CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

BRANDS AND THEIR SURFEITS

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WHAT FAKE?

From New York's Chinatown to markets in urban China, Indonesian *distros* to the highlands of Guatemala, street bazaars in Chennai to Skopje's main square, "counterfeits" and other objects of questionable provenance populate every nook and cranny of contemporary life. Remixed Nike T-shirts, fake Hollister hoodies, gray-market pharmaceuticals, pirated DVDs, imitation cell phones, knockoff store fronts, and even counterfeit national monuments hover as shadows of the "real" thing, sometimes menacing, sometimes playful in their fakery. But menacing what? Faking and playing with what? A knockoff Hollister hoodie is not a counterfeit of a commodity or of a hoodie. It, too, is a commodity. It, too, is a piece of clothing, produced under similar conditions, sometimes even in the same factory as the "authentic" item. What, then, do such "counterfeits" counterfeit? In what follows, I examine the brand, a regime of value that in recent years has increasingly become the basis, around the world, for determining both the "authentic" consumer good and the "counterfeit" version of it.

Brand is a complex notion. At first pass, by *brand* I mean the relationship between a range of materially sensible object-signs (commodities, trademarks, slogans, spokespersons, sponsored events and spaces, etc.) and some imputed virtual commonality, dubbed by marketers as the brand's "image," "essence," or "personality" (Aaker 1991; Feldwick 1999; Gardner and Levy 1955; Manning

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2010; Mazzarella 2003:187–192). This relationship holds when such object-signs, or brand instances, are taken as indexes of, and entrances to, the social imaginaries that the brand's image, essence, or personality affords (Coombe 1998; Manning and Uplisashvili 2007). The brand, then, is a conjunction of the sensuous and the intelligible, a classification of commoditized elements and the immaterial qualities (reputation, affective resonance, characterological traits, etc.) that such material objects are felt to uniquely share and actualize in the world.

It is this brand relation that the "fakes" noted above counterfeit, poach, menace, and play off. The fake Hollister hoodie dissimulates its status as an authorized instance of the Hollister brand, unjustly partaking in Hollister's unique brand aura by infiltrating its classificatory umbrella. From this point of view, there is no counterfeit without the brand. I also suggest the converse: there are no brands without counterfeits, or more precisely, without the brand's *surfeits*. By *surfeit*, I refer to those material forms that, to varying degrees, exceed the brand's authority and legibility: knockoffs, fakes, brand-inspired goods, overruns, defect goods, generics, and the like. By *surfeit*, I also refer to the immaterial excess of social meaning that emerges out of engagements with branded goods ("original" or otherwise) but cannot be fully reduced to the brand concept (at least, not as formulated by marketing discourse or intellectual property law): appropriations, resignifications, parodies, idiosyncratic associations, indifferences and ignorances. As an emerging anthropology of brand and counterfeit has shown, such surfeits depend on and destabilize the brand (Coombe 1998; Halstead 2002; Nakassis 2012; Pang 2008; Sylvanus 2007; Vann 2006). This tension, I argue, is key to understanding the whats and whens of brand.

In what follows, I trace out this "more than" of the brand. I briefly historicize the relationship between brand and commodity form that took shape in the 19th century, showing how under conditions of industrial capital the commodity form already implied an excess of value and social meaning—institutionalized and anchored by the trademark—that although immanent in the commodity was detachable from it. I then show how this surfeit, called today brand image, has in recent years come to the fore of economic practice as a way to navigate a number of shifts associated with neoliberalism. In particular, I focus on how the global reorganization of labor since the 1970s has given rise to forms of speculative capital that, by being increasingly decoupled from commodity manufacture, have necessitated new ways to organize, on the one hand, forms of investment and, on the other hand, the increasingly complex linkages between commodity production and consumption. I focus on the brand as one such principle of organization, exploring its role in the respatialization of labor; the reorientation of the state vis-à-vis the market and the changing role of intellectual property (IP) law therein; and the marketization of forms of other- and self-relationality. My aim is to show how brand surfeits—both material and immaterial—have mediated these different moments and forms of capital.

COMMODITY, BRAND

Writing in *Capital* in the 1860s, Marx dwells on the strangeness of the commodity form. It stands on its own head, he tells us, an inanimate thing that animatedly speaks to us. Not what it seems, the commodity object is more than itself; it is in excess of itself. It is a doubly articulated relation, on the one hand, of an object to its sensuous qualities, and these to some function or need (its use value), and, on the other hand, to other use values with which it is nonidentical, yet substitutable (its exchange value). It conjoins a material, sensuous here-and-now to an immaterial not-here-and-now, suturing that gap by the act of exchange and its manifestation in another material form (its "equivalent"). The commodity exists in a liminal space, caught between itself and what it is not but what it reaches for, what it can become.

In construing that "social hieroglyph," Marx argues, we misattribute this relation as an inherence of essence, an autopoetic value, a fetish that obscures the commodity's relational and social conditions of possibility. Marx notes, therefore, that value "does not have its description branded on its forehead" (1967:167)—at least, not its true description. It has, rather, a mere quantitative value, a paltry caption that in its fetish extinguishes the "sensuous characteristics" (Marx 1967:128) of the commodity's objectual and social form.

I would suggest, however, that the commodity (and its exchange value) has long had a description branded on its forehead—at least since the 1860s when Marx was writing *Capital*. It has its brand branded on its forehead. The commodity form, historically if not by definition, implies an excess of social meaning and value—a brand fetish, we might say now—that always already reaches beyond itself, beyond (but through) exchangeability into another realm of value, the requalified realm of the immaterial: goodwill, reputation, loyalty, and even love. We see this if we take not the relationship between a producer and the product of his labor, as Marx did, but the relationship between a consumer and a commodity.

The mid–19th century saw a number of changes in capitalism that were crucial to the rise of the modern brand in Western Europe and the United States. Technological capacities in both commodity manufacturing and distribution that allowed commodity producers to operate with larger and larger economies of scale made it possible for such producers to constitute, and capitalize on, emergent mass markets (Wilkins 1992). By virtue of their size, such markets were transnational in scope, with sites of consumption located far from the commodity's origin of manufacture or the disciplinary reach of its producers. Such mass markets faced at least two blockages. First, there was the increasing indistinguishability of mass-produced commodities of unknown provenance and quality. Second, the distances between producers of such commodities and their consumers resulted in the rampant counterfeiting and piracy of goods that were recognizable in the market.

As legal historians tell us, it is in these gaps of provenance and meaning that the legally protected trademark emerged in legal and business circles in the 1860s. It was to be a solution to problems of consumer confidence and the inscrutability of the modern commodity form (Bently 2008; Davis 2008; Ginsburg 2008; cf. Johns 2009; Kriegel 2004). The trademark would serve as a guarantee of origin and quality, differentiating otherwise equivalent commodities from one another, as well as differentiating authorized from counterfeit goods (Coombe 1998). Through their legal protection, such "marks of liability" would allow the producer's "reputation" or goodwill to reliably attach to commodities, "rationally" guiding and protecting consumers as they navigated the market, and thereby stabilizing supply and demand. Such marks would encourage competition, now mediated not simply by price but also by producer reputation.

Through its semiotic monopoly, the protected mark branded a description on the forehead of the commodity. This brand was not a description of its exchange value, its use value, or a sociological description of either. Nonetheless, it was a description, a set of directions that linked the commodity in hand to the figure, or "reputation," of its absent producer, purporting to trace the commodity's production history for its would-be consumers. And this image made the commodity all the more valuable, usable, and exchangeable.

The value addition of the 19th-century trademark, then, emerged from its ability to invoke a particular imaginary of fidelity, standardization, quality control, and trustworthy distribution. This imaginary, in effect, attempted to reauthenticate the relationship between a consumer and a producer by making the commodity more than its use and exchange values, even as it purported to more transparently reveal something of them. The trademark stood to decode capital's social hieroglyph. Ideological in the extreme, this imaginary imputed quality to the otherwise quantified commodity, conditioning and augmenting the exchange value of the commodity through its brand fetish or, what amounts to the same thing, its "image."

What this brief discussion shows is that the very origins of the modern commodity produced material and immaterial surfeits—what we now call counterfeits and brand images—and this necessitated, in turn, the requalification of the commodity form, a proleptic projection of some "original" against which particular economic practices and objects could be labeled as "fakery" and "piracy." In this sense the counterfeit preceded and prescinded the brand, a conjuration accomplished through the legally protected trademark. From its emergence, already transnational in scope, trademark law aimed to create and protect commodity classifications that were unique and distinct from all others and that were linked to the responsible figure of their production. By differentiating such classifications from "generic" classifications and from other producers' marks and wares, the mark was, in theory, to create and protect a "commons" within which economic freedom, competition, and consumer rationality could coexist and flourish. And importantly, from which profit could be more efficiently extracted and risk better managed.

One hundred fifty years later, the commodity–brand relation is decidedly more complex. Even by the 1920s, it was recognized that because the trademark could be taken as a surrogate for an absent producer, largely unknowable except through his or her commodity extensions, the trademark was an asset unto itself (Schechter 1927). It stood for itself. More than a representative for a guarantor of quality, the trademark was the guarantor of quality, performatively grounding its own economic and social value by virtue of being recognized in the market and by the law as a mark.

The reflexive awareness of this fact—that the trademark and the brand image it projects and anchors are detachable from its commodity instances, not a mere sign but an object of value itself—ushered in a new era of thinking about consumer markets in the 1980s. As Adam Arvidsson (2006) and Naomi Klein (2000) argue, it signaled a shift toward the centrality of market*ing* and the importance of the brand to it. This involved a reformulation of the social imaginary of capital that the brand and its commodity instances invoked. Today we are told that the brand aspires to be much more than its commodity bodies, its production history, or its producer's double. As put by brand marketers, such as Stephen King, "a product is something that is made in a factory; a brand is something that is bought by a customer" (Aaker 1991:1; see also Klein 2000:456). It is the brand that corporations produce and sell through, just as it happens, commodities. Platonesque in form, brands are seemingly unmoored from this world, "weightless" (Klein 2000:4), preexisting and independent of the commodities and other object-signs that actualize them. But what kind of Form is this brand? In some visions, the brand is a social interactant we have a relationship with, something we cathect affective energy in (Allison 2009), that we are loyal and connected to (Fournier 1998), that we might even come to love (Foster 2005, 2007). In other marketing formulations the brand is a context for community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001), self-fashioning (Agha 2011), or the expression of one's social philosophy (Arvidsson 2006).

Like the productivist imaginary of "reputation," all this, too, is ideology (of a decidedly real and consequential nature, of course). The focus of this brand fetish, however, is crucially different, located not in the commodity or its figuration of its origin or producer, but in the brand's selfsame image, its seemingly independent essence (Coombe 1998:56ff.). This late-20th-century brand fetish, I suggest, reflects and has mediated a number of features linked to what we today call neoliberalism.

BRAND NEOLIBERALISM

Neoliberalism is a term that is notoriously capacious, easily criticized for "its totalizing reach" and "its application to almost everything today" (Allison and Piot 2011:5). My aim here is not to offer a total account of neoliberalism(s), if such a thing were possible (Hoffman et al. 2006; Kingfisher and Maskovsky 2008; Ong 2006; although see Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Gershon 2011; Gowan 1999; Harvey 2005 for useful synoptic discussions). Instead, I want to focus on a number of socioeconomic changes, discussed under the rubric of neoliberalism, in order to outline some of the ways in which the brand and its surfeits have functioned as mediating technologies of and for neoliberalism.

Since the 1970s, post-Keynesian-influenced economic policies have been exported, wholly or partially, across the globe, guiding the actions of both national and international bodies as they have attempted to come to terms with the perceived failures of developmentalism and the (increasingly) frequent crises of capitalism, most notably, the debt crises of the 1980s (McMichael 1996). Conceived as a way to stimulate economic growth in stagnating economies by allowing market rationality to function most efficiently, such policies have strategically deregulated state controls on market activity. In many places, such "reforms" have involved, at the behest or coercion of the International Monetary Fund and other such international trade organizations, reduced trade barriers and taxes on imports, the relaxation on the terms of foreign investment, and the privatization of key nationalized sectors.

Such deregulatory pushes have aimed to make capital more flexible and abstract, this being, as David Harvey suggests (2010:21), a response to the glut of investment capital and decreased returns from commodity manufacturing that resulted from wage repression in developed economies after 1980. This immaterialization of capital and wage suppression followed on the heels of the breakdown of Bretton Woods and the postwar developmentalist paradigm (Gowen 1999; Gregory 1997), culminating in the decoupling of the U.S. dollar from a gold standard in 1971, subsequent "loan binges" by developing states, and the inevitable "debt regimes" and neoliberal structural adjustments that followed in the 1980s and since (McMichael 1996:31–36).

In such globalized markets the increasing intangibility of capital allowed investors and large corporations, generally U.S. and Western European, to generate surplus value through speculation and strategic risk management. As Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee (2005) note, falling profits from industrial manufacture created the need to move (investments in) manufacturing to areas more and more economically marginalized from Euro-American centers of capital. This required new forms of speculative capital (such as financial derivatives), which could offset the risks of "connectivity" that this global reorganization of labor created by, curiously enough, prefiguring and internalizing those risks in order to provide higher returns. Such abstract forms of capital have been ever more (seen to be) detached from actual relations of commodity manufacturing. The point here is that economic globalization has not only involved the increasing immaterialization and mobility of capital, but it has also entailed a semi-independence of, or widened gap between, forms of capital and physical manufacturing (Hardt 1999; Lazzarato 1996). This gap is presupposed by such abstract capital as a condition of its profitability.

The importance and detachability of brand image discussed above should be seen in this context. Although the brand predates these shifts in capitalism, it is precisely since the 1980s that the brand has been more intensively used as a kind of abstracted rentier capital laminated onto a structure of production capital, a site of investment and speculation and a form of value addition that derives profit not *from* its commodity vehicles but *through* them—more precisely, through the ways brand image (and the premiums it extracts) commodify *access* to brand imaginaries (as mediated by moments of purchase) through a continual relationality with, or leasing of, the brand (Frow 2002; Lury 2004). Brand image, in this sense, functions like other financial instruments, attempting to hedge against the risks that emerge from the exteriorities of production—most importantly, fickle consumer tastes, the globalization of commodity manufacture, and price fluctuation—even as it multiplies surplus value. Competition on brand image is, indeed, a way to shift competition away from price—thereby staving off the downward pressures of manufacture cost (and thus profit) which the globalization of labor has entailed—to the unique value addition of brand identity.

This financialization of the brand is not simply an analytic metaphor. It reflects the increased importance of the brand in business practice and the law. The capacity of the brand to function as the site of abstract investment capital has been institutionalized in IP law, which has in recent decades come to police brand image not simply on the mandate to protect against fraud or "consumer confusion" (Davis 2008; Ginsburg 2008) but to protect against the "tarnishment" and "dilution" of the brand (here conceived as a bundle of mental associations), in effect constituting the brand as an alienable form of capital unto itself, so-called brand equity (Coombe 1998:60–66; see Ladas [1975:967] on an early realization of this transition in the law). This legally visible "intangible asset" quantifies brand image, expressing how much brand image contributes to the worth of the corporation that owns it, and this, as a function of how much more can be extracted from commodities because of the brand's recognition and affectivity (Aaker 1991; Lury 2008).

Of particular interest here is how this detachability of brand from commodity has worked in tandem with the respatialization of labor that economic globalization has engendered. While the creative labor of marketers and advertisers to craft the identity and image of global brands like Nike and Diesel largely takes place in First World brand heartlands, the grunt work of manufacture is increasingly relocated to the labor-cheap Third World, to sweatshops and factories in Indonesia (Luvaas this issue), Guatemala (Thomas this issue), India (Nakassis 2012), and China (Pang 2008), among other places. Today companies like Nike are, as Nike's CEO Phil Knight admits (Klein 2000:22), no more than marketing companies for their brands, the manufacture of their commodity vehicles being franchised and outsourced to multiple producers scattered across the globe, a decentralized organization that devolves the risk associated with (increasingly devalued) manufacturing away from IP-owning corporations (Luvaas this issue).

The possibility for such a division of labor has been made possible by the very neoliberal reforms that have gutted labor unions and allowed capital to relocate labor wherever it is cheapest and most unencumbered (Harvey 2005, 2010). But it has also been made possible by the very fact that the variegated and spatially disparate practices involved in producing a commodity—from design to manufacture to marketing—are all contained under the "same" brand identity. The brand makes possible this respatialization by coordinating these complex global processes, even as it obscures them. The brand, then, not only provides the "connectivity" required by the global reorganization of production and consumption, but it attempts to mitigate the risks that this reorganization introduces, as I argue below, by internalizing them.

This remapping of brand and commodity production and the inclusions and exclusions it has engendered has interestingly triggered in many places a reimagination of the nation *as* a brand and the state as its marketers (cf. Özkan and Foster 2005). Even as brand has come to mediate economic exclusion at a global scale, the language of brand increasingly permeates the politics of such exclusions in local and national contexts. Under neoliberal conditions the state is increasingly seen as that institutional body that exists to produce surplus value for the nation, its industries, and its citizens, as they come to collectively compete for international investment capital (Graan this issue; Thomas this issue). The nation must brand itself neoliberal, make itself amenable to capital by accepting structural adjustment, prove its respect for IP laws, and advertise its attractiveness as a site for investment (McMichael 1996). Statecraft not only comes to look like brand marketing, but it takes on its very discourse, employing its techniques and even its personnel (Graan this issue). And in so doing, the brand concept increasingly functions as the measure of the state, its "value" and its legitimacy, its ability to "participate" in the global economy and "develop" itself.

This remediation of politics is possible only given the detachability of brand from commodity, literally and figuratively (such that today, e.g., nations can be talked about *as if* they were like consumer product brands). If nations compete to attract global brands and thereby build up their own nation brand, this is because this neoliberal collusion operates on an ideology in which commodities are reckoned not by their production origins but by the floating brand identities that imbue them with sign value. It is precisely here that much contemporary antineoliberal politics situates itself, attempting to force capital to be "ethical" (Arvidsson 2006; Koh 2010) by unveiling its unfair trade practices and the global inequalities it exploits and engenders (Foster 2007; Klein 2000). Such politics aims to "tarnish" brand image (be it product or nation brand), revealing "the brand-name secrets of the global logo web" (Klein 2000:xviii; cf. Coombe 1998:143–164) to mar the brand, negate its premium, and encourage consumer boycott. Such consumer politics attempt to reattach the brand to its commodity origins, not to negate the brand and provide a return to mere commodity form, but to make ethical commodity manufacturing part of brand image. The intelligibility of this politics presumes on the brand as much as it disavows it, an irony that unwittingly naturalizes the brand even as it seems to resist it.

BRAND, SURFEIT

This brand edifice, as social imaginary and social fact, is troubled by its surfeits. Mirroring the duplex structure of the brand, the surfeit's troubling is also double. On the one hand, the brand form is troubled by the material surfeit, the "counterfeit" that cites, without authority, the brand's image, which intervenes in its just profit flow, siphoning off money from "rightful" IP holders. On the other hand, the brand is troubled by the surfeit of social meaning that is constantly produced by idiosyncratic and contextualized experiences of consumer engagement with brand forms (authorized or otherwise).

Both forms of surfeit are entailed by, and necessary to, the brand even as they problematize it. The movement of brand commodity manufacturing to developing countries that have recently undergone liberalization has created the very infrastructure for the manufacturing and distribution of material surfeits in local markets. Local producers utilize the brand designs and the material debris of outsourced manufacturing (not to mention factory spaces, distribution networks, and retail locales) to cater to local brand desires that are priced out of authorized brand consumption (Luvaas this issue). Surfeits proliferate in those zones where authorized brand commodities are made for export, precisely because of the inequalities of wealth which have driven capital to move manufacturing to such poorer nations in the first place (Nakassis 2012; Thomas this issue). Under such circumstances, novel brands (often authorized by an appeal to IP law) may emerge, created by local producers who bootstrap their own brand production out of their surfeit origins, engendering a complex interplay between surfeit and brand (Luvaas this issue; Thomas this issue).

In addition to the entanglement and disjuncture of brand and surfeit at the level of material manufacturing and circulation, there is also always a disjuncture of meaning and intelligibility between contextualized commodity engagements and the brand images that propel them (Coombe 1998). The brand is never able to legislate its own intelligibility completely. Although goods that seem to index some brand identity are consumed the world over, just as often as not, they are consumed, *not as brands* but as instances of other commodity classifications, with different aesthetics and notions of (in)authenticity and authority (Nakassis 2012; Thomas this issue; Trouillot 2003:126; Vann 2006). There are simply no guarantees that the brand will be seen by various consumer publics as it projects itself, or even as a brand or "counterfeit" at all.

As I have argued, the line between real and fake is not underwritten by the brand, even if the brand fetish projects its stability thus. The brand, rather, is the *effect* of this distinction, the baptismal performative acts that conspire to bring the brand into being situated in the law's (often tenuous) legibility and efficacy. Ultimately, trademark law and the implied potential violence of the state ground this regime of intelligibility, excising and denuding surfeits even as they produce and require them. The law is key here, not simply to draw the line between the unauthorized "counterfeit" and the authorized "real" thing, but also as a technology of governmentality (Graan 2010), as a way to distinguish between "good" and "bad" states (and citizens) and to subject the latter to the oversight of the former (Thomas this issue). Increasingly, IP law and respect for brand authenticity are articulations of neoliberal reform, ways to rehabilitate (or coerce) "failed" and "weak" counterfeit states (i.e., those that cannot abide by the IP norms of the international community) into viable sites for international goodwill, investment, and development. And yet, as we've also seen, the attempt to legislate brand intelligibility produces its own transgressions, undercutting its own moral logics, and thereby provides the very justification for its continual operation. This is precisely because, as noted above, the very inequalities that drive this tandem movement of capital and IP law across the globe continually create their own exteriorities, their own material and immaterial surfeits (Dawdy 2011; Ong 2006). At the heart of the brand is its own tendency toward negation, a fact registered in the aggressiveness of international campaigns to enforce and strengthen IP law around the world so as to socialize the world to brand intelligibility and authority (Pang 2008; Thomas this issue).

But this aggression, and the anxiety of brand fragility that it belies, is not simply about disciplining those who do not recognize the brand's intelligibility and authority. It is the sine qua non of contemporary marketing practice. Although I might point to marketers' fears of consumer "brand blindness" (Klein 2000:12ff.) or "genericide" (Coombe 1998:79–82; Moore 2003), here I am more interested in the ways in which the unruly tendencies of brands to exceed themselves are prefigured in the ideologies that guide contemporary brand design and marketing. As noted, contemporary marketing turns on outsourcing itself to its consumers, reflexively recognizing that brand image ultimately lies in the hands and minds of its consumer publics (Arvidsson 2006; Lury 2004). Brand viability depends on consumers generating social meanings through brand engagements that cannot be reduced to any already existing brand image or identity. And this, precisely so that such "affective labor" (Foster 2007) can be "co-opted" by marketers (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000) to build brand equity and direct future iterations of brand image. The immaterial surfeit of image—consumers' local meanings, idiosyncratic associations, and emotional investments—is the brand's very vitality and profitability. The brand's fragility and openness to novel (re)signification creates surplus value because it makes the brand a possible site, and medium, for sociality and affective attachment.

Within bounds. It is precisely at the moment when such excesses negatively impact the brand's image that such surfeits must be contained, that openness sewn shut. Although Nike, for example, encourages the personalization of its made-to-order sneakers, it will not allow "sweatshop" to be printed on them (Lury 2004:118–121). To "tarnish" the brand's image with such antibrand "associations" (which, again, point not to the brand's image but its dark commodity origins) is to move into illegality, to become akin to those "pirates" who produce material "counterfeits" (Coombe 1998:41–87, 130–65; Jenkins 2006). This is what William Mazzarella (2003:194) calls the brand's "keeping-while-giving," the opening and foreclosure of the brand's tendency toward excess. Hence, the contemporary importance of market research, much of it "brandthropological" (Sherry 2005:40) "thick description" (Fournier 1998:344), informatized consumer feedback (Hardt 1999; Manovich 2008), event sponsorship, branded space (Alexander and Schouten 1998; Moor 2003), trend hunting, and other reflexive marketing practices that attempt to fold the excesses of brand consumption back into the brand design and production (Callon et al. 2002; Lury 2004).

What this shows is that the surfeit is not simply constitutive of the brand through its externalized transgressions (i.e., material "counterfeits") and the risks they pose, but that contemporary brand marketing internalizes that very transgression in order to exploit it. Even in its most canonical form—iconic product brands in brand heartlands as formulated by marketers and protected by the law—the brand comprises its own exteriority, that which it is not but is constantly becoming. This brand logic requires the brand to constantly slip outside of itself, to traffic in risk and threat (and thus speculative possibility), a promiscuity that must be closely monitored by legal and marketing practice. The very neoliberal changes that have reconfigured the social and economic landscape of brand hinterlands, then, are precisely those that are at issue in brand heartlands—the always already detachability of the brand from the commodity, its fetishization, its abstraction as an excess value hovering over and breathing life into the commodities it purports to preexist, and the fragility of this whole enterprise.

COMMODITY, BRAND, SURFEIT

Studying the brand requires trolling its limits, decentering it by foregrounding the ways in which it constantly denatures itself, becoming that which it is not. And this is because it is not at all clear that the exteriorities that brands make possible, and depend on, are always recoupable by the brand concept itself, marketers' (and academics') optimism (and cynicism) notwithstanding. This is not simply a theoretical point. It is an empirical observation, one that escapes marketing theory and other brand discourses that assume the pregiven intelligibility, coherence, and stability of the brand. Once we displace the brand and refuse to privilege its analytic authority, we can start to see the ways in which the dialectic between the brand and surfeit opens up new performative spaces, possibilities, social relations, and material forms that exist in tension with, and beyond, the brand even as they emerge through it. The brand is not, and cannot be, treated as the horizon of commodity intelligibility, social affect, market organization, or anticapitalist political action. It is always already one step beyond and contained within that horizon, a fact which requires an ethnographic sensitivity not simply to those brand formulations articulated through legal and marketing discourse but to creative brand engagements, to acts of appropriation, resignification, negation, and indifference that trouble, and often undo, the very ontology of the brand. In a word, it requires our attention to surfeit.

ABSTRACT

This article approaches the brand from its surfeits, those material forms and immaterial social meanings that exceed its authority and intelligibility. By thinking through "counterfeits" and other unauthorized brand forms, on the one hand, and the novel and often unpredictable social meanings that emerge through moments of brand consumption, on the other hand, I argue that at the heart of the brand is an instability, a tendency toward an excess of meaning and materiality. Showing how brand and surfeit emerge out of the commodity form in late-19th-century consumer markets, the article then demonstrates how in recent decades the brand has mediated, and been mediated by, shifts in the global economy; in particular, I examine the respatialization of labor, the financialization of capital, and the neoliberal economic and legal reforms that have made such shifts possible. I argue that the capacity of the brand to function as a financial instrument of global capital has turned on its ability to both produce and police those surfeits that threaten to decenter it. This tension between brand and surfeit requires us to rethink the study of brands. In particular, any approach to the brand requires ethnographic sensitivity to those moments when the brand displaces itself in ways that enable novel social imaginaries, performative possibilities, and material forms that cannot be easily recouped by it. [brands, counterfeits, trademark, neoliberalism, globalization]

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