BRANDING THE NATION

The Global Business of National Identity

MELISSA ARONCZYK

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Branding the Nation

"What sort of a country is this," said the one to the other, "that is unknown to all the world, and in which Nature has everywhere so different an appearance to what she has in ours? Possibly this is that part of the globe where everything is right, for there must certainly be some such place."

—Voltaire, *Candide*

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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Depending on how you look at it, this book has taken me ten years, fifteen years, or my entire lifetime to write.

Ten years ago, I met the three people who initially helped me conceive this project and who first gave me the confidence and conviction to write about it: Craig Calhoun, Richard Sennett, and Aurora Wallace. Aurora has represented that figure that every writer needs: a true believer and fan since the very beginning. Her friendship and support, both intellectual and emotional, have been limitless. Richard Sennett has been a great inspiration to many. I am not the first to recognize his uncanny ability to put his finger on the pulse of a social and cultural issue of as-yet unrecognized importance, then to write profoundly about it just as the rest of us are waking to its centrality. His imaginative and provocative style has provided an overture for many generative conversations. Beyond his "day job" as sociologist, Richard's musical passions provided a different kind of inspiration, rekindling my interest in the musical studies I thought I had left behind. Craig Calhoun, as anyone who has encountered him knows, is simply an exceptional individual. It is not merely his seeming ability to be in all places at all times, nor even his encyclopedic habits of mind and troves of insight, but also his innate generosity of time and spirit and his commitment to people far beyond the scope of their projects. I could not be more fortunate, nor could I wield enough superlatives, to acknowledge such mentors.

Fifteen years ago, I began what I thought would be a long career in advertising. In high school I devoured books like David Ogilvy's *Ogilvy on Advertising*, Wally Olins's *The Corporate Personality*, and James Webb Young's *How to Become an Advertising Man* as I pictured my fabulous life in the promotional industries. A few years later, I got my big chance, landing a job in a Montreal ad agency. To those who taught me the craft and the concepts, and who let me find my own interpretation of what it meant to be "creative," I am immensely grateful: Yves Desharnais, Gilles DuSablon, Jennifer Goddard, Marc-André Rivard, and especially Sophie Massé. I hope they know that devoting my career to critical research and writing about promotion

instead of doing it from the trenches is not a slight but in fact a tribute to their work and to my ongoing fascination with this magical and troubling world.

Long before my entrée into advertising, I wanted to be a writer. But I especially wanted to be a writer who had something to say. It is in this sense that I see the trajectory of my life as leading up to this book. And it is in this regard that no number of pages would contain the acknowledgments I would need to make to recognize and honor all the people who helped me get here. A necessarily abridged list follows.

During my time at New York University, many scholars provided wise counsel at critical moments. Stephen Duncombe, Ted Magder, Sue Murray, Marita Sturken, Mildred Schwartz, and Helga Tawil-Souri all offered valuable research and writing perspectives. The NYLON Culture and Politics workshop at NYU gave me that all-important combination of support, critique, and friendship that (as I now stress to my own graduate students) is critical to balance the solitary stages of academic research. Special thanks are owed to Claudio Benzecry, Ashley Mears, Erin O'Connor, and Marion Wrenn, who provided extra help at key moments. Thanks, too, to Noah McClain for the idea for the book cover.

At Carleton University I had the great fortune to work with equally supportive, warm, and witty colleagues. Thanks go to Miranda Brady, Mary Francoli, Josh Greenberg, Chris Russill, and Ira Wagman, as well as Graeme Auld and Sarah Brouillette, who have heard far too much about this book over the last four years. I am also grateful to the department's director, Eileen Saunders, who helped provide the space and time in my schedule to focus on writing the final drafts. I gained immeasurable insights from my Carleton students, and am indebted to them for their willingness to let me explore these ideas and their ability to keep me on my toes.

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Joanna Kurczewska was a fantastic source of insights and inspiration. I also thank Marta Hereźniak for her assistance with the material on Poland.

It would not have been possible to write this book without the insights gained from the dozens of professionals I subjected to interviews. These people generously gave of their time and shared their expertise, opinions, and materials from their work, all of which have contributed to forging my views of the phenomenon of nation branding. Some of them may not agree with the arguments I make in these pages. I hope nevertheless that I have done justice to their insights by recognizing the importance of their ongoing discussions about what this phenomenon is and does in the world.

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Branding the Nation

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Introduction

THERE MUST CERTAINLY BE SOME SUCH PLACE

In July 2011, two months after Syrian president Bashar al-Assad sent tanks into urban centers to crack down on demonstrators against his regime, but before the country's descent into sectarian violence, a series of billboards appeared across the city of Damascus. Each billboard featured a brightly colored outline of an upraised hand against a white background, accompanied by the words "I'm for Syria" in Arabic. The billboards were the brainchild of Ammar Alani and Rami Omran, Syrian advertisers who had shelled out four thousand dollars to pay for them. In many ways the project was just like the branding campaigns they usually worked on for products such as cereal or home mortgages. "The only difference now is that the customer, if you like, is society. The brand is Syria and it needs promoting," they said in an interview with the American media organization National Public Radio.[1] The campaign was meant to bring Syrians together, to promote democratic debate and civic engagement, to counter the polarizing effects of the political situation, and to encourage regime and revolutionaries alike to think differently about what it meant to be Syrian.

About a year earlier, and about three thousand miles due north, Iceland's government launched a media campaign called Inspired by Iceland.[2] Developed by the branding consultancy The Brooklyn Brothers, this campaign was cast as a desperate attempt to improve the country's image in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, when it came to light that Icelanders had accumulated debts worth 850 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP).[3] Using Icelanders as the "stars" of the campaign was seen as a way to raise domestic spirits.[4] It also helped the campaign's goal: to attract more positive international attention by focusing on the country's quirky culture rather than its financial and political reforms.[5] In one video, viewed

thousands of times on YouTube and Vimeo, the tiny nation's white-haired president, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, invites viewers to visit his home so that he and his wife Dorrit can "give you delicious pancakes with cream and sugar, a traditional Icelandic delicacy." Similar invitations follow from the mayor of Reykjavik, who stands awkwardly with his fingers clasped in front of him proffering Icelandic sushi, and from the federal minister of industry, energy, and tourism, who appears in the video sitting on wet rocks at the edge of the sea, encouraging viewers to join her for a foot bath in a geothermic pool at Seltjarnarnes.[6]

On the other side of the globe, as the first waves of the financial crisis roiled news headlines, a seventy-two-page report entitled "Positioning Mauritius in the World" landed on the desks of the Brand Mauritius steering committee. The wealthy African country, dubbed the "Mauritian Miracle" by the World Bank for its open trade policies, low barriers to international investment, and political stability, would largely escape the effects of the economic meltdown.[7] The report—a glossy book filled with photographs of flowers, beaches, mountains, and trees—outlined the rationale and strategy for the Mauritian brand identity. Despite the country's status as a center for international banking and finance; its well-developed infrastructure befitting a premier luxury tourism destination; and a history of consensus-making among diverse cultural, business, and political interests, the report cautioned against complacency:

> We live in a highly competitive world which means we need to fight harder for visitors, investment and business opportunities. We have to stand out and play to our strengths. We must not lose sight of what makes Mauritius authentic and unique. We must be clear about who and what we are. Developing a country brand strategy and identity for Mauritius touches every one of us. We all have an important role to play in the economic, social and cultural success of our nation. This book has been produced to help everyone in Mauritius understand what makes it so special and how we can use that knowledge to our advantage. By concentrating on our particular qualities, we will give ourselves an advantage in this highly competitive world. We will stand out—improving our image and helping our economy whilst retaining our essential character.[8]

These three countries—Syria, Iceland, and Mauritius—span three continents and as many different polities, histories, and cultural realities. They are united by their commitment to success amid the common pressures and possibilities of a globalized and competitive world, and by their apparent desire to be recognized and valued in this world under the sign of the brand. These countries are not alone. In the last ten years, national governments

of at least forty countries around the world have sought the expert counsel of international consultants and strategists to help them brand their jurisdiction.[9] Using the tools, techniques, and expertise of commercial branding is seen as a way to help a nation articulate a more coherent and cohesive national identity, to animate the spirit of its citizens in the service of national priorities, and to maintain loyalty to the territory within its borders. In short, the goal of nation branding is to make the nation *matter* in a world where borders and boundaries appear increasingly obsolete. But what, exactly, is a brand? How did branding become the favored genre, technique, and value form of national collective identity-making? And with what consequences for our understanding and experience of national belonging?

This book is about how nation branding became a worldwide phenomenon and a professional transnational practice. But it is about much more than this. It is about how nation branding has become a solution to perceived contemporary problems affecting the space of the nation-state: problems of economic development, democratic communication, and especially national visibility and legitimacy amid the multiple global flows of late modernity. In this book I chart the political, cultural, and economic rationales by which the nation has been made to matter in a twenty-first-century context of global integration.

Although I use recent examples throughout the book to illustrate the contemporary impact of the phenomenon, the story of its emergence spans a longer time frame. The seeds of nation branding sprout shortly after the Second World War, when corporate and state leaders begin to think about the space of the nation as a valuable resource in the growing competition for global investment, trade, and tourism. Seen as resources—that is, as potential sources of economic value—national culture and territory gradually become thought of as marketable and monetizable entities.[10] Like other profitable assets, these entities need to be managed. Unlike other kinds of resources, however, national culture and territorial attachments (both symbolic and material) require a particular kind of knowledge and a particular set of tactics in order to be managed on terms acceptable to their stakeholders. *Branding the Nation* examines these shifts of knowledge and practice, providing a portrait of the ways that national self-understanding has been reoriented by the experts and expertise of corporate brand strategy.

It would be possible to start the prehistory of nation branding even earlier. We could see the phenomenon as rooted in the long-standing relationship between the nation-state and the corporation, the two dominant social institutions of the last three centuries. The economics of loyalty produced between national governments and the major international trading companies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—such as the East

India Company, the Hudson's Bay Company, and the Russia Company—made both national and commercial activity integral to the making of patriotic sentiment.[11] Another piece of nation branding's prehistory could be located in late nineteenth-century forms of national display. World fairs and international exhibitions drew massive crowds to witness the staging of national culture. Through artistic renderings, buildings, performances, and other material and symbolic representations, visitors could experience the nation at once as a bounded collection of unfamiliar goods and peoples and as one among many similar units in a system of international classification.[12]

I recognize the relevance of these legacies to the contemporary context. Yet there remain aspects of the current phenomenon of nation branding that are qualitatively different from these earlier forms of national imagining and need to be addressed as such. Nation branding represents a transformation of business in the articulation of national identity. Attending to this transformation is necessary to understand what role the nation has come to occupy in our time. The primary argument in this book is that nation branding reveals how the social, political, and cultural discourse constitutive of the nation has been harnessed in new ways, with important consequences for both our concept of the nation and our ideals of national citizenship.

When I began the research for this book in 2003, public presentations of my work were met with considerable astonishment. The notion that anyone would dedicate time and effort to "brand" a nation was immediately interpreted as either laughable and impossible, or manipulative and propagandistic. In all cases, "nation branding" was dismissed; it was hardly to be taken seriously as a political or economic phenomenon, let alone a matter for sociological investigation. Less than ten years later, the idea that individuals, organizations, institutions, and even territorial places can have a "brand"—and indeed should devote a large part of their time and resources toward developing and managing that brand—is a commonplace assumption in both academic literature and mainstream accounts.[13] The ways in which branding has exceeded its original home in business and corporate management is part of the story I tell here; in the normalization of its usage we can also see the normalization of the values and assumptions associated with it.

In researching and writing this book, I interviewed many different groups of people who were all engaged at some level in determining whether and how to brand their jurisdiction: government representatives and bureaucrats, corporate executives and communication strategists, journalists, policymakers, and academics.[14] I interviewed nearly one hundred people

and collected thousands of pages of documents detailing the results of their work: trade and development plans, corporate and national investment reports, national vision statements, news and feature stories in the mainstream press, policy papers, brand books, conference proceedings, promotional resources, and advertising campaign briefs. From this material I developed a portrait of the field and an analysis of branding efforts in twelve countries: Botswana, Canada, Chile, Estonia, Georgia, Germany, Jamaica, Libya, Poland, Spain, Sweden, and Uganda.

Throughout this process, I observed shifts in resource allocation within public institutions, modifications to cultural policy, and most tellingly, new ways of thinking and talking about what the nation was *for* in the contemporary era. What became clear to me was that those who determine what constitutes legitimate culture and national identity have changed dramatically. The knowledge identified as vital to maintain the nation now comes not from national governments, not from historical or social legacies, and not from civic sources of leadership, but from branding and marketing experts. These experts' particular expertise, tools and techniques apparently give them the license to determine what values, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs are superior to others, and allow them to see their role as one of helping their national clients adopt these superior frames and shed unfavorable ones. Part of my story is about these new cultural experts and how their ideas have become so dominant.

There is a second component to my story, however, that appears as a kind of counterpart to the first. Nation branding also maintains and perpetuates the nation as a container of distinct identities and loyalties, and as a project for sovereignty and self-determination. Because this second component appears so antithetical to the first, it is worth taking the time to tell another narrative of how this project came to be.

BACKGROUND

The real story behind this book began a little over ten years ago, when the Montreal office of the international advertising agency McCann Erickson was hired by the government of Quebec to create a tourism campaign for the American market. As the "creative" assigned to develop the campaign, my job was to help the provincial government tourism board convince American travelers to spend their then-valuable vacation dollars in Quebec.[15] Along with the usual information detailing budget, media buy, and deadlines, the client's brief contained a curious injunction: *Do not refer to Canada*. Throughout the campaign—whether in radio spots and TV commercials or