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Cultural Anthropology 101

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“Queens is Forever”: Examining the Merits of Place Branding

Growing up in Queens, New York, it's not uncommon to hear that you're living in one of, if not the most ethnically diverse urban areas on the planet. This is a fact that many Queens natives — myself included — take pride in and will gladly display their affection for the borough through various means. Fashion is a prime example of one of these means, and my desire to represent Queens led to my purchase of a peach t-shirt adorned with the slogan “Queens is Forever” from a brand called *Meanwhile Back in Queens*. Designed in Queens, made in Nicaragua, the blend of fabric used in the shirt is 100% ringspun cotton, and the color is slightly mottled to the eye. The t-shirt is straightforward in its focus around the “Queens is Forever” slogan. As the name suggests, the brand is based in Queens, and they use social media to provide insight into the borough by examining its historical, cultural, and social impact both inside and outside of New York City. This marketing style is known as place branding, or a marketing strategy oriented around establishing a specific identity for individuals to associate with a place, a tactic New York City itself has deployed in its “I Heart New York” campaigns for decades. In the case of Queens, this identity is “The World's Borough.” One might assume that using place branding enhances the perception of a place, but common sense seems to dictate that a place's image instead conforms to its characteristics that people value. While place branding certainly has merit in spreading awareness about regions, it's not responsible for the prestige these regions accrue in people's minds. Therefore, Queens can be branded due to its already rich diversity and

status as a vital backbone of New York City's economy; place branding simply captures the aspects of Queens that people have long appreciated before garnering outside attention.

Concerning demographics statistics, Queens is a gleaming bastion of diversity. In a study of 2017 census data by Axios, Queens "claimed the highest rate of racial and ethnic variety of all populous counties in the nation" (New York Post, 2019). Essentially, if you selected any two persons from Queens, the odds of them being from different backgrounds were 76.4%. Conversely, the country had a diversity rating of 57.5%. However, pure variety in ethnic backgrounds alone is just scratching the surface of the idea that Queens is the "World's Borough." It is also the most linguistically diverse urban area on the planet, with at least 138 languages spoken throughout the borough (Koyfman, 2017). "If an ethnically diverse, multinational and multilingual travel experience is what you're after, Queens is your best bet for a deep cultural immersion that's accessible on a domestic travel budget — and worth it for the food alone." In short, the vast array of human cultures that reside within Queens, coupled with their proximity, has created a unique environment in which people get to peruse one another's backgrounds without having to travel all over the world.

One of the universal aspects of culture that brings people together is food, and the plethora of cultures in Queens has created what one could say is a seemingly never-ending world fair of cuisine, in which numerous cultures from all over the world serve their tastes of home on the table. The late food journalist Anthony Bourdain, most known for his work in *Parts Unknown*, a CNN TV show oriented around Bourdain's global exploration of culture and cuisine, visited Queens during his tenure on the show. In that episode, Bourdain highlighted the immense assortment of dishes that one could find in Queens, from Ecuadorian food in Corona to Nigerian food in Jamaica and Korean and Chinese food in Flushing (Dai, 2017). In doing so, Bourdain

brought attention to the immigrants providing meals to the many constituents of Queens, and in his field notes for the episode, he stated:

It's America—when America was still seen and believed to be an idea: a place for people from all over the world to be free, to better their lives, to build a new future. To say such things these days is unpopular. But Queens, I hope, is an argument for the founders' original intent, a place where America still offers the world something of inestimable value: hope—and in return, receives so much (Bourdain, 2017).

By showcasing this harmony between cultures, Bourdain made it known that Queens is a symbol for the ideals on which America was founded, a country created for people to live freely in pursuit of a better life.

The same harmony displayed in *Parts Unknown* can also be found in the annual Queens Night Market, a fair founded and organized by former attorney, John Wang. The Night Market, held at Flushing Meadows - Corona Park — home to the renowned 1939 and 1964 New York World's Fairs — offers food and crafts hailing from more than 80 countries and all five of NYC's boroughs in celebration of diversity (Herrmann, 2019). Most of these vendors, according to Wang, “participate because they want to share a part of themselves, to share their stories with our visitors. Food is a great vehicle for stories and cultural exchange, and that's the whole point of food at the Queens Night Market.” Wang's ideals when he founded the Queens Night Market revolved around that critical component of diverse cultural exchange, and in doing so he created an event that brings people of all backgrounds together, not unlike the World's Fairs of the past. There aren't many places in the world where you can readily gather up people from 80 different backgrounds to serve food, and the Queens Night Market is a critical example of what

differentiates Queens from NYC as a whole; the experiences people have in the borough are unlike any other.

In developing the slogan "Queens is Forever," the people behind *Meanwhile Back in Queens* wanted to capture the borough's significance for its residents. An anonymous brand representative stated that "'Queens is Forever,' is a simple, universal and identifiable phrase. The real beauty behind it is that it can be interpreted personally by every individual that sees it. Every Queens kid has their own experience of the World's Borough and we wanted 'Queens is Forever,' to be that exclamation point when they finish telling their story" (Anonymous, 2021). This common notion that individuals from Queens all have a unique experience reinforces that place branding reflects an existing environment. Organizations cannot engage in place branding without actively implementing policies that improve their reputation, a fact demonstrated during the creation of the "I Heart New York" campaign that has been run for decades.

In chapter 5 of her novel, *Branding New York – How a City in Crisis was Sold to the World*, Miriam Greenberg examines how the wealthy elites of New York made it their mission to establish a new brand image for the city amidst a financial crisis in the 1970s (Greenberg, 134). Their goal was to target middle- and upper-class residents, business travelers, tourists, and corporate executives (Greenberg, 135). However, in their campaign to do so, these elites ran into numerous obstacles, most notably New York's out-of-control crime rate at the time. In the summer of 1975, then-mayor Abe Beame announced a plan to combat the financial crisis, which entailed cutting the contracts of some 50,000 city employees. This move was met with severe backlash by the city workers, and as such, the Committee for Public Safety (CPS), a coalition that consisted of the city's 24 police and fire unions, was created. The CPS used a negative form of place branding to develop a media campaign titled "Welcome to Fear City."

Knowing that they would be laid off from their delegated public safety tasks, the CPS turned around on New York's government and elites. By capitalizing on crime potentially spiraling even further out of control without their forces to patrol the streets, the CPS deterred the same demographics that the wealthy elites were trying to draw into the city. The campaign was incredibly influential in its goal to attract negative media attention towards New York, and a battle between the elites and the city workers ensued, going as far as the State's Supreme Court. As Greenberg puts it, "The speed, scale, and legal reach of the Fear City backlash revealed the extent to which the leadership in New York had become—or felt themselves to be—profoundly dependent upon the city's good reputation as a tourism and business capital, and vulnerable to effective attacks against it" (Greenberg, 139). Ultimately, the number of lay-offs remained the same. However, the distribution of the lay-offs was biased towards poor and working-class districts, intending to protect New York's image in the areas most visible to the outside world (Greenberg, 140). This pivotal moment in New York's history showcases how the characteristics of a region determine the perception of a place in a consumer's mind; place branding necessitates that policymakers can only brand places themselves on their existing merits.

In the article *Why Queens Matters*, the author Steven Malanga extensively details how the borough has held up NYC's economy as a whole for decades as well as its revival from the brink of collapse by its residents. While mass immigration in the early 20th century fostered a vibrant environment in the borough, New York's policymakers disproportionately burdened Queens' economy with an increase in their spending budget. However, in doing so, the policymakers drove the people of Queens into rampant unemployment, crime rates and also shrunk the middle-class due to large portions of the population fleeing the steadily rising chaos. In the aftermath, revival projects led by more than 200 civic associations in Queens took it upon

themselves to manage the borough's evolution. At the time of the article's publishing, due to the efforts of these associations, Queens stood as an economic backbone for New York City:

The number of Queens residents working in Manhattan—a larger contingent than from any of the other three outer boroughs and nearly as large as that from all New York's suburbs combined—is growing, while the other three boroughs' share is declining, as the suburbs, particularly the Jersey suburbs, grab an ever-greater share of Manhattan's jobs. In addition to providing a responsible and dedicated workforce for Manhattan's vital businesses, these residents make an enormous contribution to New York's fiscal health. They pay about \$1.4 billion a year in state and city personal-income taxes, while property owners pay \$2.1 billion in taxes, more than any borough except Manhattan. The borough's high concentration of middle-class families bears much of that burden: 217,000 or so Queens families earning between \$40,000 and \$100,000 a year pay about half of Queens's income taxes. Without them, New York—like so many other cities—would be much more a place of just the rich and the poor, and the burden on the rich to support city services would be even greater than it is now. As a result, ever more of them would leave the city or avoid its high taxes by establishing dual residences elsewhere—which is how cities decline (Malanga, 2004).

Overall, the middle-class families of Queens are one of the vital economic forces that bolster NYC's economy. While Queens today, like the rest of the world, is struggling in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, history shows that its resilient population will eventually overcome the obstacles they are now faced with.

Although discussions around the merits of place branding may seem trivial, they're, in fact, crucial in understanding that towns, cities, states, and nations *earn* their reputation through development. Simon Anholt, an independent policy advisor and founder of the Good Country Index, which measures countries' contribution towards the human race, discusses this in his article, *Definitions of place branding – Working towards a resolution*. He writes the following:

Similarly, good products, services, culture, tourism, investments, technology, education, businesses, people, policies, initiatives, and events produced by a good country also acquire a positive brand image, which eventually reflects on the country, and perhaps also becomes its principal asset. The message is clear: if a country is serious about enhancing its international image, it should concentrate on the national equivalents of 'product development' (and the effective and professional marketing of those 'products') rather than chase after the chimaera of branding (Anholt 2010).

Regardless of the field, consumers will always deviate towards better products. In the same vein, if policymakers worldwide focused on serving their citizens better and providing a better quality of life to them, not only would the reputations of their locale change, but the world would be much better off by virtue of pursuing development.

Places like Queens, where citizens uphold its reputation with such high esteem, are revered due to their contribution to an individual's experience in life. I don the "Queens is Forever" shirt with pride because it carries immense weight behind it. Growing up in the "World's Borough", where people of all backgrounds come together to create beautiful events, share their cultures and stories, and connect as humans, demonstrates that people can live harmoniously regardless of where they're from. As a collective species, we often stop and think

about working together and breaking down the barriers that divide us. Yet, most of us don't realize that the answer often lies right in front of our own eyes, and we need not look further than places like Queens for those solutions.

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