terms are examples that capture how emergent narratives are formed (individually, spontaneously, arbitrarily, authentically) and what challenges they present for the dominant narrative of the city (irrelevance, subversiveness, fluidity).

In the case of Los Angeles, branding labels such as “The City of Angels,” “Tinseltown” and “La La Land” represent aspects of so-called dominant narratives. The reason Los Angeles makes a perfect study subject is that it does not cater to dominant narratives as readily as the average global metropolis. While cities like New York and Paris have built strong brands that lend themselves to immediate articulation and recognition, Los Angeles challenges its visitors by defying the preconceptions they seek to confirm. But this challenge is equally present for Los Angeles residents because they often mythologize the parts of the city they do not frequent. In this sense everyone in Los Angeles is a visitor. The effect this has is that the city amplifies the two contradictory conditions that the nineteenth century *flâneur* was trying to enjoy at the same time—it oscillates between the extreme existential anonymity of the sprawl and the radical individualization of the spotlight. The middle ground that exists between the two is the narrative function of identity. We approach Los Angeles as a city-making toolkit—a story each one of us, visitor and resident alike, pieces together to ever more idiosyncratic specifications.

The convergence of these two types of narratives creates what we term *negotiated identity*. This occupies the shared space of the previous two--a contested ground whose boundaries are perpetually redrawn. In the tension between artificial order (dominant narrative) and organic chaos (emergent narratives) there exists a conceptual space, which we qualify as liminal, collaborative, dynamic, transitional, mediated, and relational. And while both extremes--the dominant and the emergent--are real and ever present in our reading of the city, it is this middle negotiated ground that represents the urban reality that informs our judgments and actions.

CONSUMING THE CITY THROUGH CULINARY ADVENTURES

The physical aspect of cities is just as inconstant as that of humans. When we think of cities it is not of statistics or infrastructural

agglomerations that supply our operational concepts. Instead, it is certain events, people and places that command disproportionately important status in the urban imagination. The sanction of what is remembered and what is conscripted to oblivion is a function of the city's narrative arc. For Baudelaire, the city is a spectral accumulation of "glorious perspectives, only increased by the thought of all the drama they contain" (as cited in Benjamin 1999, 231). This is in agreement with Hughes' (1964) insistence on the vital role partially arbitrary abstractions play in the composition of historical narratives. Each event, place and person that lends itself to such arbitrary abstraction, to the multiple perspectives of multiple beholders and storytellers, gains entry into the symbolic identity of the city. The unique trajectories we travel along—commutes, diversions, explorations—are not derived from the city's identity but are, rather, constitutive of it.

The construct of place encompasses three components: geography, available activities, and the cultivated meanings its residents give to the city (Gustafson 2001). The identity of each place/city is unique, and is created in consort with both official narratives (originating with government entities and marketing firms) and communal ones, both of which are separate from the influence of any one group of residents (Lewicka 2008). Much of the literature on place argues that the way people understand cities is similar to the way they understand brands (Ashworth and Kavaratzis 2009), which suggests that the branding of a city can be similar to that of other goods and services (Freire 2005). Each year, billions of dollars is spent marketing places (cities) as "commodities to be consumed" (Rainisto 2003), and as invigorating, entrepreneurial, alluring and fun, yet safe and distinct (Prytherch 2002). Still, Ashworth and Kavaratzis (2009) have argued that a city is more than simply a product to be marketed—it is also an object to be consumed. Hence, our focus here is not city/place branding/marketing.

Understanding a particular location allows for deeper insights into the specific consumptive behavior of its inhabitants. Freire (2005) argued that a city's residents consume the goods, services, and experiences in and of the city, and these acts of consumption serve as the foundation of belongingness and identification with that city, which ultimately drives its continued consumption. Invariably, place plays a pivotal role in the formation of any negotiated identity (Tigger-Ross and Uzzell 1996). In an urban environment, the highly differentiated consumption spaces often leave residents negotiating multiple identities.

The critical components of a brand—equity, essence and authenticity—are all reliant on the relevant modes of consumption. This is why those who live in and consume the city co-create its identity and culture. Living in a particular city impacts each resident's identity constructions including values and culturally-influenced customs (Aitken and Campelo 2011). Cities inherently create a binary engagement which suggests not only a sense of one's individual place in society, but also of others' place in it (Bourdieu 1984). The extent to which values and customs are disseminated by residents drives the collective understanding of the city's brand for both residents and non-residents (Aitken and Campelo 2011). Although people consume a city through a variety of means -- transit, geographic layout, entertainment choices/venues, festivals, to name but a few, -- food is perhaps the most quotidian. In its many shapes and forms, and cultural/ethnic/racial affiliations, food shapes our relationship to a city. It is a system of communication (Barthes (1961) 1997; Douglas, 1991) in which the relations between the members of a social group are reflected. When treated as a code, the message food encodes can be "found in the pattern of social relations being expressed" (Douglas 1991, 249). When treated as a narrative device,

culinary adventure becomes a metaphor for cultural consumption writ large.

Los Angeles Eats Itself is "a dinner series where cuisine and LA noir merge like freeway onramps in a savory digestible history." (<http://losangeleseatsitself.com/about/>). The themes for each dinner "event" are notorious LA moments that "border on the tragic, catastrophic and macabre" (<http://losangeleseatsitself.com/about/>). Our taste of and for Los Angeles is in part a function of these adventures which are centered around some of Los Angeles' most notorious events, like the Black Dahlia murder and the Heidi Fleiss (Hollywood Madam) scandal, and the salacious stories that drive them. "If the narrative of Los Angeles is one of an industry that makes narratives but has no singular story, Los Angeles Eats Itself is an effort to present a range of narratives in a unique and tangible way" (<http://losangeleseatsitself.com/about/>).

The *Los Angeles Eats Itself* project affords a contextualized understanding of the city's negotiated identities. Since the stories around which the dinner series is built are sealed in the formaldehyde of urban legend, their deconstruction through the clash of culinary and artistic visions is truly transformative. All relevant parties—the creators, the artistic and culinary luminaries, and even the intrepid diners—are given the opportunity to reread history from a highly personal viewpoint. The dominant narratives of exploitation, inequality and disaster are confronted by the idiosyncratic personalities and remembrances of everyone involved. It is a scripted clash, but the resultant mythologies are impossible to predict. So are also the new identities Los Angeles assumes as it consumes itself.

CONCLUSION

In exploring the way cities are understood and consumed, scholars operate on a reductive picture of the formation and structure of the city's identity. With the help of philosophy and critical theory we explore a series of unresolved dichotomies that frame our understanding of the city as a disjunction of two types of narrative identity--the dominant and the emergent. Dominant narrative is the centralized top-down image of the city produced over time through marketing, branding, etc. Emergent narrative is the idiosyncratic fabric of individual, bottom-up storytelling that links to and challenges the dominant narrative. While the extant literature accommodates both sides of the dichotomy, the relationship between the two is left unexplored. We propose a third kind--*negotiated identity*--which not only furnishes a novel ground for conceptual analysis, but also captures the realities of how the identity of the city is constructed and, consequently, how the city is consumed. We show that narrativity is as helpful in understanding our consumption of the city as it is in articulating our phenomenological and semiotic engagements with it.

Between the dominance of urban legend and the emergence of personal association we are able to apprehend a middle ground--negotiated narrative identity at its most palpable. Further discussions on the dominant and emergent narrative construct could explore the mechanisms through which negotiated identities enable emergent narratives to become dominant narratives over time, and examine whether dominant narratives are fixed, or dissolve over time through negotiated identities?

While our study has its limitations, one of which is the specific context of Los Angeles and the food theme, we propose that the scope of our thesis reaches far beyond the example of this series of culinary adventures. Our notion of negotiated identity could benefit from intentional application to other cultural contexts such as art, education, sports, or politics.

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