Chinese and Italian Place Brands in Contemporary Sydney:
Assembling Ethnicity and/in the City

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2016
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My first thought goes to my mother and to my sister, two inspiring women who have made this journey with me. Without your love and support nothing of this could have ever been possible.

I feel extremely privileged to have been supervised by Professor Ien Ang and Professor Greg Noble. Thanks for always encouraging me, for letting me experiment, for helping me to shape my ideas and to put them on paper. You have been wonderful supervisors and I treasure every single conversation we had during these years.

I have immensely benefited from all the ideas that I have been exposed to as a student at the Institute for Culture and Society. Thanks to the fellow PhD students with whom I crossed paths, to the Administrative Staff and to all the Research Staff, in particular Professor Kay Anderson, for her insightful comments at multiple stages of my research.

Thanks to my academic mentors, Assistant Professor Yi-Chieh Lin, who encouraged me to pursue a PhD, and Michele Lancione, who has been a big source of inspiration.

To all the good friends that I made in Australia. To Christina Bacchiella, for generously opening up her colourful world to me, and to José Miguel Videla for sharing so many life experiences across continents. Thanks to my dearest friends Francesco Scatena, Filippo Viti, Simone Giovannetti and Francesco Flavio Gioia for being on the opposite end of the phone line in the morning during my endless train journeys to campus, and at the weirdest times of the night. Talking to you has made me feel connected to a ‘space’ that has kept me afloat in many difficult moments.

To Lucca, Venice, Taichung and Sydney, the cities that I have called home so far. To all the things that these places have given to me and to all that I have experienced while growing there; to the people I have met, to the busses I have lost, to the various types of labyrinths in which I have lost myself to eventually find my way again, every time more enriched.

This thesis and the intense, beautiful life experience that came with it, are dedicated to the memory of my father.
STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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(Signature)
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is based on an ethnographic study conducted in Sydney, Australia, to investigate the relations between ethnicity and the city filtered through the practice of place branding. I adopt a comparative case study that addresses the production and application of what I call ‘ethnic place brands’ to two precincts named Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt (Little Italy), with the aim of dynamising the type of analysis proposed, for example, in the ‘immigrant economy’, ‘ethnic precinct’ and ‘urban tourism’ literatures, where ethnicity is often conceived as a quality contained within demarcated urban units and treated as a static essence that defines unchanging categories of collective identification. In contradistinction, this thesis argues that ‘ethnic place brands’ are complex assemblages that are put together in contingent and disaggregated processes of representation and identification defined by inherent tensions between the need to essentialise for marketing purposes and increasing degrees of cultural complexity.

My work unfolds in two main parts. The first three chapters are dedicated to the overview of the emergence of ‘precincts’ as a point of departure for the analysis of the entanglements between culture, ethnicity and the city in global urban discourses and how they become visible in the Sydney context. ‘Ethnic place brands’, I argue, are social, cultural and economic constructs that increasingly drive revitalisation projects targeting some of these urban areas, where ‘difference’ has been reworked across a series of narratives spanning from ethnic marginalisation to ethno-specific service provision to end up becoming strategic points of competitive differentiation. By framing Chineseness and Italianness within this paradigmatic shift, this thesis proposes a theoretical framework for understanding ethnicity and/in the city, which takes into account the complex system of value production in which place branding practices are embedded, while respecting the multiplicity of discourses that frame the making of difference. Street ethnography is introduced in this context as a mobile, creative and self-reflexive method of inquiry that enables to ‘act’ on this complex phenomenon (Chapter Four).
In the second part of the work I look at the brand management strategies for the two precincts that are the focus of my investigation to describe the way in which ethnicity can be understood beyond the limits of static representation. Chapter Five illustrates how Chineseness has become a ‘flexible’ brand for Chinatown/Haymarket, which incorporates different meanings into the production of a brand identity based on ambiguous articulations of ‘multi-Asianness’. These converge on a ‘flexible platform’ that makes bounded notions of Chinatown morph into the more spatially porous Haymarket. The production of Leichhardt’s brand, on the other hand, remains confined within ‘rigid’ representations of Italianness, which systematically disavow the increasingly complex fabric of the precinct; in Chapter Six I discuss how the continuing attempts to mobilise Italianness result into a series of competing and mutually exclusive conceptions of Little Italy contextualised by a narrative of decline. Lastly, in Chapter Seven, the role of the Chinese and Italian communities as integral parts of the two ‘ethnic place brands’ is considered. My argument is that ‘ethnic place brands’ shed light on the ‘ethnic community’ as a temporarily assembled network of stakeholders, defined by strategic positioning and instances of alignment or discord over the aims of the two brand management strategies.

This thesis brings different levels of urban analysis in conversation with one another and replaces the essentialised and static conceptualisations of ethnicity that loosely circulate to advertise the specificity of ‘ethnic precincts’ with a more nuanced, description of place branding as an abstract, complex and networked process, which is less dependent on fixed conceptions of space and difference and more oriented towards the type of fluid relations by which ethnicity and the city are constantly reconfigured. I address ‘ethnic place brands’ as platforms of plural and contested meanings and treat them as instances that offer the opportunity to imagine what Amin and Thrift (2002) call ‘new sociospatial vocabularies’ based on the understanding of cities as spaces of heterogeneity and circulation.
Introduction

Between Essentialism and Complexity

In 2012 Sushi Bay, a Sydney-based business owned by Korean entrepreneurs, asked a team of researchers from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) to explore the dynamics of Korean-owned businesses in the Sydney food industry and to provide recommendations on how to expand their business niche. One of the key recommendations made in the report that followed proposed the establishment of a ‘Little Korea’ (Collins & Shin 2012). ‘While Sydney does have a Chinatown, Little Italy and other “ethnic precincts” that attract locals and tourists to eat, shop, access services and attend ethnic festivals’, write the authors (Collins and Shin 2012: 21), the city ‘does not have a “Little Korea”’. The establishment of such a precinct, they argue, ‘would assist in marketing Korean food culture to Sydneysiders and national and international tourists’. They also stress that its creation ‘would require co-operation between Korean community organisations, the State and relevant Local Governments, who would commit funds to the branding of (...) Little Korea, and thus assist in marketing this to the Sydney and [international] tourist markets’ (ibid).

The report recommends, in other words, the ‘spatialisation’ of Korean business and food culture into a specifically designed urban area. ‘Little Korea’ is introduced in the report as the meeting point between two different discourses: the branding of ethnicity and the use of culture
as a tool of urban regeneration. This is a commonly deployed strategy in many cities worldwide, which particularly takes hold in Sydney given that, as Murphy and Watson put it, one of this city’s most striking characteristics is ‘how differentiated [its] various parts (...) are either imaginatively, topographically or materially’ (1997: 4). Put simply, this strategy is characterised by the transformation of ‘city spaces’ into ‘tourist places’ (Hayllar et al. 2010) via the commodification of local cultural assets. Ethnically branded precincts are one of the results of this process: they are redeveloped areas that facilitate the association of ethnicity and urban space while increasing the city’s touristic potential, often by promoting activities connected to the food industry. They reveal how urban revitalisation projects take advantage of the heterogeneous spaces of the city to institutionalise cultural differentiation at a precinct level.

The UTS report also frames the development of such an ethnic precinct as a matter of collaboration between various stakeholders (such as the business community, other community organisations, and Local Government) to achieve a coherent ‘concept’ for the precinct. This concept, or what I call ‘ethnic place brand’, is introduced as the assemblage of different actors and factors, working together to appeal to a generalised sense of branded ethnicity:

There is a strong case for promoting the emergence of a ‘Little Korea’ in Sydney, either in Eastwood or Strathfield. There are concentrations of Korean immigrants in these suburbs and clusters of Korean immigrant entrepreneurs, particularly those engaged with restaurants and food outlets. (...) With support from either the Strathfield or Ryde Councils to draw up Local Area Plans to fund a ‘Korean makeover’ of the streetscape in the form of street signs, artworks and other iconography, either Strathfield or Eastwood could be promoted as Sydney’s ‘Little Korea’. (...) This would not only have economic benefits, but would also help to build the social capital between Sydney’s Korean community and other parts of Sydney’s cosmopolitan community. This would also encourage Sydneysiders to get a ‘taste of Korea’, enlarging the non-Korean and non-Chinese customer base of restaurants and food outlets owned by Korean immigrant entrepreneurs in Sydney (Collins and Shin 2012: 8-9).

This thesis explores ethnic place brands as social, economic and cultural constructs that highlight how ethnicity is used as a brand to promote the uniqueness of redeveloped precincts. My analysis relates to the production of two ethnic place brands that, unlike Koreanness, do loom large in Sydney – Chineseness and Italianness – and their application to two precincts – Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt (sometimes known as Little Italy) – in a specific context of urban transformation, which has contributed to the re-branding of these two areas in the
context of the institutionalisation of the ‘City of Villages’ vision for Sydney (see chapter 2). In particular, I focus on ethnic place brands beyond rigid conceptualisations of spatialised ethnic difference and I argue that they offer textured understandings of how ethnicity and the city are constructed in the process of place branding. I am interested, in other words, in rethinking the relation of ethnicity and the city by looking at ethnic place brands as platforms of contested meanings. The possibility of gaining a glimpse on the changing meaning of ethnicity starting from the observation of ethnic place brands derives from an awareness that they are networked representations of ethnic identity characterised by inherent tensions between essentialism and complexity.

I will resort once again to the proposed ethnic place brand for a ‘Little Korea’ to explain this point. As the passage from the report suggests, this ethnic precinct is imagined on the premises of suburbs defined by ‘concentrations of immigrants’ who share common ethnic traits; secondly, the differentiation point of the precinct is highlighted by an ‘ethnic makeover’ made of street decorations and signage in the Korean language. Lastly, the precinct is described as a container of an essentialised ‘Korean culture’ and as a bridge between the ‘Korean community’ and Sydney’s wider, cosmopolitan community. The idea of Little Korea therefore reinforces an image of the city where separate ethnic groups are presumed to inhabit specific areas, each bounded and visibly different, shaped by collective forms of identification and static notions of ethnic culture.

If a coherent ethnic image is the main goal in the branding of an area as ‘Little Korea’, the actual reality of the multicultural urban scenario tends to undermine the consistency of this image. For example, the UTS report admits that ‘the 65 Korean immigrant entrepreneurs surveyed for the research project were not only involved in restaurants selling Korean food, but also owned Japanese restaurants (16%), including Sushi restaurants (13%) and Chinese restaurants (7%), [as well as] cafes and take-away food shops’ (ibid: 26).

Here we can see clearly how the attempt to formulate an ethnic place brand for ‘Little Korea’ highlights fundamental tensions between essentialism and complexity; that is, it is characterised
by the need to essentialise and homogenise in a context that is defined by increasing heterogeneity and multiplicity. If, on the one hand, the process of place branding via the marketing of ethnicity is characterised by the engineered territorialisation of particular groups, on the other hand the increasing diversification of Sydney’s population makes it hard to conceptualise ethnicity in terms of neat, spatially bounded units. Ethnic place brands, in other words, offer a privileged standpoint to discuss different ‘urban narratives’ (Watson 2006: 1). They illustrate the point that ‘living with difference as a quintessential characteristic of what city life is about’, but at the same time they cast light on the city as ‘a space of segregation, division, exclusion, threat and boundaries’ (ibid). I use this tension inherent in place branding practice to embed the analysis of ethnicity in the city within the search for ‘new vocabularies to describe the urban, one which takes circulation, hybridity and multiplicity as key urban moments, and fixed boundaries as temporary allegiances and alignments’ (Amin and Thrift 2002: 77; Sandercock and Lyssiotis 2003; Simone 2010).

The borrowing by Korean-born entrepreneurs of ethnic tools ‘other than Korean’ to partake in the commodification of culture in the urban economy is another relevant factor that destabilises the idea of fixed, spatialised ethnicity. It points to the fact that the terms of engagement in the production of ethnic meanings need to be framed in what Vertovec (2007) calls a ‘superdiverse’ condition, characterised ‘by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified’ (2007: 1024) actors, leading to the multiplication of the ‘power of definition’ (Anderson 1991: 10, see also chapter 3) of ethnicity. This issue became clear to me from the beginning of my research when, as a newcomer to Sydney, I started to engage in informal conversations with business owners who use ethnic symbols as economic resources and who are active in the two ethnicised precincts that became the focus of my research. The level of cultural complexity represented in the various shops was illustrative of the type of ‘diversity’ that I was going to witness throughout the rest of my research project.
My first two encounters evoked two instructive stories. The first is about a bakery located on the trafficked thoroughfare that leads to the Leichhardt precinct, marketed as the city’s Little Italy. The showcase of the business – decorated with French flags and a big basket filled with baguettes and croissants – suggests a straightforward type of ethnic identity, in this case a commodified French ethnic imagery via its traditional baked products. However, the statue of the Bodhisattva of compassion that sits on the shop’s counter next to the Taiwanese flag suddenly transports the seemingly consistent ethnic message sent by the shop into a more complex scenario. The shop is owned by a Taiwanese couple who moved from Taipei to the outskirts of Paris in their early twenties. After running a Chinese restaurant for 18 years, Mr and Mrs Chen attended evening classes in a French bakery workshop and decided to open a French – instead of a Chinese – business once they moved to Sydney in the late 1990s. The second story relates to an Italian-themed ice cream shop located a few meters away from one of the iconic archways in Sydney’s Chinatown. A gigantic representation of Rome’s skyline is painted on the shop’s main wall, while the Italian flag is sewn on the uniforms worn by the employees (mostly Chinese students from a neighbouring university). The shop is a franchised business with branches throughout Sydney. The Chinatown branch has recently been taken over by a young Chinese couple from Shanghai.

The ways in which ethnicity is mobilised in these businesses lead to a necessary problematisation of the uniform consistency of a spatialised ethnic identity that ethnic place brands seek to achieve. The point that I am trying to make here is not that a French bakery owned by a Taiwanese couple who migrated to Australia via France and a shop selling ‘Italian’ commodities run by young Chinese expatriates are oddities or exceptions standing in the way of a ‘vision’ for urban Little Italy and Chinatown. On the contrary, I am suggesting that these two instances reflect a normal type of complexity that escapes notions of bounded identity, ethnicity and territoriality. In attempting to describe how the tensions between essentialism and complexity are managed in the process of branding urban places as ‘ethnic’ I use qualitative methods to look comparatively at the production and application of Chineseness and Italianness as the brands for Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt, respectively.
The intent of this thesis is to move beyond the static representations of the ‘ethnic enclave’ – a thesis proposed in the ‘immigrant economy’ and ‘ethnic precinct’ literature (Waldinger et al. 1990; Light and Rosenstein 1995; Rath 2000; Kloosterman and Rath 2003) that reinforces essentialist understandings of spatialised ethnicity in the city. My argument is that interpreting
ethnicities as particular place brands embedded in different brand management strategies and mobilised as contextual assemblages defined by inherent tensions has the potential to unsettle the ‘homogenising terms of community, neighbourhood and visibility’ (K. Anderson 2006: 18), with which the relations between ‘ethnicity’ and ‘the city’ are framed in the dominant discourse of place branding. In order to develop my argument, I will ask the following questions: through what images and symbols are ethnic place brands mobilised in the Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt precincts? Who are the stakeholders that partake in the practice of ethnic place branding? How can the homogenising terms of community and precinct – widely accepted in the place branding discourse – be unsettled by a comparative analysis of two ethnic place brands in contemporary Sydney?

Positioning

The focus of this thesis on Chineseness and Italianness originated from autobiographical and intellectual considerations that have been crucial for the unfolding of this work. A few months prior to my departure from Italy to Australia, I attended the ceremony of the ‘Lucchesi nel Mondo’ (Lucchesi in the World), an organisation that includes the representatives from all diasporic Italian communities across the world, whose members trace their ancestries from the city where I was born and grew up – the small town of Lucca, located in the centre-north Italian region of Tuscany. Lucca has a rooted history of migration which determines the relevance of a sort of ‘diasporic narrative’ visible in a number of contexts; many of its inhabitants left Italy from the beginning of the 20th century to escape poverty and to create a better future abroad for themselves and their families.

Once every year, members of the various LNM associations (from Colombia to Thailand, to Germany and Argentina) gather for a parade through the candle-lit narrow streets of the historic town centre. The annual meeting happens in conjunction with the celebration of the saint-patron, when the statue of a religious icon is carried from the old to the new cathedral as a tribute to its role as guardian of Lucca. On this occasion, the associations parade behind the
religious carousel\(^1\) and, in doing so, they spectacularise their ‘coming back’ to their Italianness, while at the same time mobilise a shared sense of collective local identity despite the centrifugal movement from their ‘imagined community’ (B. Anderson 2006 [1983]).

It is not only this narrative of migration and the rhetoric of diaspora ‘around which I grew up’ that triggered my interest in issues related to identity formation across borders and the use of culture to shape places. This thesis can also be considered as a more elaborated body of work done into the concept of identity formation across borders that I initially addressed in my MA thesis as a student of Chinese language and culture; here I was looking at Chinese migration in terms of time, space and mass media, with a particular focus on the possibility of analysing Chinese diasporic identity through the lens of socio-cultural theory as an interdisciplinary field of research that stresses the importance of a ‘diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities’ (Hall 1996: 444) in the formation of social categories.

I relied in particular on Ang’s argument that diaspora is a system based on ‘the presumption of internal ethnic sameness and external ethnic distinctiveness’ (Ang 2005: 82, see also 2003); at the same time, the interpretation of the city as a ‘contested zone in which borders and ethnic boundaries are blurred and where processes of hybridisation are rife’ (Ang 2005: 89) prompted the idea of exploring Chinatown as a spatially visible area in which to anchor the debate about the changing paradigm of Chineseness; a change due not only to the socio-cultural contexts outside of China as a paradigmatic nation-state where Chinatowns are usually embedded, but also to the diverse practices of representation/auto representation and consumption that have a kaleidoscopic effect on the idea of a static and generic Chinese ethnic identity.

This thesis therefore occupies the intersection of different perspectives: the first is a critical approach towards ethnic identity as a definer of unchanging bodies of collective identification like diaspora and community; the second is a broad interest in the city as a site of social transformation – whose ‘ideological foundations, physical construction, social and political

\(^1\) Each association gathers around a velvet blue banner bearing the name of the city where the specific community migrated and settled. The name of the city is embroidered in golden letters underneath a black panther – the symbol of the town. The two opposite symbols of globalism and localism are therefore visible in their banners and crystallised in the unchanging paradigm of the ‘diasporic community’.
significance, aesthetic value and metaphorical meaning’ require close analysis; the third is a fascination for research as a protracted moment of self-reflexivity. From here I develop a theoretical framework to look at the changing meaning of ethnicity in an urban context defined by the branding initiatives that seek to constantly reconstruct essentialised ideas of ethnic identity in spite of a growing cultural complexity.

In this thesis I propose a way to look at ethnic identity in the city not in terms of groups or communities, but in terms of ‘practical categories, cultural idioms, cognitive schemas, discursive frames, organisational routines, institutional forms, political projects and contingent events’ (Brubaker 2002: 167-168) that are captured by a relational process of composition (ethnicity as assemblage) rather than unchanging parameters of difference (ethnicity as paradigm). In doing so, I do not want to disregard the existence of shared forms of identification; but I want to focus on their being constructed and mobilised for economic purposes. Through an ethnographic exploration of the production and application of two ethnic place brands, I hope to highlight the ways in which ethnicity is not a fixed attribute (of a group or a place) but the product of a series of situated assemblages that are precariously stabilised and constantly underlined by inherent tensions between essentialism and complexity. This represents my attempt to dynamise the analysis of ethnicity while developing ‘creative ways of inquiry, incisive conceptualisations and nuanced insights into the city’ (Stevenson 2012: 3).

**Layout of the Work**

Chapter One analyses the position that ethnicity occupies within the culture/city entanglements particularly visible in cosmopolitan scenarios. The chapter provides a theoretical introduction to the relational approach that I will use throughout the thesis to analyse ethnic place brands with the aim of dynamising static, essentialist and un-problematised representations of ethnicity and urban space.

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2 From the call for papers of the 1st Symposium on Global Cities and Cosmopolitan Dreams, organised by the International Network for Alternative Academia, Barcelona, May 2015.
Chapter Two looks at the geographical scale used in the analysis of ethnic place brands. In this chapter, I introduce the geographic landscape of Sydney as a constellation of demarcated areas, which result from the adoption by the City of Sydney and the Leichhardt LGAs of a globally circulating model of urban revitalisation based on cultural differentiation at a precinct level. In this chapter, I also interrogate the modality via which ethnic culture and urban places are made to overlap and, in doing so, start to tease out the multiplicity of stakeholders and the complex series of spatial layers that are involved in the branding of ethnicity.

In Chapter Three, I frame a series of paradigmatic shifts in the meaning of ethnicity in the Sydney context. This trajectory moves across several historical phases of Australian urban history and, for each of them, I describe the way in which the relations between ethnicity and urban spaces have been conceptualised. Ethnic place brands represent the end point of this paradigmatic trajectory. I discuss how their objectivity and the way in which they generate value differentiate them from previous phases of ethnic representation, therefore opening new windows to understanding ethnicity and/in the city.

Chapter Four sketches out the methods used in the research process and discusses ‘street mapping’ as a mobile ethnographic strategy of inquiry that allows the networked nature of ethnic place branding to be adequately represented. I argue that the methods that I used to retrieve data for this thesis reflect the specific epistemological framework that I develop for ethnic place brands; one that is loyal to their ‘messiness’ and to the disaggregated, non-linear ways in which they are assembled.

Chapter Five describes the process that leads to the branding of the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct via a ‘flexible’ ethnic place brand, which diversifies into an ambiguous multi-Asianness while maintaining Chineseness as an integral component. I read the transformation of the geographies of Chinatown/Haymarket according to the application of the ethnic place brand that is reflected in a spatially ‘porous’ precinct. Chapter Six, on the other hand, deals with the ‘problematic maintenance’ of the brand for Leichhardt. In this instance, Italianness as the ethnic
place brand for the precinct is framed in a ‘rigid’ way, and it implies that any non-Italian input is considered incompatible with the branding process.

Chapter Seven draws on participant and non-participant observation conducted with a series of cultural organisations, which are based in Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt. In this chapter I describe how the so-called ‘ethnic community’ – an integral part of the brand management strategy for both precincts – should not be understood as an unproblematised body of collective identification, but as the constant reconfiguration of hybrid cultural assemblages that are formed around moments of intensification of the ethnic place brands. These assemblages encompass the collaboration between organisations, the alignment between human and on-human actors, and the micro-narratives that inform the mobilisation of ethnicity.

Chapter Eight focuses on comparativism as a central component of this thesis and discusses how the parallel examination of the production and application of two ethnic place brands in Sydney enriches a new sociospatial vocabulary to describe the city.
1

Culture, Ethnicity and the City

1.1 Introduction

In order to understand the relevance of ethnic place brands in the analysis of contemporary globalised cities it is important to place them in the context of how ‘culture’ and the urban economy have become mutually constitutive. The specific position that ethnicity has come to occupy in these urban/cultural entanglements constitutes the broad theoretical framework within which I will operate in this thesis. This chapter provides an overview of this theoretical framework.

In The Cultures of Cities, Zukin (1995) wrote that urban scholars could not speak about cities anymore without understanding how these used culture as an economic driver, and how their economies were increasingly based on symbolic production. Of course, the role of culture is not limited to the analysis of cities; today it has been taken as a point of entry to discuss the development of a ‘global economic rationality’ (Yudice 2004: 1), where ‘culture as-a-resource’ represents ‘the linchpin of a new epistemic framework in which (…) the management, conservation, access, distribution, and investment – in “culture” – take priority’ (ibid). The city,

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3 In both her works The Cultures of Cities (1995) and Naked City (2009) Zukin explains this issue by looking specifically at the reconfiguration of New York starting from the 1970s, when developers of downtown shopping centres turned derelict industrial and waterfront land into profitable attractions to compete with suburban malls, followed by the consolidation of ‘clean images of diversity for mass consumption’ (2009: 5) such as cultural districts, ethnic touristic zones and artist lofts, which started to emerge from the 1980s.
however, remains a privileged site for the analysis of culture as an economic input; this, according to Amin and Thrift (2007), ‘is not due to the fact that cities are more culture-inflected than other economic arenas. Instead it is (…) because (…) they provide a useful vantage point for observing the overlay between different cultural-economic impulses’ (2007: 147). The city, they argue, is an ‘interesting visual laboratory’ (ibid). Culture has therefore undertaken a prominent role in urban studies scholarship, and the analysis of it has kept developing along with the study of the economic reconfiguration of cities that thrive on the process that Breidenbach and Nyíri (2009) describe as ‘seeing culture everywhere’. 

1.2 Narrowing down the Research Focus

The production and application of ethnic place brands can be read as a specific articulation of the multiple relations between culture and the city, which becomes particularly visible in cosmopolitan scenarios. I once again resort to Zukin (1995), who wrote that the provision of culture in the urban context can be approached in different, interrelated ways: the first is the attempt of cities to attract tourism and capital by enhancing their profile through the creation of a competitive edge; the second is related to the city as a terrain staging cultural diversity – at stake here is the negotiation of difference around practices and symbols that becomes visible in mundane contexts; the third concerns the production of public spaces, which happens at the junction of physical security, cultural identity and geographical community, and sees the mobilisation of cultural symbols intertwine with entrepreneurial capital.

The idea of the ‘imagined city’ developed by Stevenson (2012: 145) illustrates the first point; here the analysis of culture and the city privileges the ‘reprofiling strategies’ that include the construction of landmark building projects and the organisation of mega-events. Furthermore, it merges with the development of a ‘complex mix of advertising, visions and narratives, as well as catchy city slogans and mottos’ that results in the synthetic production of the urban image as a centre of cultural innovation. The use of culture in this context, writes Stevenson, reveals ‘a great deal about the relationship between capitalism and the urban, as well as about the ways in
which neoliberalism intersects with governance to reshape environments’ (ibid: 144). Ong (2011) echoes this point and describes as the Art of Being Global the ‘variety of political, cultural and economic projects pursued (...) to improve the condition and standing of [cities] vis-à-vis others that are perceived as being in de facto competition in the game of urban ranking’ (13). Culture, in this case, intersects with the city purely in terms of top down perspectives.

Unlike these macro-theoretical approaches used to understand the positioning of cities in global contexts, the ‘rich and complex experiences of multiculturalism’ (Flower and Swan 2012: 3) that relate to ‘the negotiation on the ground of cultural diversity in everyday situations’ (Wise and Velayutham 2009: 2) deal with the second point made by Zukin (1995). Here, the role of ethnicity in understanding the relations between culture and the city is introduced. ‘Everyday multiculturalism’, as the literature addressing these issues has been called, highlights the contested processes of cultural negotiation and the making and remaking of identities with a special interest in the relations between human and non-human actors in a disparate set of contexts. It involves a wide variety of practices, which range from food (Bishop 2011; Duruz 2011), to spaces of commensality and street signage (Wise 2010; 2011), to performances and festivities (Baldassar 1999; Noble 2011; Tabar 2005). The everyday multiculturalism literature highlights a never-ending process of mobilisation and contestation, where differences are neither absolutised nor ignored, and where the encounter of different actors is depicted without glorifying its outcome as a conflict-free cultural mix.4

Zukin’s third point can be understood by looking at the way in which cultural differences have been utilised as a tool for urban development ‘to project a sense of difference and global cosmopolitanism in the present’ (Dehart 2015: 185). Ethnicised precincts are relevant examples to discuss in this context as they have become ‘a prime target for public and private urban initiatives that seek to stimulate urban revitalisation and compete for global recognition’ (ibid: 186), while relying on ‘a vision of cultural consumption and a social and an ethnic division of

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4 Caglar’s work (1999) on the introduction of Döner kebab in Germany, for example, reveals stories of adaptation, cultural hybridity and self-positioning, which are all framed by the demand for ’ethnic food’ and the commodification of culture in the city’s symbolic economy. The production of a delicacy here represents what Wise (2011: 83) calls ‘an everyday lens into contested debates’; it points to a dialogue between multiple actors, who shape a product that speaks more than one language.
labour’ (Zukin 1995: 10). Dehart’s research on the construction in San Jose, Costa Rica, of the latest in a list of more than 100 urban Chinatowns worldwide, illustrates the global reach of urban revitalisation projects characterised by the intersection of culture, urban forms and the construction of place identities for global consumption based on the use of ethnic images. As I will discuss in this thesis, Sydney is a cosmopolitan city that certainly is no exception to this trend. Its urban fabric is undergoing significant transformations resulting from the adoption of revitalisation projects that are predicated upon the provision of culture and that are translated into the creation of spatially demarcated places, where urban consumers can expect to enjoy a number of specific versions of culture, or ‘flavours’, prominent among which is ‘ethnic’ culture.

However, the increasingly heterogeneous social composition of Australia’s urban centres and the complexities related to the use of ethnicity as an economic tool – as I have illustrated in the Introduction through the two vignettes from my preliminary engagement with the research sites – imply that fixed ideas of culture are bound to encounter a heterogeneous reality on the ground, which escapes rigid conceptualisations, especially when ethnicity is the type of flavour that drives the production of public spaces. It is within the tension generated by the encounter of multiple forces of representation (top-down and bottom up) and the tendencies toward essentialising ethnicity in spite of a complex heterogeneity that I situate city space and ethnic culture as the main concepts that I will use in this thesis. I will engage with both the macro-processes that embed Sydney in a global context of image construction, as well as with the daily negotiations of ethnic difference, which become visible in the ‘micro politics of everyday social contact and encounter’ (Amin and Parkinson 2002: 959). In adopting different perspectives to observe how urban spaces are produced according to contested versions of culture, I therefore draw on Lefebvre’s (1991) conceptualisation of space – one defined by a dialectical interplay between micro and macro-perspectives – and on Ong’s interpretation of culture-making as a ‘practice embedded in strategies of positioning, control and maneuver’ (1999: 243) that involves

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5 Lefebvre’s theory resonates in Soja’s understanding of cities as ‘the hard physical spaces of built infrastructure, architecture and planning as well as the soft spaces of representation, imagination and everyday life – simultaneously material, imagined, and lived’ (1996: 9).
not only the act of ‘othering by dominant players’, but also ‘self-theorising and re-envisioning in relation to fluid power dynamics’ (ibid).

My work focuses on the rise of city suburbs as ‘identifiable local products for global consumption’ (Zukin 2009: 45), with a specific interest in how ‘ethnic heritage landscapes, as marketable landscapes (…), become subject to (…) re-invention’ (Yeoh and Kong 2012: 133) in the post-industrial urban economy (Lin 2010). I am interested, in other words, in how contemporary urban revitalisation projects in Sydney merge discourses on urbanisation with localised cultural difference to turn suburbs into precincts (a distinction that I will make in chapter 2) and I anchor my analysis in Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt, two ethnicised precincts that are maintained as visibly different – as opposed to being created from scratch – by means of the application of ethnic place brands that result from a number of networked efforts between a wide range of stakeholders. I argue that the way in which these precincts are re-branded as ‘ethnic’ in a culturally complex scenario offers innovative ways to look at ethnicity and/in the city.

1.3 Place Branding

The study of place branding is a young field of research interested in the reconfiguration of places inspired by a corporate ethos; this has been discussed in relation to the process of ‘designing, planning and communicating the name and the identity of places’ (Anholt 2006: 4). Place branding originated from an interest in how nation states have become actors in an ‘ongoing process of competitive differentiation’ (Mayes 2008) in a context where ‘products, services and locations have become so alike that they can no longer differentiate themselves by their quality, reliability and other basic traits’ (Van Ham 2002: 251). Anholt (2002; 2006) writes that this phenomenon is due to the rapid advance of globalisation, which makes ‘every country, every city and every region (…) compete with every other for its share of the world’s consumers, tourists, investor, students, entrepreneurs, international sporting and cultural events, and for the attention and respect of the international media, of other governments and the people of other
countries’ (Anholt 2006: 1). He calls ‘competitive identity’ the ‘new model for enhanced national competitiveness in a global world’ (ibid: 3) at a time when territorial actors are increasingly engaged in implementing ‘competitive global policies and strategies designed to achieve prosperity and influence’ (Van Ham 2002: 265).

The analysis of how governments use branding to avoid the transmission of ‘a highly confused image’ of their administered territories (Anholt 2006; Dinnie et al. 2010; Kleppe and Mossberg 2015) has been extended to include the development strategies adopted by a growing number of cities (Donald et al. 2009; McManus & Connell 2011). According to Kavaratzis, place branding has become a defining character of the ‘business-like manner’ (2005: 336) in which many cities are governed. Paganoni writes that the adoption of branding as part of cities’ development strategies is a ‘response to the inter-urban competition characteristic of the new post-national dynamic of globalisation,’ where different branding tools are ‘included within the modernisation agendas of many local governments’ (2012: 14). In this thesis my interest is in the way in which ethnicity is used as a brand management strategy by different Local Governments and, by describing the complexity of this phenomenon, my aim is to challenge the static nature of ethnicity as it is mobilised in the dominant place branding discourse.

Broadly speaking, ethnic place brands are made of three main components: a spatial, a temporal, and a collective/communal one. I analyse the first by looking at how their production and application turn spaces into ‘stages’ for tourism; this is understood, in line with Edensor, as a ‘process which involves the ongoing (re)construction of praxis and space in shared contexts’ (Edensor 2001: 60). As I will show in chapters 5 and 6, the maintenance of tourist stages as part of the brand management strategies for Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt involves different tools (such as public art, mapping activities, cultural activities and mottos) which involve different degrees of managing the tensions between essentialism and complexity. The management of these tensions, I argue, contributes to shaping the way in which the stakeholders who mobilise ethnicity on the stage (re)construct their identities and represent themselves is social contexts (Goffman 1959). The temporal dimension of ethnic place brands, on the other
hand, is based on what I describe as moments of ‘intensification’; I address this element by looking at the organisation in the precincts of events on a large scale that allow us to glimpse shared narratives based on the more or less successful brand management strategies and that have enlarged the analytical framework for the observation of the stakeholders involved in the branding process. Lastly, ethnic place brands largely rely on the mobilisation of a collective/communal component based on the idea of the ‘ethnic community’ as the owner of the precinct and an existing, collective body of identification that justifies the adoption of the ethnic ‘theme’.

My analysis of how ethnic place brands are produced and applied draws on theorists in the field who argue that little has been written regarding the modalities through which the branding of places is actually managed, and that recent developments of corporate branding theory can be used to understand the management of place brands. According to Kavaratzis, for instance, place branding requires a treatment of the brand as the whole entity of the place-product in order to achieve ‘consistency of the message sent’ (2005: 336, my italics); elsewhere it has been suggested that a successful place brand ‘must be consistent and cannot allow for polysemy, plurality or contradiction without the risk of becoming and indecipherable cacophony – which is widely agreed to be the “death” of a brand’ (Mayes 2008: 127). The application of corporate branding becomes part of an ‘urban lifestyle in which visual images and myths [are] relentlessly packaged and presented’ (Goodwin 1993: 147-48, in Kavaratzis 2005: 330) and where processes of urban economic revitalisation involve the creation of a consistent image, sometimes referred to in the literature as ‘recognisable place identity’ (Kavaratzis 2005; Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013; Mayes 2008). This demands that the image of the place becomes associated with ‘stories [that] need to be built in place, (…) by planning and design interventions, infrastructure development and the organisational structure (…); communicated through the more general attitude of the place and (…) through promotional activities’ (Kavaratzis 2005: 336; see also Kavaratzis 2004).

As I will show in chapter 2, the application of place brands involves a sophisticated and networked process of abstraction, association and spatial alignment that attaches specific
versions of culture to urban places. This process involves inevitable simplifications related to both the type of cultural ‘essence’ used to brand a specific area, and the urban space supposed to contain the branded image within defined boundaries. My interest, however, is to look closely at ‘ethnicity’ as the element that drives the production of place brands. To return to Kavaratzis’ understanding of place branding processes, this thesis focuses on how Chineseness and Italianness become the ‘stories’ that emerge as the outcome of place branding for the two precincts of Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt. The consistency of these stories (or, as I will address them ‘images’) is challenged by a – mostly ethnographic – analysis aimed at understanding how the application of ethnic place brands corresponds, or clashes with, disaggregated, networked and contextually assembled strategies of representation and identification.

In achieving this goal my aim is to fill a number of gaps in the place branding literature which have been left open despite the growing relevance of the topic in the analysis of cities. The overwhelmingly Western, if not Anglo-Saxon, bias highlighted by Lucarelli and Berg (2011) in their review of 217 research studies on city branding between 1988 and 2009, for example, shows that there is a significant geographical imbalance in the selection of the cities discussed in the literature. They observe that 35% of the case studies refer to English, American and Canadian urban centres. ‘Even more striking,’ they write, ‘is the fact that 61% of the studies deal with European cities’ (Lucarelli and Berg 2011: 14). Another relevant factor emerging from their review is that studies of large metropolitan cities dominate the material even though ‘the emergence of subparts of the city branding domain (...) can be observed’ (ibid).

The place branding scholarship therefore seems to be defined by a lack of empirical penetration in the field, and by a shortage of analytical resources in relation to different ways of conceptualising ‘the city’ (i.e. town, destination, region, place, metropolis, municipality) as well as branding techniques (i.e. selling, communicating, marketing, promoting, making regeneration, transformation). In regards to the methodological aspect, the authors write that ‘the empirical foundation of the domain is largely based on anecdotic evidence from single case studies, and
[that] there are few comparative studies addressing the impact of different types of branding elements on output or performance data’ (ibid: 11).

The novelty of this thesis is twofold: firstly, by looking at one of the most culturally diverse cities in the world, I propose a comparative analysis that looks at different localities within the same city. I therefore problematise the matter of ‘scale’ in the analysis of place branding (see chapter 2) and I experiment with the potential of urban comparativism as a way to shed new light on the meaning of ethnicity and/in the city (see chapter 8). Secondly, I do not simply wish to end my analysis within the confines of a constructivist debate, but I aim to ‘dynamise’ the concept of ethnicity itself by elaborating a theoretical framework informed by empirical data that embeds ethnicity in a complex scenario of brand production. In achieving this goal, I build on a series of case studies (mostly related to the revitalisation projects in North American urban centres) which, like Sydney, are characterised by polynucleated patterns of urbanisation and by an increasingly diverse population.

The reshaping of the urban fabric in two Californian districts addressed by Irázabal and Gómez-Barris (2007) and Davison (2013), for example, has inspired the analysis of ethnic place brands starting from their material representation in the context of specific projects of urban transformation that cater for the urban tourism agenda. These authors focus on the redevelopment of a main commercial area defined by a generic ‘Latino character’ in the outskirts of the city of Oakland, and the construction of a ‘Mexican-themed shopping mall’ in the south-eastern part of Los Angeles. Both studies focus on how the branding of ethnicity is reflected in two places of invented tradition and consumption, with a particular interest in the emergence of a ‘new frontier for the development of the corporate tourist industry’ (Irázabal and Gómez-Barris 2007: 195) based on the ‘global trend toward the increasing thematisation of spaces of entertainment and consumption’ (ibid). In this context, they explore the complexities related to the ‘politics of character and its use in planning and urban design’ (Davison 2013: 211) while revealing the multiplicity of contested understandings of ethnic identity that underlie the production of a themed space based on a seemingly consistent and uniform images.
Dávila (2004) and Lin (2010), on the other hand, discuss ethnicised precincts in U.S. cities in wider social, political and economic contexts. These authors shed light on how ethnic identity becomes a relevant tool for the analysis of the reconfigurations of contemporary American cities and, in doing so, they explore the ‘re-signification of ethnicity (…) which involves claims to physical space and shaping of the past, present, and future meanings of the area [in which they are represented]’ (Dávila 2004: 6). Dávila’s exploration of New York’s East Harlem – also known as ‘El Barrio’, or ‘Spanish Harlem’ – takes the ‘Latinisation’ of U.S. cities as a way to discuss gentrification and the neoliberal policies that favour privatisation and consumption in the urban milieu. Lin, on his part, concentrates on ethnicity as cultural heritage that can stimulate social change and community development in American ‘gateway’ or ‘world’ cities.\(^6\)

The two analyses proposed by Dávila and Lin move beyond static conceptualisations of ethnicity by underlining how wider political and economic structures inform the reconceptualisation of ethnic identity. In this thesis I draw inspiration from these works in terms of how they point to the necessity to constantly change and enlarge the frame of reference in the analysis of ethnicity and in the city by looking simultaneously at different levels of power and influence that ‘recast the culture-economy dichotomy into a far more powerful cultural political economy of urban identities and places’ (Fincher and Jacobs 1998: 3) based on multiple ‘processes of representation, signification and performativity’ (ibid).

A significant number of studies has looked at the growing relevance of ethnic precincts in Sydney. These studies have often addressed the interconnections between culture, tourism, the commodification of ethnic identity and the production of public spaces in the city (see Collins and Castillo 1998; Collins 2007; Collins and Kunz 2009; Mura and Lovelock 2009; Hayllar et al. 2010); they have provided a detailed account of this type of urban place in Sydney and they have pointed to the role of ethnicity in a complex landscape of production and consumption. However, the focus on the ‘types’ of precincts and the ‘categories’ of visitors that they attract seems to prevail in these urban analyses, which somehow overlooks the ‘essence’ itself that

\(^6\) His work focuses on Urban Ethnic Places such as those in New York and Los Angeles, Houston’s Chinatown and Miami’s ‘Latino’ district Calle Ocho.
drives the construction of precincts. A taxonomic exercise that focuses on the categorisation of precincts and on the type of tourist experience that they provide, in other words, overshadows the critical analysis of the presumption that sees the link between place and ethnicity as a given.

Collins, in particular, refers to ethnic precincts in Sydney as ‘contradictory sites’ (2007); he frames these contradictions in terms of ‘credibility and authenticity’ (Collins and Kunz 2009: 42), which involve problematic assumptions on ‘who’ is authorised to claim authenticity; ‘how’ that authenticity is symbolised and produced; and how ‘legitimate’ the commodified version of ethnicity is (ibid: 43). The production of ethnicity in this case is framed in terms of the role that different ‘cultural groups’ undertake in the consolidation of urban spaces of difference: from the ‘ethnic entrepreneurs’ who provide commodified versions of ethnic identity, to the three categories of customers that the authors chose as their source of information regarding the ‘perception of authenticity’: ‘co-ethnics’ (e.g. Chinese in Chinatown); ‘co-cultural’ (e.g. non-Chinese Asians in Chinatown) and ‘others’, including other minority or majority groups (Collins and Kunz 2009: 209).

Hayllar et al. describe the emergence of precincts in the Sydney context by looking at the ‘distinctive characteristics that mark them out’ as places for tourism (2010: 40). They write that their distinctiveness may be due to ‘physical’ characteristics – related for example to specific architectural styles – and specific ‘cultural’ features – if the precinct, for instance, ‘reflects the dominance of a particular ethnic community’ (ibid). In addition to this, they suggest that precincts may arise as a result of ‘concentration of certain land use activities’, or the ‘juxtaposition of the precincts to attractive physical environment’ (ibid). Their comprehensive analysis of precincts in Sydney is aimed at understanding the functions that precincts perform and the type of visitors they attract – which they divide into ‘explorers’, ‘browsers’, and ‘samplers’ (ibid: 55).

The analysis of ethnic precincts as it is proposed in these studies starts and ends with the static image of ethnicity and the bounded conception of urban space. To put it in Anderson’s words, these studies seem not to reject a ‘spatial lexicon of enclave and roots,’ premised on ‘the

Place branding here appears as a uniform process of urban reconfiguration producing the same spatial phenomena, which are measured according to a series of fixed parameters. I argue that the comparative focus on the production and application of ethnic place brands has the opposite effect: by relying on an ethnographic approach that seeks to sketch out similarities and differences in the branding processes for two precincts, the links between ethnicity and space are necessarily described in more disaggregated, complex and de-essentialised ways. The categorisation of the precincts’ functions and their patrons, in other terms, is less important than the analysis of the mobilisation of the ethnic place brand.

1.4 Ethnicity Beyond Groupism

The achievement of a consistent ethnic image is a fundamental part of the place branding exercise that aims to fix ethnicity to urban spaces. So far I have described it as a process aimed at creating and disseminating ‘stories’ about the branded image and, in the case of Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt, I have begun to suggest that the production and application of ethnic place brands include a spatial, temporal and communal component based on essentialist conceptions of ‘diversity’. By seeking a conceptualisation of ethnic identity in the city that breaks away from unchanging paradigms and images of static difference, on the other hand, my aim is to connect with the call made by Brubaker (2002) to look at ‘ethnicity without groups’. As I will show throughout this thesis, the idea of groupism is connected to the series of essentialist images used in the place branding discourse to categorise ethnicity, to inscribe it into demarcated areas, and to define collective bodies of shared identification attached to it. The case studies that I explore indicate that, unlike the linearity with which groupist simplifications of ethnic identity are marketed as the ‘essences’ of ethnic precincts, ethnic place brands are part of a complex system of value production that affects the shaping of identities and the crafting of urban forms.
Brubaker argues that ‘few social science concepts would seem as basic, even indispensable, as that of group’ (2002: 163). This understanding of ethnicity, according to Wimmer (2013), is based on the work of 18th century German philosopher Johan Gottfried Herder, who proposed the categorisation of the human population into groups distinguished by ‘a unique culture, held together by communitarian solidarity, and bound by shared identity’ (2013: 16). Ethnic groups, according to Brubaker, have progressively formed ‘self-evident units of observation and analysis for any historical or social inquiry’ (2002: 163). The legacy of this understanding of ethnicity is still largely visible, and unproblematised notions of ethnic groupism continue to be ‘understood as entities’ and ‘cast as actors,’ writes Brubaker. At the same time ‘essentialised collective forms of ethnicity are increasingly appropriated and echo in everyday talk, policy analysis, media reports, and even much more ostensibly constructivist academic writing’ (ibid: 165).

The resilience of groupism in understanding the entanglements between ethnicity and the city has been acknowledged by an increasing number of urban scholars, who have called for ‘more work that breaks with the tradition of envisioning minorities as “homogenous communities”’ (Anderson 1999: 73) and for a ‘style of thinking that breaks with the dichotomous culture/identity models that have enjoyed a long (…) history in theorising about race and the city’ (Anderson 1998: 220). In Tonkiss words, ‘a key challenge for some recent urban theory has been to conceive of forms of identity, diversity and community in the city without reinforcing actual or imagined lines of segregation’ (2005: 15). The task at hand, writes Smith (2001: 14), is to ‘move beyond romanticised notions of communitarianism,’ and to highlight ‘the cross-cutting local, translocal, and transnational social practices that “come together” in particular places at particular times and enter into the contested politics of place-making, (…) and the making of individual, group, national and transnational identities, and their corresponding fields of difference’ (ibid: 5).

The process aimed at marketing Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt largely relies on groupist images of ethnicity. The very ‘ethnic’ nature of these ethnicised precinct is dependent, for example, on a conceptualisation of ethnicity as a feature that can be counted by means of
Census data (see chapter 2), aided by parameters such as ‘country of origin’ and ‘language spoken at home’ to determine their ‘ethnic uniqueness’. The clustering of ethnic businesses and the visual representation often related, but not limited to, the service industry is another instance of how these areas have been targeted by urban development projects driven by ethnic place branding. Finally, by being embedded in a context defined by the competitive differentiation between precincts, the marketing material used to advertise their economic activities capitalises on simplifications that highlight ethnic difference, such as the discursive construction of a visible ‘heart of the precinct’ (see chapters 3, 5, 6) often mobilised in conjunction with the activities of the ‘ethnic community (see chapter 7). The process that leads to the production and application of the two brands that form the cases studies of this thesis, in other words, is largely characterised by what Ang (2014: 1188) calls ‘ethno-cultural substance’.

In order to develop a theoretical scaffolding to unlock this groupist paradigm, I draw on a number of works of cultural theorists and urban anthropologists, who have produced accounts ‘tuned to the multiply ambiguous idioms [of ethnicity]’ (Anderson, in press: 16). Paying attention to how ethnicity moves across a ‘diversity of identifications’ as well as ‘self-identification processes’ and ‘social constructions,’ for instance, is the way in which Ang (2014) proposes to move beyond the association of ethnicity with fixed and singular groups with the aim of highlighting the ‘uncertainty and ambivalence of Chinese identity’ (1188). In Ang’s view, the analysis of the social construction of ‘being Chinese’ needs to be attuned to how these variables are shaped by ‘changing historical circumstances, geopolitical relationships and social and political locations’ (ibid). In her article that looks at the meaning of the concept ‘Chinese’ in the Australian national context, she writes that:

We should examine the ways and contexts within which [Chineseness] is imaginatively produced and reproduced as the marker of a salient ethnic identity (...) [as well as] the social and historical processes by which the label “Chinese” continues to be used today to describe the ethnic identities of a very wide range of people (...) even if the meanings attached to their “Chinese” identities may fluctuate wildly. Who is and is not Chinese? How is this determined, and who does the determining? (ibid)

Baumann (1996), meanwhile, moves beyond the ethnic groupist paradigm by adopting ethnographic methods in a neighbourhood-based context. His work challenges the perception
of the main ‘communities’ (Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, Afro-Caribbean and White) that form the dominant discourse on the social fabric of the Western London borough of Southall, based on what he understands as ‘the “racial” divisions between Asians, Caribbean, and Whites which are readily taken for granted in Britain’ (1996: 33). By looking at the variable uses of culture, rather than treating culture as a self-evident a priori analytical category to make sense of groups, Baumann shows how Southallians ‘disengage the dominant equation [between culture and community] whenever the context appears to be suitable’ (ibid: 143). Baumann, in other words, moves beyond ethnic groupism by making a clear distinction between culture as ‘a process of meaning-making’ as opposed to culture interpreted as a ‘reifiable heritage’ (ibid: 187).

A similar strategy is adopted by Noble and Tabar (2002) in their critique of Australian multiculturalism based on the basic assumption that distinct ‘ethnic communities’ possess a neatly bounded cultural identity. In examining the narratives of identity formation of young Lebanese-Australian youngsters in a western Sydney suburb, they examine their ways of ‘code mixing’ as ‘strategies deployed’ and ‘resources used’ to move between multiple worlds, which are not the neatly separated ‘ethnic cultures’ simplistically adopted to describe their hyphenated identities, but malleable ‘elements transformed in the process, (…) [and] ways of holding often incommensurable differences together’ (Noble and Tabar 2002: 144).

Another strategy is proposed by Wimmer (2013), who ‘revitalises’ the boundary metaphor introduced by anthropologist Fredrik Barth (1969) based on the understanding that ethnicity is not a given characteristic of the social world (as it is stressed in primordialist and essentialist theories), but rather the result of the closure of social and symbolic boundaries around individuals. These boundaries, writes Wimmer, emerge ‘when actors distinguish between different ethnic categories, and when they treat members of such categories differently’ (2013: 3).

He also argues that the analysis of the boundary needs to be ‘dynamised’, so to show how such boundaries emerge in the first place and what the logic of their subsequent transformation might be, how and why they might be redrawn to include new groups of people or exclude hitherto accepted ones, how they might become blurred, fuzzy, and porous and perhaps eventually dissolve altogether, or, to the contrary, remain stable and persist over time (ibid: 4).
The use in this thesis of a number of analytical tools from the constructivist debate on ethnicity enables me to explore the tensions between essentialism and complexity inherent in the ethnic place brands. The commodification of ethnicity, or as Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) call it *Ethnicity Inc.*, is a concept of pivotal importance since it frames ethnicity as the ‘template identity’ that ‘emerges out of a loose liable dialectic [between] the incorporation of identity and the commodification of culture’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 140). I draw on this understanding of ethnicity, which treats it ‘in the guise claimed by those who would assert a collective subjectivity by objectifying it for the market’ (ibid: 118) as a starting point to destabilise the type of essentialist ethnicity that is mobilised in the dominant place branding discourse. An exploration of ethnicity through the *Ethnicity Inc.* lens therefore prevents the possibility of treating ethnic identity as an a priori analytical category. On the contrary, it enables us to look at it as an economic instrument, a strategy of positioning aimed at gaining visibility in the cultural and symbolic economy based on the provision of ‘difference’ or, to resort to Comaroff and Comaroff once again, a way to ‘(re)fashion identity, to (re)animate cultural subjectivity, to (re)charge collective self-awareness, [and] to forge new patterns of sociality, all within the marketplace’ (ibid: 26).

The process of place branding, however, is an exceptionally complex, relational and spatially exhaustive concept that necessitates more analytical tools that extend beyond the actors whose identities are pragmatically re-fashioned. As my analysis will show, ethnic place brands are mobilised as much by entrepreneurs who make creative uses of ethnicity to stimulate their economic activities, as they are by the colourful street signage announcing ‘traditional ethnic food’ provided in restaurants; by flyers distributed in information kiosks; by the speech of a local Mayor; by the cultural activities promoted during a festival; by a review on a food blog; or by the nostalgic words of a community leader. In order to engage with the multi-faceted mobilisation of ethnicity as a network of disjointed practices, and in connection with the aim of moving ethnicity beyond essentialist images of ethnic groupism, it is necessary to reconnect briefly with the theoretical advancements in place branding scholarship.
1.5 Toward Assemblage Thinking

Recent publications on place branding are characterised by a shared emphasis on the issue of ‘complexity’, especially when the application of brands is associated with the creation of ‘place identity’. Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013: 76), for example, suggest that what connects places to brands and identities is not their existence as simple results of representation, but rather that they are ‘erratic, fluid and that they are better understood as interwoven processes’. More specifically, there are several ‘complications’ in relation to the process of place branding that need to be taken into account. The first is that the brand is embodied ‘in various and diverse actions and objects, (…) that are not always aligned but also conflicting’ (Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013: 70); it is a synthesis of ‘overlapping different political, historical, religious and cultural discourses’ (Govers and Go 2009: 17). The multiplicity of actors participating in the process of branding has also been highlighted as a complex factor; the number and the role of the ‘stakeholders’ involved (Hanna and Rowley 2011), in particular, implies problematic issues such as the coordination between them, their conflicting interests, and the lack of control over the branded entity (Hatch and Schultz 2010).

Another relevant argument has been made regarding the peculiar nature of places as branded entities. According to Hankinson ‘places as products differ in several fundamental respects from commercial products’ (2007: 240); he goes on by writing that these differences ‘not only make the task of destination branding more complex [but also] call into question the relevance of a marketing theory based on organisations with no experiences of such complexities’ (ibid). In Hankinson’s opinion, the co-production, co-consumption and variability of the place product, are among the main characteristics that make places and ‘ordinary products’ differ, along with the legal definition and administrative overlap of place boundaries and their political accountability. Lastly, the difficulties of treating places as the mirror of one single identity have been pointed out by Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013). This argument echoes the theorisation of geographer Doreen Massey, who wrote that ‘multiplicity and space are co-constitutive’ (2005: 9) and that we can only imagine space as a ‘synchronicity of stories-so-far,’ or a ‘contemporaneous
plurality (...) in which distinct trajectories coexist’ (ibid). Thus, she concludes, ‘understanding space as a product of interrelations chimes well with the emergence of a politics which attempt a commitment to anti-essentialism’ (ibid: 10).

It is within this series of disjointed activities, discrepant practices and the multiple meanings that attempt to tie ethnicity and place together that I aim to embed the production and application of ethnic place brands. In this thesis I use a dynamic framework of socio-spatial relationality that enables the understanding of ethnicity beyond essentialist groupism and its often-unquestioned association with urban places that marks conventional approaches. Hence, drawing on contemporary socio-spatial theory that argues that entities are relational, emergent from and taking place in relations (Anderson et al. 2012), ethnic place brands are recognised in this thesis as ‘assemblages’. According to Anderson et al. (ibid: 186), assemblages emerge in a context where ‘relationality (...) [is] the point of departure for geographical research and debate.’ Assemblage theory, they write, allows us to understand how spatial forms and social processes are held together as an ongoing process of forming and sustaining associations between constituents.

This perspective becomes useful as it allows us to capture the complexity of ethnic place brands as things that are ‘put together’ and then associated to urban forms. Assemblage theory, in other words, stresses the ‘heterogeneous process of differentiation involving the materiality of bodies and spaces’ (Saldanha 2007: 9), and a ‘process of composition that produces durable orderings’ (Anderson et al. 2012: 175). Ethnic place brands will be investigated through this lens as social-spatial formations that emerge from ‘diverse assemblages of institutions, actors and practices’ (McGuirk and Dowling 2009: 178). This framework allows an understanding of ethnicity as a dynamic, unstable and contingent process of composition characterised by the persistent tension between essentialism and complexity.

In Deleuzian thought, assemblage thinking ‘invites us to wonder about how heterogeneous parts are assembled and orders hold together and endure both across and through differences’ (Anderson et al. 2012: 177). More specifically, Deleuze’s (1977) interpretation of assemblage can
be read as ‘the co-functioning of heterogeneous parts into some form of provisional, open whole (…) a “harlequin’s jacket or patchwork” of different bodies that can never be reduced to a series of constituent parts, nor identified as an organic whole’. The open, incomplete and uncertain nature of assemblages as explained by Deleuze has been recently reworked by Tampio, who writes that an assemblage implies ‘an entity that has both consistency and fuzzy borders; [something that] has some coherence in what it says and what it does, but it continually dissolves and morphs into something new’ (2009: 394). These perspectives have been used in recent geographical literature to understand, for example, how ‘assemblage provides a useful purchase on processes of composition, allowing us to understand how spatial forms and processes are held together, often with degrees of internal tension’ (Anderson et al. 2012: 172).

In this thesis I rely on the assemblage framework to understand ethnic place brands and their application as ‘provisional unities’ (ibid: 176) that emerge from particular arrangements and connections between heterogeneous phenomena. The ‘context’ of this application is fundamental, as the conditions that enable assemblages to emerge cannot be reduced to a ‘neutral frame within which a set of ideal forms are somehow articulated’ (ibid); they rather need to be described as a contingent and specific alignment of factors that ‘create’ ethnicity as a brand. McFarlane suggests that assemblage thinking is concerned with ‘how different spatio-temporal processes are historically drawn together at a particular conjuncture and often made stable through the work of particular powerful actors, but can then be made to disperse or realign through contestation, shifting power relations or new contexts’ (2011: 209). In this thesis I treat the brand management strategies adopted by various stakeholders in Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt as the specific contexts that frame the assemblages. From here, I pay attention to the modality of the assemblages by looking, for example, at how ethnic place brands are ‘intensified’ in particular moments, and how they produce distinct ‘narratives’ in the ethnically branded precincts where they are applied.

According to McFarlane, assemblage thinking and some versions of actor-network theory articulated by Latour (2004, 2005) are closely related. The Latourian concept of ‘gathering’, for
instance, can be read as a specific interpretation of assemblage, which indicates a ‘multifarious inquiry’ that seeks to detect ‘how many participants are gathered in a thing to make it exist and to maintain its existence’ (Latour 2004: 245-246 cit. in McFarlane 2011: 213). Anderson et al. (2012) support this statement and suggest that, in Latour’s work, the term ‘network’ is oriented toward what he describes as ‘traceable connections’, whereby ‘pockets of social order are precariously stabilised against a much vaster backdrop of discontinuities’ (Latour 2005: 245, cit. in Anderson et al. 2012: 178). This emphasis on relational thought shared by actor-network theory and assemblage theory is of pivotal relevance in this thesis, as it casts light on a complex network of representations and practices that are not necessarily related to the ‘ethno-cultural substance’ (Ang 2014), but rather to the coming together of a multiplicity of actors that make its existence possible. Hence the question of ‘who/what is engaged in the process of branding?’ will be addressed in this thesis by looking at the various stakeholders that partake in the process. I argue that it is the collaboration between them that enables the assemblage to stabilise, and therefore become a coherent brand that is temporarily visible and relevant. At the same time, lack of such collaboration, or disagreement among the stakeholders, may jeopardise the coherence of the brand, indicating the instability or precariousness of the assemblage. This issue will become clearer in chapters 5, 6, and 7, where I will describe the brand management strategies adopted for the two precincts.

To sum up, I use assemblage thinking as a theoretical framework from which ethnic place brands can be observed as platforms of multiple, contested meanings that inform the conceptualisation of ethnicity in the city beyond static and essentialist representations. As McFarlane argues, assemblage theory opens up the possibility to describe how ‘urban actors, forms or processes’ are defined ‘less by a pre-given property and more by the assemblages they enter and reconstitute’ (2011: 208). Seen in this light, ethnicity is nothing but ‘a multiplicity of processes of becoming, affixing socio-technical networks, hybrid collectives and alternative topologies’ (Farias and Bender 2010: 2). Sharing some characteristics of Latour’s actor-network, ethnic place brands as assemblages are framed in this thesis by ‘ambivalence toward a priori reduction of social-spatial relations to any fixed form or set of fixed forms’ (Anderson et al.
These ideas form the basis of the critical approach that I develop throughout this thesis toward essentialised images of ethnicity that are un-problematically associated with ethnicised precincts. I start from the assumption that ethnic place brands are complex assemblages and multi-layered discursive, spatial and social constructions related to ethnicity that are applied to specific historical, political and geographical contexts. From here, I work to describe how places and ethnicity are ‘put together’ in contingent, disaggregated and non-linear processes of representation and identification.

1.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have introduced ethnic place brands as part of the array of cultures that drive the repositioning of cities in a hierarchy of cosmopolitan urban centres and as examples of the micro-narratives of everyday negotiations of difference. Ethnic place brands are ultimately products of a managerial approach to the urban that intersects with multiple lines of power of definition over the meaning of ethnicity and that are materially represented in urban units – the precincts – that compete to highlight their point of differentiation. As I have shown in this chapter, the way in which ethnicity and the city have been framed in the place branding discourse relies on the conceptualisation of static, essentialist images of ethnicity and space that overlook a series of complexities related to the management of places and ethnicity as branded products; this idea is not always moved forward by the studies that have explored these urban phenomena, especially in the Sydney context. By introducing a theoretical framework within which I will operate in this thesis, on the other hand, I have suggested how a dynamic component can be added by applying assemblage theory to the exploration of how ethnic place brands are put together, and by taking in consideration the globally oriented, but Sydney-specific intersections between culture, ethnicity and the city that drive the reconfiguration of urban places. This is the issue onto which I will now turn.
Figure 2. Framed by the contemporary Sydney cityscape, a group of migrants stands on a sidewalk. Graphic elaboration by the author.
A Brand for the Precinct:

Interrogating the Scale of (Urban) Analysis

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides points of entry into the urban geography of Sydney to problematise the understanding of the city as ‘a whole’, and it suggests that we need to carefully consider the ‘scale’ of the inquiry when we take into account the production and application of ethnic place brands. In doing so, this chapter connects with Brenner’s reflection on the ‘scale question’ or, to put it in his words, on the “transformed form” of the urban question in an era in which entrenched geographical scales (...) are being profoundly rearticulated, reshuffled and redefined throughout the world economy’ (Brenner 2000: 362). My argument here is that place branding is a catalyst for urban rearticulation and a model of urban economic revitalisation that is sustained by the interrelation between different spatial layers. This chapter looks at the ‘precinct’ as a ‘historically specific epistemic framework’ (ibid: 367) through which Sydney can be interpreted ‘in sociological analysis, in public discourse, in sociopolitical struggles [and] in everyday experience’ (ibid).

7 The ‘question of scale’ (la question d’échelle) was introduced by Henri Lefebvre (1976).
8 The concept was introduced by Manuel Castells (1972), to describe the role of the “urban system” as a determinate structure within the capitalist mode of production. In Castells’ terminology, writes Brenner, ‘scales are described as the differentiated “spatial units” of which the capitalist system is composed’ (Brenner 2000: 363).
Equally central to the scope of this chapter is to describe the modality through which Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt are constructed as ethnicised precincts via urban development strategies based on the institutionalisation of the precinct model. The description of this process unveils the multiplicity of layers involved in the assignment of a brand for the two precincts and it explores the variety of angles and perspectives that needs to be taken in consideration: from the intersections between culture, ethnicity and the city discussed in chapter 1; to overarching narratives of urban growth and economic development that interest the Sydney metropolitan area; to the way in which Local Government Areas (hereafter LGAs) manage their points of differentiation while appropriating globally circulating models of urban economy. Lastly, there is a range of stakeholders at a local level, who work to make culture and place to overlap via a process of abstraction, association and spatial alignment.

2.2 Sustainable Sydney 2030: ‘Green, Global and Connected’

In Sydney the practice of place branding takes place in a context defined by urban development and growth, a ‘vision’ for the city’s future called ‘Sydney 2030’. In this section, I will look closely at the way in which precincts are made to discursively exist in the context of this development plan as they represent the overlapping of the different types of ‘culture’ discussed in chapter 1, and ‘city’ as a differentiated field of development. In doing so, I also want to start teasing out the multiple spatial and institutional ‘layers’ that are inherent in the practice of place branding. My aim is to introduce the context in which place branding operates as a multi-scalar conceptualisation of the urban, one defined by different and interrelated levels of governance and areas of growth.

Sustainable Sydney 2030 is a long-term development plan officially adopted by the City of Sydney LGA in 2008. The plan was conceptualised as a consequence of the pressures of ‘continuing growth and change,’ as well as the incumbent ‘environmental and economic threats’ (City of Sydney 2013: 10) to which the city authorities have been called to respond by implementing efficient policies, which are ‘underpinned by a visionary approach (…) focussed..."
on sustainability’ (ibid). ‘Green, Global and Connected’ was adopted as the motto for the development project: here ‘Green’ stands as a metaphor for a development with minimal environmental impact; ‘Global’ represents a sought-after economic orientation, which becomes translated into the consolidation of global links, partnerships and knowledge exchange; lastly ‘Connected’ indicates facilitated circulation among the different areas of the city; a virtual interconnectedness aided by world-class telecommunications and a lived dimension of ‘connected communities through a sense of belonging, contribution, social well-being and quality’ (ibid: 3). The plan addresses, in other words, a wide range of complex and interrelated issues that extend beyond the physical environment to include economic, social and cultural dimensions of city life; it places Sydney in a context defined by global and local flows, which will shape its future.

The ‘Community Strategic Plan’ (hereafter the Plan) was released in 2013 as part of the monitoring process of the implementation of the overall Sustainable Sydney project; it includes a geographical description of what the wider project recognises as ‘city’ and a list of the areas that will be influenced by the changes that it envisions. In the Plan there is no fixed conception of what the city is; as a matter of fact, the document specifies that there are ‘numerous stakeholders that share an interest in the development process,’ who have ‘key planning and development responsibilities’ (ibid: 6), and that the understanding of the growth of Sydney should not be limited to the role of one actor only (with reference to the City of Sydney LGA).

The Plan, in other words, conceptualises the ‘city’ as a process of making, where a multiplicity of stakeholders plays different roles, at the expense of one coherent, bounded understanding of the ‘urban’. The distinction between what the city is and how far the effects of city planning stretch is also constantly problematised, as the Plan recognises a broader development context of Inner Sydney, which includes the Inner Western, Eastern and Northern suburbs. These areas are not under the direct jurisdiction of the City of Sydney LGA; however, they represent a fundamental aspect to understanding the development of Sydney, as they are a ‘focus for jobs, leisure and cultural opportunities for the wider Sydney region’ (ibid: 6).
The terminology used in the Community Strategic Plan conceptualises the ‘city’ not only as a series of stakeholders and a field of interrelated developing areas, but also as a spatially differentiated field of governance. As a matter of fact, a neat distinction is made between different ways to refer to ‘Sydney’, each one indicating a different idea. The ‘City of Sydney’, for example, refers to the Council as the organisation responsible for the administration of the LGA; the ‘City’ relates to the geographical area that is administered by the City of Sydney and its physical elements; the ‘City Centre’ encompasses the Central Business District and its major civic functions, government offices, cultural and entertainment assets; ‘Inner Sydney’, on the other hand, is used to describe the 11 LGAs of Inner Sydney\(^9\) (see figure 3); lastly ‘Sydney Region’ refers to the 43 LGAs of the wider Sydney metropolitan region and Central Coast (ibid: 6).

Here a conceptualisation of the city emerges as a multi-layered entity defined by spatial demarcations that make of it a manageable field of governance. This enables us to understand

\(^9\) City of Sydney, North Sydney, Ashfield, Botany Bay, Canada Bay, Leichhardt, Marrickville, Randwick, Rockdale, Waverley and Woollahra.
the city in many ways: a Local Government Area, a constellation of different cities, an agglomeration of different zones characterised by phases of development, and the sum of it all. The Plan seems to point to ‘the city’ at the same time as what lies within and beyond the boundaries of a series of spatial interventions. ‘Sydney’, in other words, emerges out of a comprehensive and holistic plan that ‘requires a focus on the wider metropolitan region’, as it is indicated that the process of growth will have ‘inevitable implications beyond the [City of Sydney] Local Government Area’ (City of Sydney 2013: 10).

2.3 Culture and Place: Activating the Precincts

The role played by ‘culture’ in the document is central to this chapter. My aim here is to analyse how this is placed within the discourse of urban development, and what the consequences of its application to the areas of growth are. In the Community Strategic Plan culture is framed with people’s beliefs, practices and lifestyles, as well as to the city’s infrastructures. Its role is explicitly connected to that of positioning the city in a global hierarchy and its potential to drive urban development underlines the whole document. The overall aim of the Plan seems to be that of enhancing the status of a generalised culture as a prominent factor in driving Sydney’s growth; this is especially visible in the 10 ‘strategic directions’,10 where the management of culture represents one of the most relevant underlining themes.

The Plan recognises, for example, that the status of a globally competitive and innovative city is one of the most desirable outcomes for the city; to achieve this goal, it is essential to ‘strengthen the economic activities and the role of the City Centre precincts’ (ibid: 27); this will happen by means of establishing cultural infrastructures and amenities, so that ‘effective partnerships for delivering world-class tourism’ can be achieved (ibid: 30). The creation of an engaging and lively city centre is another main objective of the Plan; the document in this context recognises the

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10 Sydney as a ‘globally competitive and innovative city’; a ‘leading environmental performer’; an ‘integrated and connected city’; a ‘city for walking and cycling’; a ‘city endowed with a lively and engaging centre’; a ‘city with vibrant communities and economies’; a ‘cultural and creative city’; a ‘city with housing for a diverse population’; a ‘city defined by a sustainable development based on renewal and design’; a ‘city characterised by the implementation of policies based on effective governance and partnerships’ (City of Sydney 2013: 25).
need to ‘manage and strengthen the mix of active frontages, engaging built form and precincts’ (ibid: 43) to enhance the iconic status of the city as it is represented in its most symbolic core. The Plan also acknowledges the different ‘cultures’ that inhabit the city, when it reads that ‘the City is made up of diverse communities, with diverse lifestyles, interests and needs’ (ibid: 46); here, the document starts to refer more specifically to a more lived dimension of culture, even though without explicitly referring to ethnic identity. Culture, however, seems to be increasingly referred to as the defining characteristic of specific groups of people who inhabit areas of the city, which are recognised as ‘unique’. This localised understanding of various cultures leads to another main way in which cultural expressions are framed in the document: through their spatialisation and management. Culture seems to represent a valuable asset particularly when it is made to ‘fit into’ specific parts of the city and stabilised by means of governmental techniques. This factor becomes increasingly prominent in the Plan, as the city’s different cultural expressions are recurrently articulated in relation to ‘precincts’ or ‘villages’. These urban spaces are recognised to be important assets for the economies of the city and a great source of employment. The Plan concludes that ‘the City’s local communities and economies can be even stronger; [and] that the distinctive character of the Villages should be enhanced’ (ibid: 46).

My point here is that the underlining theme of ‘culture’ being an economic and spatial driver of change is encapsulated in the image of the precinct; in this thesis I frame this urban spatial unit as a core issue in understanding the urban economic rearticulation (see Brenner 2000) visible in Sydney, and a symbol of how the entanglements of various understandings of culture and the city are woven together. Two passages, one from the Community Development Plan and the other from the City of Sydney’s website, help to introduce the point that I have just made:

The City’s distinctive Villages will continue to be strong focal points for community life and will encourage a sense of belonging. The Villages will be served by centres where services are concentrated, which will be interconnected and make a significant contribution to the City’s liveability, which will increasingly underpin its global competitiveness (City of Sydney 2013: 17).

Like all great capitals, Sydney is a collection of villages, each with its own unique atmosphere and local characteristics (...) this collection of classic Sydney experiences will immerse you in village life, wherever you are in this wonderful, multifaceted city (www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au).
The concept of ‘village/precinct’ here is relevant for two main reasons: firstly, it illustrates the complexities of the scalar analysis when the city is analysed in the context of place branding practices. Secondly, it refers to the globally circulating model of urban economy that is appropriated by the City of Sydney as a way to plug into branding strategies used by ‘great capitals’, while at the same time paving the way for methodological experimentation in the study of the city.

The density of the scalar interconnections represented by the institutionalisation of precincts can be noticed in the way in which these are framed in the two excerpts. Precincts here represent at the same time ideas of sustainability, globality and connectedness that the overall Sustainable Sydney 2030 vision aims to achieve, and a fundamental asset to strengthen the global competitiveness of the city. The uniqueness that each village/precinct needs to carefully manage is understood as part of the process of ‘competitive differentiation’ (Anholt 2006) that I have explored in chapter 1. This becomes visible both within the city (where culture creates places that compete for their share of urban consumers) and across cities (where spatialised cultural diversity is a necessary characteristic to elevate the status of Sydney as a competitive global city).

Here, again, it is possible to notice how the layers inherent in the practice of place branding are complex and interrelated. Stevenson writes that, ‘cities worldwide have embraced [branding] approaches with enthusiasm, since they are generally preoccupied both with gaining a position as a “world class city”, and cashing in on urban tourism’ (Stevenson 2012: 145). In this thesis, I start from this assumption and I set out to observe the forces at play in shaping the city’s competitiveness. However, I am also interested in addressing place branding in Sydney as an opportunity to shift the analytical lens from a comprehensive and totalising understanding of the city, to a constellation of differentiated fields of social, economic and cultural action. In doing so, I do not wish to trace new boundaries and treat precincts as ‘separate territorial islands of social relations’ (Brenner 2000: 368). Rather, my aim is to acknowledge them as ‘scalar vocabularies’ that allow us to gain insights into the ‘perpetually changing historical interconnections and
interdependencies among [continually reconfigured] geographical scales’ (ibid). The differentiation between precinct, village and suburb is the first step to add richness to a spatial vocabulary, which focuses on the prominence of scale in the context of place branding.

2.4 Organising Cultures

The role played by the LGAs is a fundamental one in the context of place branding. In this section I introduce the City of Sydney and the Leichhardt LGAs and I look at the strategies through which they organise specific types of culture within their administered areas by both embracing the precinct-centred model of development that emerges from the Sustainable Sydney 2030 plan and by choosing ethnicity as the ‘flavour’ for two of their administered areas. Culture, in this context, emerges as the specific type of development tool discussed in chapter 1, which is appropriated by LGAs based on their localised cultural assets. In describing this process, my aim is to tease out a number of factors that enable to look at Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt in a comparative manner within the context of place branding despite the different institutional frames of references in which these two places are situated and the different dynamics of growth that underpin them (see Dear 2005).

Chinatown/Haymarket

The City of Sydney is bounded by Port Jackson in the north, the Woollahra Municipal Council and Randwick City in the east, the City of Botany Bay in the south and the Marrickville and Leichhardt Council areas in the west. The LGA includes the suburbs of Alexandria, Annandale, Barangaroo, Beaconsfield, Camperdown, Centennial Park, Chippendale, Darlinghurst, Darlington, Dawes Point, Elizabeth Bay, Erskineville, Eveleigh, Forest Lodge, Glebe, Haymarket, Millers Point, Moore Park, Newtown, Paddington, Potts Point, Pyrmont, Redfern, Rosebery, Rushcutters Bay, St Peters, Surry Hills, Sydney, The Rocks, Ultimo, Waterloo, Woolloomooloo and Zetland. As we have been able to observe, the cultural diversity of the areas administered by the City of Sydney Council has been officially ‘organised’ since 2008 by
adopting the model of the precinct/village, of which the picture below is a visual representation (with Haymarket in blue). This has been mostly propagated by means of an advertising campaign called ‘Slices of Sydney’. In 2013, the first page of the campaign – published physically via A5 sized booklets – contained a message from the Lord Mayor of Sydney, which read:

Sydney is a city of villages. Each community radiates a unique essence. Taste the culture and take away a slice of Sydney. (...) Taste the distinct flavours of each village (City of Sydney 20011: 1).

Together with the marketing campaign used to promote the precincts’ uniqueness, the City of Sydney has also released a series of reports for each of the villages into which the LGA is divided; these outline their individual geographical and socio-economic characteristics.

Figure 4. City of Sydney Village Centre Boundaries (www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au).
The Chinatown Village, also described as ‘CBD South Village’, is introduced in one of these documents as the area that stretches from Bathurst Street in the north to Central railway station in the south, and from Elizabeth Street in the east to Darling Harbour in the west. The precinct is referred to as a ‘mixed use area, with entertainment, commercial and increasing residential land uses due to redevelopment,’ where ‘residents from China and other Asian countries are well-represented’ (City of Sydney 2012: 2). The report concludes that major features of the area include Harbourside Shopping Centre, Pyrmont Bay Wharf, Sydney Entertainment Centre, the Australian National Maritime Museum, Market City Shopping Centre, Chinatown, Paddy’s Markets, TAFE NSW, University of Technology Sydney, Central Station, Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre, Belmore Park, the Chinese Garden of Friendship and Tumbalong Park.

Based on the list of the landmarks that characterise the precinct it can be noted that, exception made for a number of attractions and development sites in Darling Harbour and Pyrmont, the conceptualisation of the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct utilised by the City of Sydney overlaps entirely with the Haymarket ‘state suburb’ used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This spatial demarcation is used to provide statistical data related to the demographics of the precinct based on the 2006-2011 Census of the Haymarket suburb. These indicate that the median age of the population of 5,376 in Chinatown Village today is 27. According to the same statistics, the most common ancestries of the precinct’s inhabitants are Chinese (32.7%), Thai (12.8%) and English (6.6%). Data collected using country of birth as interpretive filter highlight the diversity of the precinct by suggesting that China (18.3%), Thailand (14.8%), and Indonesia (10.8%) are the most common countries of birth, while the most common languages used in the precinct’s households include Mandarin, Thai, Indonesian, Cantonese and Korean, respectively used by 17%, 14.4%, 9.6%, 7.6% and 6.4% of the population.

11 The first is a pedestrian precinct that is administered independently of the LGA of the City of Sydney, by a New South Wales state government statutory authority called Sydney Foreshore Authority; the second is another City of Sydney suburb.
12 This figure does not include SARs and Taiwan.
Leichhardt

Leichhardt LGA is located in the inner-western part of metropolitan Sydney, adjacent to the City of Sydney. The boundaries of the Council’s area are the Parramatta River in the north, the City of Sydney in the East, Marrickville Council in the south and Ashfield Council in the west. Leichhardt is also the name of one of the six suburbs – including Annandale, Balmain, Birchgrove, Lilyfield and Rozelle – the sum of which forms the Leichhardt LGA. The suburb of Leichhardt is located in the south-western part of the municipality and it is considered the administrative centre for the LGA. Leichhardt Council collaborates with the Leichhardt and Annandale Business Chamber in the publication of a similar initiative to the City of Sydney’s ‘Slices of Sydney’. This is called ‘Places to Discover’ and it introduces the suburbs of the Leichhardt LGA and their amenities as it follows:

this guide is designed to showcase local hotspots, secret gardens, great tasting food, where to get the best coffee and pay tribute to the local heritage (…) meander through historic streets or just relax in the manicured urban parks of Leichhardt and its villages…. The places to discover’ (Leichhardt Council and Leichhardt and Annandale Business Chamber 2013: 2).

Leichhardt is framed by the project as one of the ‘Places to Discover’. Like in the case of Haymarket/Chinatown, a geographical map of the precinct released online by the Council shows that the borders that delimit the precinct are the same that define the state suburb of Leichhardt (see figure 5); these are City West Link, Balmain Road, Moore Street, Moore Lane and White Street in the north and Whites Creek Lane in the east. Parramatta Road and the Hawthorne Canal represent respectively the precincts’ southern and western limits. According to the 2011 Census, Leichhardt (precinct) is home to 13,520 people whose top five ancestral sources are England (31.7%); Australia (26.9%); Ireland (14.2%); Italy (10.7%) and Scotland (9.5%). Analysis of the languages spoken shows that 73.8% of the population speaks English only and that 21.3% speaks a non-English language. The dominant languages other than English spoken in Leichhardt’s households are Italian (6.1% of the population), Spanish (2.1%) and Greek (1.5%).
The Leichhardt LGA Community Profile indicates that Leichhardt precinct is a mixed use area, with residential, commercial and industrial land use and that the major attractions in the precinct are Market Place and Norton Plaza Shopping Centres, the Italian Cultural Centre, the Italian Forum, Leichhardt Town Hall, Hawthorne Canal Reserve, Lambert Park, Pioneers Memorial Park, and the Norton Street commercial area. The Development Control Plan (DCP), published by the Council in 2006, highlights the centrality of this last area in particular for the economy of the precinct, and describes its landform as ‘the slopes of the main Leichhardt/Balmain ridge, with the junction of Marion and Norton Street forming the highest location. From this point,

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13 Norton Street hosts a concentration of residential buildings, restaurants, cafes, eateries and individual retail outlets, including several bookstores and grocery shops.
the street slopes down towards Lilyfield Road in the North, and falls towards Parramatta Road in the south’ (Leichhardt Council 2006: 84).

The data discussed so far show that the City of Sydney and Leichhardt Council adopt a similar strategy to organise urban areas in recognisable spaces via an urban development template and a number of economic activities that promote the paramount role of the precincts. The process that leads to the creation of these urban areas starts with a specific understanding that depicts the LGAs as spatially/regionally/culturally differentiated fields divided into administrative units. These are described in terms of their amenities, their landmarks and their potential for development, or the areas that have undergone the most obvious phases of growth and where the majority of activities are concentrated. The same spatial demarcations used to delimit these areas as ‘suburbs’ are used in official documents to institutionalise the role of the ‘precinct’ in a number of ways: on the one hand, the role of the border is that of containing the precinct’s cultural specificity, while on the other a delimited understanding of the area makes it possible to draw on a number of measurable parameters (e.g. country of birth and language spoken at home) to foreground specific demographic characteristics as part of the construction of the precinct’s point of differentiation. A measurable concentration of immigrants and the role of borders as containers for urban culture are crucial elements for the achievement of a brand for the precinct, as we have been able to observe in chapter 1 with the proposed creation of a concept for ‘Little Korea’.

The measurement of the population, the description of the assets and the demarcation of borders, in other words, are the shared characteristics that enable us to observe how the ‘structure’ of the Chinatown Village and Leichhardt precinct can be analysed as product of the same urban economic strategy. This is based on competitive differentiation and it constructs a fragmented urban landscape to promote a series of cultural amenities, whereby culture represents at the same time the tool that positions the city in global hierarchies, the lived dimension of cultural negotiation, and the driver for project of urban revitalisation. As I will demonstrate in the rest of the chapter, stemming from this type of spatialisation and
management of culture, ethnicity emerges as the differentiation point for these parts of the city, and the feature that drives their passage from suburbs to precincts via marketing initiatives: Haymarket/Chinatown is defined by an ambiguous multi-Asianness, whereas Leichhardt is introduced by means of a more assertive Italianness.

Although the structure that I have just sketched out helps to understand the general mechanism that leads to the emergence of precincts, Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt need to be framed in a more complex interrelation between urban spatial reconfigurations and ‘ethnic settlements’. In particular, I want to focus on the formation of symbolic boundaries and spaces of interest in both precincts as a result of the Chinese and Italian histories of migration that have characterised these two parts of Sydney from the early 20th century. The understanding of this historical factor, I argue, is necessary to grasp the inclusion of ‘ethnicity’ within a range of ‘cultures’ used as instruments of urban development that this thesis looks at. The point that I am trying to make here is that the production of ethnic place brands necessarily involves the deep understanding of the particular urban areas to which they are applied, in particular how the ethnic narrative became rooted in their history.

2.4.1 From The Rocks to Haymarket: The Social Construction of Chinatown

According to Williams (1999), thousands of Chinese gold seekers came by ship via Sydney onto the various diggings in the NSW countryside between 1848 and 1853. The areas in the immediate proximity of the docks became the preferred site for all those who were looking for a convenient and cheap ‘exit point to the goldfields’ (Mak 2003: 93). Despite the temporary premises upon which early docks-based settlements such as the one in The Rocks were built, and amidst a growing negative perception of Chinese migrants and their settlements in Australia, ‘by the 1890s Chinese people were represented in a wide variety of occupations including scrub cutters, interpreters, cooks, cabinet makers, storekeepers and drapers’ (Williams 1999: 6). A number of factors however contributed to the shifting preferences of migrant labourers (mostly from the southern parts of China) in their settlement choices in Sydney. The first was the nature
of the migratory experience, which in most cases increasingly passed from sojourning to staying; the second was the fact they were restricted to taking up jobs that Europeans found less desirable, such as market gardening (Mak 2003).

These were the most influential factors that informed the choice of a southwards movement to the surroundings of the Belmore Markets, in the southern end of what today is the area administered by the City of Sydney. Despite the growing anti-Chinese sentiments, an increasing number of businesses conducted by ex-gold seekers and Chinese migrants were established in Surry Hills from the beginning of the 20th century. In particular, the diversification of Chinese entrepreneurial activity included the establishment of a range of industries such as newspaper publishing and international trading. The process of sending remittances to the home village would be entirely organised by businesses established in this period; these acted simultaneously as banks, notary, exchange agents and couriers (Williams 1999). As a result of this flourishing socio-economic life, Fitzgerald (1997: 112) writes that ‘by 1900, streets (…) in the top end of Surry Hills were well established as a Chinese residential precinct’. However, mounting xenophobic sentiments that specifically targeted the Chinese population contributed to the fact that this settlement became generally regarded with fear and suspicion by the mainstream society. The area was therefore increasingly ‘perceived to be full of vice and crime (…) [and] legitimised government persecution as a necessary control over the racially inferior’ (Mak 2003: 94).

Fitzgerald (1997) observes that many of the Chinese entrepreneurs that had gravitated for years in the surroundings of Surry Hills decided to move to Haymarket when Sydney City Council reclaimed ten acres of land in the precinct bounded by Hay, Quay and Thomas Streets. This piece of land was chosen as the preferred site for the establishment of a market building, which was officially opened in 1909. This new Chinese urban concentration bore significant similarities with the previous settlements. It was located in one of the poorest areas of the city, where small or marginal retail businesses or restaurants could be set up for low rents; however, one of the most relevant features that made the Haymarket settlement different from the previous ones was that the Chinese ‘were beginning to buy into the area, instead of renting’ (Fitzgerald 1997: 94).
A number of buildings in Dixon Street, the main street adjacent to the market building, were purchased in the following decades by Southern Chinese clan associations and retailing firms. Dormitories were also set up in the buildings bought by Chinese entrepreneurs especially in Dixon Street, contributing to the consolidation of the street as a point of congregation. An economically and culturally stable point of reference was therefore created for a community nested around a strategic location in the proximity of the newly established market area, which gave Haymarket its raison d'être for many years.

The relocation of the markets to the western suburb of Flemington that occurred at the end of the 1960s created a huge business vacuum in Haymarket. The area was abandoned to its own destiny, amidst the tendency to suburbanisation that characterised the pattern of urban growth of many cities – including Sydney – in the second half of the 20th century and that coincided with the gradual deterioration of inner-city areas (see Zukin 1995, 2009). The introduction of multicultural policies, however, entirely changed the fate of Haymarket. The extensive development that took place in Dixon Street from the mid-1970s and throughout the 1980s has been described as a demonstration of the City of Sydney’s ‘commitment to multiculturalism’ (Mak 2003: 94). In this context, the proposal to turn the area into an ethnic urban attraction (ibid: 93) signalled the City authorities’ pragmatic decision to contribute to the cause of multiculturalism while revitalising ‘a part of the city that had for many years been perceived as an undesirable ethnic ghetto’ (ibid: 94).

The first objective was met by making the precinct appear ‘more consistent’ (Collins 2007: 76) with architectural motives and symbols of ancient/mythical China; the second, by endowing the urban forms with the sanitised, predictable and standardised features of a pedestrian mall. A ‘desirable expression of Chinese ethnicity,’ Mak (2003: 93) argues, was therefore achieved through the joint effort of the municipal authorities and the local business community, who looked at tourism and beautification as the channel through which to mediate the revitalisation of Haymarket via the material and discursive construction of ‘Chinatown’. The impact of ‘multiculturalism’ in the conceptualisation of Chineseness as a type of ethnic expression in the
city is an issue that will be discussed in depth in chapter 3. Here it is sufficient to mention that the beautification of Haymarket inscribed a stereotyped Chineseness in the urban forms and laid the basis for the future adoption of ethnicity as the ‘theme’ for the Haymarket/Chinatown precinct.

Throughout the years Chinatown/Haymarket has consolidated its position as a testimony to the influence of waves of migration to Sydney from different Asian countries, the committed efforts of a number of businesses and regional associations, and its visibility in the urban fabric of a growing global city. Its relevance for the City’s cultural assets has been proved by the decision of the authorities to name Chinatown/Haymarket a ‘priority precinct’, a decision which characterised the implementation of another major recent project of beautification which ‘strategically aligned’ with the Sustainable Sydney 2030 plan (see chapter 5). Chinatown/Haymarket, in other words, capitalised on its central position in a context defined by significant urban transformation, driven by an increasing cultural political and economic interconnectedness between Australia and the Asia Pacific region. A type of Chineseness represented in the urban fabric by the construction of a thematised platform and sustained by continued migration to Australia from a variety of Asian country has sanctioned the adoption of ethnicity as the brand for the precinct, encapsulated in the motto ‘a multi-Asian taste carnival’ (City of Sydney 2011: 59). Today, the precinct is inhabited by a culturally diverse population and sustained by a growing economy based on the service industry.

2.4.2 Sketching out Italian Migration to Leichhardt

Italians who lived in Sydney in the first decades of the 20th century found employment in a fairly narrow range of occupations, mostly in restaurants, fruit and vegetable growing and vending, but also in the fishing industry. From the turn of the century, Italians used the area of today’s Central Business District as both the centre of their activities14 and the location for their clubs15

14 The filmmaker Fabio Cavadini has explored these places in relation to their past as Italian settlements in a documentary set in Darlinghurst titled ‘The Other Side of the Coin’ (1979).
Pesman and Catherine 2001). Burnley (1981) argues that the expanding Australian metropolis of the first decades of the 20th century provided ‘new opportunities for artisans and craftsmen in the catering trades and small businesses, as well as for small farmers in the market gardens’ (Burnley 1981: 179). Following the First World War and the restrictions on European migration imposed in 1921 by the United States, Italian migration to Australia increased considerably. In 1921, the Census registered a growing and diversifying Italian population in Sydney, with the percentage of women rising from 10% in 1881, to a significant 27%. Only a decade later the figures had almost tripled, when the 1933 Census counted 3,325 Sydney-siders with Italian origins.

In spite of the popularity of the central urban areas for the first Italian settlements,16 Sydney’s Inner West increasingly became one of the favourite destinations for Italian migrants mostly due to its proximity to unskilled work opportunities in the outer suburbs. According to the 1933 Census, the Italian-born population in the Leichhardt area had already grown to become ‘the major Italian concentration’ in Sydney (Burnley 1981: 192). As clusters of Italian migrants extended in the following decades, Leichhardt acquired an important meaning as a point in between the early Italian settlements in the city and those in more rural areas. The newly arrived migrants of the post-World War II period chose to settle down in the suburb due to the availability of boarding houses and the ‘echo effect’ produced by the cluster of Italian services in this part of the city. During this time a new, massive wave of migration happened in conjunction with the evolution of institutional structures, which facilitated the adjustment of newcomers; ‘this phase,’ continues Burnley, ‘coincided with an early thrust towards private home ownership in the main concentrations, mostly in the 1950s’ (Burnley 1981: 182).

Between 1954 and 1961, Leichhardt was both ‘a reception centre’ and a ‘transit camp’ (Solling and Reynolds 1997: 226) for migrants; in this timeframe, the number of Italian-born grew dramatically from 1493 to 4566. Dozens of interrelated families clustered together in the neighbourhood mostly following the chain migration process, whereby a male migrant arrived

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15 According to Cresciani (2008) the Aeolian Island Club, the Italian Star Society and Club Italia were funded respectively in 1903, 1906 and 1915.
16 Particularly Surry Hills, Darlinghurst, Paddington and Kings Cross, today part of the City of Sydney LGA.
from a certain village in Italy and found a livelihood somewhere; his wife and children would later join him, followed by relatives and, eventually, people from the same village or district. This pattern is characterised by what Solling and Reynolds (1997: 224) understand as an ‘immigrant culture that (…) was bonded by membership of political clubs, loyalty among ‘paesani’ (people from the same village), and occupational ties’. Community life flourished and it was aided by a series of regional, religious and recreational associations, which provided the community with spaces for socialisation and a refuge from the sense of isolation experienced when confronted with the culturally different Anglo-Celtic dominated Australian society of the time.\textsuperscript{17}

By the 1970s, Leichhardt had become an established business area for Italian travel agents, pastry, bridal and gift shops, butchers and delicatessen, furniture and clothing workshops. The area increasingly functioned as a point of reference to the extent that, by 1976, there were 175 Italian-owned businesses located along a two kilometres stretch of Parramatta Road and in Norton Street, especially near their intersection (Cresciani 2008).

The settlement preferences of Italian migrants in Sydney, however, changed from the late 1970s. This shift can be attributed to the changing logics of chain migration that had characterised the settlement process up to that point, but also to wider issues related to Italian migration and their arrivals to Australia. As a matter of fact, historian Gianfranco Cresciani (2009: 1) writes that 1976 is the year that marked ‘the end of the Italian diaspora’, following a period, between 1876 and 1976, when over 26 million people had left Italy. Many of the families who lived and operated in Leichhardt in the previous decades began to relocate from the late 1960s to outer suburbs such as Five Dock, Haberfield, Concord and Drummoyne.

Following the generational turnover of shop ownership, whereby most second and third generation Italian-Australians refused to take up their parents’ businesses, a number of Italian businesses in Leichhardt also disappeared and Norton Street slowly diversified in its commercial

\textsuperscript{17} In 1945, the Catholic religious congregation of the Capuchin Fathers set up their parish at St. Fiaces, in Catherine Street; the Italian-Australian Sporting Association (APIA Club), on the other hand, was founded in Leichhardt in 1954 (Pesman and Catherine 2001).
composition. Meanwhile, the urban area along Parramatta Road, which for many years had served as the main socio-cultural artery of the suburb, progressively lost its occasional nature as a pedestrian strip (when markets would be hosted) to become a traffic thoroughfare connecting the expanding western suburbs to the financial centre of the emerging global city.

Despite the relocation of previous residents to other areas, which continued throughout the 1970s, Leichhardt’s symbolic relevance significantly increased when iconic institutions like La Fiamma (Sydney’s Italian newspaper) and Casa d’Italia (a structure hosting the Italian community service provider Co.As.It) established their headquarters in Norton Street at the beginning of the 1980s. At the same time, the ‘resurgence’ of Italian-food-related businesses along the street, catering to the increasing demands for world cuisine in a rapidly ascending global city like Sydney, sparked an initiative of beautification that the Council interpreted as ‘Italian in inspiration and realisation’ (Solling and Reynolds 1997: 39) and that relied on the visible ‘Little Italy’ concept.

The Bicentenary gift made by the Federal Government in 1988 of a parcel of land located in the southern end of Leichhardt to the Italian community in honour of its contribution to multicultural Australia resulted, in 2001, with the construction of an ‘Italian themed’ mixed residential, cultural and commercial structure covering an area of almost 700m². This structure, which became known as ‘Italian Forum’, undoubtedly consolidated the suburb’s reputation as Sydney’s ‘Little Italy’, and it provided the same type of stage that had constructed Chinatown in Haymarket a decade earlier. Today, annual activities like the Norton Street Festa, and the recent major planning for the re-activation of the cultural/economic activities along the Parramatta Road corridor have contributed to an intensified interest in the area of Leichhardt, with a specific focus on its Italianness following a period of protracted economic decline. The type of branding adopted for the precinct is carried out under the motto ‘Little Italy with a Twist’, a strategy that highlights the revitalised importance of the idea of ethnicity in a context of gradual decline due to relocation and scattering of ethnic business activities.
2.5 Reifying/Intensifying Difference through Marketing Material

So far in this chapter I have explored the way in which the precinct is institutionalised in the Sydney context and how, at the LGA level, this type of city space-tourist place (Hayllar et al. 2010) represents the result of an intervention that imposes a bordered urban template characterised by a complex mix of demographic features and places of interest. The Chinese and Italian heritage that has defined Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt throughout the 20th century, has determined the adoption of ethnicity as a theme for the two ethnicised precincts that this thesis looks at. We have been able to observe how the spatialised understanding of ‘difference’ that the two areas have provided and the management of this type of culture by the LGAs are the two main factors that contribute to the construction of ethnic place brands.

In this section of the chapter I want to shift my attention onto an even more microscopic dimension and the ‘modality’ of the construction of the precincts’ themes. I will do so by looking at their activation from the perspective of a specific discursive intervention, which is disseminated in marketing material regarding the two precincts. I argue that this process is based on a marketing language designed to ‘evoke a clear mental picture’ (Griffin et al. 2010: 40) of the precinct in the consumer’s mind starting from the abstraction of ethnic culture, and its application to the precinct previously sketched out. I suggest that, in the case of Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt, this process foregrounds an initial series of contradictions – mostly related to the tensions between essentialism and complexity – that I will discuss in more depth in the empirical chapters.

The series of social, cultural and economic activities that have proliferated in Sydney in response to the institutionalisation of the precinct model of urban development can be taken as examples to discuss the modalities of place-brand activation. The company ‘Urban Walkabout’ is one of the major actors in this context. This was established in 2006 with the aim to ‘encourage shopping locally, support local businesses, and activating local economies’ (www.urbanwalkabout.com). Since its inception, the company has worked to produce a series of pocket-sized fold-out map guides related to various Sydney precincts. The main role of the
company is to liaise between different LGAs (such as City of Sydney, Willoughby City Council, City of Ryde), tourism organisations and festivals (such as Sydney Fashion Festival and Tropfest), independent businesses and associations (for example the Haymarket Chamber of Commerce) with the aim of consolidating the concept for the various precincts.

The Urban Walkabout guides have become a common sight to international visitors, but are also aimed to Sydneysiders and local consumers.\textsuperscript{18} They have become part of a wider process of place branding that is being increasingly adopted by several cities across Australia (the company has recently started to publish its guides in Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra, Hobart, Melbourne, Perth and Newcastle). In Sydney, the guides are printed for each of the precincts that adhere to the initiative; they include an illustrated map with slick photography and descriptive venue reviews that direct readers to a selection of boutiques, spas and salons, local artisans’ workshops, art galleries, markets, bookstores, cafes, bars and restaurants. The ways in which certain discursive expedients are used in the Urban Walkabout guides illustrate the process through which precincts’ distinctive characteristics are highlighted. The introduction of the beachside suburb of Manly, for instance, reads:

Sydney’s favourite beachside village conjures the halcyon days of a seventies summer: the hazy union of the sun, surf and sea and the promise of days that never end and nights you know you’re meant to remember (Urban Walkabout MAR-SEP 2013, ‘Manly’).

A simplified image of the ‘beachside village’ is constructed here that points to several issues worth noticing: firstly, the reference to a specific historical period operates as an intervention to the mind of the reader/consumer, who is required to draw a line around the precinct, decontextualise and re-embed it into a romanticised past. This process of ‘imagining’ the sunny, conflict-free, surf-driven days spent on the beach works to objectify, depoliticise, and flatten the multiplicity of cultures coexisting in Manly. It creates a brand-identity based on a uniform and consistent image of what the precinct looks and feels like: an image crystallised around surf, beach and sun that can be conducted to the methods of corporate brand application to places

\textsuperscript{18} They can be found in most 3-5 star hotels, as well as in visitor centres and airport business lounges nationally. Furthermore, each guide is available in the stores featuring within the respective area; the guides are also physically distributed via letterbox drops to the surrounding suburbs.
that I have analysed in chapter 1. The centrality of the image in this context is evident in figure 6: here I propose a selection of the front covers of the 2013 series of the Urban Walkabout map guides. This shows that the company’s trademark is the type of visual dimension that it has brought to the production of the precinct concept.

![Figure 6. A selection of the Urban Walkabouts booklet covers from the 2013 series.](image)

As a matter of fact, the guide maps project supports local artists who draw an image that aims to represent a consistent idea of the precinct. By endorsing this construction of the precinct, the Manly Council commits to sticking with this idea, and so do the business owners and all the commercial actors that partake in the project; all these stakeholders ‘buy into’ the image of the precinct constructed in a certain way and, in doing so, they also align with it to achieve the successful delivery of a promise to the consumers. In other words, illustrators, writers, business owners, marketing directors and policy makers are all included in a joint effort. They all play a crucial role in the creation of the brand for the precinct. By framing the production of ‘culture’ in such an assembled way we can start to understand the complexity related to the ‘essence’ that drives the place branding initiatives.

Urban Walkabout is not the only company that has developed an interest in sustaining the emergence of branded precincts in Sydney. Other projects – like ‘Chippendale Creative Precinct’ (CCP) – were carried out by local business owners, community centre leaders, and cultural
organisations. CCP specifically focuses on the enhancement of the Chippendale precinct from a more ‘local perspective’. Here the culture of the precinct is formulated not by an external network of stakeholders, but by the insiders’ perspective of the local economic actors, who are active in the precinct. In this case, the language adopted to advertise Chippendale illustrates another point worth noticing: the way in which the mobilisation of culture crystallises around the idea of ‘community’ as a collective form of identification. One of the printed materials that the organisation circulated during my fieldwork read:

CCP emerged as a way of harnessing and uniting the overwhelming creative pulse that flows through this lively inner city precinct. Overlooked and skirted round, Chippendale quietly grew into a thriving community of production houses, art galleries, eateries, artists, architects and designers’ (Chippendale and Surrounds, Gallery Guide).

This passage highlights the role of a marketing language in turning ‘creativity’ into a specific aspect of culture that inhabits and defines the quintessential characteristic of the precinct; this issue has been discussed by Davison (2013) in relation to concepts such as ‘genius-loci’ (Norberg-Schulz 1980) and ‘quality without a name’ (Alexander 1979) in the urban planning and design literature. The point to be made here is that, by means of a discursive intervention, the geographies of Chippendale converge into a uniform branded image, which includes a collective body (the ‘community’) as an integral component. The precinct is evoked as creative because creativity ‘flows through the streets’ of the precinct. It is also, and foremost, creative, because a ‘community’ that shares a fundamental constructed trait of identification lives there. ‘Creativity’ here operates as a consistent image that is mobilised via the illustrations + photos + maps + interviews with gallery owners + reviews of film festivals + the community. This assemblage consolidates the place brand for Chippendale.

Based on a review of the material from ‘Urban Walkabout’ campaigns, the ‘Slices of Sydney’ and ‘Places to Discover’ projects, themes such as ‘hipster culture’, ‘quirky and independent fashion vein’, ‘sunlit alfresco lifestyle’, ‘artisan talent’, ‘colourful working class heritage’, ‘modern tribalism’ and ‘culinary adventure’ have been the branding campaigns of a number of precincts in Sydney. Here, following the process of discursive association previously described, abstract versions of culture have been overlapped by means of marketing language with the bordered
space of the precincts, which has been institutionalised via the organisation of culture by several LGAs. In this thesis I am interested in looking at the complexities of including ethnicity in this array of cultural expressions. The same number of simplifications related to the achievement of a consistent image to attach, for example, to the precincts of Manly and Chippendale are applied to the process that constructs ‘ethnicity’ as the essence for Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt. My analysis will therefore focus on how the production and application of images of ethnicity as an ‘all-encompassing (…) singular category’ (Noble and Tabar 2002: 134) involves ‘putting aside’ or working with a series of internal differences.

As I will show in the next chapters, the demographic changes that the two precincts have undergone – as evident in the data provided by the Councils to describe their contemporary socio-economic profiles – is one of the main challenging factors to the consistency of the image used to brand the two ethnicised precincts. As a result, the application of ethnic place brands will correspond to more or less successful attempt to ‘rework’ the meaning of ethnicity in the light of the demographic changes that belie their characterisation of ‘clusters of immigrants’ (see chapter 5, 6). Similarly, the way in which I will discuss the assemblage of the ethnic community around symbolic spaces and moments in the life of the precincts (see chapter 7) stands in stark opposition to the image of static coherence conveyed by bounded ‘ethnic communities’ as neutral and given categories of collective identification that are made to sit alongside the brand management strategies. Once again, I am suggesting that there is a cultural, historical, geographical specificity to be considered in the production of ethnic place brands for the precincts that the dominant discourse on place branding overlooks.

2.6 Conclusion

With the expression ‘a brand for the precinct’ I address the type of urban development that is based on the association of an image to a demarcated part of the city. The result of the networked efforts that lead to the translation of ethnicity into a brand is framed in this thesis within Zukin’s theorisation of neighbourhoods as ‘identifiable local product[s] for global cultural
consumption’ (2009: 40). In this chapter I have worked to achieve two main goals: the first was to reflect on the number of shifting scales that feature in this process, from overarching, macro-levels of analysis to micro, place-based, locally differentiated units of urban space; the second was to describe the process that leads to the emergence of Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt as ethnicised precincts in Sydney. The aim of this chapter was to problematise the understanding of the urban and to treat the precinct not as a point of arrival, but as a point of departure to understand the changing relations between ethnicity and the city.

I have started this chapter by suggesting the relevance of ‘scale’ in the context of place branding. Throughout the chapter this issue has been elaborated via the adoption of continually shifting lenses of analysis and a discussion of a number of layers of space involved in the process of brand creation (from inter-urban and intra-urban processes of competitive differentiation; to globally and locally circulating models of economic reconfiguration; to different areas of development and governance at the city level and marketing strategies aimed to activating the cultural potential of the various precincts). In doing so, what I hope to highlight is that the practice of place branding appears to be premised upon what Brenner calls ‘a highly volatile scalar flux,’ in which interscalar hierarchies and relations are continually reshuffled in response to a wide range of strategic priorities, conflicts and contradictions’ (Brenner 2000: 373, italics in original). In my analysis, I have also suggested that the process that leads to the creation of a branded image relies at the same time on fixed and fluid notions of culture, ethnicity and community – an issue that I will unpack more in depth in the rest of this thesis. The point of this chapter is that the precinct as the ‘urban scale’ that I use in this thesis is not a pre-given or fixed platform for urban development, but ‘a socially constituted, politically contested and historically variable dimension of relations’ (Brenner 2000: 367). In other words, I use the effects of place branding to understand how ethnicity is made to ‘stabilise’ in the space of the precinct. This, ultimately, helps me to set up a comparative framework to look at the process of

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19 Brenner quotes Jessop to explain urban scales in relation to contemporary neoliberal regulatory projects. He writes that ‘state institutions no longer attempt to secure an encompassing institutional fix on any single geographical scale’ but struggle instead to maintain a ‘variable mix of institutional forms and governance mechanisms involved in stabilising specific economic spaces in however provisional, partial, and temporary a manner in the face of continuing volatility, market failures, and economic (and other) conflicts’ (Jessop 1998: 23 in Brenner 2000: 372-373).
brand production for the two precincts without overdetermining their ethnic character and their spatial coherence.

The activation of the Chinatown and Leichhardt precincts happens at the crossroads of a series of interventions on ‘culture’ and ‘the city’. I understand these interventions as the structure for the practice of place branding. In this chapter, in particular, I have demonstrated how this analysis of Sydney needs to be framed within the adoption of globally circulating strategies of urban reconfiguration, and I have used the development plan adopted in 2008 as a starting point to discuss the relevance of ‘the precinct’ in the Sydney context. The plan relies upon ‘the city’ as a fragmented field of economic action and it places a considerable amount of emphasis on the role of the precinct as a privileged unit of cultural/economic development.

The joint efforts of various stakeholders at Local Council level, who actively work to institutionalise the specificity of their suburbs via overarching urban narratives, have been looked at as a second step to achieve the idea of precincts as units of competitive differentiation. Marketing projects such as ‘Slices of Sydney’ and ‘Places to Discover’ borrow the spatial demarcations of suburbs and propose statistical data to support the idea that a specific demography is contained within urban boundaries. The demarcation of borders and the ‘measurement of culture’ therefore represent devices that activate urban units of ‘competitive differentiation’ (Anholt 2006) at a local level by turning suburbs into precincts.

Lastly, the modality through which ethnicity becomes a character for the precinct involves a number of scattered stakeholders, who intervene in a process defined by the discursive association of culture and place. This aims to highlight special characteristics, or points of differentiation, that define the various areas into which the LGAs are divided. A marketing language plays a crucial role here, as it highlights specific ideas of culture that are then superimposed on spatially bounded urban units previously institutionalised. It is in this manner, characterised by an engineered process of abstraction, association and spatial alignment, that precincts are made to discursively ‘exist’ and then ‘fit’ within specific geographies of the city by means of
fixed images of representation. This process highlights the malleability of culture as a tool of urban governance that adapts to the various specificities of each precinct.

My analysis of the process that leads to the assignment of a brand for the precinct has also hinted at the mechanisms that embed ethnicity in the process of place branding. In other words, I have anticipated that place branding requires the analysis not only of the ‘space’, but also the ‘thing’ that is at the centre of the place branding practice. Looking at how ethnicity has become a malleable tool of urban reconfiguration, in this context, gives more depth to the analysis of ethnicity and the city, as it complements the scalar analysis that I have suggested in the course of this chapter. Here, factors such as the number of actors involved in the mobilisation of ethnicity, the channels of its dissemination and the different methods of representation open up new avenues to understand not only ‘where’ place branding takes place, but also ‘how’, and ‘who’ is involved in the process.
3

From Alien Minority to Place Brand:

Shifting Paradigms of Ethnicity and/in the City

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I am interested in situating ethnic place brands within a paradigmatic shift for the analysis of ethnicity and the city and I focus on their application to the Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt precincts. I call this shifting paradigm ‘from alien minority to ethnic place brand’ to indicate that different phases of Australian urban modernity starting from the early 20th century contributed to different types of representation, which in turn materialised in specific urban spaces and possibilities to conceptualise ethnicity and/in the city. By discussing the ideas of alien minority and visible difference, my aim is to sketch out a historical trajectory that moves from the framework of assimilation theory, one that analyses how different ethnic communities moved along a one-way road into the “mainstream” (Wimmer 2013: 18), to multiculturalism, which ‘assumes that each ethnic group is endowed with a unique universe of norms and cultural preferences and that these cultures remain largely unaffected by social mobility or spatial dispersion’ (ibid: 19-20).

Ethnic place brands, as they are applied to Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt, are located at the end of this trajectory. My argument is that, while they share significant similarities with
previous systems of representation, their peculiarity is that they challenge the static meaning of ethnicity inherent in the other two stages. Following Lury’s conceptualisation of brands, I examine ethnic place brands as ‘a set of relations between products in time’, which is ‘intended to have a dynamic unity’ (Lury 2004: 3), and foreground them as platforms of contested meanings that open up new ways to understand ethnicity and the city. I hope to demonstrate, in particular, that they can represent conceptualisation of ethnicity and the city that steer clear from ‘un-reflexive descriptions of difference fixed on categories, moral judgements and assimilationist goals’ (Jacobs and Fincher 1998: 7) and that point to the importance of recognising ‘the sheer multiplicity of differences that may cohere around any one person’ (ibid). Ethnic place brands, as I will introduce them in this chapter, embed the marking of difference ‘in relational frameworks of power, in institutions, and in structures of governamentalty (…) contingent upon ongoing social processes and (…) complexly intertwined with material conditions’ (ibid).

3.2 The Alien Minority

The early settlements of Chinese and Italian migrant workers in Sydney at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century need to be framed within a specific phase of Australian history defined by the introduction of the ‘White Australia Policy’ in 1901 and its progressive dismantling between 1949 and 1973. This was a population policy imbued with racial nationalism aimed to severely restrict non-European migration to Australia, ‘which embodied Australia’s desire to maintain itself as a white, British nation’ (Tavan 2004: 111). The framework of this policy is useful to understand the ‘Chinese’ and the ‘Italians’ as socially constructed categories and to explain ethnicity in the context of migration to Australia and settlement in Sydney in the first half of the 20th century. Seen under this light, the restricted array of work that migrants were forced to take and the multiple movements that ethnic settlements underwent on the backdrop of an expanding city, can be explained as dynamics that represented an alien minority. In this chapter I will argue that ethnic place brands at the same time appropriate and transgress this conceptualisation of ethnicity as marginalised groups in specific urban places.
Chinese suffered the heaviest stigmatisation directed to migrants in the Australian context of the early 20th century. The settlement of a number of Chinese workers in the north-western end of Surry Hills,20 in particular, became increasingly referred to as a place of vice and danger, a ghetto for the ‘Chinese other’. This started in 1900, when the Council obtained the right to resume land for road alignment, and later gained the power to resume property in general, which paved the way for the allowance of resumptions aimed at clearing ‘urban slums’. One article published by the *Daily Telegraph* in September 1911, refers to one of the streets where the concentration of Chinese migrants was more prominent as:

A thirty foot lane across a dirty, Chinese-infested slum packed thick with fan-tan shops and opium dens and far worse places; eight acres, dreaded of the respectable, and known mainly to the police, with a death rate twenty per-cent worse than the rest of Sydney. That was the Wexford Street area, the most direct way of communication between the eastern suburbs and the railway station, only a few years ago. And now a hundred foot wide roadway (...) running clean and clear from Oxford and College Streets to Belmore Park. This is the Wentworth Avenue’ (www.history.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au).

The source, contained in the historical archives of the City of Sydney, sheds light on a particular relation between ethnicity and urbanisation processes. The Wexford street slum was demolished to give way to a connection between the eastern suburbs and Central Station, a thoroughfare that has survived to this day with the name of Wentworth Avenue. Here it appears how, in a process of urban expansion, the spatialisation of ethnicity was used to make sense of cultural diversity as an obstacle to the process of urban growth; ethnic settlements, in other words, were understood as “disturbances” to the urban “metabolism” (Burgess 1925: 52 in Jacobs and Fincher: 1998: 6) and “problem” groups [that] deviated from the white, heteronormative ideal embodied in the clean and bright outer suburbs’ (Jacobs and Fincher 1998: 6). The derogatory framing of ethnic minorities in this context was informed by the White Australia Policy as a discriminatory legislation, which contributed to the construction of Chineseness as the definer of an alien ethnic group. The case of Wexford Street, however, is not the only instance where the troubled relation between urban growth and alien minorities can be observed in Sydney’s history.

20 The area of today’s Mary, Albion and Campbell Streets.
In reviewing the earliest Italian settlements in Sydney, historian Gianfranco Cresciani quotes the memoires of Francesco Sceusa,21 an Italian political activist who reached Australia after boarding a vessel that had left Italy in 1856. Upon his arrival in Sydney, a year later, Sceusa wrote that the city at the time hosted an Italian community of fewer than five hundred people, many of whom lived in abysmal conditions in what the Australian press desparingly called ‘Macaroni Row’, ‘a cluster of thirty-six putrid and miserable houses in Castlereagh Street’ (Cresciani 2008: 74). According to the same historical records, these migrants earned their living by selling ice cream, fruit or flowers; they were otherwise street-musicians and organ grinders, begging in the streets with ‘the inevitable monkey on their shoulders’ (ibid). Here, once again, it is possible to see how the construction of ethnicity in the ‘groupist’ terms (Brubaker 2002) of alien minority was aided by the derogatory framework, in which non-Anglo migrants were described in the media and accounted for in the public opinion.

With ethnicity understood as the embodied characteristic of an alien minority, a parallel can be traced with the works of scholars of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology, who were engaged in the study of the expanding and culturally diverse American metropolises of the first half of the 20th century. Taking Chicago as a paradigmatic case, Park theorised the city as a ‘mosaic of little worlds that touch and do not interpenetrate’ (Park 1925: 40), a context in which the task at hand for the urban sociologist was to ‘isolate and describe the typical constellations of persons and institutions’ (ibid: 2). The way in which these scholars depicted the relations between ethnicity and the city was based on ‘somewhat crude urban model, [where] the encounters with “difference” (...) contain[ed] many assumptions and prejudices’ (Jacobs and Fincher 1998: 5), and it produced an account that worked for ‘an assimilationist model of the city’ (ibid: 6). Two main aspects, in particular, of this conceptualisation of difference and its evidence in city spaces are relevant to the scope of this chapter: the first is the interest of the Chicago School scholars in the spatial disposition of difference; the second is the way in which they engaged in the description of the relations between ethnicity and the processes of urban expansion.

21 Together with a group of socialist refugees, Sceusa was instrumental in raising the profile of the Italian in Sydney. In 1882 he set up the Italian Benevolent Society; in 1885 he began publishing the first Australian newspaper written in Italian: the ‘Italo-Australiano’ (Cresciani 2008:74).
Figure 7 illustrates the theory of one of the Chicago School most famous scholars – Ernest W. Burgess – regarding the mapping of social categories in the city. His model understood the city as a system that places cultural heterogeneity in fixed spatial forms, ‘for segregation,’ in his own words, ‘offers the group, and thereby the individuals who compose the group, a place and a role in the total organisation of city life’ (Burgess 1925: 56). This understanding of ethnicity as a concept that intersects with spatially isolated urban places was echoed by Park, who wrote that ‘the isolation of the immigrant and racial colonies (…) tend to preserve (…) the intimacies and solidarity of the local and neighbourhood groups’ (1925: 10). On the backdrop of this urban scenario defined by extreme segmentation, Burgess attempted to describe the process of expansion at play in the city and argued that this could be illustrated ‘by a series of concentric circles, which may be numbered to designate both the successive zones of urban extension and the types of areas differentiated in the process of expansion’ (Burgess 1925: 50).

Figure 7. The concentric zone model of urban expansion elaborated by Burgess (1925); in the background: aerial photograph of the urban area affected by the West End renewal program in Boston and described in *The Urban Villagers* (Gans 1962). Graphic elaboration by the author.
The ‘concentric zone model,’ as Burgess’ theorisation of urban expansion became known, was introduced to explain how logics of urbanisation could be understood in terms of a systematic taxonomic exercise of tracing the movement of ‘groups’ within the city, a process of distribution explained in terms of ‘expansion, succession and concentration’ (Burgess 1925: 61). According to this model, ‘ethnic settlements’\textsuperscript{22} were initially formed in undesirable areas, generally in locations that granted migrants cheap rents and the proximity to manufacturing centres located in the city’s core. As migrants were assimilated in the mainstream society, their movement would be toward the suburbs and their previous settlement areas would be inhabited by another ethnic group. The succession process of ethnic groups in urban areas became the focus of McKenzie’s work, who defined it as ‘the product of invasion’ (1925: 75) of ‘natural areas’ (ibid: 78), each one having its own cultural characteristics.

The way in which the scholars from the Chicago School described urbanisation processes in relation to the spatialisation of ethnicity resonated in later works of urban sociology. Gans’ ethnographic work, for example, followed step by step the resumption of an area in Boston in the 1960s, and looked closely at the life of the Urban Villagers, ‘representative of the mainstream of second-generation Italian life in America’ (Gans 1962: 18), who inhabited what had become a ghettoised space of difference in the city. Gans critiqued the discursive construction of ethnic otherness as an unwanted, backwards characteristic and how it contributed to the development of urban planning projects that erased a low-income working class neighbourhood from the urban fabric of Boston. Both the spatialised conceptualisation of ethnicity and its relation with processes of urbanisation articulated by Gans demonstrate the legacy of the theories of the Chicago School. They also share fundamental similarities with the case of the Wexford Street resumption and the derogatory framing of the migrant settlement in Castlereagh Street in Sydney at the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. As a matter of fact, they all indicate ‘spatially concentrated areas used to separate and to limit (…) particular involuntarily defined population group[s] held to be, and treated as, inferior by the dominant society’ (Marcuse 1997: 231).

\textsuperscript{22} Chinatown and Little Sicily are two examples located in the area labelled as ‘zone of transition’. 
Contemporary media production helps us to understand how, in Sydney, the narrative of ethnicity as an embodied marker of spatialised difference in underprivileged areas is not necessarily a past thing. In January 2012, the Australian television network Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) screened for the first time a documentary series titled ‘Once Upon a Time in Cabramatta’. The series narrates the events that led the Western Sydney suburb of Cabramatta – which became increasingly known after a large number of Vietnamese refugees made it their home in the 1970s, when the Australian borders were opened to waves of people fleeing from the horrors of the Vietnam War – to become infamously known as an ‘Asian gangland’ and the ‘heroin capital of NSW’ at the end of the 1990s. A big part of this TV series is dedicated to the analysis of how the ‘Vietnamese gangs’ were formed in the suburb as a result of poor cultural infrastructure apt to facilitate the communication between an alien minority and the Australian wider society.

Like the way in which past migrant settlements were framed, TV shows such as the Once Upon a Time in Cabramatta rely on a certain narrative that depicts essentialist images of ethnic groups, drawing the attention to ‘ethnicisation’ understood as the ‘self-reinforcing process of focussing and reacting upon the ethnic dimension of social reality’ (Wimmer 2013: 27, my italics). The precinct here becomes a spatially demarcated area that operates as a background to what Dávila (2004:6) calls a ‘ghettocentric TV show’, while the type of ethnic narrative constructed around these spatial units shares significant characteristics with the early century’s theorisation by the Chicago School theorists. The fact that the Once Upon a Time series has released a second season shows the continuing appeal of using ethnicity as a way to construct Sydney’s urban geography. The first episode of the ‘Once Upon a Time in Punchbowl’ series was screened for the first time in June 2014; this was dedicated to another ‘troubled’ Western Sydney suburb, associated this time with the dynamics of a Middle-Eastern community.
3.3 The Visible Difference

Whereas discriminatory legislations such as those associated with the White Australia Policy contributed to the discursive formation in Sydney of alien minorities defined by embodied markers of ethnic identification such as ‘Chineseness’ and ‘Italianness’, the introduction of multicultural policies from the late 1970s resulted in the production of specific urban places tainted with ‘visibly ethnic’ features. As a matter of fact, the beautification of both Haymarket and Leichhardt via the adoption of the ‘Chinatown’ and ‘Little Italy’ concepts took place during the government shift from an assimilationist to a multicultural strategy, when ‘in Australian cities, local council and planners (…) took the paradigm of [cultural] pluralism on board’ (Anderson 1990: 142). As a result of the positive reassessment of the same ethnic areas that were previously regarded in negative terms, ethnicity became a ‘quality’ of the urban fabric, a celebrated instance of visible difference working for the Australian multicultural project. This phase, I argue, is fundamental to understand the mobilisation of ethnic place brands, as it endows the two precincts of Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt with a material ‘stage’ upon which ethnicity is mobilised and constructed as a visible image.

Geographer Kay Anderson describes the production of ethnicised precincts such as Sydney’s Chinatown as the ‘cultural and political process (…) of transforming physical and cultural features into identities, or classifying people into historically specific categories’ (Anderson 1990: 139); this type of urban spaces, she argues, reproduces an essentialist understanding of ethnicity as it provides a thematised background to the articulation of unchanging cultural paradigms, which are functional to the display of ethnic difference in the multicultural urban scenario.

The beautification of Leichhardt is another example that can be discussed to illustrate this point. The decision of the Federal Government to donate a parcel of land in the suburb to the ‘Italian community’ in the late 1980s was influenced by the ‘ethnic reputation’ that Leichhardt had strengthened during the post-World War II years. As an article published in the Sydney Morning Herald dated October 1987 read:
Honouring Sydney’s Italian population (...) Premier Barrie Unsworth will make a $2 million Bicentennial gift of Leichhardt land to Australia’s largest Italian community. Plans for the site, to be known as the Italian Forum, will be developed by a consortium of big name Italian commercial enterprises. A big emphasis at Leichhardt will be on the ‘piazza’ space for a genuine experience of Italian sociability.

Framing the project of a structure dedicated to the Italian population in a suburb which hosted ‘Australia’s largest Italian community’ worked for the idea of an Australian multicultural society defined by the coexistence of different and separated ethnic cultures. In this context, Leichhardt’s unique difference would materialise around the physical construction of a structure that gave a visible shape to Italianness. Following the decision to build the Italian Forum complex, the engineered intensification of Leichhardt’s ethnic character can be observed in documents of urban planning. In a study by the Leichhardt Council division of planning and community development carried out in 1987, for example, the ‘Norton Street Neighbourhood Centre’ is mentioned in conjunction with the idea of a ‘desired future character’. The study identified how Leichhardt – and more specifically Norton Street – would become ‘the commercial and business heart of the Italian community and provide a wide range of specialised commercial and retail services’ (Leichhardt Council 1987: iv). It also encouraged ‘the development of the identity of the centre as one specialising in Italian goods, services and social and cultural activities’ (ibid) with the introduction of ‘attractive paving, street furniture and landscaping’ (ibid: vii).

The idea of the ‘commercial boulevard’ (ibid: 147) explicitly relying on Leichhardt’s Italianness, in other words, began to officially emerge from the urban planning material from the late 1980s. Here, a focus on the material representation of ethnicity can be observed as an attempt to force the association between ethnicity and place. A few years later, a number of street beautification projects were sponsored by Leichhardt Council to achieve this ‘vision’; architects and urban designers were called to propose ideas to strengthen Leichhardt’s ethnic distinctiveness.

23 In the original document this is described as the corridor running along Norton Street between Marion Street and Lilyfield Road, with a retail/service core located between Wetherill and Macaulay Streets (Leichhardt Council 1987: 14).
Norton Street will be reinforced as a centre for the Italian community, and as a place for interaction between Italo-Australians and other groups.

It should be recognised as such at a Sydney-wide level. The community sharing will happen through opportunities to enjoy the Italian-inspired food and drinks, and through the provision of spaces for comfortable social intercourses.

All the senses will be delighted - Italian language, and the sound of bells pealing will be heard, the smell of food and coffee will pervade, touch and sight will be stimulated through water, sculpture, ceramics, and trees.

Norton Street will be seen as a great and a fascinating passageway through the urban fabric. It provides a rich sequence of experiences as one moves from Pioneer Park climbing through the cafes and restaurants to the crest with its magnificent civic buildings.

The descent past the school through the weekend markets area leads to Parramatta Road - itself a great conduct to the city and an endless shopping strip.

Norton Street will have a strong sense of history confirmed through the conservation of buildings, roadway and the use of materials and forms.
By this time, the term ‘Leichhardt Commercial Neighbourhood’ had been officially adopted by the authorities to refer to the Norton Street area; in the authorities’ mind, the street would become the main recipient of projects of upgrading and beautification inextricably connected to the desired ‘Italian ethnic distinctiveness’. One of the projects proposed the division of the street in different sections, each indicated with an Italian name: L’entrata (the entrance); La collina (the hill); Il Centro (the centre); Residenziale (residential). According to the project, an illustration from which is shown in figure 8, the first part would be ‘marked with specially designed flags attached to buildings’; furthermore ‘Italian food stalls’ would be placed on the road shoulders and broadened footpaths would ‘remain available for the passeggiata’ (Leichhardt Council: 1994).

Although the plan was never entirely brought to completion, the same division into various segments named in Italian has been continuously adopted in the official documents of Leichhardt Council to make sense of the area via the association with the ‘ethnic theme’. In the Leichhardt Development Control Plan, which came into effect in December 2000 and that was updated in 2006, issues such as ‘existing character, urban forms, economic viability and desired future character’ were still related to the suburb’s visible Italianness and explicitly connected to the type of development that ‘has transformed the southern part of [Norton] Street into a (…) commercial centre’ (Leichhardt Council 2006: 85). 24 My point here is that the designed interventions based on the introduction of street furniture and details in the streetscape recalling an ‘Italian atmosphere’ gradually institutionalised the ideas of Leichhardt’s Italianness. They did so by ‘strengthening’ its difference through a number of visual effects and rhetorical devices used in the official documents released during the street beautification phase. The same type of discursive intensification that I have reviewed in chapter 2 as an integral component of the place brand production can be noticed as early as in the 1994 Street Improvement Project; here we read:

Norton Street will be reinforced as a centre for the Italian community, and as a place for interaction between Italo-Australians and other groups. (…) [The street] should be recognised as such at a Sydney-wide level. The community sharing will happen through opportunities to enjoy the Italian inspired food and drinks, and through the provision of

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24 Here the plan refers already to the Italian Forum.
spaces for comfortable social intercourse. All the sense will be delighted – Italian language, and the sound of bells pealing will be heard, the scent of food and coffee will pervade, touch and sight will be stimulated through water, sculpture, ceramics, and trees. (...) Norton Street will have a strong sense of history confirmed through the conservation of buildings, roadway and the use of material forms (Leichhardt Council: 1994).

This excerpt highlights the changing role played by ethnicity in shaping Sydney’s urban environment and, more generally, the positive role accorded to cultural diversity within the Australian multicultural policies. The beautification of Leichhardt also becomes an opportunity to reflect on how the re-conceptualisation of ethnicity was translated into a rhetoric that highlighted new forms of essentialist representation. Ethnicity now was not only understood in terms of the embodied difference of othered minorities, but also manifested in the visible interplay between built environment and ethnic images tailored to fit into the multicultural discourse. The idea of the ‘centre for the Italian community’ represented in this context a rhetorical device to make the ethnic group and the place overlap, whereas the designation of Norton Street as the ‘place of interaction between Italo-Australians and other groups’ spatialised the positive reassessment of ethnicity that became the background to unchanging collective forms of identification. Historian Gianfranco Cresciani echoed this point in an interview during the fieldwork:

The 1980s was a period of ‘ethnic rediscovery’ that interested different parts of New South Wales; at that time, the government under Neville Wran wanted to give something to its migrant communities. So the Japanese were given (...) half a million dollars to refurbish a cemetery for war prisoners in Keowra; (...) the Greeks were given money to refurbish a church in Newtown. And the Italians got money for a cultural centre (Interview with Gianfranco Cresciani, 22nd July 2013, my italics).

The beautification of Leichhardt from the late 1980s was inspired by other urban projects that took place across Sydney from the previous decade. In Haymarket, for example, a $323.000 plan to upgrade the Dixon Street area was met with approval by the City Council in 1972. A Chinese community leader, whom I interviewed during my fieldwork, has meticulously documented the transformation of Haymarket into Chinatown and agreed to share some of the material from his private collection. Figure 9 is a postcard from 1980; here we can see the portico of Chinese design that was erected in Haymarket following the Council decision; as the figure shows, litter bins decorated with ‘Chinese motifs’ were introduced, street decorations such as lanterns,
ornamental paving, plazas, pagodas, temple dogs, red and green paint were applied to Dixon Street and surroundings. Haymarket was quickly transformed in conformity with a visual image of Chineseness, seen as strengthening the area’s restaurant and entertainment sector. The decision adopted by the Council in 1979 to close Dixon Street to traffic completed what Anderson (1990: 149) calls a ‘total Chinatown concept’, and the idea of the ‘pedestrian mall’ has since then been attached to the precincts’ central spine – Dixon Street.

Figure 9. Dixon Street in 1980. From community leader's personal archive (reproduced with the consent of the owner).
A reified image of Chineseness was applied to the precinct as a process of representation that interpreted ethnicity as a ‘self-contained “entity”’; something that had been transported as hermetically sealed baggage to Australia’ (Anderson 1990: 50) and transplanted to Dixon Street in a series of constructed images of representation, ‘as if they told of some essence that resided in people of Chinese origin in Australia’ (ibid). As in the case of Leichhardt, here too we can notice a paradigmatic shift whereby the logic of official multiculturalism introduced in Australia ‘altered the positioning of ethnic subjects within the nation state’ (Ang 2015: 6) and where migrants were no longer asked to ‘assimilate and hide their cultural difference away, [but rather] to reveal it and put it on view’ (ibid).

The beginning of a period when ‘[ethnic] community life became entangled with ethnic commodification’ (Ang 2015: 5) did not only turn upside down the conceptualisation of ethnicity as an unwanted hindrance to the process of urban growth to its enthusiastic embrace as a valuable asset; it also significantly diversified the network of actors involved in the process of ethnic representation. As a matter of fact, with the construction of ethnicised precincts as showcases of a visible difference, the interpretation of ethnicity could not be limited to a top-down, imposed category of identity, but needed to take into account forms of ethnic representation appropriated pragmatically from the ground up – for example, by local business associations, who saw in the thematisation of city suburbs the opportunity to carve up niches of wealth by simply embodying their ‘ethnic capital’. This concept, which will be central to my analysis in chapters 5, 6 and 7 of how several actors mobilise ethnicity, is based on Hage’s elaboration of Bourdieu’s ‘cultural capital’; this is understood as ‘the sum of valued characteristics and practical behavioural dispositions within a given field (…) in which individual and collective subjects are involved in various competitive (…) struggles over the accumulation and the deployment of [these characteristics]’ (Hage 1998: 53 my italics). The relevance of the ‘visible difference’ phase in understanding ethnic place brands, in other words, is that it points to the necessity to frame ethnicity in terms of a ‘strategic use’ for ‘scrupulously [economic] interest’ (Spivak 1988).
Despite the diversification of strategies aimed at mobilising ethnicity, the type of representation lying at the core of ethnicised precincts remained largely constrained within the limits of thematisation of urban spaces discussed by Zukin as a ‘tightly structured discourse about society (...) [and a] fictive narrative of social identity [that] exercises the spatial control and that reinforces this identity’ (Zukin 1995: 55). The limitations that these forms of representation have posed to the understanding of ethnicity can be still noticed to these days, especially when television food shows and economic initiatives capitalising on ‘ethnic cuisine’ reinforce the narrative of ethnic precincts as ‘authentic sources’ of ethnic commodities.

The company Gourmet Food Safari, for example, is a famous Sydney-based food tour company headed by a TV celebrity that has taken off at the same time that food has started to dominate Australian television schedules with shows like ‘Master Chef Australia’ and ‘My Kitchen Rules’. The company offers guided excursions throughout the Sydney metropolitan region for tourists who are interested in consuming ethnic delicacies from different culinary traditions around the world. During the food tours, customers are taken to an array of sites including delicatessen, coffee shops, bakeries, butchers and markets in selected precincts in Sydney, which are known for their ‘ethnic difference’. The various tours are conducted by guides ‘who are experts in their own culture’ and usually feature ‘a chat with an acclaimed local chef and a banquet feast’ (Burfitt, 2013). Gourmet Food Safaris especially targets the area of Western Sydney, as one article published in the magazine Companion shows. Figure 10 illustrates the most popular destinations, featuring Marrickville (Greek food), Haberfield (Italian), Eastwood (Korean), Auburn (Turkish), Punchbowl (Lebanese), Smithfield (South American), and Cabramatta (Vietnamese). The way in which the various ‘ethnic flavours’ are visually represented (inside red boxes pointing to specific locations on the map) conveys the most straightforward association between ethnicity and urban space as the food tour company clearly appears to rely on the conceptualisation of neatly organised pockets of ‘difference’.

25 Here I am referring in particular to Zukin’s discussion on Disney World and her analysis of the intersection between visual culture and urban public spaces (see also chapter 5).
26 This is Sydney Airport’s official magazine and it is distributed freely on national and international flights.
It is illuminating in this context to dwell on the term ‘Safari’, since this can be read as a way to construct the exotic uniqueness of the various precincts. The spatialisation of culture in this context operates as a device to position ethnic bodies and cultures in ‘a permanent spatial in-between, where their will is excluded, while their exploitable “savage” [characteristics] are included’ (Hage 1998: 136). The proliferation of these initiatives demonstrates the renewed interest in capitalising on the association between ethnicity and place in contemporary Sydney based on the reassertion of ethnic identity that can be traced in the passage from alien minority to visible difference. This association is the result of a specific understanding of embodied ethnicity clustered in specific areas, which justifies the halo of authenticity constructed for places inserted into a circuit of urban tourism, more than the marginalisation of certain ethnic groups.

It is also relevant to mention that the selection of the destinations of the Gourmet Food Safaris coincides with places where ethnicity emerges as a measured category relying on fixed parameters of difference, as used by the Census. According to the 2011 Census data published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, for example, 24.7% of the population of Haberfield declared Italian ancestries, 14.6% was born in Italy, and 23.6% currently speaks Italian as a first
language at home. In Hurstville, 47.5% of the people declare Chinese ancestries, and 47.1% speaks one of the two major Chinese languages (Mandarin or Cantonese) in the household. The characterisation of spatialised ethnic flavours through ‘food adventuring’ (Heldke 2003) in other words, is a contemporary example of how ethnic cultures ‘become a resource that aids (…) the [urban consumer's] quest for novelty and their desire of authenticity’ (Flowers and Swan 2012:6); a kind of ‘colonial practice of exploiting the Other’ (ibid) that revitalises the perception of ethnic difference as a ‘passive provider of raw materials’ (Hage 1998: 140).

By looking at these examples, we can notice how the criteria that hold together the association between ethnicity and certain urban places rely again on a narrow understanding of ethnicity constrained within the limits of authenticity and its perception; we can also see how they have stretched to inform the analysis of precincts in the Sydney context, as I have discussed in chapter 1. These conceptualisations of ethnicity and/in the city fail to acknowledge a more complex network of relations and complex production of value, which becomes visible once we move onto the analysis of Haymarket and Leichhardt as contemporary adaptations to the precinct-centred model of urban revitalisation.

3.4 The Ethnic Place Brand

The marketing strategies that promote the ‘ethnic themes’ of Chinatown and Leichhardt share significant similarities, as well as a number of differences, with previous phases in which ethnicity has become a meaningful category in the Sydney context. If, on the one hand, the built environment and the street furniture constructed in the past decades are still part of the materialities of the precincts and suggest a sort of straightforward association with the idea of ethnicity as visible difference, the diversification of the precincts’ populations that I have discussed in chapter 2 has increasingly posed significant threats to the ‘consistency’ of the message sent via the mobilisation of images of ethnicity by the network of actors interested in branding activities. I have begun to suggest that the ethnic characters of Chinatown/Haymarket
and Leichhardt are held together by ‘something’ more complex than a simple process of representation, something related to the process of branding applied to the precincts that is at the same time ‘abstract, dynamic and indeterminate’ (Lury: 2004: 157).

As we have been able to observe, the main vehicle for the propagation of the City of Villages concept has been the ‘Slices of Sydney’ initiative; here, Haymarket/Chinatown is referred to as one of the seven villages marketed during my fieldwork in 2013. The motto ‘multi-Asian taste carnival’, used to advertise the precinct, reflects the multiplicity of cultures that inhabit this area of the city. The acknowledgement of this diversity, however, appears rather problematic if we look at the way in which the main attractions of the precinct are represented in the illustrated map used in the Slices of Sydney project (see figure 11); these are referred to as the series of activities nested around Dixon and Sussex Streets and highlighted on the map by means of stylised flames to indicate the ethnic ‘hot spots’.

Here, global symbols of thematised urban Chinese attraction, such as the Chinatown archways, can be found alongside art installations such as the Golden Water Mouth, a 10.7 meters high sculpture dedicated to Chinese gold seekers that settled in Australia in the second half of the 19th century. This area is also characterised by the presence of tributes to the collaborations between Australia and China, like in the case of the walled miniature park realised in 1988 called ‘Chinese Garden of Friendship’. The monument is introduced as a space that ‘respectfully recreates the philosophy and harmony of a traditional Chinese garden with waterfalls, lakes, exotic plants, pavilions and hidden pathways’ (www.darlingharbour.com).

By looking at the main vehicle for the contemporary propagation of the Chinatown concept, in other words, the point of differentiation of the Haymarket/Chinatown precinct seems to rely on the conceptualisation of a circumscribed area defined by symbols of Chineseness that recall the boundedness of an ethnic group and fixed conception of culture. As I will be discussing in more depth in chapter 5, this boundedness is conceived via the mobilisation of the history of Chinese migration and settlement in the Haymarket area, tainted with an orientalist narrative that
maintains and strengthens the difference of the precinct. The descriptive tag positioned next to the map of the precinct, for example, reads:

Opium dens and gambling lairs precede the modern microcosm of tea and merchants, dumpling houses, neon food courts and Oriental food galleries (City of Sydney: 2011).

Figure 11. Map of the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct used in the ‘Slices of Sydney’ project (City of Sydney 2011: 58-59).

The marketing approach used by the Leichhardt Council, meanwhile, is defined by the categorisation of ‘experiences’ in four main groups and their spatialisation on the map of the Local Government Area, followed by a descriptive passage that encapsulates the main narrative associated to the various ‘Places to Discover’. The motto ‘Little Italy with a Twist’ is used in this case to indicate the gradual change in the social make-up of the precinct compared to its past demographic composition, which was heavily influenced by Italian chain migration. These changes notwithstanding, the marketing strategy seems to be still heavily focused on the association of Leichhardt with an essentialised Italian theme, which becomes evident in the marketing material, where the precincts is described as:
A highly popular place to be for both the Italian community and Sydneysiders with a love for good food, fine wine and a taste of Europe, (…) a heartland of Italian culture that boasts an abundance of Italian restaurants serving traditional and regional fares as well as contemporary twists (Leichhardt Council, Leichhardt and Annandale Business Chamber: 2013).

By looking at the map of the precinct included in the marketing material (see figure 12), it can also be noted how the southern end of Norton Street and the intersection with Parramatta Road are constructed as ‘the core’ of the precinct, by virtue of their offering the majority of ‘experiences’ related to the Italian theme. Geographically, this is the area that coincides with the street upgrades that Leichhardt went through during the 1990s. The 700m² Italian-themed complex known as the ‘Italian Forum’ is another significant feature of this part of the precinct; this inevitably recalls the idea of the ‘Italian heartland’ through the direct association with a thematised ethnicity.

Figure 12. Map of the Leichhardt precinct used in the ‘Places to Discover’ project (Leichhardt Council and Leichhardt and Annandale Business Chamber 2013: 12-13).

A close analysis of the marketing material for both Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt framed in terms of the modalities of representation enables us to observe how contemporary
practices of place branding represent the continuation of ideas of ethnic essentialism, which can be traced back to the previous ‘phases’ articulated so far in the chapter. If we take the images of ‘opium dens and gambling houses’ as constitutive components of the Chinatown brand, for example, a straightforward parallel can be traced with the Wexford Street at the beginning of the 20th century, when a series of representations of otherness worked as a ‘framework’ to represent and constrain the ‘Oriental’ (Said 1978: 40). The contemporary marketing material for Chinatown/Haymarket, in a sense, performs again the same sort of paradigmatic shift that turned upside down the conceptualisation of Chineseness with the introduction of the multicultural policies, this time by weaving the same representations that were used to demonise the ‘Asian other’ into the revitalisation of the ethnicised precinct.

In the marketing material used for Leichhardt, on the other hand, the emphasis on the Italian community and the reconstruction of Norton Street as the heartland of Italian culture works for a ‘groupist’ understanding of ethnicity (Brubaker 2002), which relies on the unproblematised overlapping of collective forms of ethnic identification with urban places. The type of link, traced to highlight the connection between an essentialised collective Italianness and the thematised part of the precinct, reinforces the symbolic line that divides the precinct – understood as ‘ethnic’ – from the outside. It can be argued therefore that the type of marketing material used in Leichhardt relies, to a certain extent, on the same images of ethnic coherence that sustained the understanding of the ethnicised precinct as a space of visible difference.

However, by closely considering the marketing material as the medium through which ethnic place brands are propagated, a number of significant differences from the alien minority and the visible difference can also be observed. To highlight these discontinuities, I aim to filter the contemporary mobilisation of ethnicity in the Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt precincts through Lury’s (2004) understanding of brands as ‘complex’ entities. By doing so, I want to suggest that the networked system of representation and the multi-layered process of value production that characterise ethnic place brands are significant issues to take into account as they have the potential to destabilise the consistency of previous systems of ethnic
representation, and to open up new possibilities to examine the meaning of ethnicity as the driving theme of place branding practices.

Firstly, the mobilisation of ethnic place brands relies as much on the commodification of ethnic identity at the individual business level (how well-known the cuisine of a specific restaurant is, or how visibly a business positions itself in the context of the ethnicised precinct by means of specific symbols/signage) as on the coordination of a number of individual efforts on behalf of ‘bigger’ structures (for example business chambers that organise events and involve precinct-based shop owners). This level of analysis, however, is still not exhaustive enough to capture the richness of the system of representation at work at the core of ethnic place brands. Other forms of knowledge (such as marketing) and practices (such as design) play pivotal roles in the way in which ethnicity is constructed within place branding practices; their combination involves logics of consumer research that sustain the optimisation of market activities, and various styles and forms of representation that are put together in advertising material to construct and propagate the idea of the ethnicised precinct. It can be argued therefore, that ethnic place brands are not simply ‘more complex’ systems of representation, but that they multiply the channels of ethnic mobilisation.

This point is crucial to understand the possibilities left open by ethnic place brands to (re)signify ethnicity in relation to the two ethnicised precincts that I am focusing on in this thesis. What I call here ‘multiplied channels of ethnic mobilisation’ is a reflection on the relevance of investigating more closely the agents of representation in the context of the ethnicised precincts. In particular, I am referring here to what Anderson (1991) calls ‘power of definition’ with reference to the formulation of Canadian (and Australian) Chinatowns as products of unequally distributed agencies in defining of what/who is ‘Chinese’. ‘For more than a century, in cities such as Vancouver in Canada,’ writes Anderson, ‘assumptions about Chinese “difference” have informed the policies of powerful government institutions toward the Chinese enclave and its inhabitants, in ways that demonstrate the considerable material force and effect of beliefs about a Chinese race and place. In an important and neglected sense, then, “Chinatown” belongs as
Building on Anderson’s interpretation of ethnicised urban spaces, my argument is that ethnic place brands represent complex efforts of ethnic mobilisation defined by an increasingly diverse range of stakeholders, who share the power to define and shape what ethnicity means. In the case of Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt, the understanding of the landscape of actors that share the interest in mobilising ethnicity is even more relevant in this context, given the increasingly diverse number of backgrounds (see chapter 2) that are represented in the precincts at all levels: from second and third generation Chinese-Australians and Italian-Australians involved in community based organisations, to the business owners to the artists that realise public artworks, from officials of Business Chambers, to policy makers. In this context, the distinction made by Anderson between powerful government institutions and ethnic places’ inhabitants as the main actors endowed with the power of definition needs to be updated, since there is a level of complexity and complicity ‘within’ these categories that her analysis does not capture. In the empirical chapters, I will suggest that the ‘superdiversity’ (Vertovec 2007) of stakeholders and the network of actors who engage in the mobilisation of ethnic place brands enables us to deploy an analytical lens that is more apt to capture the ‘diversification of diversity’ (ibid: 1025) not just in terms of bringing more ethnicities and countries of origin’ but also in regards to the ‘multiplication of significant variables’ that affect the way in which images of ethnicity are mobilised in Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt.

The analysis of ethnic place brands also reveals how the number of efforts that result from these different types of representation will circulate through a wide variety of mediums, including magazines, booklets, advertisement campaigns and websites. The modality of distribution, in other words, is another significant factor to take into account when we consider the mobilisation of ethnic place brands. In this context, the ‘objectivity’ of the ‘thing’ branded ‘is not independent of or external to [various] knowledge practices’ (Lury 2004: 6) that constitute it; on the contrary, the diversifying scenario related to the mobilisation of ethnicity reminds us of much to the society with the power to define and shape it as it does to its residents’ (Anderson 1991: 10, my italics).
the necessity to be attuned to the ‘multidimensional aspect of products’ (ibid: 23) and, more
generally, to the ideas of ‘intensive’ differentiation, in which ‘the previously existing distinction
between the process of production (as the source of value) and those of distribution (as a means
of exchange) begins to be eroded’ (ibid).

The width of the network of actors partaking in the mobilisation of ethnic place brands
therefore challenges the straightforward objectification of ethnicity based on the production of
more or less authentic goods by introducing an unprecedented degree of complexity. This
escapes the parameters of ‘ethnic measurement’ used to understand the relation between
ethnicity and the city according to the ‘alien minority’ and the ‘visible difference’ lenses. The
diversification of the representation of ethnicity as the product at the centre of the place
branding practice is also important to understand another significant aspect that marks the
peculiarity of ethnic place brands: the way in which they ‘produce value’. Lury (2004) discusses
the brand as a thing that ‘is not in itself fixed in time or space in terms of presence or absence’
(ibid: 1); she describes its meaning as ‘a platform for the patterning of activity, a mode of
organising activities in time and space’ (ibid). In this context, the brand is not understood as a
clear ‘thing’ or the mere representation of a thing, but rather a specific ‘type of production’ that
‘emerges out of relations between products or services and the organisation of a controlled
relation to its environment – that is, to markets, competitors, the state, consumption and
everyday life (ibid: 2).

The examples of the ‘Slices of Sydney’ and ‘Places to Discover’ projects are illustrative of this
point, especially when they are considered as ways to discuss ethnic place brands as parallel brand
management strategies used by various Local Government Areas. Both initiatives are made possible
only by the coordination of a number of stakeholders (Councils, business associations,
individual retailers), whereby the generation of value is not determined by some pre-existing and
unchanging ethnic essence that automatically materialises in the commodification of culture, but
rather by the orchestration of various efforts that form specific assemblages. In this context, the
landscape of actors involved in the system of representation is significantly more complex than
both the one-way imposed identification of ethnic otherness used to explain the alien minority, and the agreement over some thematised ethnicity displayed by the visible difference. Unlike the embodied or materially represented ideas of ethnicity, the ethnic place brand presents itself as an immaterial ‘thing’, which is more detached from an understanding of ethnicity as an embodied essence, and more akin to a disjoined, messy and irregular series of ethnic representations that are mobilised by assemblages of actors interested in the branding of the precincts.

A last point made by Lury relates to the necessity of flexibility demanded by the market of which the brand is part; she elaborates on this point by writing that, ‘the dynamic differentiation of products enables the management of change’ (ibid: 28), concluding that brands are ‘the objectification of a manageable flexibility, of indeterminacy within limits’ (2004: 151). Brands should therefore be understood as malleable things that operate in a context of change, whereby the results of the branding practice constantly morph according to ever-shifting contexts and market-driven demands. The ‘adaptation’ of the ethnic narrative to the demographic changes experienced by the two precincts can be taken as an example to discuss this last point. The narratives of ‘multi-Asianness’ and ‘Little Italy with a twist’ illustrate how the branding campaigns for the precincts have to take into account larger discourses in their elaboration of the branded image. This interpretation enables us to look at the visual spatialisation on the maps of the precincts, the strategic use of mottos, and the descriptive passages used in the marketing material as representations of adjusting brand management strategies aimed to promote the association between ethnicity and place at a time when the ‘unique’ value of the two precincts is being revitalised by wider narratives of intra-suburb competitive differentiation, while being ‘threatened’ by changing demographic trends.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have made the ‘specificity and contingency of difference as lived in particular socio-spatial configurations’ (Watson 2006: 3) central to my analysis by suggesting that the relations between ethnicity and/in the city need to be situated within different ‘cultural politics
of place’ (Yeoh and Kong 2012: 124), and that we need to take into account how these are constantly ‘reconstituted and transformed to serve new purposes’ (ibid) within different power structures and systems of representation. In trying to achieve this goal, I have explored one historical trajectory that describes the shifting paradigms for the analysis of ethnicity and its relation to a number of urban spaces in Sydney with a particular focus on how Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt have ‘transitioned’ from being containers of minority groups to representing the stages for ethnic place brands. Firstly, I have used the terms Chineseness and Italianness to refer to the derogatory framing of alien minorities in a context of discrimination and assimilation. Secondly, the constructs of Chinatown and Little Italy have emerged out of the analysis of the positive reassessment of ethnicity starting with the introduction of multicultural policies at the end of the 1970s; these resulted in the beautification of urban areas based on the mobilisation of a visible difference conforming to the cultural pluralist ideals of multiculturalism. Lastly, I have situated the brand management strategies used by the City of Sydney and Leichhardt Councils as “texts” that can be “read” for the [ethnic] relations they inscribe and naturalise' (Anderson 1991: 28) in the precinct-based urban development context of contemporary Sydney, which leads to the emergence of Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt. By doing so, I have discussed ethnic place brands as complex platforms of contested meanings that, on the one hand, rework conceptualisations of essentialised ethnicities, while on the other they leave open the possibility to describe ethnicity in more open-ended ways.

Overall, I have suggested that ‘dynamism’ and ‘complexity’ are inherent in the very meaning of ethnicity as the entity produced via place branding understood as a specific system of value production within the urban cultural economy, and that the peculiarity of ethnic place brands lies in their simultaneous being abstract and material. Branding practices in Haymarket/Chinatown and Leichhardt significantly differentiate from the meaning of ethnicity articulated in previous (and sometimes persisting) representations of marginalised ethnic identity, and economic strategies of value production based on different degrees of spatialised authenticity. They do so because they focus less on the existence of groups and the visibility of
difference per se. The mobilisation of ethnicity as place brands, I have argued, is embedded in multiple practices of representation and auto-representation and it is characterised by networked efforts among stakeholders that manage the increasing tension between the need to essentialise in a context of change.

Lastly, the multiplication of the power of ‘definition’ (Anderson 1991) that characterises the mobilisation of ethnic place brands in the two Sydney precincts necessitates a more precise analytical framework that treats ethnic identity less in terms of pre-given essence and more as a ‘symbolic value’ (Noble and Tabar 2002: 136), an act of identification that is ‘conjunctural and positional’ characterised by processes of ‘reduction and accretion’ (ibid) from which the actors involved in the mobilisation of ethnicity can gain visibility. I have started to suggest, in other words, that framing ethnicity and the city as place brands poses significant challenges in terms of ‘how’ to investigate that mobilisation.
4

Entering and Dwelling in the Field:

Methods of Research

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the ways in which data for this thesis have been generated and analysed, and I argue that the exploration of ethnic place brands needs to take into account the issues of complexity in which the relations between ethnicity and the city have been framed in the previous chapters. This thesis relies on qualitative research methods such as ethnography, discourse analysis, participant observation and reflexivity, as well as physical approaches to the field (the act of walking) defined by an alternation of systematic and structured observation techniques with a more experimental, playful and creative approach. I nest all these strategies under the umbrella of ‘street ethnography’, and throughout this chapter I describe this as a flexible method defined by lateral thinking and adaptation.

My fieldwork comprised 50 interviews, 40 of which were semi-structured conversations that have been recorded and carefully transcribed. The remainder 10 unfolded as unstructured chats; although these interviews have not been recorded, I took detailed notes afterwards. The interviews involved a variety of informants ranging from business owners active in Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt, to community organisation leaders, Local Council officials and various professionals engaged in the mobilisation of ethnicity (such as landscape
architects, business chamber representatives, urban designers and gallery curators). 32 of these interviews have been used throughout the thesis either in the form of a direct quote or in a descriptive manner to clarify specific data discussed in the chapters. Unless the name of the respondent was publicly acknowledged on media outputs or publications, I have used pseudonyms – in the case of interviews with shopkeepers and community leaders – and initials – in the case of policy makers, business chambers representatives and other professionals. In addition to this, I have partaken as an observer in 15 events including street festivals, public talks and community meetings, which were of paramount importance to understand how ethnic place brands are produced and applied to the two precincts.

4.2 Generating Data: Talking, Listening and Writing

Ethnography has a predominant role in the methodology used in this thesis. I have chosen this approach not with the aim of producing something ‘more humanistic, more experimental, more in depth’ (Silverman 2007: 37) to set against quantitative research methods. The adoption of ethnography rather reflects an attempt to design a research practice that reflects and respects the complexity of the field. A number of reflections related to ethnography have helped me to achieve this goal. One of these has been to constantly problematise the interview as a source of data, where a distinction should be made between ‘what people do’ and ‘what people say that they do’. Another one is the development of a series of skills, which allowed me to retrieve significant data by acting as a participant or non-participant observer. Finally, a descriptive and self-reflexive writing style is discussed as a way to make sense of the data collected during the fieldwork process.

During the first phase of the fieldwork, informants were recruited based on the role that they undertake in the mobilisation of ethnicity either in Chinatown/Haymarket or Leichhardt. These interviews have helped me to gain a glimpse on the specific ‘narratives’ (an open and ambiguous multi-Asianness in Chinatown/Haymarket and a sense of decline and cultural loss in Leichhardt) shared by the actors at a local level, whose efforts contribute to the emergence and
maintenance of the ethnic place brands (see chapters 5, 6). Interviews have been used as ‘creative and productive part[s] of the research’ (Gray 2003: 148) and approached with openness and curiosity. The interview became tools to engage in discussions with the respondents, whereby they were invited to reveal some of the conditions of their processes of ‘social becoming’ (ibid).

However, the shortcomings of interviews as the main methodological strategy have also been considered; according to Silverman, for example, the problem with interviews is that, by asking questions related to the topic of the research, the interviewer often becomes blinded by people’s ‘deep interiors’ and tends to ‘remorselessly focus on accessing the insides of people’s heads rather than observing how “experiences” and “motives” are made available’ (2007: 46). Silverman refers to Garfinkel (1967) and his notion of ‘rewriting history’ according to which, in responding to the interviewer’s questions, the interviewees who are invited to answer will ‘document their past in a way which fits [the research outcome], highlighting certain features and downplaying other’. In other words, in Silverman’s view, the interviewer’s intervention invites a ‘retrospective “rewriting of history”’ (Silverman 2007: 39). During the design of the methodological approach for this thesis, Silverman’s statement has been taken seriously and, as a consequence, a mix of other strategies has been adopted, which allowed me to retrieve what he calls ‘naturally occurring data’ (ibid: 50), or ‘material that appears to arise without a researcher intervening directly or providing some stimuli to a group of respondents’.

After an initial phase of fieldwork, in which interviews with business owners and other stakeholders involved in the branding of ethnicity were recorded and transcribed, the modalities in which I established relations with the informants were revisited along with the ways access and trust were gained to generate data to discuss. I also began to acknowledge ethnic place brands as the complex assemblages of representation that I have discussed in chapter 3. As a consequence, an increasingly mobile and eclectic strategy was adopted during the fieldwork to retrieve a richer set of data. Ethnic place brands were from this point on investigated more from an assemblage perspective, one defined by the belief that the researcher has to ‘follow the actors
themselves,’ as Latour writes, in order to ‘catch up with their often wild innovations [and] learn from them what the collective existence has become in their hands, which methods they have elaborated to make it fit together, which accounts could best define the new associations that they have been forced to establish’ (Latour 2005: 12).

In this context, I decided to take a differently active role in the generation of data, opting for techniques that invite the researcher to be less intrusive and more attentive to what actors in the field actually do. I have drawn on what Back (2007: 24-25) labels sociological attention: a heightened propensity toward listening, and a ‘mode of thought’ that encompasses a sense of empathy and a constant monitoring of the self as an active part in the co-production of the information. Back explains this as a practice ‘situated in time and place, fixated on the object of attention,’ but also ungrounded and mobile, characterised by ‘imaginative movement through the past in and out of the present’27 (ibid: 24-25). He describes its purpose as ‘an attempt to remark upon the unremarkable, evidence the self-evident and relate the troubles contained in the smallest story to a larger, more worldly scale’ (ibid: 22). To put it more simply, throughout the fieldwork, listening gradually became a more important research strategy than asking.

This strategy was applied throughout the second phase of data collection, which dealt with a number of organisations that label themselves as part of the ‘ethnic community’ (see chapter 7). Here I drew on contacts that I had made during the first phase of fieldwork, and explored more in depth the mobilisation of ethnic place brands from the perspective of a participant and non-participant observer with a series of stakeholders, whose assembled efforts and contested notions of ethnicity play a significant role in the branding of the precincts. Unlike the interview material previously collected, this time it was the observation of the actions of people to prevail, their use of symbols, and their participation in events as they engaged with various moments of performativity in the two precincts. More time was spent tracing connections, and figuring out the provisional networks, which these actors were part of. These experiences as an observer enabled me to practice what Czarniawska (2007) calls ‘shadowing’; with this word she refers to

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27 Back’s ideas are dependent on Mills’ (2000 [1959]) notion of the Sociological Imagination, understood as a form of self-consciousness, a quality of mind that seeks to reflect upon biography, history and their intersection within a society enabling its possessors to trace linkages across a variety of milieus.
the ‘attitude’ (ibid: 21) that allows ethnographers to follow activities based on the idea that ‘one has to step back in order to observe and [that], paradoxically, this step backward means stepping forward into the field’ (ibid: 9).

The importance of shadowing in the context of this thesis has been the space that this technique has provided to think through ‘cardinal rules of ethnography’, namely the necessity for a prolonged period in the field characterised by problems such as: ‘participation, time, space and invisibility’ (ibid: 13). The issues of ‘access’ and ‘blending in’ (ibid: 56-57) are the main critical challenges that shadowing as a technique presents; these are integral parts of the research process that constantly need to be re-negotiated and that help the researcher to develop a constant self-reflexive attitude. These issues, as I will explore later in this chapter, became central to the unfolding of the fieldwork, where the social and cultural capital that I embodied constantly defined points of access in some situations, while playing a decisive role in shutting doors elsewhere.

The representation of the field in a written text or, to quote Back again, a ‘careful evocation’ (2007: 21) of the field, has been at the centre of my reflections once data were retrieved. In this regard, Back argues that ‘sociological listening is tied to the art of description’ (ibid), which is rooted in ways to evoke the field developed by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, especially in his elaboration of ‘thick description’ (1973). This is a written text that is ‘selective and discerning, but [that] also require[s] imagination and creativity’ (Back 2007: 21), a kind of description characterised by the ‘mutual implication of theoretical imagination and empirical detail’ (ibid).

Savage (2009) underlines the role of description, or ‘descriptive assemblage’, in the social sciences as a writing style that offers ‘powerful ways of connecting substantive, theoretical, and methodological currents’ (ibid: 163). In the transcription of the fieldwork process, this thesis features a descriptive writing style alongside the analytical component. More specifically, a combination of description and interview material is used in the analysis of the application of the ethnic place brands in the two precincts in chapter 5 and 6; whereas a more experimental

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28 According to Czarniawska, the act of shadowing permits to preserve an attitude of outsideness; this, however, does not prohibit feelings or expressing emotions as main instruments of cognition, and – most importantly – it allows for a great degree of mobility over stationary observation.
approach is adopted in the evocation of my experience as an observer. In chapter 7, a storytelling style helps me to blend different dimensions into the narration of how the role of ‘ethnic communities’ has been witnessed as a series of provisional and hybrid cultural assemblages.

Van Maanen (1988) considers the written report as a basic mode of representing culture, and a feature that adds quality to the fieldwork; he goes as far as to suggest that, ultimately, ethnography refers to the modalities of writing fieldwork. The centrality of the writing style, in Van Maanen’s opinion, is due to the fact that, while choosing how to represent the fieldwork experience, the writer needs to jostle a series of basic factors such as: the role of the observed, the role of the observer, the tale, and the role of the audience. Stories, or as he calls them tales, are devices for transmitting cultural understanding, given ‘their ability to condense, exemplify, and evoke a world’ (Van Maanen 1988: 119). These are, in his opinion, vivid interpretations of reality and culture that transform writing into a way to ‘explicitly question the very basis of ethnographic authority,’ and that make of ethnography ‘a more philosophical, artistic, phenomenological or political craft’ (Van Maanen 1988: 92). Van Maanen’s impressionist tale has been used as a valuable template to write up the data gathered as a non-participant observer. Here, I have tried to condense in a narrative ‘the action observed in the field; snippets of conversations; interpretive skills (…) developed; documentary evidence collected; stories (…) heard; bits and pieces of the “relevant” literature (…) read; encounters (…) done; native category systems created and textualised’ (ibid: 20).

4.3 Discourse Analysis

Whereas ethnography has been used as a tool to generate and gather data, discourse analysis has enabled me to analyse the ways in which the meaning of ethnicity is constructed in the two precincts by means of particular discursive practices. Pennycook’s version of discourse analysis as an investigation of ‘the ideological construction of common sense’ (Fairclough 1989 in Pennycook 1994: 131) has been particularly inspiring in this context. This model of discourse analysis emphasises the dialectical relationship between the micro-structures of discourse
(linguistic features) and the macro structures of society (social structures and ideology). This perspective was ultimately useful to frame ethnicity within a wider ‘discursive production of truth’ (ibid), encompassing a multiplicity of actors and contexts, which naturalise ethnicity by mobilising it discursively via a series of representations.

Barker and Galasinski (2001: 64) write that ‘discourse is studied (…) as a constitutive part of [its local and global] context [made of] setting, participants and their communicative and social roles, goals, relevant social knowledge, norms and values, institutional or organisational structures’. They add that the idea of discourse rests ‘on more or less contested cultural classifications of people and circumstances, [which] are always part of a communicative situation (…) indicative of the power relations between communicators and the subjects of representation’ (ibid: 65, see also Markula 2014). This perspective is informed by Van Dijk, who points out that discourse analysis is interested in ‘social interactions embedded in various social and cultural contexts’ (Van Dijk 1997: 2); here, the relevance of the relations that hold together the actors of discourse, and that of the context in which discourse operates are highlighted. Throughout my research, the power relations between the various communicators have been carefully considered and the whole research process has been attuned to the complex process of image production, which involves a variety of stakeholders who mobilise ethnicity as part of the brand application to the precincts.

According to Pennycook, discourse analysis can be described as ‘a three-level model, in which the text (…) is given meaning by discourses (…), which in turn derive from a multiplicity of non-discursive practices’ (ibid: 130). Based on this distinction, the discourse of this research has been identified as the process of place branding – involving the complex spatio-temporal relations between culture, ethnicity and the city that I have articulated in chapters 1, 2 and 3; contested notions of ethnicity have represented the texts to read; whereas the geographical sites of the two precincts have been considered the non-discursive contexts in which the majority of data related to this discourse has been collected. Discourse analysis has been translated in the research process into the investigation of ethnicity as a practice of representation in both the
production of space and the construction of subjectivity. To explore these issues, the following questions have accompanied the entire research process: ‘how are representations of ethnicity (e.g. the heart of Little Italy; the Chinese community; Italian culture) mobilised in the discourse of ethnic place branding? Who makes them? What do they mean?’ These questions have worked to problematise the way in which ethnicity is constructed, mobilised and commodified in the ethnic precincts of Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt.

Representations of ethnicity have been gathered in the form of inscriptions of public art pieces; highlighted as parts of governmental reports; recorded during speeches by representatives of community organisations; and transcribed from the recorded interviews with shop owners and others. Their relevance in this thesis is not limited to their status as discursive acts; they are also interpreted as possibilities of resistance or challenges to the dominant place branding discourse based on the mobilisation of essentialist images of ethnicity. In other words, discourse analysis has operated as an investigation of instances in which essentialist representations of ethnic identity have been discursively mobilised or contested as part of the production of ethnic place brands. These instances have been placed in the specific contexts of the urban areas where they were mobilised, looked at in the ways in which they were used, contested and reworked. Lastly, the network of actors lying behind them was traced.

As I have discussed so far, discourse analysis and ethnography are the two main methods adopted in this thesis. These approaches have been used as a toolbox, whereas skills and strategies related to them were refined once in the field to generate a diverse set of data to interpret. The adoption of this methodology encompassed a broad range of reflections before, during and after the fieldwork, mostly regarding the knowledge produced throughout the research process, the approach with people as sources of data, and how the field could be acted upon, both in terms of research activities and modes of representation. In the next section, I reflect more in depth on the ‘modalities of moving’ in the field; how, in other words, the methodological toolbox made of ethnography and discourse analysis has been physically translated into the analysis of ethnic place brands. The point of departure has been a
straightforward approach to the two precincts of Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt: the act of walking.

4.4 Street Ethnography

De Certeau (1984: 98) writes that walking is ‘a spatial acting-out of the place’ that implies ‘relations among differentiated positions’. Throughout the fieldwork, this methodology has been largely used to engage with, make sense of and find my feet in the city, and specifically in the Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt precincts. The term ‘street ethnography’ is used in this thesis to indicate the process of retrieving data in the two precincts by applying a wide range of ethnographic methods to the gradual unpacking of the process of ethnic place branding. I discuss it as a modality of research and a curious attitude towards the field defined by the alternation of systematic observation and moments of experimentation.

A systematic approach to street ethnography has been adopted in the initial stage of my fieldwork, following the strategy developed by Zukin and Kosta (2004) in their analysis of New York’s East Village. They divide their exploration of the suburb in three main parts: the first one is the anatomy of the block, an in-depth observation of the buildings, the number and the variety of businesses in the street (including opening times, the kind of clientele attracted and what they are specialised in), the description of the shop fronts, the architectural details of residential and commercial spaces and the landmarks. Secondly, they explore the suburb’s patterns of sociability through conversational encounters with residents and shop owners, and they write that this is the way in which the researcher can get accustomed to the daily reality of the street, namely how social relations take place and how people negotiate and shape the public space. Lastly they reflect on the waves of change, addressing the history of the street and its constant change in relation to events, policies, and historical moments. This structured way of describing the field has proved to be extremely useful, particularly at the outset of the fieldwork, as it allowed me to systematically spend time in the street counting, taking notes, reading about the history of the two precincts, and thinking about these issues in connection to my research topic.
The recruitment of the interviewees was another chapter of my experience in the field. Formal invitations were used in the case of business chamber representatives, policy makers and various professionals; the same, however, cannot be stated for the business owners and all those stakeholders that partake in the mobilisation of the ethnic place brands at a street level. Here interviews were never automatically granted, and a degree of trust had to be gained, maintained and managed. In order to achieve a satisfactory number of respondents, techniques developed in other street ethnographies had to be deployed, as I soon learned that time to chat is a luxury that few shopkeepers in Sydney can afford.

In this case, seminal street ethnographic works such as Hall’s exploration of the Walworth Road in London (2012) became of pivotal importance. She introduces ethnography as a method that involves regular engagement with local meeting spaces as a way to get in touch with informants, and she refers to recruiting as a process that can be completed by resorting to a series of skills or ‘arts’. One of these is the art of sitting and involves the ‘repeated maintenance of time and place’ (2012: 108), namely sitting in a spot more or less at the same time of the day and mostly in the same space. By sitting down and observing, Hall argues that data related to ‘the public use of work’ (including a description of the workplace, the daily rhythms, the proprietors and the patrons) and the ‘allegiances’ formed within this space (the habitual customers, the locals, the subcultures inhabiting the place) can be systematically retrieved. Thanks to this technique, the majority of transcribed interviews were collected in each precinct, usually relying on word of mouth between business owners, whose businesses I kept frequenting throughout the fieldwork. As a consequence of this, however, the data set soon became a collection of interview material and diary entries on how the two precincts were ‘perceived’. The research strategy was therefore changed and the ethnographic methods were made to align with less intrusive and more detached methods of participation (Back 2007; Czarniawska 2007; Silverman 2007).

Whereas the methods of street ethnography proposed by Zukin and Kosta (2004) and Hall (2012) have proved immensely useful at the outset of the research process, when the two
precincts were nothing but two unknown parts of a city in which I was a newcomer, more experimentation to the urban wanderings was gradually applied, inspired by flaneurism as a method to reflect critically upon urban modernity. Vachon (2004) discusses the figure of the flâneur as an urban scholar engaged in the analysis of the ‘short-lived character and ever-changing life of the modern city’ (Vachon 2004: 48); he looks at figures like Benjamin and Baudelaire, whose ‘daily lives in the city [were] guided by chance, coincidence, the unconscious, and desire’ (ibid). I became increasingly intrigued by these approaches, especially as I was engaging with spaces of consumption in the city, while reflecting on ethnic branding as a networked practice that has significant repercussions on how the relation between urban places and notions of diversity are reconfigured. Step by step, and in line with the conceptualisation of ethnic place brands as complex, assembled and disjoined representations of ethnicity that I have described in chapter 3, the methods of my research began to adapt to the unpredictable rhythms of Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt by not necessarily seeking regularity and systematic recruitment of respondents, but also by interpreting fieldwork as an ‘experimental, contingent, eventful and becoming practice’ (Cheng 2013: 212).

Recent works in urban sociology seem to rely on these techniques of street ethnography quite heavily. Jung (2014: 622), for example, describes as ‘mindful walking’ the ‘physical way to start exploring a research focus, especially one that deals with relationships among people, organisations, places, communities, and environments’. Cheng (2013) also adopts this ethnographic method and calls it ‘aimless wandering’ (ibid: 212). He argues that this methodology provides the ethnographer with important insights into the urban aesthetics and politics, especially when walking is coupled with photographing; this produces what he understands as a ‘walking ethnography that is generative and inventive’ (Cheng 2013: 215). These methods interpret the city as an unpredictable field of research that cannot be represented only by systematic and ordered techniques. Such a perspective draws explicitly on concepts developed by exponents of the Situationist International (S.I.), a cultural and political movement

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29 Hall’s account of her experience in a London borough in this sense was very inspiring; she writes: ‘I was a newcomer, moving about with an A-to-Z of London perpetually in my backpack, and while subconsciously engaging with questions of my own belonging, I began to explore how the diverse individuals on the Walworth Road experienced and expressed their ties to people and place’ (Hall 2012: 23).
that was established in the 1950s France and whose exponents were active until the mid-1970s (Vachon 2004). Concepts such as ‘dérive’ (drift) – an ‘experimental wandering through urban ambiances associated with a systematic study of modes of behaviours’ (Vachon 2004: 48) – are a product of this movement.

To some extent, the experimental urban ethnography explored by both Jung and Cheng has been used to gather data for this thesis; these methods can be best understood when the role of the ethnographer in the field is defined by three main aspects: ethnographer as a curious spectator, the field as a series of entangled pathways, walking ethnography as a way of knowing and meditating (Jung 2014:624). All three aspects were applied during the street ethnography. They were reflected in the often aimless afternoons spent ‘mapping’ the precincts, or in the archive of over 1500 photos were taken and filed according to specific moments connected to the exploration of the two precincts.

I foreground the concept of ‘creativity’ here, when I should possibly talk about ‘serendipity as method’ instead. With this idea, I wish to introduce a part of the fieldwork experience, where a sort of experimental openness was used as a way to retrieve data, and where my methods became less dependent on ‘strategies’ and more inclined to rely on ‘operational dexterity, lateral thinking, flair for experimentation, [and] a willingness to innovate and take risks’ (Ang 2011: 789). The way in which this approach helped me to add significant data to those collected up to that point will be illustrated in the next section, and unpacked in the following chapters. Here, I want to stress the balance kept in the research methods for this thesis between a structured and analytical approach and a more experimental method points to the fact that a methodological openness was embraced once in the field. This was done to show a capacity to be attuned to a field characterised by high degrees of cultural complexity, one that calls for ‘cultural improvisation in circumstances beyond our control and prediction, where there are no fixed scripts for action’ (ibid).

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30 The Situationist movement developed as a critique to urban planning understood as the main cause of alienation that suppressed imagination and individual action. As a response to this, its exponents developed strategies to move in the city, where artistic methods connected to Surrealism and Dadaism were applied to the exploration of the urban.
Street ethnography represents a ‘practical application’ of ethnography, or an extension of it, and it applies to the field a synthetic form of flexible, emergent, non-simplistic strategies to gather an increasingly diverse set of data to interpret. Street ethnographic methods were adopted with the scope to make narrative justice to the complexity of ethnic place brands, while at the same time managing and reducing the messiness that complex phenomena present, without losing the complexity that messiness offers (Ang 2011). The following section aims to reconstruct, in a chronological order, the actual way in which the research was performed, bringing together the different methodological approaches discussed so far. Theory and practice were woven together in a street ethnography that unfolded through five main phases over a period of 16 months, from March 2013 to July 2014.

4.5 Five Phases of Research

Getting started, keeping eyes and ears open.

New to Sydney, I dedicated a first phase of research to developing a geographical imagination (Gregory 1994), namely ‘the articulation in the researcher’s mind of different forms of geographical knowledge’ (McNeill 2004: 3) such as ‘visible landscapes’ (neighbourhoods, streets and buildings); ‘territorial shapes’ (like the ideas of the city and the nation); and ‘imagined spaces’, understood as the ‘pop geographies and other forms of representation’ that help us to realise ‘how territories are frames popularly, and how these knowledges are formed or guided’ (ibid). The first phase of my research was characterised by a hyper-mobile approach to the city: I took part in walking tours, spent afternoons on bus seats across suburbs, formulated random hypotheses, cut newspaper articles and pasted them in diaries. Lastly, I consumed a huge number of movies, documentaries, and TV shows in relation to the intersection of cultural diversity and urban modernity in the Sydney context.
Narrowing down the research focus, first steps in the precincts.

The two main streets of Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt – Dixon Street and Norton Street – became my points of reference as complex locations that helped me to make sense of the two precincts. I focused on the ways in which ethnicity is commodified in the ‘heart of the precinct’ and explored the ways in which cultural commodification and identity formation could be brought to the surface in conversational encounters with business owners. In this preliminary phase of fieldwork, I started to produce little vignettes stemming from the conversations with the first respondents. These formed the basis for the more structured interviews that happened at a later stage of the fieldwork (when respondents were recruited according to stricter criteria, such as the location of their business or the type of commodity provided).

In this phase, interviews usually started with a request made on my behalf to the interviewees to ‘tell me a bit of their history’. This led to a second part of the interview, when I asked questions related to the provision of the ethnic commodity in their business, and if that was somehow connected to their biography and to the specific location where they decided to set up their business. This elicited responses, which connected the experience of migration and identity formation of the different actors who are based in the precincts, and it shed light on how ethnic branding impacts the everyday life of those who work in the precincts. Throughout the interview process, I never explicitly mentioned ethnic labels; in other words, I avoided over-determining its relevance in the life histories of my interviewees (all of whom are permanent residents or Australian citizens). On the contrary, I concentrated on if/how they, as actors, played with ideas of ethnicity in relation to their identity and to their economic activities.

Supplementing the knowledge and experimenting with representational methods.

In this phase I complemented the interviews with business owners with other data that I retrieved through the interviews with a wider range of respondents. In between one interview and the other, my fieldwork at this stage was defined by periodical retreats to the history rooms of the local libraries and archives, where I consulted official online surveys and statistics. These
were triangulated with historical material and official documents regarding the two areas (for example urban planning documents). In the meantime, I spent more and more time in the street spotting, counting and selecting an increasing number of businesses. The high streets gradually changed from ‘messy stretch[es] of space’ (Hall 2012: 8) to familiar research sites. An ever-expanding time spent talking and observing gradually morphed into fixing appointments, chatting for hours at café tables, and being stood up. The increasing number of interviews provided me with a training ground to develop ethnographic skills related to the written representation of interview data:

A ball-shaped chrome-plated teapot sits in the middle of the table; fake bunches of grape hang from the strings traversing the ceiling. The huge drape that hangs from the wall depicts belly dancers moving to the sound of percussions and guitars played by white-bearded men. Between the counter and the Australian flag, a large screen projects TV news in Cyrillic. The air is filled with the aroma of lamb and onions. I am in the middle of what is called qingnian tangrenjie, or ‘young Chinatown’. The three of us sit at the table next to the entrance: Ehmet, his father and I. Ehmet keeps repeating ‘Eastern Turkestan’ as opposed to Xingjiang, which is the Chinese word for it (Fieldwork diary, June 2013).

Anchoring the field.

During this phase I managed the contacts that I had built throughout the initial phase of fieldwork and I kept an eye on the activities organised in the two precincts in relation to the branding of ethnicity (such as the screening of movies and public meetings on ‘Italian culture’, and the organisation of cultural activities during the Chinese New Year Festival and the Moon Festival in Chinatown/Haymarket). I worked to gain access with two community organisations (one based in Chinatown, the other in Leichhardt) by strategically managing the cultural capital that I brought to the field. The protracted engagement with these two organisations – the Chinese Youth League of Australia and the Federation of Italian Migrants Workers and Families – and the networks of actors of which they are a part, involved different degrees of insideness and different challenges related to how to access, dwell, and exit the research sites. These experiences represented a relevant source of data, retrieved this time as a participant and non-participant observer, depending on the various occasions.
Closing ‘the shutter’, exiting the field.

Unlike the initial problems of figuring out strategies to retrieve data, at the end of my fieldwork I began to interrogate the ways in which I could stop recruiting respondents, as my occasional returns to the field coincided with the engagement with an ever-expanding network of informants, which I kept on snowballing as the direct result of the prolonged interaction with the community organisations that I had ‘anchored’ in the previous phase of research. It can be argued therefore that I was affected by what Back (2007: 177) calls the ‘one more interview syndrome’; in other words, I observed the field changing throughout time and the vaster network of stakeholders partaking in the mobilisation of the ethnic place brands, but I was able to effectively acknowledge that my time in the field had to come to an end. I therefore made what Jung (2014: 625) describes as the ‘synthetic closure’ of the fieldwork experience: a pragmatic decision on behalf of the researcher in order not to get lost in the entangled pathways of the field. More specifically, I used two symbolic moments related to the assemblage of the ‘ethnic community’ (which I will describe more in depth in chapter 7) to step out of the field.

4.6 Reflexivity and Self-Awareness

The open-ended, partial and unfinished nature of my fieldwork experience made me realise that the cultural capital I brought into the field had not sat alongside as a neutral element throughout the process of contacting and recruiting respondents, managing contacts, accessing, gathering and interpreting data. Without over-determining it, I began to systematically reflect on how I had defined (or biased?) my fieldwork experience. I realised, in other words, that fieldwork is a task ‘always unfinished (…) never free of doubt or ambiguity (…) driven by strategic choices that are often accidental’ (Van Maanen 1988: 120), and that my account was simply a ‘meaning added’ (de Vault 1987 in Czarniawska 2007: 82) to it, a ‘fragment of experience that was given momentary identity’ (ibid) through my own account. Hobbs (2013) agrees on this point and states that ‘all ethnographers should bring their biographies to the research table (ibid: 9); my role therefore could not remain a silent feature in the background, but rather needed to be
brought to the surface, making of reflexivity and self-awareness a defining feature that I now wish to explore briefly.

As I have mentioned in the introduction, my biography features an ‘Italianness’ determined by my birth and upbringing in Italy, and a ‘Chineseness’ developed as an academic interest throughout a pre-doctoral university career across universities in China and Taiwan. From this standpoint it is fair to argue that this thesis has been approached with the intention to use life experience in the context of the intellectual work, and to develop the self-reflexive habits that Mills (2000 [1959]) understood as a main feature of the sociological imagination. This ‘fusion between personal and intellectual life’ (Mills 2000 [1959]: 201) has been particularly evident in the course of the fieldwork, where it has been possible to test the argument made by Naz (2012: 97), who writes that ‘the multiple identities the researcher brings to the field, (…) the manner in which the research presents [them] (…) and the manner in which they are perceived or decoded by participants influence rapport formation, informants’ acceptance and access to ethnographic information’.

My ‘access’ in Leichhardt was almost immediate. Here, I took advantage of a part-time job in a call centre that had been set up in one of the Italian regional associations in Leichhardt during the 2013 parliamentary election in Italy, when one of the two running candidates to represent the Italian electorate in the Asia-Pacific for the Italian Senate and the Chamber of Representatives happened to be an eminent political figure in the Leichhardt area.31 My role as an employee at the call centre was to get in touch via telephone with a number of Italian citizens across Australia, and explain them the modalities of voting and the goals of the candidate’s political party. The location of the workplace – in a back alley a few minutes’ walk from Norton Street – allowed me to perform the street mapping phase before or after the shifts at the call centre. Most importantly, during this experience contacts were established with members of regional, political and cultural associations labelling themselves ‘Italian’, who were visiting the club at any given time of the day.

31 He undertook a prominent role in the construction of the Italian Forum and the Italian Cultural Centre from their inception in the early 2000s (see chapters 6, 7).
The engagement with one association in particular enabled me to plug effectively in the dynamic of a network of 'Italian cultural associations’ that I will explore in chapter 7. This experience as a participant to its activities coincided with the possibility to snowball a significant number of informants by being introduced personally by the association's members to all those figures active in the Leichhardt precinct, who label themselves (or are labelled) ‘friends of the Italian community’. The major drawback of this experience was the difficulty in stepping out of the field. As a matter of fact, the leaders of the community organisation saw in my enthusiasm the possibility to give ‘the Italian community’ a new, younger face. I became gradually more involved in the activities of the community, entangled in an ever-expanding network of stakeholders, and caught into a protracted legal battle related to the managing of the most symbolic community asset of Leichhardt: the Italian Forum Cultural Centre. It was hard, in this context, to frame my experience as a snapshot of the field, which could be written up in a dissertation.

The experience in Chinatown/Haymarket differed significantly. The bustling nature of the inner-city precinct generated a considerable amount of perplexity as to how to effectively ‘access’ the field from the outset. I explored the precinct via a protracted time of mapping its thick and complex fabric; most of the business owners and public officials interviewed in Chinatown/Haymarket were recruited at the very initial stage. If, on the one hand, this enabled me to gain a satisfactory descriptive overview of the precinct, on the other the access to a deeper narrative connected to the dynamics of the ‘Chinese community’ as an active component of the ethnic place brand became a much more daunting task to accomplish. I made a number of attempts to gain the same degree of insideness that I had enjoyed in Leichhardt: from following the activities of the elders of the local community, to enrolling in a semester-long Chinese language course organised by a cultural association based in the precinct, to a part-time tutoring experience in a college funded with mainland Chinese capital, which was catering for a clientele of young students interested in obtaining English language certifications for visa application purposes.
None of these attempts was successful, as the linguistic and cultural capital that I brought to the field this time proved to be completely irrelevant, too much, or not enough. My competence in Mandarin, for example, was totally useless when I was confronted with community members who spent most of their life in Australia and spoke Cantonese as second language. The classes that I attended, on the other hand, started from the basics of Mandarin Chinese, and were relocated to an outer Sydney suburb; I soon could not justify my attendance anymore, given the disparity between my level of proficiency and that of the rest of the attendees. Lastly, although my ‘looking like a native speaker’ and ‘speaking a fair Mandarin’ granted me access as a casual tutor in the language school, my non-native proficiency in neither English nor Mandarin gradually defined an attitude of scepticism by the school’s principal who, after an initial enthusiasm, cut my shifts and eventually fired me.

Despite these linguistic issues, a telephone call in Mandarin with the secretary of one of the organisations that I serendipitously discovered during one of the ‘inventive walking ethnographies’ (Cheng 2013: 215) in Chinatown/Haymarket, paved my way to a series of participant and non-participant observation activities at the headquarters of the cultural association, based in Dixon Street. At this point, another crucial issue arose in the collection of the data; namely that the interaction with the network of Chinese community organisations unfolded according to a precise timeframe, which happened across a time span of one year. I realised, for example, that the possibility to engage with community organisations mostly coincide with the organisation of the Chinese New Year activities (which I will discuss at length in chapter 7). The fact that the Festival took place almost ten months after the official beginning of my fieldwork, however, forced me to spend a prolonged time in the field and it was only thanks to the privilege of living and conducting research in the same city that data could be successfully gathered.

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32 This factor revealed interesting insights on the racial politics of representation, and especially how a Chinese business focussed on language training and mostly catering to mainland Chinese students, relied on the presumption that the Australian national identity is white. My ‘whiteness’ initially gave me the priority over Chinese-Australian candidates with a Mandarin-speaking background, who applied for the same position.
To sum up, comparing the fieldwork experience in Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt is relevant, as it highlights how the cultural capital brought to the field is not a neutral component of the research process. It affected many issues related to the temporal unfolding of my research and the type of data that I accessed. In Leichhardt, my cultural capital proved to be ‘too useful’, to a point where the distinction between my role as a researcher and participant in the mobilisation of Italian-related cultural activities became hard to tell. In other words, at some point I became an active part of the ‘Italian community’, while critiquing it in my own work. Not only did this issue present problems for the duration of my fieldwork, but it also marked a point of tension between the nuances in the mobilisation of ethnicity that I was trying to describe and the aim of my participation in community related activities, which was based on helping to ‘resurrect’ the vibrancy of the precinct by resorting to the idea of Leichhardt being ‘the heartland of Italian culture in Sydney’ mobilised through a series of activities that target Norton Street.

My cultural capital in Chinatown/Haymarket, on the other hand, was useful as far as a number of moments of performative ethnography enabled me to crack open some situations that I would probably not have been able to access otherwise. Furthermore it added depth to the analysis of some of the data that I was able to gather as an observer, especially in relation to the use of language. However, my ‘difference’ – both as a researcher upsetting the normal dynamics of the community organisation and as a non-Chinese individual – automatically excluded me from many situations, making my access an always agonising process of negotiation.

4.7 Conclusion: Researcher as a Quilt-Maker, Creativity as Method

In this chapter I have discussed the methodology for the investigation of ethnic place brands in Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt. The process of branding has been discussed in this chapter as something that happens following complex and messy ways, an assemblage of representations that can be analysed only when a disparate set of research strategies are adopted. I have explained how certain aspects of the ethnic place brands can be investigated through a
systematic observation and via structured interviews with respondents recruited following precise sampling criteria. However, I have also made another point, namely that there is a considerable part of ethnic place brands that emerges from the adoption of a non-linear approach and methods that embrace serendipity as a way to interpret the field. Here, I follow Anderson’s argument, who writes that researching is ‘at once logical and creative’, something that ‘not always follows a definite and precise logic’ (1999: 81). I conclude this chapter by briefly reflecting on how this series of strategies can be viewed as ‘creative’.

Firstly, these methods of research are creative because of the eclectic and multi-dimensional data set – ranging from business cards, newspaper articles, fieldwork diary entries and photographs – that they generate and, most importantly, that has to be managed. The task of the researcher in this context is to find a way in which the field as a series of representations can be put together as a narrative. This is, ultimately, what Denzin and Lincoln (2011) describe as bricolage, quilt-making or montage, namely an assemblage of representations that is an integral part of qualitative research methodology and that includes fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, recordings and memos to the self. Qualitative research methods, in other words, commit to using more than one ‘interpretive practice’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2011: 3) applied to a variety of empirical materials. I interpret creativity, in this context, as a specific method of composition, and as the capacity to weave together the multiplicity of representations gathered and interpreted.

Secondly, creative is the way in which theory and practice have been bridged in the research process. This type of creativity refers to the alternation of ‘methodological attributes’ (Willis 2000) towards the field including a series of ‘imaginations’ (geographical, sociological), ‘arts’ (the art of sitting), and ways of physically approaching the field (mindful walking, inventive and generative walking ethnography). The combination of these practices has been concretely translated into street ethnography as something to ‘throw at the messiness of data’ (Willis 2000: afterword, xvi), a strategy aimed at uncovering the ‘overlapping connections between (…) the individuals and groups and wider [societal] structure’. Seen from this perspective, creativity is a form of self-consciousness based on imaginative capacities or, as Mills puts it, the ‘understanding of the intimate realities of ourselves in connection with larger social realities’ (Mills 2000 [1959]: 15).
Fieldwork, in other words, represents an account of how ‘problems of biography, of history and of their intersection within a society’ find their connection throughout an ‘intellectual journey’ (ibid). At the core of these different uses of creativity as integral part of the research process, there is the issue of how to legitimate the role of experience as a generator of ideas or, to put it in Pickering’s words ‘how to give experience the quality of narrative’ (2008: 18). Experience, writes Pickering, is an ‘analytical resource’, or a ‘two-way process: analytically, it requires the tools for interrogation, which we can bring from cultural theory, but as a resource it can also be used to interrogate the abstract formulations of theory’ (ibid).

In this chapter I have attempted to convey a wide range of research practices deployed in the field. I have used them as a ‘series of narrative resources’ through which the reader can gain a sense of the ‘texture of the relationships the research is seeking to describe’ (Latham 2003: 2009). I started my fieldwork with a ‘plan’ on how to investigate ethnic place brands, but I revisited it and improvised new strategies once ‘bogged down’ in the field, as Latour (2005: 17) writes. I argue that this represents the ‘detour through the empirical’ explored by Ang (2011: 791) as a way to ‘respond to complexity in practice’ (ibid). In other words, I have dealt with the complexity of ethnic place brands through a ‘detailed mapping’ (ibid) of the field, where structured observation, lateral thinking and serendipity became a valuable currency to make complexity legible, without turning it into a simplistic account.

Human geography, Latham writes, ‘must seek a more pluralistic and imaginative dimension in both methodology and research outcomes’ (2003: 2012). This can be achieved if researchers become more attuned to the ‘creativity of practice’ defined as a ‘broadminded openness to methodological experimentation and pluralism (…) and the allowance of a certain amount of methodological naivety’ (ibid). The methodology for this thesis reflects this call, exploring how such an approach requires a propensity towards complexity, and a heightened reflexive approach to the field. As the chapter has illustrated, this can result in the engagement with a wide range of informants and with the possibility to limit the messiness of the field by developing the habits to file, collect, record ethnographic minutiae, move, wait, fail and try again.
A Flexible Brand for Sydney’s ‘Global Chinatown’

5.1 Introduction

Chinatown/Haymarket is not simply a branded precinct. It is part of a complex process of transformation that is changing the southern end of the City of Sydney. In this chapter I will explain how the idea of the ‘multi-Asian taste carnival’ used to market the precinct is better understood as a constant tension between stereotyped images of Chinese ethnic identity and multiple, hybrid forms of identification reflected in the recent upgrading of the precinct’s public domain and in the provision of commodities and services. I will dedicate the rest of the chapter to the analysis of how these tensions become visible by looking at the application of the ethnic place brand to Chinatown/Haymarket from different angles: firstly, I will look at Dixon Street as a ‘stage’ for the precinct’s brand; secondly I will explore the main tools used to highlight the precinct’s brand; thirdly I will describe the wider tensions between essential Chineseness and multi-Asianness that are ‘intensified’ by the Chinese New Year Festival; lastly, I will address the business strategies adopted by some business owners and how they appropriate specific aspects of ethnicity to conduct their activities in the precinct.

The production of the ethnic place brand and its application to Chinatown/Haymarket is translated into what I describe throughout this chapter as a ‘flexible platform’. This metaphor helps me to convey the type of tensions inherent in the meaning of ethnicity that are brought to
the surface by the brand management strategy for the precinct. The platform needs not to be understood strictly in physical terms, but most importantly in terms of a rearticulation of the meaning of ethnicity through the place branding practice. I will focus on ‘flexibility’ as a fundamental attribute for the ethnic place brand for Chinatown/Haymarket by addressing art installations, mapping activities and the restaurant industry, the main arenas in which ethnic images are mobilised. Recent public installations in the precinct contribute to highlighting ambiguous representations of Chineseness that move between essentialism and complexity; mapping activities promote a specific type of mobility in the precinct that challenges fixed conceptions of ‘core’ and ‘periphery’; the commodification of ethnicity in the service industry, on the other hand, promotes an understanding of ethnicity as a fluid response to always shifting market demands.

5.2 Framing the ‘Priority Precinct’

Chinatown’s central position and proximity to some of the City’s main landmarks – such as Darling Harbour, the Australian National Maritime Museum and Central Station – has contributed to its growing relevance for Sydney’s urban economy, especially during the past fifteen years. Major infrastructural and redevelopment projects such as World Square (a shopping centre adjoined with a skyscraper hosting commercial and residential strata spanning an entire block bounded by George, Liverpool, Pitt and Goulburn Streets) and Central Park (a major mixed-use urban renewal project located in Chippendale, 1.2km from Chinatown)\(^{33}\) took place in proximity of the precinct from the beginning of the 2000s. These have redefined the spatial and social-economic landscape of the southern end of George Street – the main artery of the City’s Central Business District – with no exception for Chinatown/Haymarket. The expanding structures of the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and its growing intake of international students have also been driving the transformation of Chinatown/Haymarket,

\(^{33}\) The development is focused on a new public park located just off Broadway Shopping Centre, of approximately 6,500m\(^2\) in size. The project features as one of the major infrastructural developments set by the Sustainable Sydney 2030 plan.
contributing to a growth in the number and diversification of services catering for an increasingly transnational patronage in its southern end, which borders with UTS main buildings.

The area has also been increasingly included in the plan for Sydney’s future articulated in ‘Sustainable Sydney 2030’. The overall plan recognises Chinatown/Haymarket as a ‘priority precinct’. This means that it does not only acknowledge its paramount position within the city’s urban economy, but that it also considers its development one of the first objectives to meet in order to deliver the proposed vision of Sydney as a ‘Green, Global and Connected’ metropolis (see chapter 2). According to the City of Sydney’s website, the one in Haymarket is considered ‘the largest Chinatown in Australia, both historically significant and a contemporary attraction for local and international visitors’; its development as a priority precinct implies ‘building on its unique character, supporting its economic development and promoting its many attractions’ (www.Sydney2030.com.au).

The sum of three factors – Chinatown’s uniqueness, its economic development and its abundance of attractions – places the precinct in a specific context, defined by growth and urban transformation. My emphasis on these three factors echoes the analysis by McDonogh and Peterson about worldwide downtowns as urban areas undergoing major changes that ‘have taken shape through imagined forms and meanings that have global currency: consumption, monumentality, mobility, modernity, and gentrification’ (McDonogh and Peterson 2012: 2). Historically placed in this part of the city, contemporary ‘Global Chinatowns’, as McDonogh and Wong (2012) name them, cannot be simplified as ‘exotic alternative spaces’ (McDonogh and Wong 2012: 275), but rather need to be conceptualised as urban places that ‘offer fundamental insights on downtown as urban/regional places of political economic power, social structure, and cultural meaning constituted by multilayered and contested global flows of goods, people, knowledge, and imagery’ (ibid).

The way in which Chinatown/Haymarket has been included in the urban tourism agenda is exemplary in explaining these issues. The increasing significance of the precinct in a context of development and long-term planning has indeed not passed unnoticed to the eyes of
governmental bodies, which are interested in the promotion of the touristic amenities of Sydney.

The website of Destination NSW, for example, dedicates a long section to the description of Chinatown/Haymarket, with a special focus on the ‘type of experience’ offered in the precinct:

Sydney’s Chinatown is a melting pot of eateries. From Cantonese to Malaysian, Thai to Vietnamese, the dumpling houses and neon-lit nooks of Chinatown and Haymarket present an irresistible attraction. With all the colour and excitement of an Asian marketplace, Chinatown and Haymarket offer an enticing mix of restaurants, food halls, noodle bars and quirky shopping experiences. (...) Located close to Sydney’s Central Station, Chinatown and Haymarket are ideal starting points for exploring the many attractions of nearby Darling Harbour and the city centre (www.sydney.com).

This passage relies on two main points to advertise the precinct: its rich offer of Asian cuisines, and its charm as an urban place. The mention of the multiplicity of delicacies that are provided in the precinct connects with the motto ‘the multi-Asian taste carnival’, which has been used in projects such as Slices of Sydney to market the specificity of Chinatown/Haymarket, as we have been able to see in chapter 3. The comparison between Chinatown/Haymarket and ‘the excitement of an Asian marketplace’, on the other hand, aims to introduce the precinct’s specificity in terms of its hidden spots, which suggests the idea that there is something exciting about this part of the city that needs to be explored via shopping experiences and urban adventures. In this passage we can also start to glimpse one of the main consequences of the application of the ethnic place brand to the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct: the description of it as an area with ambiguous boundaries that ‘stretches across’ a number of localities in the City, and as a site characterised by connection, accessibility and circulation. This characterisation belies the representation of a strictly demarcated ethnicised precinct defined by clear-cut images of ethnic identity.

Chinatown’s pivotal importance for the tourism industry has been further highlighted in studies such as the ‘Sydney Precincts Research’, funded by the NSW Government and Tourism New South Wales. This study, published in May 2011, was carried out with the objective to ‘gauge consumer awareness and perceptions of Sydney’s key tourism precincts’ and ‘to feed into the development of market strategies’ (Tourism NSW 2011: 3). The study refers to domestic tourism and it engages with visitors from Melbourne, Queensland, the Australian Capital
Territory (ACT) and regional NSW by investigating their perception of 32 Sydney tourist destinations. Research covered a geographical radius of 60km, and a number of precincts within the metropolitan area were ranked according to their ‘performance’ in relation to a variety of ‘themes’. Chinatown/Haymarket features in the final report as the best performing precinct in regards to ‘shopping, food and dining’; it also ranks second in the category ‘art, design and culture’; and third in relation to the organisation of ‘events and festivals’. The study concludes that Chinatown/Haymarket falls in a category of precincts targeted by consumers with relatively low levels of awareness of, but high interest in visiting the site. The study indicates that the precincts that rank in this position ‘have high growth potential and should aim to increase awareness’ (ibid: 12).

Urban economic development and tourism are the main discourses in which Chinatown/Haymarket has been placed and that have informed the prioritisation of the precinct’s development in a wider context of urban growth. As I will explain in the rest of the chapter, this development has been based on the enhancement of the precinct’s ethnic character and it has been translated into a constant ambivalence and uncertainty surrounding the understanding of Chineseness as the precinct’s point of differentiation, and an emerging multi-Asianness, which is reflected in the contemporary business community. These tensions become especially visible once the central spine of the precinct – Dixon Street – is looked at as a ‘stage’ for the ethnic place brand.

5.3 Dixon Street: Complex Stage for the Ethnic Place Brand

Edensor argues that the fragmentation of tourism into niche markets entails ‘a proliferation of spaces, activities and identities’ (ibid: 61) and that the coherence of most tourist performances depends on their taking place in specific contexts, which he describes by drawing on Goffman’s (1959) influential metaphor of the ‘stage’. I borrow Edensor’s conceptualisation of the stage as a setting for ‘tourism as a form of performance’ (ibid: 59) and I filter the description of Chinatown’s most iconic street through this analytical lens. By borrowing the stage metaphor, I
do not wish to make the discourse of branding, which forms the centre of this thesis, collapse entirely into the tourism literature. Rather, I want to add complexity to the exploration of how ethnic place brands become enmeshed within different discourses addressing, for example, the reconstruction of downtown areas as particular forms of tourist attraction.

Edensor (2000; 2001) explores the relation between tourists and the spaces in which they reside and pass through by discussing the contrasting forms of ‘enclavic’ and ‘heterogeneous’ stages. By drawing on this distinction, I argue that Chinatown/Haymarket represents an instance of what he calls a stage ‘whose enclavic or heterogeneous nature is unclear’ (Edensor 2000: 333), and that this blurred distinction is crucial to understand the tensions between essentialism and complexity that lie at the core of the branding process for Chinatown/Haymarket.

As I will show in more detail throughout the chapter, the southern part of Chinatown/Haymarket is often addressed as ‘the heart of the precinct’. This characterisation is often due to the presence of the two iconic archways that bookend the section of Dixon Street between Hay Street and Goulburn Street. The maintenance throughout the decades of the distinctive oriental features that drove the beautification of the area in the 1970s and 80s illustrates what Edensor calls an ‘enclavic’ tourist stage. A defining characteristic of this space is the ‘visual order’ that ‘theming’ imposes on it (Edensor 2000: 329). In such a space, argues Edensor, ‘the pedestrian gaze is directed to particular attractions and communities and away from “extraneous chaotic elements”’ (ibid). This idea is in line with Zukin’s understanding of Disneyfied streetscapes as defining characteristics of downtown areas. Zukin writes that ‘cities impose visual coherence in many ways: by using zoning to impose design criteria (…) by making memory visible in historic districts, by interpreting the assimilation of ethnic groups in street festivals, by building walls to contain fear’ (1995: 77 my italics). Dixon Street is a very prominent example of how the visual coherence discussed by Zukin is maintained in Chinatown/Haymarket by means of a series of material details and practices that rely on a specific version of Chineseness as the defining theme of the precinct. Figure 13 provides some examples to understand how the thematised nature of Chinatown/Haymarket is maintained.
Here we can see how the street signage around the Dixon Street area is displayed in rectangular golden boxes framed in red, where the English name of the street is accompanied by the Chinese version. The Chinese version of the English name has no meaning in itself; it is just the verbatim transliteration of the English word. Factory Street, for example, is translated into faduoli jie, while Ultimo Road is translated into oudingmo dao. The instance of bilingual street signage here shows how Chinese language is deployed as part of an oriental street furniture that is maintained to indicate the cultural otherness of the street, and that is used as part of a visual coherence that constructs Chinatown/Haymarket as an enclavic tourist stage. The iconic nature of this part of the precinct is also maintained by the preservation of buildings, which were constructed during the 1970s beautification projects, while a number of pagoda-shaped, green-tiled upturned roofs are still visible.

34 This is the street that connects the southern end of Chinatown to Darling Harbour.
These street details have recently been complemented by other interventions on the precinct. The installation of vertical red flags reading ‘Chinatown’ along George Street and in proximity to the precinct’s ‘hot spots’ (see chapter 3) can be used as an example to show how, despite the growing connections between Chinatown/Haymarket and the rest of the Central Business District, the City authorities still rely on indications that ‘signal’ the specificity of the precinct. There seems to be an emphasis, in other words, on the role of borders as they delimit the precinct and create a distinctive visual experience for tourism purposes.

Besides its obvious touristic oriented nature, however, Dixon Street offers a number of opportunities to engage with the urban fabric that are not entirely dependent on consumerist activities framed by exotic Asianness. It is in Dixon Street, for example, that Falun Gong activists hand out flyers to passers-by and ask them to sign petitions that denounce the brutality with which their movement is repressed in Mainland China. Dixon Street is also increasingly targeted by buskers, street performers and beggars, who share the tree-shaded public seating along the pedestrian area with groups of elders and young students, who enjoy a milk tea during their class breaks. Lastly, the street offers a space for consumption, which is defined by the circulation of commodities and practices that escape the rigid conceptualisation of a monolithic Chineseness as the only theme for this urban space.

I argue therefore that Dixon Street is a kind of tourist stage that goes beyond the ‘monitored aesthetic that combines ideal cleanliness and just a hint of the “exotic”’ (Edensor 2000: 329) and that it can be understood as ‘heterogeneous’. According to Edensor, heterogeneous tourist stages are complex spaces, where different points of congregation, enaction and performance are formed, and where ‘there is a constant stream of temporary pleasurable activities, entertainment and transaction’ (ibid: 332) together with ‘mundane social activities such as loitering with friends, sitting and observing and meeting people’ (ibid). The notion of the heterogeneous tourist stage here is useful as it indicates that the multiplicity of activities,

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35 Falun Gong is the political movement that was formed around the Falun Dafa, a qigong practice of the Buddhist school, whose teachings incorporate elements drawn from Taoist tradition. In 1999, the movement was declared illegal in Mainland China and, since then, practitioners of this discipline and the followers of the movement have been arrested and detained.
symbols and actors hosted in the street contests the immobility of the oriental Chineseness and expands the network of stakeholders that can access and rework its meaning. My point here is that the improvised, democratic and public use of Dixon Street that I have documented during the fieldwork is one of the ways in which the ambiguity of Chineseness is played out in Chinatown/Haymarket. Figure 14 includes some of the main activities that shape Dixon Street as a heterogeneous stage. By looking at how Falun Gong activists use the Dixon Street area to raise awareness about their political struggle, for example, the static and timeless meaning of a monolithic Chineseness is contested and reworked in a politicised public space, which gives it a different meaning. It disentangles Chinese culture from the images of pagodas and archways and embeds it into a more dynamic discourse addressing contemporary socio-cultural and political issues connected to Mainland China.

Moreover, a few metres from a newly established café next to one of the two ‘Chinese’ archways, a duo of musicians dressed up in ‘traditional Chinese clothes’ performs regularly. The informative material that can be found next to their improvised platforms reads that one of the instruments played by the duo – a bowed string instrument similar to a violin and called erhu – ‘became popular in China during the Song dynasty’, whereas the other – called zheng or Chinese harp – ‘was already a popular musical instrument in the Shaanxi province almost three thousand years ago’. The use of ancient Chinese musical instruments and costumes is proof that the street is a space in which static and essentialist notions of Chinese culture are articulated. This, however, does not preclude the possibility to consider Chineseness a malleable resource that can be accessed and transformed by an expanding range of actors (the duo consists of a Chinese man and a Dutch woman). Secondly, during their performances Chinese instruments are used to play not only Chinese music, but also popular songs from other countries. On the cover of the CDs sold by the duo it is possible to read that ‘if western music is played on Chinese instruments, such Erhu and Flute, new depth is given to famous songs as for instance Don’t Cry for me Argentina or Danny Boy’.
Figure 14. A duo of musicians performs at the corner of Dixon Street and Goulbuen Street (top); a Falun Gong activist prays next to a protest stall set up in Dixon Street (middle); people hanging out in Little Hay Street (bottom). Photographs by the author.
The potential of multiple activities to ‘disrupt’ the street’s static conceptualisation as ‘simply Chinese’ becomes especially visible during the street market that takes place in the southern end of Dixon Street every Friday evening. For the occasion, food and souvenir stalls are set up along the pedestrian area in between the two ‘Chinese’ archways.

Here, walkers and consumers can engage with hybrid commodities and global symbols of popular culture that sometimes transcend, and at other times reinforce and reinvent, the centrality of Chineseness in this part of the precinct. For instance, ‘traditional Chinese’ commodities like the Peking duck rolls can be purchased from stalls set up next to others selling Uyghur-style lamb skewers and Japanese Takoyaki. Items sold at the street market range from NBA basketball jerseys, to handmade jewellery and Lego-shaped USB sticks imported from Korea. While browsing the endless variety of commodities, the echo of the latest American RnB songs can be heard from the open doors of a restaurant specialising in Yunnan spicy noodle soups.

By looking at the inclusion of the precinct in an urban development context dominated by the tourism agenda, I have focussed so far on the ‘stage’ to grasp how the Chinatown/Haymarket ethnic place brand is reflected materially. Despite the characterisation of Chinatown/Haymarket as the ‘melting pot of Asian eateries’ and a ‘multi-taste Asian carnival’, I have shown how the description of Dixon Street as a tourist stage reveals, on the one hand, that a degree of cultural essentialism is maintained to deliver the message of the ethnicised precinct; on the other hand, the heterogeneity that this street hosts also points to the contestation of these fixed images of essential Chineseness. The multiple activities that take place in the street, in other words, disrupt the precinct’s theme as ‘simply Chinese’, and rework it into a more complex and hybrid series of practices and commodities related to a public space. In the next section, I will suggest that the branding of ethnicity is also reflected in recent upgrading of the precinct’s public domain. These development projects highlight the connection between an uncertain, flexible and open-ended public space, and the complexity of Chinatown/Haymarket’s brand.
5.3.1 The Chinatown Public Domain Plan

In 1997, a report was commissioned by the City of Sydney to investigate the alleged decline in the popularity of the Chinatown/Haymarket area despite the major upgrading that took place only two decades earlier. The report that followed confirmed the hypothesis of a general decline and, in response, ‘the council undertook a round of new refurbishments to update and modernise Chinatown’ (Mak 2003: 99). The authorities replaced the old lanterns and pagodas with modern lighting and new seating. The surrounding areas were repaved with granite and trees were planted; new street furniture involved high-tech lighting and modern design. Reviewing this project, Mak (2003: 99) writes that ‘the old “Chinesified” Chinatown had given way to new notions of identity’ and that, in undertaking a major urban restructuring project, the City was showing a willingness to help Chinatown ‘to keep up with the times’ (ibid). However, Council did not seem satisfied with this further beautification and it commissioned another major upgrading that was implemented in 2010. This time the project not only echoed the past grand ambitions of revitalising the precinct, but it also ‘strategically aligned’ with the Sustainable Sydney 2030 vision.

The project became known as the ‘Chinatown Public Domain Plan’ and it featured experts such as the City’s Design and Public Art team; urban design professionals; one architect studio; transport and traffic consultants; and a Sydney based urban planning and development firm, which led the consultation with the local community. The overall strategic objective of the Plan states that the Public Domain Plan’s aim is ‘to respect, protect and build on the area’s historic links with Chinese culture and the Chinese community together with the growing influence of other Asian cultures and communities, while recognising the area’s importance to contributing to the vitality and diversity of Sydney as a global city’ (Spackman Mossop & Michaels 2010: 4). Furthermore, the project’s aim is to ‘reinforce and enhance the unique characteristics of the Chinatown urban experience’ (ibid: 27), as a way to make it become a ‘stronger hub’. The representative of the architect studio involved in the Chinatown Public Domain Plan, whom I interviewed during my fieldwork, commented:
This area has basically been off the agenda for many years. It was felt that the community contributed a lot to the city, but it wasn’t getting much back. I guess this is where the project came from. And then, of course, Clover is very concerned about what she calls “the Villages”. This is basically where the Plan started (Interview with landscape architect M. S., 23rd April 2013).

The starting point for the Public Domain Plan is articulated here as a pressure to respond to the needs of ‘the community’, while conforming to the ‘Villages’ project. Both issues of urban upgrading and competitive differentiation seem therefore to be central to the aim of the Plan. Overall, the issues of walkability and the creation of a pedestrian friendly and traffic-free urban area are recurrent themes throughout the final draft of the Plan. This echoed by the interviewee:

The issue was to give the area back to pedestrians and walkers. (...) [The business community] wanted more space. But they did not want more cars, they wanted more walkable spaces, they wanted vibrancy. They wanted a stage where to do their festivals, their markets. They wanted a platform.

The landscape architect explains that the issue of public space is the main thread that guided the entire project. From this perspective it is possible to appreciate the significant difference between the Public Domain Plan and the one-dimensional process of beautification of Dixon Street and surroundings in the late 1970s that aimed to highlight Chinatown’s ‘visible difference’ (see chapter 3). The priority given by the Chinatown Public Domain Plan to public space is related to the idea of a ‘Green, Global and Connected’ vision for Sydney (see chapter 2), with its stated objective of working for a city ‘where its villages interrelate, prosper, and where residents, workers and visitors move around in a connected urban area’ (Spackman Mossop & Michaels 2010: 4; see also City of Sydney 2013: 3). In line with the overall vision for Sydney, the main concern of the Public Domain Plan therefore becomes creating more connections, more space, which in turn is believed to contribute to creating more vibrancy for the business community. Here we can also glimpse a tension between the stated objective to working entirely with the idea of public space, and to highlighting the role of a central platform, where the business community can carry out their activities.

The division of the precinct into manageable and demarcated areas for redevelopment is one example of how this tension is translated into practice. The Plan recognises that the precinct is

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36 Clover Moore is the Lord Major of Sydney.
made of three main parts: Chinatown North – situated between Goulburn Street and Liverpool Street – Chinatown South – defined by significant attractions such as the shopping mall Market City – and a ‘highly active urban core’ (Spackman Mossop & Michaels 2010: 9). This is understood as the section in between the northern and southern part of the precinct and it is indicated in the Plan as the ‘social and cultural heart of Chinatown’ (ibid). Here it becomes visible how the work on public space aligns with the goals of place branding; the consolidation of a specific terminology to address the significant sections is one indicator of this process, particularly the overlapping of the social and cultural ‘heart of Chinatown’ with the consumption-oriented activities supposed to take place in the ‘pedestrian mall’.

By looking at how Dixon Street is highlighted in this discourse as the ‘platform’, we can appreciate how this spatial unit becomes the preferred location of the ‘Chinatown/Haymarket experience’, and how the work of the Plan becomes strengthening its visibility or, to use marketing jargon, to increase consumer awareness. In achieving this goal, the role of borders seems crucial, as it informs the use of a spatial lexicon to drive the development process. Although the Public Domain Plan is driven by this fragmented spatial awareness, there seems to be a tension articulated by my respondent:

We had to recognise the way that the Council framed the project: there were boundaries. However, the report recognised that we should understand that there are other Asian centres outside our boundaries. Chinatown actually… well, originally it continues all the way up to Surry Hills. So it’s actually being shrinking down back to here but now is going back to Pitt Street, Campbell Street and so on. So [Chinatown] is a very fluid concept, it has fluid boundaries. (…) But you know, essentially the economic, political considerations made us watch closely at Dixon Street because Dixon Street, for better or for worse, is the economic driver of this whole neighbourhood (…) so it is fair to say that this central spine drove the project in a lot of the considerations. (Interview with landscape architect M. S., 23rd April 2013)

The idea of the precinct’s fluid boundaries plays havoc with the consistency of the message that the brand is supposed to deliver to the consumer based on place branding literature that I have discussed in chapter 1. According to this literature, in order for the brand to be successful it needs to point to a consistent message, or ‘avoid cacophony’ (Kavaratzis 2005; Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013; Mayes 2008 see chapter 1). However, as the representative from the architect studio explains in the interview, the upgrading of Chinatown’s public domain is based on the
assumption that the ‘periphery’ of the precinct is as important as the so-called ‘core’, for the ‘Chinatown/Haymarket concept’ travels across the institutionalised boundaries within which the Chinatown Public Domain Plan is meant to work.

My interest in this context is to discuss what kind of consequences this approach has for the mobilisation of the ethnic place brand. In other words, given the importance of the ‘heart of Chinatown’, and the proposed goal to build on the historic links of the area with Chinese culture and the Chinese community, it is interesting to explore how ethnicity and issues of space reconfiguration are interwoven in the Chinatown Public Domain Plan. As my respondent commented:

Sure we were concerned with the cultural identity of the area. What is identity? What is the appropriate response to identity? Can you really design like that or not? I mean ‘What is Chinatown?’ was a basic question. We had to deal with it as a dilemma. I guess our philosophy on public space is that it can’t be didactic; you can’t theme space; space belongs to everyone. There is not one Chinatown. There are many Chinatowns here. There are Vietnamese, Koreans, and Filipino…. It is changing all the time, and this is already different from how it used to be 5 years ago. So really, the space cannot be too didactic. It cannot be a history lesson, and not belong to only one cultural group. (…) So we don’t impose. Cultural identity comes from the users. (Interview with landscape architect M. S., 23rd April 2013)

The design of a space that ‘does not impose a meaning’ represents, in the interviewee’s words, the extent to which the Chinatown Public Domain Plan engages with the ‘dilemma’ of ethnicity. The fact that an imposition of cultural representation is not at the forefront of the team’s thinking appears rather clearly; furthermore, the scepticism toward representing – or ‘designing in a didactic manner’ – can be interpreted as a way to engage with cultural complexity while implementing structural changes for the precinct. The stress on public construction of space points to the fact that cultural identity is thought to come from users, and this suggests that notions of essentialism are explicitly avoided in the Chinatown Public Domain Plan as the urban space is recognised to be everyone’s property.

However, the problematisation of cultural identity here is framed as much in terms of the redundancy of a static image (‘what is identity?’, ‘what is Chinatown?’) as much as in a context of change and competition; in other words, space should not be didactic mostly because another group might define the character of the area in a few years’ time, or other Chinatowns might
emerge somewhere else. According to the representative from the architect studio, the solution conceived by the Public Domain Plan to respond to the ‘dilemma’ of ethnicity is to adopt a redevelopment strategy based on the ‘flexibility’ of space:

We want to contribute to a flexible space, which can be multi-programmed. This is what I mean by ‘not being didactic about the design of public space’. It is flexible, and open to other cultures and other people. (…) And remember, these spaces are fascinating to explore. Part of their charm is that you do tend to get lost, which is nice. We do not really want to reveal everything at once. We want to reveal the space slowly. Chinatown has a completely different grain to the rest of the city, and I think this is important and this architecture needs to be protected. (Interview with landscape architect M. S., 23rd April 2013)

The Chinatown Public Domain Plan contributes to the reorientation of the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct by merging two aims: the creation of more ‘connections’, focussing for example on the idea of improved public space, and the enhancement of the precinct’s theme. On the one hand, the process of urban development that characterises the upgrading of the public space is defined by the question ‘what is Chinatown?’ On the other hand, there is uneasiness with the requirement to work within strictly defined spatial borders that prevent an engagement with what happens outside of them. The idea of a flexible space that can be multi-programmed appears here as a synthesis between the two approaches to the precinct: an open public urban space and an ethnically branded place.

The idea of flexibility of public space, in other words, illustrates how the recent upgrading of the precinct and a flexible understanding of ethnicity are two interwoven concepts. The words of the representative of the architect studio suggest that there is a rejection of a sort of cultural imposition together with the urban upgrading. Seen under this light, the application of the ethnic place brand to the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct illustrates its discontinuity with the process of beautification that constructed Chinatown in the late 1970s. Although the recent upgrading of the precinct’s public domain does not signal a total opposite approach (after all the project still relies on the ‘visibility’ of the ‘heart of Chinatown’), what makes this project new is the tension lying at its core; this is defined by the necessity to work within the boundaries of the delimited precinct – whose core needs to be ‘highlighted’ – and the understanding of a flexible platform with fluid boundaries.
The tensions between essentialism and flexibility in the brand management strategy of the Chinatown/Haymarket brand are not only reflected in the recent upgrading of the precinct’s public domain. ‘Mapping’ and ‘public art’ are two other recent ‘types of interventions’, which foreground how an ever-expanding network of actors has contributed to different interpretations of the precinct’s ethnic theme: the first by resorting to a ‘mysterious Chineseness’, the second by articulating the malleability of ethnicity through the critique of a ‘baseline Chineseness’.

5.3.2 Mapping Activities and Constructed Narratives

Marketing activities based on the ‘mapping’ of Chinatown/Haymarket are interesting factors to observe that partake in the mobilisation of the ethnic place brand for the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct. These rely on a wide network of stakeholders, whose interpretations of ethnicity contribute to the maintenance of the precinct’s ethnic theme. China Heart, for example, is an application for mobile devices that was developed thanks to the collaboration between the Sydney Powerhouse Museum,37 a local gallery of contemporary Asian art, and the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority. Aided by GPS technology, the application unravels a labyrinth of video clues, oral histories, soundscapes and historic re-enactment that unfolds through a journey across the precinct and beyond. The users are guided from one location to another by using an interactive digital map and are faced with a task each time they approach a site; if they are able to complete it, they access some information on the history of Chinatown and Haymarket. The narrative used in the app to describe the precinct capitalises on essentialist images of ethnicity associated to Chinatown/Haymarket, while also highlighting the tensions between the centre and the periphery that I have foregrounded throughout the analysis of the Chinatown Public Domain Plan.

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37 The application was inspired by a collection of digitalised artifacts, which were exhibited at the museum during the celebrations for the 2011 Chinese New Year.
The interactive mapping starts at the corner between Sussex and Hay Streets, in the southern end of the precinct; here, users encounter the public artwork titled ‘Golden Water Mouth’, an installation that comprises the trunk of a yellow-box eucalyptus tree partly covered with gold, which was installed in 1999. The sculpture was realised by the Chinese-born artist Lin Li and it represents a tribute to the Chinese gold-seekers that arrived in Australia in the second half of the 19th century. The tour continues under the southern Chinatown gate and through the ‘enclavistic tourist stage’ of Dixon Street to reach the Loon Yee Tong clan house, a joint clan society established in Dixon Street in 1916 by people from the neighbouring districts of Dongguan and Zengcheng, in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong. Users are then taken to Capital Square and Belmore Park, across George Street, and then back again through the narrow alleyways that connect the main downtown artery to the parallel Kent Street, just outside the area once known as Albion Place. From this location, in the northern end of the precinct, the end of the game is reached at the Chinese Garden of Friendship, one of the main attractions of the touristic area of Darling Harbour.

McDonogh and Wong (2012: 282) write that it is through the ‘manipulation of an established imagery that the idea of Chinatown as an exotic downtown destination remains strong worldwide’. The narration that accompanies the different stages of China Heart can be used as an example to understand this point. Firstly, language stands out as one of the most powerful devices through which China Heart introduces Chinatown/Haymarket as an exotic urban place. At the passage under the Chinatown gate, for example, users are asked to read the motto written in traditional Chinese characters on the archway’s top end. Here, the focus on language as a marker of difference connects with the analysis of ‘linguistic landscapes’ as brand devices, where the adoption of different linguistic systems relies on the idea of language as an ‘exotic choice, where exotic stands for foreign and therefore different, and therefore better’ (Tufi and Blackwood 2010: 204). Language, in other words, emphasises the ‘different’ dimension of Chinatown/Haymarket; it does so by ‘exploiting the consumer’s perception of and pre-conception of [ethnicity] as a given reality’ (ibid). Upon the completion of the video task, a short vignette rewards the users by providing the following urban legend:
It is said that a dragon lies beneath the streets of Sydney, linking the three sites that have served as Chinatown since the 19th century: The Rocks, Ultimo and Haymarket.

The second part of the tour focuses on areas outside of the ‘core’ of Chinatown. In Capitol Square, China Heart features the historic re-enactment of a love affair in a Chinese-Australian household of the ‘ethnic settlement’ in Belmore Markets.38 Here, a character playing the role of

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38 Before the relocation to Haymarket in 1909, the enclosed structure of the Belmore Markets (built in 1892-1893) was a point of reference for the gardeners who sold their products in this part of the city. The market site is adjacent
the wife of a Chinese gardener explains the difficulties that she, as a white woman, encountered after marrying a Chinese man. This video explicitly addresses Chinese ethnic culture as a system dominated by a patriarchal structure and permeated with inescapable duties to pay to the family; it also addresses the clannish nature of the Chinese community and, in doing so, it plays a symbolic role in echoing the meanings that have been associated to the early Chinese settlements in the bordering Surry Hills (see chapter 3). The last part of China Heart relates to the history of the Chinese community from the second half of the 20th century. One of the last stages of the tour explores what used to be an important point of congregation: a music venue adjacent to Sydney Town Hall that today hosts the premises of Event Cinema complex.

The static nature of Chinese diasporic culture is highlighted in China Heart by means of a narrative that places the essentialist characteristics that define a close-knit community in the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct. Chineseness is also mobilised by means of images of representation producing a series of vignettes that Mayer (2011) calls 'Chinatown stories'. These 'revolve around instances of ethnic conflict and obsess about cultural encounters, and (...) span the width of themes that were and are considered central to the Chinatown phenomenon: commerce and crime, religion and superstition, ethnic and regional diversities' (Mayer 2011: 18, my italics).

Mapping-related activities have become a common device used to highlight Chinatown/Haymarket’s uniqueness. The Haymarket Chamber of Commerce, for example, organises another walking tour in Chinatown, where elders of the local Chinese community use ‘a fierce sense of custodianship over the area’ (Ang 2015: 8) to explain the geographies of the precinct by stressing ‘an intimate and communal Chineseness’ (ibid). The tour guides lead tourists across a labyrinth of ‘traditional’ Chinese businesses such as Buddhist crafts retailers in George Street, Chinese medicine stores and Cantonese butcheries. The complexity of the identities of many of the actors included in these tours are systematically brushed aside to serve the static and essentialist Chineseness that presents Chinatown in an essentialist way and that

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to Surry Hills, where many Chinese has established their dwellings after the dock-based concentration in The Rocks started to crumble (see chapter 2).
strategically conforms to the part of the branding strategy based on the precinct’s mysteriousness.

The ‘exotic Chineseness’ used to introduce the medicine shop in George Street, for example, fails to acknowledge both the complex trajectory of the Cantonese-speaking Vietnamese-Chinese family who owns the premises, and the politically charged meaning of their ‘being Chinese’. The family leases part of the structure that hosts the medicine store to the Australian branch of the Chinese National Party, or Kuomintang – the ruling party of Taiwan. According to one of the Chinese community leaders that I interviewed during the fieldwork, the headquarters of the political party used to be the centre of many activities organised by the local Chinese community. Their number, however, decreased significantly after Australia made its relations official with communist China, in 1973 (Interview with community leader K.F, 10th May 2013).

Mapping activities are significant components for the mobilisation of the Chinatown/Haymarket brand for two main reasons: firstly, they highlight the growing collaboration of a number of stakeholders in the mobilisation of ethnicity; here a number of human and non-human actors form a complex network, the aim of which is to link ethnicity with the urban place. China Heart alone, for example, featured the collaboration between a Museum (which allowed the digitalised reproduction of the artefacts exhibited at its premises), game developers (who designed a gaming experience based on the history of the precinct), the Chamber of Commerce (that markets and disseminates the product), and policy makers (such as the Darling Harbour Foreshore Authority, who are involved in the initiative by virtue of administering one of the locations featuring in the project). Mapping activities as components of place branding, in other words, complexify the landscape of actors engaged in the production of ethnicity as a brand: as a matter of fact mobile devices, tour guides and street details equally share the agency of mobilising ethnicity in the Chinatown context.

Moreover, the mapping activities that construct Chinatown/Haymarket as an ethnicised precinct articulate tensions between the ‘centre’ and the ‘periphery’ and between essentialism and complexity, which are crucial to the understanding of the ethnic place brand for
Chinatown/Haymarket. The movement across a variety of places of interest throughout the precinct that is designed by the China Heart gaming experience shows the ambivalence of locating Chinatown/Haymarket in one precisely delimited urban place. The mobile application’s emphasis on Belmore Market and the Surry Hills settlement, for example, takes the attention of the users away from the core of Chinatown. Similarly, the choice of The Garden of Friendship, in Darling Harbour, and Albion Place contests the centrality of the ‘Chinatown experience’ and expands the effects of the ethnic place brand across multiple locations towards the periphery of the precinct. Lastly, the explicit reliance of the mapping tours on the exotic Chinese mysteriousness of the precinct strategically brushes aside the complexities of contested versions of ethnic identity, which are dependent on specific migratory trajectory, linguistic and political preferences. Whereas mapping activities bring to the fore how these tensions are played out in the context of the precinct at large, the recent installation of public artworks in the precinct brings the discussion of the frictions between essentialism and complexity, centre and periphery back within the Dixon Street pedestrian mall, to which I will now turn.

5.3.3 Questioning a ‘Baseline Chineseness’: Public Art in Chinatown

Public art has played a significant role in the recent upgrading process that took place in the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct. The Chinatown Public Domain Plan reads that ‘public art has the ability to contribute significantly to an urban area’s sense of place and cultural expression’ (Spackman Mossop & Michaels 2010: 35) and it includes parts of the Chinatown Public Art Plan, a document drafted through a joint effort between the City of Sydney and 4A Gallery of Contemporary Art – a Haymarket based art space for the promotion of Asian art. The Chinatown Public Art Plan was drafted with the aim of developing ‘new public works that address the social and cultural aspects of the area and tell the stories of the contributions of Asian-Australian communities to Sydney’ (www.cityartsydney.com.au). Art, in other words, takes on a primary role in the articulation of ‘development’ in the Chinatown/Haymarket context. It does so by contributing to the theme of the precinct by achieving two main goals,
which are particularly relevant to the scope of this chapter: ‘inviting a conversation with the precinct’ – or engage with ideas as visitors move through Chinatown’ – and ‘building upon the symbolic heart of the precinct’ – defined as the cluster of public art projects around Dixon and Sussex Streets (Spackman Mossop & Michaels 2010: 35).

Two artworks recently installed in Chinatown/Haymarket, in particular, will be used here to explore more in depth the tensions revolving around the mobilisation of the ethnic place brand for the precinct. The first is the beautification of Kimber Lane, a narrow alleyway parallel to Dixon Street; the second is the construction of the Chinatown information kiosk at the intersection of Dixon and Goulburn Streets. Realised in 2012, both these artworks can be seen as contemporary interventions on the urban fabric that symbolise the expansion of the network of actors, institutions and forms involved in the mobilisation of the brand. Both artworks feature the collaboration of 4A, with which I became involved during my fieldwork. In reviewing the artworks located in the precinct during an interview, the director of the gallery said:

There are a number of ways in which art is dealt with in Chinatown. One is through community expression. Dixon Street, as you probably know already, is really important. The gates were one of the heritage art, the manifestation of a kind of Chineseness in the middle of Chinatown. The other thing is lighting design: those works that have been driven by public designers and architects. Then you have a series of place marking going on; things that are there to say: this is Chinatown. But also, you have other important places in Chinatown that relate to the 19th century; you have all the arcades that cut across [the precinct], and that’s how people traded. That’s more interesting to me than a physical thing representing what somebody thinks that Chinese culture is. Chinatown is a place where you have all of this historical layering, something that goes beyond the expression of the 1980s (Interview with gallery director A.S., 13th May 2013).

This passage can be observed in parallel with the stated objectives of both the Chinatown Public Art Plan and the redevelopment project in Chinatown/Haymarket as one of Sydney’s priority precincts to better understand the interconnectedness of art, urban upgrading and the vision for the city. First of all, we can interpret the focus on Chinatown’s historical layering as a way to refer to the stated objective of the Chinatown Public Art Plan to invite a ‘conversation with the precinct’. The layering operates here as a series of representations in the urban environment that invite an engagement with the multiple meanings that have been attached to this part of the city.
Furthermore, the idea of the ‘heart of Chinatown’ can be related to the so-called ‘community expression’, or the ‘manifestation of Chineseness’ in what is mentioned as the ‘middle of Chinatown’. The proposed economic development of the precinct, on the other hand, is characterised by a strengthening of its edges and a focus on circulation and mobility across the porous boundaries of the precinct. From this perspective, the ‘arcades that cut across the precinct’ can be read as a recent example that contribute to delivering this vision, as they highlight the collaboration between designers and architects previously discussed. Lastly, the recently installed public artworks are instances of what my interviewee called ‘place marking’. Of particular interest for this chapter is the fact that the installation of these art pieces draws at the same time on the notion of the ‘symbolic heart’, while it simultaneously celebrates the mobility within the precinct and problematises issues of cultural impositions or, as my interviewee puts it, ‘what somebody thinks that Chinese culture is’.

‘In Between Two Worlds’ is a public installation realised by the emergent Australian artist Jason Wing. Comprising a series of wall and floor murals accompanied by 30 suspended illuminated figures, the artwork forms the centrepiece of the City of Sydney’s upgrade of Kimber Lane. This redevelopment project is a highly visible intervention in the urban fabric of Chinatown/Haymarket, given both the laneway’s geographical position and the nature of the installation itself: the murals depict blue clouds that stretch across the granite pavement and climb onto the red brick walls of the previously hidden and dark service laneway, whereas the sliver spirit-like figures hang suspended from wires connected to both sides of the buildings in the alleyway. At night, the figures are illuminated by an electric-blue neon light, which shines against the walls and the pavement creating a suggestive landscape in the ‘heart’ of Chinatown.

‘Pao Cha’ is the name of the design pattern created by Brisbane-based artist Pamela Mei-Leng See. The artwork covers the outside surface of a pagoda-shaped public seating at the intersection of Dixon and Goulburn Streets that was refurbished into a modern lighting

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39 Kimber Lane is a laneway parallel to Dixon Street. It is accessible via Factory Street or via Little Hay Street – located at the intersection with Dixon Street, halfway between the Chinatown northern and southern archway. One alternative point of access to the laneway can be found opposite to the Sydney Entertainment Centre side-entrance to the shopping mall Market City.
installation at the end of the 1990s. The artwork was commissioned by the City of Sydney when the business community complained about the repeated acts of vandalism that targeted the public seating as a result of the decline experienced by Chinatown in the early 2000s. The intervention that followed was twofold: firstly, a design lantern realised by a design studio in collaboration with an architect firm was inserted as a new volume inside the existing structure; secondly, the paper-cut artist was recruited to create the outside pattern of the structure. This represents the residual chrysanthemum leaves left at the bottom of a ceramic vessel after the tea has been steeped and poured – hence the title of the artwork, which means ‘to steep tea’ in Mandarin Chinese.

4A gallery took part in the installation of the two artworks by liaising with different institutions and by nominating the artists who realised them. The way in which the gallery director explained to me how ethnicity was approached in the process that led to the realisation of the artworks is central to the aims of this chapter:

I think in some way we are trying to be a little critical of those images of Chinatown, which have to do with red lanterns or, you know, the very stereotypical view of the city. We want to provide a bit more depth and nuance to how people engage not just with cities, but also with their own heritage and history. I just want to make sure that there is a scope within our personal cultural infrastructure in this place of the city, where this complexity can emerge without simply turning into some baseline Chineseness (Interview with gallery director A.S., 13th May 2013).

The role of public art in the context of Chinatown/Haymarket is explicitly acknowledged as that of letting complexity emerge from the redevelopment of the precinct. The avoidance of a ‘baseline Chineseness’ articulated by the gallery director becomes evident in the beautification of the laneway. Here, the artwork plays an important role in adding a meaningful and complex urban layer that can be understood by looking at the selection of the artist, the artwork’s details, and the ‘alternative space’ that it works to produce in the context of the precinct. Jason Wing’s ‘dual heritage’ – Chinese and Aboriginal-Australian – forms a big part of his creative production; this is visible in the realisation of the artwork, where reference to ancestral figures and natural elements are meant to represent these ‘two worlds’ coexisting within himself, but also expand to the physical location where the artwork is installed, the so-called ‘in between’.
In Kimber Lane, Wing’s half-human half-spirit suspended figures are meant to represent our past, present and future ancestors, while the motives depicted on the walls and on the pavement incorporate references to the natural elements. The significance of Wing in contemporary Australian art has been celebrated in a recent publication on the artist, where his body of work is reviewed as one that ‘offers new perspectives on the social and historical place of cultural hybridism in Australian art’ (Poll 2014: 71). In the case of Chinatown’s Kimber Lane, the artist’s intervention is highlighted by the artwork’s location in proximity to the heavily trodden path of Dixon Street. In this area, defined by the gallery director as a ‘manifestation of a kind of Chineseness in the middle of Chinatown’, the meaning of Wing’s artwork becomes central to understand the role of art in (re)signifying the relation between ethnicity and the precinct:

The reason why we set [Kimber Lane] up like that is because we wanted to create different thoroughfares that go North to South, East to West, that do not always traverse the same ground. So, as we were thinking about different ideas for public art in Chinatown, we suggested keeping the historical things, even the most recent ones. But then allow for other opportunities to happen around them that might contest them, that might create new opportunities for people to engage [with the space] in completely different ways. Kimber Lane was one of the first opportunities. We chose an artist who…. So Jason has…. Jason is Aboriginal-Chinese. I thought that it was very important to illustrate to the Chinese community that they also occupy a space, which has a much deeper historical… Not a much deeper, but another history on top of it (Interview with gallery director A.S., 13th May 2013).

With the example of Kimber Lane we can observe how art is used as a way to problematise essentialist images of ethnicity that have been attached to Chinatown in the past. In the case of ‘In Between Two Worlds’, this is achieved through different means: as I have illustrated, the artist’s cultural capital plays an important role in the realisation of the piece; the function undertaken by the beautified laneway is another factor that needs to be considered. During my fieldwork, I took note of how common the sight was of stunned tourists taking pictures of this ‘secret part of town’ (I even came across the shooting of a music clip that took place in the newly developed Kimber Lane). ‘New users’ range from urban explorers and professionals in the creative industries, to chefs and kitchen hands that work in the Chinatown precinct, who use the beautified laneway as a hidden spot for their cigarette breaks. This highlights how the

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40 In the same publication, printmaker, painter and sculptor Garry Jones adds on this by writing that Wing is one of the artists who, in recent years, ‘best reflected the plurality and fluidity of Australian identities’.

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laneway has become an alternative path to Dixon Street, but also a significant space to think about the various layers of history that coexist in the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct.

Figure 16 highlights the multiplicity of meanings accorded to Chineseness via the juxtaposition of various streetscapes in the precinct: the red bricks and the fading awning painted on the wall in Parker Lane transport the mind to the commercial activities at the beginning of the century, in proximity to Belmore Markets, where Chinese market gardeners living in the bordering Surry Hills were active. The derelict mixed commercial and residential structures in Thomas Lane, on the other hand, recall the function performed by many buildings as the market activities shifted
to the neighbouring Paddy’s Market. In this context, the complex meaning that Kimber Lane adds to the streetscape is evident.

‘Pao Cha’, on the other hand, has found a different place in the context of Chinatown/Haymarket. This is possibly due to the function that the structure of the pagoda has undertaken after its refurbishment. During the day, the interior of the lantern is revealed when its walls are opened in a semi-circle that discloses a tiny workspace, which is used as a kiosk from which tourist information, such as the Urban Walkabout guide maps that I have discussed in chapter 2, are freely distributed. Contrary to the ambiguity displayed in the Kimber Lane beautification, the function of the information kiosk appears that of strengthening the village concept by highlighting the opposite: an essentialised Chineseness, the material representation of which is ‘upgraded’, from the archways to a modern design installation. Furthermore, unlike the physical function performed by the laneway, proposing new pathways as well as layers of complex meaning, the kiosk seems to centralise the attention to the Chineseness of Chinatown/Haymarket. At night, the illuminated walls of the lantern filter through the patterned surface creating the suggestive vision captured in figure 17 that recalls the stereotyped version of Chineseness reflected in the Chinatown northern archway, which is located just a few meters away. Tourism, in other words, has been the context in which this artwork has been placed from its inception; this has strengthened the role of the artwork as a component of the brand management strategy for Haymarket/Chinatown that partakes in mobilising essentialist notions of Chineseness via a discursive intensification.

A few months prior to its installation, in July 2011, the City of Sydney Media Centre released a public announcement boasting the upcoming opening of a ‘brightly illuminated, oriental inspired tourism information kiosk’. The website reported the words of both the Lord Mayor of Sydney, who stated that ‘it’s fantastic to have a venue to promote some of the best activities and events our city has to offer, while also respecting the rich heritage of this historical area,’ and those of the president of the Haymarket Chamber of Commerce, who proudly announced the support of his organisation to the initiative of the City of Sydney (www.sydneymedia.com.au).
The Information Kiosk won the best prize at the 2012 Sydney Design Awards. The media release of the initiative praised the sympathetic and contextual design of the artwork for adding ‘richness to the experience of the public domain’ by expressing ‘the community identity in an exuberant way’ (www.sydneydesignawards.com.au), while at the same time creating a popular meeting point. The overview of the artwork at the art design award introduced it as the product of a well-known Chinese paper-cut artist, based on a contemporary form of a traditional technique with cultural references to the Chinese community. Notions of ‘tradition’ and ‘community’ can be read here as ways to strengthen the significance and the visibility of the ‘heart of Chinatown’ or, to put it in Lin’s words, as tools to build ‘an “iron cage” that regulates and standardises the cultural heritage of the Chinese community for tourism and popular consumption’ (Lin 2010: 223).

Figure 17. The Chinatown Information Kiosk, corner of Dixon Street and Goulburn Street. Photograph and graphic elaboration by the author.
So far in this chapter I have concentrated on Dixon Street as a ‘stage’ characterised by multiple mobilisations of Chineseness, and I have highlighted the malleability of ethnicity as a tool for branding reflected in practices such as art and mapping. I now wish to move onto a discussion of how consumption practices further highlight the complex nature of ethnicity as a branded theme for Chinatown/Haymarket. I will do so by describing the biggest event organised in the precinct: the Chinese New Year Festival. I use this example to introduce the centrality of cultural events in the understanding of the application of the ethnic place brand for the precinct and I argue that the same extent of ‘flexibility’, showed in the upgrading of Dixon Street as a complex tourist stage and a source of conflict and negotiation, can be observed by looking at the mobilisation of ethnic commodities during and after the celebrations.

5.4 Brand Intensification: The Chinese New Year Festival

The Sydney Chinese New Year Festival started as little more than a neighbourhood-based carnival celebrated on a communitarian basis in Chinatown, but it progressively developed to become today one of the most prominent events in the cultural palimpsest promoted by the City of Sydney. Based on the distinction that I have made in chapter 1 regarding the various elements inherent in the mobilisation of the ethnic place brand, I analyse this event as an instance in which the temporal dimension of the Chinatown/Haymarket’s ethnic brand is highlighted by means of a celebration that ‘intensifies’ the specificity of the precinct. By ‘intensification’ I mean how, during the celebration of the Chinese New Year Festival, the ‘flexible Chineseness’ of Chinatown/Haymarket is amplified on a larger scale, in an area that stretches across the Central Business District of the City of Sydney. The festival brings on a bigger stage than the one usually offered by Dixon Street a number of cultural activities that creatively mobilise different aspects of Asia-Pacific flows of culture, as well as instances in which an essentialised Chinese character is highlighted, hence pointing again to the tension between essentialism and complexity that define the Chinatown/Haymarket’s brand.
The importance of the Chinese New Year Festival nowadays is visible by looking at how the City authorities have made of it a terrain to herald messages of cultural diplomacy between China and Australia. And how, each year, the festival involves a growing number of participants. This was the case in 2014, when important sponsors supported the celebrations of the Year of the Horse; these ranged from the Pyrmont Star Casino to Private Health insurance companies such as Medibank, to the popular Singapore-based canned food company Ayam. The sophistication of the Festival is due to the vast support that it receives from corporate sponsors, government and charity partners and, foremost, to the patronage of the City of Sydney. The celebrations also include the ‘assistance’ of the Embassy of the People’s Republic of China, and feature the participation of a Mainland Chinese city in an experimental ‘sister city project’. A community advisory board is elected every year to direct the artistic organisation of the Festival, which is composed by Australian and Sydney-based eminent exponents of the creative sector, such as photographers and performers, fashion designers, restaurateurs, artists and chefs. The board is supported by a charity partner, usually represented by a local community organisation, together with a number of members from the City of Sydney Council.

The celebrations feature exhibitions of contemporary Asian Australian artists and guided bike tours around the city exploring the historical settlements of Chinese migrants from the 19th century. In addition to this, Buddhist and Taoist temples in suburbs like Glebe, Alexandria and Surry Hills stay open for extended hours during the Festival to allow visitors to engage with scattered spaces built by clan-based associations and that reveal a history connected to Chinese migration across Sydney. Library meeting rooms, shopping centres, art galleries and public gardens around the City are also used for all sorts of cultural activities during the celebrations: from calligraphy workshops to film festivals. Food, however, is the main focus of the Chinese New Year Festival: for the occasion, hundreds of businesses receive unprecedented waves of

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41 In the pamphlet edited for the 2014 celebrations, the Chinese Consul General of the PRC in Sydney stated: ‘Australia and China have jointly harvested a deepened friendship as well as fruitful political, economic and cultural exchanges. (...) By working together, we will make our bilateral relationship a fine model of harmonious co-existence and win-win cooperation’ (City of Sydney 2014: 5).

42 The Year of the Snake celebrations in 2013, for example, featured the participation of the Shenzhen Municipal Bureau of Culture, Sport and Tourism.
customers and enjoy outstanding advertisement in the Festival booklet, which is distributed from multiple locations around the city.

The best eateries are proposed in the advertising material under the name of ‘Lunar Feast’; this selection brings together a mix of rediscovered local and regional cuisines with pan-Asian traditions and new hybrid fusions. The highlights of the Festival are the launch at Belmore Park, where performances by hip hop dancers, Cantonese opera singers, K-pop fans and local community organisations follow a speech by the Lord Mayor of Sydney; the Dragon Boat races, featuring 3000 peddlers participating in two full days of racing on Darling Harbour; and the Twilight Parade – a huge choreographic procession that blocks the southern end of George Street for a day, from Town Hall to Railway Square, to make room for a parade of elaborated carousels accompanied by dance shows.

During the Chinese New Year Festival, the cultural activities associated to ethnicity as a brand are included in an increasingly interconnected urban space and mobilised by means of a proliferation of practices that (re)discover, strengthen and sometimes even invent the connections between Asia and Australia. Hybridity becomes here an appropriate lens through which the effects of branding can be analysed. Hybridity has been discussed in a number of ways: as the ‘possibility of incremental openings of identity, where (…) the narratives of “the other” seep across (…) boundaries’ (Wise 2011: 102); as ‘a way to capture the dynamic multiplicities of culture and ethnicity’ (Noble and Tabar 2002: 131); as a condition for living ‘together in difference’ (Ang 2003) defined by a ‘cultural permeability that makes of ambivalence its very source’ (ibid: 150); and as the encounter at a cultural crossroads, where differences are problematised without necessarily being erased (Ang 2005). In the same way, the Chinese New Year Festival can be read as a cultural event that opens up possibilities to think about the concrete examples of cultural hybridity in action, as the flow of cultural commodities and practices that characterise the Festival points to different instances of ‘appropriation, acculturation, transculturation, transfer and exchange, encounter, mix, syncretism, dialogue and negotiation’ (Burke 2009: 41).
However, it can also be argued that the celebrations still rely on the fetishisation of Chineseness as an instance of bounded ethnic otherness. This becomes evident by looking at how the Dixon Street area functions as the epicentre of the Chinese New Year activities. For example, the ‘core’ of the precinct features as the end point of the Twilight Parade, which is the centrepiece of the celebration; moreover, traditional dances are performed by several community organisations in the Dixon Street south area and in front of a number of businesses as a blessing ritual for their economic activities in the upcoming year. These activities become the preferred instances in which an essentialised Chineseness is proposed to the gaze of the tourists, who cluster under the archways to capture a ‘true Chinatown moment’ in the smoky haze left by the firecrackers and among the colours of the dragon and lion dances crew dancing to the sound of drums and percussion plates. The orchestration of activities that highlight the centrality of the Chinatown/Haymarket experience therefore represents an instance in which the idea of ‘the core’ is strengthened.

Figure 18. Celebrations for the Year of the Horse underneath the archway in Dixon Street south. Photograph by the author.

43 The recent cancellation of the Twilight Parade from the Festival program due to major urban upgrading in the Sydney CBD area and its impact on the brand for the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct will be discussed in chapter 8.
That the celebrations of the event become a moment that injects a degree of cultural essentialism into the production of the ethnic place brand can also be observed by looking at the debate around the possibility to change the name of the whole Festival. This issue became prominent when a Vietnamese man gathered almost 2,000 signatures to back up the proposition to drop the name ‘Chinese New Year’ and change it into ‘Lunar New Year’, so that the Festival would be more inclusive of people of backgrounds other than Chinese who observe it (www.change.org). In an interview with SBS, the creative director of the Chinese New Year replied that the City of Sydney declined the idea of changing the name; however, she added that the organising committee is ‘very keen to continue to have that door open’, and concluded by urging the ‘various members of the Thai, Korean and Vietnamese communities to continue to be involved together with the wider Australian community,’ since the Chinese New Year ‘is all of our event’ (Roberts, 2015).

The preference of the word ‘Chinese’ over ‘Lunar’ can be interpreted here as part of the brand management strategy for the precinct, where a dose of ethnic essentialism is kept alive via the (re)constructed centrality of the ‘core’ of the precinct for the staging of a number of performances dedicated to the static nature of Chineseness. Furthermore, as the words in response to the petition against the label Chinese show, the rhetoric that frames the ethnic difference of the Festival is defined by a number of bounded cultural units (the Thai, the Korean, the Vietnamese and the Chinese communities). In this context, the role of the Chinese New Year Festival appears to operate within the ‘exhibitory multiculturalism’ that Hage (1998: 160) understands as ‘the post-colonial version of the colonial fare’ (ibid), where reified and equidistant ethnic units display their ethnic difference to the ‘wider Australian community’.

The reification of Chineseness in a pan-Asian context has become increasingly visible during the last two celebrations of the Chinese New Year Festival as more and more activities have been organised in Haymarket’s Campbell and Pitt Streets to celebrate the prominence of Thai and Korean business communities in these two areas. The recent decision to officialise the labels of ‘Thaitown’ and ‘Koreatown’ (Han, 2013) in specific sections of these two streets has given
visibility to Koreanness and Thainess as clustered ethnicities in bounded areas. This decision, in turn, has strengthened the relevance of the ‘Chinatown core’ (in Dixon and Sussex Streets) as a quintessential manifestation of Chineseness. The Chinese New Year Festival can be therefore read as an instance in which the spatial boundedness of Chinatown/Haymarket is re-organised and where a series of sub-precincts emerge as a result of the celebration of ethnic boundedness that overshadows the possibility of an urban condition in which ‘difference, otherness, fragmentation, splintering, multiplicity, heterogeneity, diversity, plurality prevail’ (Sandercock and Lyssiotis 2003: 1-2).

The main point of this section is to show how, by starting from a cultural event, it is possible to plug into a wide network of institutions, actors and cultural practices that intensify Chinatown/Haymarket’s ethnic place brand and that this network makes visible the process of contestation and negotiation at stake over the meaning of ethnic identity. The celebration of the Chinese New Year Festival highlights, on the one hand, the enclavic stage of the Dixon Street area as a touristic destination. On the other hand, the Festival celebrates the increasing cultural interconnectedness between Asia and Australia and the porosity of the precinct’s boundaries; this is reflected in the provision of commodities across the precinct’s boundaries and in the celebration of other emerging hubs. The notion of ‘flexibility’ therefore oscillates between an essentialist Chinese identity and a multi-Asian conception, which are alternatively highlighted depending on the angle from which the brand is observed.

I have used the Chinese New Year Festival to discuss the ‘re-signification of ethnicity’ (Dávila 2004: 6) by looking at the circulation of ethnicised commodities in the precinct, but also as a springboard to analyse the meaning of ‘multi-Asianness’ in the ethnic place brand for Chinatown/Haymarket. In particular, I argue that the uncertainty, ambiguity and flexibility surrounding the meaning of ethnic identity that are intensified during the celebrations, ‘flow back’ into the flexible platform of Dixon Street once the cultural activities organised during the Chinese New Year end. The mobilisation of commodified images of ethnicity helps me here to bring more evidence to the argument that the mobilisation of the ethnic place brand for
Chinatown/Haymarket relies on an assemblage of materialities, practices and objects that reveal open-ended and flexible approaches to ethnic identity, together with claims of both essential Chineseness and multi-Asianness. It is on this point that I want to dwell in the remainder of the chapter.

5.5 Economic Actors and Business Strategies in Chinatown

During my fieldwork, the New York based dance troupe Shen Yun set up a stall in the southern end of Dixon Street to promote their musical at the neighbouring Capital Theatre. The advertising material presented the show as ‘a wondrous tapestry of heavenly realms, ancient legends, and modern heroic tales, taking you on a journey through 5,000 years of Chinese culture’. It can be observed here how the ‘halo of difference’ created by the Chinese themed pedestrian street increases the value of ethnic commodities based on representations of ancient Chineseness. The marketing activities aimed at promoting commodified traditional culture, in other words, find in the enclavic tourist stage a fertile context to articulate notions of static and essentialised ethnicity.

Dixon Street, however, extends beyond the area defined by the ‘Chinese’ archways and across Goulburn Street, to include a northern part, which is under the jurisdiction of the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority. This part of the street has developed more recently and it has gained the reputation of ‘young Chinatown’ due to the innovation and the sophisticated engagement with marketing techniques demonstrated by the young entrepreneurs who are active here. It is in ‘young Chinatown’ that Chinese tapas restaurants open next door to ice cream shops that serve Chinese cough medicine flavoured gelato and Hainanese coffee in a cone; it is here that the fame of a Ramen Burger eatery might be defined by a post, written by a Taiwanese food blogger gone viral; or where young Sydneysiders decide to invest in a new business, which started somewhere in the suburbs before adopting a franchise identity and trying their luck abroad.
The economic activities that take place in Dixon Street (north and south), in other words, are relevant to discuss the myriad of ways in which ethnicity is constantly produced and reinvented. In the next section, I concentrate on how this issue becomes evident when the attention shifts to the ways in which ethnicity becomes a tool in the professional life of the local business community.

5.5.1 Traditional Chineseness as Business Strategy in the ‘Heart of Chinatown’

Jonathan’s family owns one of the oldest restaurants in Chinatown/Haymarket. The restaurant serves ‘traditional Yum Cha’ from 7am, while a more standard à la carte menu is provided from 4pm onwards. The restaurant is an ‘old school’ family business; this is visible not only in the organisation of the activity, but also in the way in which the building – which is the property of the family – is used for mixed residential and commercial purposes. Jonathan is very proud of the successful diasporic history of his father, who migrated from China in the early 1960s and worked several jobs before he became one of the most successful entrepreneurs in Chinatown. The way in which cultural identity played a key role for Jonathan’s family business appears when he mentions Zhongshan – the home village of his father – and the connections that he traces between this part of China and Dixon Street, given that ‘they’ve got the clan house [pointing at the northern end of Dixon Street]; the strongest society that we have in Sydney’ (Interview with Jonathan, 28th May 2013).

The centrality of the regional identification in the establishment of Jonathan’s family business, together with the position of iconicity in the context of Chinatown/Haymarket is legitimated by the living heritage of the clan society and by the pioneering role of his father in the business community in Dixon Street. This forms a solid base for Jonathan’s understanding of his own position in the precinct that, according to him, ‘is still very Chinese’. However, there is a

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44 Jonathan is the finance and accounting manager; his brother is the operations manager, while their father is the general director of the business, who ‘has the ultimate say here’.  
45 Jonathan’s parents live on the third floor of the building and refuse to leave Haymarket although they also own a property in the eastern suburbs of Sydney.
narrative that Jonathan starts to sketch out when he acknowledges the prominence of his business in a general context of change visible in Chinatown/Haymarket. ‘I can say that we have been around the longest, because there have been restaurants that have come and gone in the last years,’ he says. Jonathan articulates the idea of ‘change’ by drawing on different factors: the first is the turnover of shop ownership and the redevelopment process, which is targeting many areas of the precinct: ‘the old ones have either retired from their business or they have closed down. Most of the restaurants around here stay open for many years, but some go because the building is either being taken back for their own usage or redeveloped,’ he comments.

Another factor that he recognises is the diversification of the type of Chinese commodities provided in Dixon Street; this, in his opinion, marks a substantial difference compared to the predominance of Cantonese food/culture that defined the area in the past: ‘from mid-90s up till now… well… there are many people from Mainland China coming to Australia, and now you notice that there is more Sichuan food, more northern style food’. In this context of change, Jonathan somehow perceives a threat to the commodity provided by his family business, which he expresses by saying:

There is still a market for this restaurant. (...) It’s just that the way of doing business, the restaurant industry is different from when my father started with his business thirty years from now. Back then it would have been quite simple: as long as your food and customer service was good, you would be fine. But now (...) the thing is... all things being equal now, being all the food the same, the quality won’t differ much (...) Because the food... to be honest... we don’t often, we don’t have the ability to actually produce new stuff every now and then... you know people feel bored... always the same stuff here. Yum Cha, I mean, Dim Sum doesn’t change much. You know, traditionally you can’t move too much from that (Interview with Jonathan, 28th May 2013).

Jonathan’s comments demonstrate how ‘tradition’ has been a double-edged sword in his business, since it has simultaneously represented the point of strength of the restaurant but also the weakness in the context of a diversifying scenario visible in Dixon Street. If, on the one hand, the capacity to ‘not change’ and remain anchored in Chinatown has been the strategy that allowed the family firm to constantly rebrand itself as a traditional Chinese business and to cater for a Chinese clientele, ‘tradition’ also acts like a constraining factor that limits the margin for renewal and consumer choice. The way in which the restaurant has conveyed a strategy to
survive in the competitive business environment of Dixon Street has relied on ‘tradition’, while it has at the same time strengthened the notion of ‘difference’ by producing ethnic commodities based on essentialised versions of Chinese culture.

Over the past fifteen years, the family has opened a series of ‘traditional Chinese’ businesses clustered around the Dixon Street area. At present, Jonathan’s family properties include a Yum Cha restaurant, a bakery that operates next door, a butchery, and a Cantonese style barbeque restaurant located a few hundred metres away. The concentration of the businesses in the ‘heart of Chinatown’ has allowed the family to control the operations of the various businesses in a more convenient way given their proximity between one another; furthermore, it has strengthened the name and the reputation of the family firm as ‘traditional Chinese,’ one that remains and expands its operations in the precinct despite a situation of general change. Interestingly, the family’s butchery is one of the sites included in the itinerary of the Chinatown walking tour organised by the Haymarket Chamber of Commerce (see 5.3.2). Tour guides stop next to the front window of the shop and point to the chefs working underneath a line of lacquered ducks hanging from sharp hooks. In doing so, they provide the attendees of the walking tour with a ‘very Chinese’ image of Chinatown/Haymarket. The family business, in other words, capitalises on its fame, while reinforcing the ethnic theme of the precinct to the eyes of the tourists.

Jonathan’s family, however, is probably best known for the long queue that is visible outside the little window in between the restaurant entrance and the front of their bakery; here, a separate workshop run by the family produces one of Chinatown’s most sought-after delicacies: the ‘Emperor’s Puff’. This is a small fried pastry filled with cream and sold in a paper bag as a street snack. Jonathan praises the entrepreneurial vein of his father, who came up with this idea during one of his last trips to China:

My father saw the machine to do these puffs when he was in China eleven years ago. He went back and bought one. We didn’t expect it to be so successful. (…) The idea itself is Korean… this is manufactured in South Korea. The cake is a Chinese sort of thing. You would find it in Korea, but in Korea it would have red beans. And the mould would be a fish. We tried to sell the fish-shaped cake, but not many people bought it. So we gave up on that one and adopted this shape instead (Interview with Jonathan, 28th May 2013).
The production of the Emperor’s Puff indicates how the family business takes advantage of its position in the ‘heart of Chinatown’ and relies on auto-Orientalism as a strategy to face the increasingly diversifying range of ethnic commodities provided in Dixon Street. The auto-orientalist move is defined by the decision to call the delicacy with a name that recalls the imperial political structure of China, and that draws on a mythical representation of the East strengthened by the material representation of Chineseness in Dixon Street. A high degree of complexity inherent in the commodity in this case is brushed aside; the fact that the pastry originates from South Korean street food culture, for instance, and that the instrument to realise it was imported from China by an Australian business, which draws on the transnational networks that link its founder to his ‘homeland’, are all irrelevant factors that are folded into a ‘Chinatown snack’. It is the halo of Oriental difference provided by Chinatown/Haymarket as a tourist destination in an Australian multicultural city that endows the pastry with an additional, contextual meaning that significantly increases its value.

The ethnic commodity is not only mentioned by the interviewee as a way to extoll his family’s business operations, but it extends to an explanation of his own sense of belonging. Once I ask him to expand on the decision of adopting an imagery of Chinese ancient culture as the name of the delicacy, Jonathan starts to ‘lecture’ me about ‘Chinese culture’, a strategy that has been deployed again and again during my fieldwork and which will become more evident in chapter 7, where I will reconstruct my engagement with a Chinatown-based Chinese community organisation:

**Jonathan** There is always a meaning to a traditional Chinese dish to commemorate something that was important in traditional China. So, for example, we eat this rice wrapped in this leave…

**Andrea** Is that the Zhongzi?

**Jonathan** How do you know it? (Silence)…. And do you know about the August moon? About this woman who wanted to become a goddess, and a Chinese God made her stay in the moon all her life because she broke some rule or something… and there is this cake that commemorates this tale. August moon. It’s the lunar calendar… Chinese use the lunar calendar for all these things.
For Jonathan, the Emperor’s Puff is a serendipitous invention that has enabled his business to consolidate its prominence in the bustling context of Dixon Street commercial area. This also allows him to plug into a wider discourse where ‘ancient traditional Chinese culture’ becomes a way to explain his own sense of belonging and identity in relation to the commodity provided by his family business. He does so, again, by resorting to auto-Orientalism as a way to highlight his Chinese background, while drawing a line between his culture and the culture of the researcher. As a first generation Australian, Jonathan is not bothered by the stereotyped version of Chinese culture suggested by street details, such as the ‘Chinese’ archways. As a matter of fact, his business thrives on this objectification of culture and capitalises on it by reproducing the myth of an Oriental space and by mobilising images of ancient China.

As a successful businessman, therefore, it is only logical that when he is asked about his opinion on all the symbols and the visual elements in the precinct that recall a stereotyped Chineseness, Jonathan simply replies that ‘it is a good concept’, because these are elements that increase the
success of the family business. Jonathan’s use of ethnicity, in other words, revolves around the complex process of cultural commodification defined by the provision of ethnic commodities in a Chinese-themed street. Tradition is a word that plays an important role in his embrace of this commodified version of Chineseness, especially because his business is located in ‘the heart of Chinatown’. However, his agency as an entrepreneur appears in a context of borrowing and reinventing, where even the most iconic of the Chinese restaurants takes a big part in the rearticulation of ethnicity, well beyond the bounded territory of an ‘invented tradition’ (Ranger and Hobsbawm 1983).

5.5.2 Complex Identity as Business Strategy in ‘Young Chinatown’

Nikki’s parents opened a restaurant in the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct eight years ago. They chose Dixon Street north even though, at the time of the opening, only a few businesses operated in the area. The family took advantage of a newly opened shopping centre and rented one of the many vacant lots in the structure. The restaurant’s menu is written in Korean and English, but the restaurant is named after Taiwan’s highest mountain, which is written in the main entrance both in English and in Chinese. As I ask Nikki the reason of this choice, she replies by commenting on the kind of food that the restaurant provides:

We serve Chinese food for Korean people. Because you know… When you go to Korea and you eat Chinese food, (…) you don’t eat… like, you know the Chinese food that you get in Chinatown? The traditional kind of (…) sweet and sour kind of… pork or fried rice…. But Chinese food in Korea is not like that; it is a bit different. It caters for the Korean palate more. It might be… spicier, less oily than Chinese…. Whatever people think is Chinese food (Interview with Nikki, 4th October 2013).

Nikki’s words multiply the meaning of the ethnic commodity, by ‘placing’ Chinese food in different socio-cultural contexts. Unlike Jonathan, Nikki’s idea of tradition in relation to Chinese food changes according to the various contexts in which the commodity is provided: Chinese food in Korea, for example, is the glocalised version of Chinese cuisine that caters for the taste buds of Koreans; the type of Chinese food provided in the urban context of the Australian Chinatown, on the other hand, is simplified in the stereotyped image of fried rice and sweet and
sour pork. Each scenario in which Chinese food is placed redefines the notion of ‘traditional’, contributing to the reinvention of Chineseness as a cultural commodity according to specifically localised consumer cultures. The complexity, with which notions of ethnic identity are articulated starting from an analysis of the commodity provided in the restaurant, is further explored by Nikki as she makes a leap from talking about her family business, to explaining her own background:

You see, we are all Taiwanese. We are Taiwanese but born in Korea; but blood-wise we are like Chinese. Taiwanese people. So I am Taiwanese, but I was born in Korea because my family migrated there at a certain time. I don’t know when (Interview with Nikki, 4th October 2013).

The same degree of complexity, with which Nikki describes different versions of tradition, is reflected in her analysis regarding her own cultural background. Here, Nikki’s words illustrate how some of the trajectories that defined the transnational movements of entrepreneurs that establish their business in Chinatown/Haymarket today are mirrored by an increasing diversification of the commercial scenario, especially in the northern part of Dixon Street. The case of Nikki’s family business, in other words, illustrates how the precinct provides a fertile ground to translate complex identities into commercial activities. As a matter of fact, Nikki’s family has recently consolidated its position in Dixon Street by opening another business adjacent to the Chinese-Korean restaurant. This time, the family opted for a Taiwanese ‘hot pot’ restaurant,

We wanted to build our name. That was our main objective. And we wanted to bring more Chinese people in. So, research wise, we went to Taiwan to see what kind of food is there, so that we could bring it here and then cater for the needs of the people here. (...) This Chinatown is smack bang in the middle, you are going to have people from every nationality coming and trying your food. (...) I think when you start a business, you look at the demographics, you see what kind of people are going to come here and then you ask yourself if that business is going to work or not. A hot pot restaurant is not going to work in another suburb.... Like one where there is a huge white population (Interview with Nikki, 4th October 2013).

The case of the Taiwanese restaurant recently opened by Nikki’s family illustrates a different strategy to that adopted by Jonathan’s family: instead of capitalising on tradition, Nikki’s business has chosen to capitalise on the family’s complex history of migration and hybrid identity; here, Koreanness, Chineseness, and Taiwaneseness become all potential economic
resources to use in the precinct. This business strategy illustrates how, in Chinatown, increasingly flexible conceptions of ‘ethnic capital’ discussed in chapter 3 become resourceful elements for the economic activities of the actors engaged in the commodification of ethnicity. It suggests, in other words, that static and essential notions of ethnicity as a character for the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct are complemented by a more flexible, plural and open version of ethnicity that capitalises on ‘hybridising dimensions within self-identification as a space of orientation [within changing market conditions] which may be resourceful’ (Noble et al. 1999: 32). Different, emergent aspects both related and unrelated to Chineseness form the complex image of ethnicity the entrepreneurs use to sustain the ethnic brand in their everyday economic operations.

My analysis of Jonathan’s and Nikki’s businesses is not aimed at reducing the complex strategies of ethnic mobilisation in Dixon Street to a binary opposition between ‘tradition’ and ‘hybridity’ as the two poles between which the exploration of ethnic mobilisation oscillates. My aim here is to bring more evidence to the argument that the brand management strategy for the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct is based on a type of ethnicity that transcends singular meanings attached to Chineseness. As a result, an increasing number of actors have partaken in the mobilisation of ethnicity by utilising the precinct as a space where ethnicity-beyond-Chineseness becomes a flexible source, which values and encourages different interpretations. I want to dwell on this point by discussing two last examples.

5.5.3 Authentically Complex: Filling the Gap with (other) Asian Restaurants

Neither Lucy’s nor Tanya’s restaurant is in Dixon Street. They are both located in Goulburn Street, the street that divides the symbolic spine of the precinct, Dixon Street. Furthermore, none of the restaurants is involved in the provision of commodified ‘Chineseness’: as a matter of fact, Lucy’s restaurant is a Singaporean-Malaysian eatery located in a busy food court, whereas Tanya’s family business is a modern Filipino restaurant. The point of connection between these two businesses is the use that they both make of ‘authenticity’ as a strategy. This
type of authenticity is embedded in complex histories of migration that escape linear and bounded narratives, and that are underpinned by an ambiguous and uncertain articulation of ethnic identity. It is this factor that makes the two businesses part of the ethnic place brand for Chinatown/Haymarket; they are both constituents of the ‘multi-Asianness’ often mobilised in the marketing material which multiplies the parameters that construct ethnicity as a relevant category for the precinct.

Lucy moved to Australia to complete a postgraduate course in tourism and hotel management. She met her partner while attending university and started to fantasise with him about the possibility of starting a business in the food industry. Once she graduated, Lucy and her partner decided to give it a try. They saw in Chinatown/Haymarket a good opportunity, mostly due to the amount of pedestrian traffic in the redeveloped area between Central Station and World Square:

This is a good place to make business, especially if you have things, which are authentic and are quite rare in the market. My partner and I saw that there were not many Singaporean and Malaysian restaurants in Sydney, but there are plenty in Melbourne. So we thought that Malaysian Singaporean could be the next trend after Thai. Malaysian and Singaporean food has a taste of Asian cuisine that is quite acceptable to Australians. Because it is not too strong… unlike like some Chinese or Korean dishes (Interview with Lucy, 24th July 2013).

The mobilisation of ethnicity, in Lucy’s words, relies on a pragmatic economic decision informed by market demands (the fact that Singaporean-Malaysian cuisine might become the next big thing in Sydney) and customer number forecasts, which are based on issues of accessibility and circulation (with reference to the location of Chinatown/Haymarket in a pedestrian friendly part of the city). Lucy’s adoption of a certain ‘ethnic resource’ to conduct business, in other words, is not justified by some sort of embodied cultural capital or linked to the migratory experience like in Nikki’s case, who explained the reasons of selling Korean adaptations of Chinese cuisine based on assertive claims of ethnic belonging. Rather, Lucy makes a significant separation between the ethnic identity that she articulates for herself, and the type of ethnicity that she pragmatically appropriates to conduct her professional life:
I am originally Chinese. It is just that I was born in Indonesia, but I don’t have any Indonesian blood at all. My grandparents, they came from China originally. (…) I can understand a little bit of Chinese. My parents can speak fluently Chinese and some dialects. (…) I come from Palembang, which is only one-hour flight from Singapore. So flying in and out of Singapore was super easy for me. Just like from here to Melbourne. And I have family in Singapore too, so I got used to the area and the food (Interview with Lucy, 24th July 2013).

Lucy’s appropriation of ethnicity as an economic resource relies on a ‘type’ of Singaporeanness-Malaysianness that is not dependant on ethnicity as ‘essence’. The claim to ethnicity, in Lucy’s case, stems from her understanding of market gaps (hence the adoption of a an emergent cuisine in the Sydney context); while her knowledge of Singaporean food tradition is sustained by occasional visits to relatives who live at a short distance from her hometown, and by issues related to her personal life (her partner is an Indonesian man with Chinese background, who spent most of his youth in Singapore; he therefore provided a number of contacts and cultural resources that proved to be vital at the stage of marketing research prior to the opening of the restaurant).

Lucy’s case, in other words, offers the opportunity not only to disengage the equation of ethnicity with place that sustains the dominant discourse of ethnic place branding; it also enables us to observe the ‘multiplication of significant variables’ (2007: 1025) that defines contemporary diversity. Authenticity, in this context, should not be understood in line with MacCannell, who famously put it as a ‘touristic opening into society’s back region’ (1973: 595) and an example of ‘staged intimacies’ (ibid: 596) in the tourist’s quest for ‘experiences, perceptions and insights’ (ibid: 602). It should be rather seen as the emergence of specific components of the complex identities of the actors that partake in the mobilisation of ethnicity via the pragmatic appropriation of under-represented ethnic resources in the precinct.

This issue can be discussed further by looking at Tanya’s Filipino restaurant. The family business started in Sydney’s northern beaches and recently moved to Chinatown/Haymarket due to the ‘convenient location’ of the precinct in proximity of Central Station and other landmarks, as Tanya puts it. The restaurant is not immediately visible, as it is located on the first

46 By using the metaphor of the back region, MacCannell draws on Goffman’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959).
floor of a building along the busy Goulburn Street. A street banner at the street level, however, lures the passers-by with the motto ‘come and experience the authentic taste of Philippine cuisine’. The reason behind the Filipino restaurant lies in the same understanding of the market gaps articulated by Lucy. This time, however, the provision of the commodity and the elaboration of my interviewee’s own identity overlap quite significantly, as Tanya explains the origins of the restaurant:

The reason why my mother started the business is because there is basically no Filipino anything here in NSW, in Sydney, maybe even in Australia. What she always told me was that Filipinos have a bit of an identity crisis. Because we were like colonised by Spain, (...) and in today’s culture we are heavily influenced by American culture. That’s why people can’t really pinpoint what Filipino culture is. (...) [My mother] grew up with my grandmother cooking at home, and I am sure that a lot of Filipinos cook for themselves here, but there was no….. nothing in the market. And that’s what she wanted to bring to the Australian culture (...) she wanted Filipino culture to be a lot more accessible. We have so many people who just walk down the street and they are really quite intrigued because they have never heard of it before (Interview with Tanya, 2nd October 2013).

Tanya’s statement here illustrates how, at the core of the establishment of the family business, lies a desire to give Filipino culture a place in the market and, consequently, a ‘face’ within Australian culture. It further elaborates on the question made by Comaroff and Comaroff in regards to the current historical period, when the branding of ethnicity might imply that ‘if we have nothing about ourselves to sell, does it [then] mean that we have no culture [at all]?’ (2009: 18). The Chinatown/Haymarket precinct, in this context, emerges as the stage on which Tanya’s family can ‘display’ Filipino culture through its commodification in the food and hospitality sector. This is facilitated, once again, by the ‘flexibility’ that the precinct offers and that includes multi-Asianness, as element that partakes in the production of a brand, whose ethnic meaning is deliberately ambiguous. The novelty brought by the family business in the commercial scenario of Chinatown/Haymarket enables Tanya to confidently present her family business as ‘authentically Filipino’:

We try to keep [the food] as authentic as we can, but twisting it to the palate of Australians. So an example of that is one of our dishes, Adobo, which is classically one of the most authentic dishes. And in the Philippines it is quite fatty, the meat is served with the skin on it,
it is very greasy. And here mum has made it just lean meat. So, yeah, it is very authentic, but because we are here in Australia, we need to take into consideration the local market.

We have one Indonesian waitress, we had one Indonesian assistant cook as well, but generally it is better for us… it is generally a lot easier, and I guess more culturally relevant, to have Filipinos here. A friend of mine, a blond Australian girl, wanted a job here and I was like ‘I am sorry, but I don’t think we could do that’. (...) It’s just that our clientele is heavily Filipino (...) and they can recognise who is Filipino and who is not. (...) It’s just like… Filipino restaurant, Filipino workers…. It just makes sense, I guess (Interview with Tanya, 2nd October 2013).

Tanya articulates the notion of authenticity through an analysis of the commodity provided and the staff of the restaurant. The ‘power of definition’ (Anderson 1991, see chapter 3) over the meaning of Filipino identity, in other words, is circumscribed within the limits imposed by ‘what’ and ‘who’ is ‘authentically Filipino’. However, the provision of commodities in the Australian context unveils a process of adaptation to local consumer demands and tastes (hence the meat dish is served without the greasy skin); it also interestingly points to the diversification of actors that partake in the making of Filipino commodities. A degree of complexity, therefore, is necessarily included in the process of providing the ‘authentic Filipino experience’. Tanya further articulates the type of tension between essentialism and complexity when she talks about her in-betweenness in the context of the restaurant; her reflection on her own linguistic competences and narratives of identity formation as a first generation Australian with Filipino background working in an ‘authentic Filipino’ restaurant illustrate at least part of the complexities that lie underneath the mobilisation of multi-Asianness in the Chinatown/Haymarket context:

People [like me], who are from different nationalities, who are born here in Australia… you constantly have two perceptions of yourself going on: what you think of yourself, and what others perceive of you. So, I think of myself as Australian, even though I know I am Filipino, but other people look at me and straight away think that I am Asian, like not necessarily even Filipino, they think of me as maybe Chinese or something like that (...) I don’t speak Tagalog so… everyone else speaks Tagalog, or Bisaya, or Kapampangan, which are two different dialects… I understand but I don’t respond. So, when I am serving Filipino customers they speak to me in Tagalog and I respond in English (Interview with Tanya, 2nd October 2013).

The process that leads to the commodification of Filipino and Singaporean-Malaysian cultures involves, as the cases of Tanya and Lucy show, putting aside a number of complex cultural
narratives that transcend the essentialised nature of ethnicity. This is, I argue, a direct result of
the application of the ethnic place brand to the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct. The claim of
‘authenticity’, just like ‘tradition’ and ‘hybridity’, is a strategy deployed by the economic actors
that partake in the mobilisation of ethnicity in the Chinatown context, which also contribute to
the production of the ethnic place brand characterised by an inherent tension between the need
to essentialise ethnicity for marketing purposes, and the necessity to always re-invent ethnicity to
‘fill market gaps’. Taiwaneseness, Koreanness, Singaporean-Malaysianness, and Filipinoness are
‘peripheral’, yet integral, parts of the ethnic place brand for Chinatown/Haymarket. They are
malleable ethnic resources deployed on the ‘flexible platform’.

5.6 Conclusion

The brand management strategy for the Chinatown precinct is defined by the maintenance of a
symbolic Chineseness translated into the ‘enclavic’ stage (Edensor 2000; 2001) of Chinatown
south; furthermore, it is sustained by all the activities that mobilise notions of a static, essential,
monolithic Chineseness across the precinct. These mostly rely on two main elements: one is
orientalist Chineseness, which is usually conceived of through discursive practices that rely on
images of ‘traditional China’; the other is the history of Chinese settlement in Sydney, which is
capitalised upon by drawing on the representation frozen in time of a close-knit, inward looking
and culturally isolated Chinese diasporic culture, whose traces need to be discovered through
adventurous explorations across the precinct. The street details maintained to promote Dixon
Street as a tourist destination, the obsession with the demarcation of borders, and the practices
of commodification and (self-representation) based on the mobilisation of ancient, mysterious,
exotic Chineseness are examples that have been discussed to illustrate this aspect of the brand.

The ethnic place brand, however, also implies that this type of Chineseness is subject to a
number of elaborations, and processes of reinvention. ‘Flexible Chineseness’, in this context,
illustrates all the instances of appropriation and invention that have the potential to reinscribe
the meaning of Chinese identity in Chinatown/Haymarket. The activities that take place in the
context of the ‘heterogeneous tourist stage’ and that bring to the fore instances of a politicised and linguistically diverse Chinese cultural sphere, together with the installation of contemporary public artwork (which enables to highlight the ambivalence of ethnicity beyond ‘a baseline Chineseness’) are examples that I have proposed in this chapter to suggest this point.

Both versions of Chineseness (flexible and static, hybridised and essentialised), are embedded within a wider cultural context that is changing the cultural face of the precinct at large. The brand management strategy for Chinatown/Haymarket embraces this kind of change; it embraces, in other words, the ‘periphery’ as a metaphor to indicate everything that happens outside of the strict system of representation centred on the contested meaning of ‘Chineseness’. In a meeting with the former president of the Haymarket Business Chamber during my fieldwork, he describes the current management of Chinatown/Haymarket’s character in terms of a ‘progressive view’ for the precinct:

If you look at Chinatown, [its Chineseness] is already diluted. You know… we mentioned it’s not just Chinatown, there’s those other Asian cultures involved, and that’s not going to change I think with immigration and everything else. (…) The celebration of the Chinese New Year could become a little less ‘Chinese’, but I think that’s fine. I think, you know, we can’t just remain as a Chinese celebration anymore. To grow and to be more successful [Chinatown] needs to be representative of the whole community (Interview with former president of Haymarket Business Chamber, B.C. 31st May 2013).

‘Multi-Asianness’ needs to be understood as part of the process that describes how the Chinatown/Haymarket brand management strategy allows for flexible interpretations of ethnicity and place. This process implies the reproduction of bounded conceptions of ethnic identity (the Vietnamese, the Korean, the Thai communities), claims to authenticity and uniqueness (as in the case of the Singaporean-Malaysian and the Filipino restaurant), and endless strategies of adaptations and reinvention that happen across the ambiguous boundaries. In this chapter I have shown how the production and application of the ethnic place brand for the precinct fills these myriads of interstices, where it is possible to observe a constant alternation between multiple and open-ended interpretations of ethnicity, and bounded and spatially demarcated claims of ethnicity as a static ‘essence’.
6

The Maintenance of Sydney’s Little Italy via a Rigid Brand

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter I argue that the ethnic place brand for Leichhardt has been framed within a context of urban development characterised by the belief that the ‘strategic’ nature of the precinct is defined by its reputation as Sydney’s Little Italy. The increasing diversification of Leichhardt’s population following the relocation of many of the Italian families that inhabited the LGA since the late 1970s, however, is perceived to have increasingly challenged its distinctiveness as an ‘urban ethnic place’ (Lin 2010); hence the adoption of ‘Little Italy with a twist’ as the motto used in marketing material to advertise the precinct’s point of differentiation. The ‘twist’, in this context, represents the reluctant recognition of a changing ethnic trend in the precinct, whereas the label ‘Little Italy’ operates as an indelible marker that seeks to attach thematised images of ethnicity to the urban place. In this chapter I am interested in teasing out the various contradictions that arise around the ways in which the representation of an essentialised and static Italianness as Leichhardt’s branded identity clashes with the precinct’s increasing diversity.

Unlike the degree of flexibility implemented in the brand management strategy for Chinatown/Haymarket, I will demonstrate that the ethnic place brand for Leichhardt is characterised by a ‘rigidity’ manifested in an unwillingness to acknowledge complexity in the
process of place branding. I will dwell in particular on how the application of the ethnic place brand impacts on three main symbolic spaces in the precinct: Leichhardt’s main spine Norton Street – characterised by ad hoc, almost improvised mobilisations of ethnicity that make of Italianness a relevant category in temporary manners; the Italian Forum – a permanent materiality in the precinct that is based on a thematised Italianness; and the Norton Street Festa – an instance in which Leichhardt’s brand is ‘intensified’. I will use this event as a springboard to discuss how a general ‘narrative of decline’ characterises the precinct, which is reflected in the way in which a number of stakeholders interpret the ethnic place brand.

6.2 Framing the ‘Strategic Precinct’

Leichhardt is located in a part of Sydney that is being increasingly transformed by major infrastructural projects for the city at large. In 2012, for example, the State Government announced the construction of a 33km motorway proposed to travel from the western suburbs along the M4/Parramatta Road. The aim of this project, which was called ‘WestConnex’, is to improve the connection between Sydney’s western suburbs to the airport, located in the south-eastern part of the city. The expected outcome of the project, the completion of which is estimated for 2023, is the removal of 4,600 trucks and 20,000 cars per day from Parramatta Road (www.westconnex.com.au). The section of the WestConnex that according to the plan will affect Leichhardt is a tunnel under Parramatta Road, in the southern part of the LGA. Together with the tunnel and the road-expansion project, the authorities also program a $200 million allocation of ‘seed funding’ for urban revitalisation along the Parramatta Road corridor. This funding allocation has paved the way for the ‘Parramatta Road Urban Renewal Strategy’, an initiative led by Urban Growth NSW[^47] that was released in November 2014.

The Parramatta Road Urban Renewal Strategy aims to transform under-used or dilapidated areas and to boost local economies of the urban corridor from the Sydney CBD to the City of

[^47]: This is a state-owned corporation established in 2013 that integrates and refocuses the roles of the former Landcom and the Sydney Metropolitan Development Authority (SMDA).
Parramatta by ‘building on the strengths of eight strategic precincts’ (Urban Growth NSW 2014: 2). These are defined by their proximity to public transport, employment zones, their capacity for housing growth and access to the city infrastructure. Each of the eight precincts mentioned in the draft is accompanied by the description of its particular features, a motto that provisionally encapsulates its growth potential and the economic activity that currently defines it. The Parramatta Road Urban Renewal Strategy highlights, in other words, the way in which the role of the Leichhardt precinct is framed within a plan of urban growth characterised by the expansion of infrastructure and by the (re)emergence of branded urban units.

According to the draft of the plan, ‘careful adaptive reuse and sensitive new buildings could bring new life and a strong night time economy back to the Parramatta Road’s iconic strip [of Leichhardt]’ (ibid: 9, my italics). The cultural, economic and social life of the precinct is recognised as dependent upon the ‘highly urbanised and visitor friendly Norton Street’ (ibid: 74); moreover, the profile of the precinct reads that ‘immigrant settlement had a particular impact on Leichhardt, when the Italian community gravitated there,’ and it concludes by mentioning that ‘the Norton Street Festa is held here in October’ (ibid). From these passages it is possible to see how ethnicity is understood as Leichhardt’s point of differentiation, and how this unique cultural asset seems to be particularly placed around the Norton Street commercial area. As we have been able to observe in chapter 2, this is highlighted by the Leichhardt Council as the cultural and economic ‘core’ of the precinct in official documents such as the Development Control Plan.

Another relevant point to dwell on is that the description of Leichhardt’s Italianness is framed as a characteristic of the past (‘immigrant settlement had a particular influence’; ‘the community gravitated here’). As I will demonstrate throughout the chapter, the diversification of the business composition in the precinct is often considered a major factor to address Leichhardt’s Italian decline. This diversification can be easily noted by looking at the shop turnover along Norton Street and Parramatta Road. The latter, in particular, has seen a steady increase of commercial

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48 These are: Granville, Auburn, Homebush, Burwood, Kings Bay, Taverners Hill, Leichhardt and Camperdown.
activities such as wedding dress and garment shops, car dealers and pubs,\(^{49}\) while many of the longstanding Italian family-owned businesses have abandoned the area. Figure 20, for example, is a snapshot of the intersection of Parramatta Road and Norton Street. The Italian butchery captured in the picture (one of the few shops that remained) was shut down shortly after the end of my fieldwork, while a bridal shop opened next door. Leichhardt’s contemporary status, in other words, is framed as much in a context of growth and strategic position, as it is within a general narrative of decline of its ‘ethnic heritage’.

![Figure 20. Italian butchery, Parramatta Road. Photograph by the author.](image)

As I will demonstrate throughout the chapter, this narrative is closely associated to a series of external factors such as the increasing inter-precinct competition, whereby the replication of the ‘Italian theme’ as a differentiation point adopted by other Councils has threatened Leichhardt’s uniqueness, but also to an unsuccessful, or ‘inward-looking’ brand management strategy for the precinct focussed on the representation of a static Italianness, which brushes aside the cultural complexity that defines the precinct’s contemporary social fabric and business community.

\(^{49}\) In November 2014, Leichhardt Library hosted a public talk by a heritage architect, who introduced the photographic documentation of Parramatta Road by a local visual artist titled ‘Cars, Pubs, and Brides’. 
By looking closely at the Parramatta Road Urban Renewal Strategy, for example, it is possible to notice that Leichhardt is not the only ‘Italian precinct’ envisioned. The neighbouring precinct of Kings Bay is also described as ‘being influenced by Italian ancestries’. This precinct corresponds to a part of the suburb of Five Dock, which is administered by Canada Bay Council. The selection of Italianness as the theme for the Kings Bay precinct is due to the more recent history of Italian migrant settlement compared to Leichhardt. It was in Five Dock that many of the Italian families resettled when they left Leichhardt in the late 1970s. According to the draft of the Parramatta Road Urban Renewal Strategy the Italian character of Kings Bay is particularly evident in the main street of Five Dock, where ‘there are Italian butchers, bakers and coffee shops’ (Urban Growth NSW 2014: 29). Each August, concludes the profile of the precinct, the suburb hosts ‘a celebration of Italian food and culture’ (ibid) named after the typical Italian mid-summer festival Ferragosto.\footnote{Ferragosto is the name of a common festivity in Italy that is celebrated in the middle of summer.}

The comparative analysis of how Leichhardt and Kings Bay are discursively constructed in the Parramatta Road Urban Renewal Strategy as Italian precincts is helpful to understand the strategy used to brand ‘Little Italy’: ethnicity here is mostly referred to as a heritage left by the traces of an ‘alien minority’, and it is introduced as a source of commodified practices ‘visibly’ clustered in the high street of Sydney suburbia. The recurrence of ‘ethnic festivals’ is another expedient used to market the ethnic character of the precinct. Both Norton Street Festa in Leichhardt and Five Dock’s Ferragosto in Kings Bay represent instances in which the ethnic place brand is displayed and mobilised on a large scale.

Given the context of change that frames the emergence of Leichhardt as a branded precinct, my aim in this chapter is twofold: on the one hand I want to show how, in contrast with Chinatown/Haymarket, the brand management strategy for Leichhardt works to maintain the Little Italy concept by mobilising a series of images of ethnic identity based on essentialised versions of Italianness. On the other hand, I aim to highlight how the very concept of ‘change’ is inscribed in the process of brand mobilisation, as the current demographics and the changing
profile of the business community in Leichhardt make it no longer possible to sustain the
credibility of the precinct’s Italian theme by relying on conventional ways to ‘measure’ ethnicity.
The paradox of branding a precinct as Italian without actually involving an Italian population is
nowhere more visible than in the Community and Cultural Strategic Plan, adopted by
Leichhardt Council in 2011. This reads,

There is some discussion about trends in the cultural diversity of the local government area.
Norton Street is identified for its Italian character as many Italians settled in this vicinity in
the post-War period and this is reflected in shops, restaurants, the bilingual school and
organisations such as Co.As.It still being located here. Work is currently underway to further
develop the Italian Forum Cultural Centre to achieve its vision of becoming a culturally
important community asset. The area remains an important meeting place for Australians
with Italian heritage. Community members and groups are eager to work with Council to
express this changing dynamic and promote the concept of Leichhardt’s civic identity into
the future (Leichhardt Council 2011: 20).

This passage is based on the simultaneous acknowledgement of a visible Italianness, together
with trends of cultural diversity as the defining factors that construct Leichhardt’s uniqueness.
Here Norton Street is promoted as a stage that displays extensive evidence of Italianness, and as
an assemblage of institutions that still represents its ethnic character (Co.As.It. and the Italian
Forum Cultural Centre above all). A parallel therefore can be traced between the understanding
of Norton Street as ‘Little Italy’ and the type of thematised ethnicity maintained in Dixon Street
as a Chinese ‘enclavistic stage’ that I have discussed in chapter 5. However, unlike the inclusion of
multi-Asianness as a trend of cultural change in the production of the ethnic place brand for
Chinatown/Haymarket, Leichhardt’s increasingly diversifying population is foregrounded in this
passage as a disruptive element, which is ‘at the centre of a debate’. Ethnicity understood as a
tool for place branding in Leichhardt corresponds with Italianness and Italianness only.
Anything non-Italian therefore is considered disruptive to the production of a branded image
for the precinct and an obstacle in the process of constructing ‘stories built in place’ (Kavaratzis
2005; Kavaratzis and Hatch 2013; Mayes 2008) which deliver a consistent message.

A sort of ‘identity crisis’ for Leichhardt is also reflected in the recent performance of the
precinct in the ‘Sydney Precincts Research’ project carried out by Tourism NSW (see chapter 5).
Unlike Chinatown/Haymarket, the research findings show that Leichhardt ranks in a category
of precincts defined by ‘relatively low levels of and awareness in visiting amongst those visitors who are aware of it’ (Tourism NSW 2011: 12). Despite ranking fourth in the category ‘food and dining’, the precinct is described in the research as one that ‘must raise awareness and communicate reasons for visiting’ (ibid). In other words, if on the one hand these findings include the precinct in a dynamic circuit of urban tourism, on the other hand they normalise the narrative of its decline.

This narrative has been strengthened in recent years by media outputs that have highlighted a number of factors: the emergence of suburban Little Italies that have undermined the uniqueness of Leichhardt as the ‘Italian epicentre’ of Sydney (Kidman, 2008; Elliot, 2009); the recent closure of a number of longstanding Italian businesses in Norton Street (Smith, 2014; Bolles, 2014); the troubled financial situation of the Italian Cultural Centre (Allen, 2013; Coote, 2013); and the increasing number of vacant shops in the commercial strata of the Italian Forum (Carey, 2013a; Dumas, 2014). This last issue has triggered the interest in Leichhardt of revitalisation projects like ‘Renew Australia’, an initiative that aims to re-activate under-utilised urban spaces of major Australian cities by leasing them out for free to creative and independent local businesses on a short-term lease. Calls for entry were published on the Leichhardt Council website in November 2013, and vacant lots in the Italian Forum and in Norton Street were made available shortly after.

Despite the consolidation of this narrative of decline, essentialised images of Italianness are still largely chosen to make the precinct align with the aims of the Parramatta Road Urban Renewal Strategy and to ‘bring new life’ to Leichhardt, as a media release published on the Council’s website read in September 2013 (www.leichhardt.nsw.gov.au). In the remainder of this chapter, I want to highlight the efforts that lead to the production of Italianness as the brand for the precinct, with a particular focus on how they point to a series of tensions that are folded into an inconsistent image.

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51 Renew Australia is a social enterprise that catalyzes community renewal and economic development across Australia. Its most recent projects have been carried out in Newcastle (NSW), Adelaide and Melbourne Docklands.
6.3 A Brand for the Street ‘in Flux’

The tension generated by the continued adoption of the ‘Italian theme’ for the precinct’s branding strategy despite the increasingly diverse composition of Leichhardt’s population has been a common topic of conversation with the informants I spoke with during the fieldwork. Many of the respondents that were involved in the research process, in particular, used the current diversification of Norton Street’s commercial composition (figure 21, for example, is a photograph taken in the ‘heart of the precinct’) as a starting point to analyse the contested maintenance of Leichhardt’s ethnic theme, and explained the place branding efforts as a stubborn search of Italianness against all odds. According to the former Leichhardt Mayor, for example:

I think there is a resistance. I think we are seeing a type of stasis (…); there is an attempt to maintain something that does no longer exist as it did. And that is a kind of reluctance that people often feel to change. I feel that at the moment there is a tension between the Italianness of Norton Street and the practical, visual reality of the street. (…) How it will change, I am not sure (Interview with former Leichhardt Mayor J.P., 22nd April 2013).

Figure 21. A beauty salon, an Indian restaurant, a Chinese take-away shop and an Italian restaurant in Norton Street. Despite being marketed as the ‘heart of Little Italy’ the majority of businesses in the street are non-Italian. Photograph by the author.
A representative from the Leichhardt and Annandale Business Chamber articulates the same degree of perplexity regarding the relation between the brand management strategy and the contemporary situation of the precinct; she says:

The high street is always changing despite the history that is still there. How do then brand and market a high street that is in flux; that is in transit between what it used to be and what it is going to become, which we do not know yet. (…) What is interesting is that Norton Street is going through a protracted transition (Interview with Leichhardt and Annandale Business Chamber representative A.M., 29th April 2013).

Whereas Italianness is recognised as the point of departure to describe the precinct as ‘something unique’, both interviewees share the opinion that the cultural differentiation of the precinct represents a problem for the mobilisation of Leichhardt’s brand. The interviews with the former Mayor and the representative from the business chamber also construct Norton Street as a space that justifies the adoption of the ethnic theme for the precinct on one hand, while showing how much the precinct is changing, on the other. By and large, both figures seem to agree on the fact that Leichhardt’s change and the branding process do not go hand in hand. A state of ‘flux’, in other words, hinders the successful delivery of a number of efforts that aim to consolidate the reputation of the precinct’s Italianness.

Despite the shared understanding of a context of flux, the adoption of a rigid Italian theme for the precinct’s branded identity is a widely accepted strategy that involves the efforts of a number of stakeholders. The maintenance of Leichhardt’s ‘Italian heritage’, for example, is one of the most visible efforts by the Council to stick to the Little Italy concept. The Leichhardt Public Library – located in the Italian Forum – plays an important role in this context, particularly in regards to the organisation of symbolic initiatives that bring to the surface the stories related to the precinct’s Italian character. The work of historians from the local history room has been very prolific despite the declining popularity of the precinct’s Italianness, which in many occasions proved to be an obstacle to the organisation of cultural events, as one librarian explains:

Every year I hear this ‘Leichhardt’s Italians, Leichhardt’s Italians,’ and when the managers ask me to do another Italian thing, I say: “You are asking me to resuscitate a dead horse because… where are the Italians?” I am not here in the 1960s when they are walking and
speaking in Italian; I don't have my finger on the pulse of a community of 500 people that will turn up’ (Interview with Local History Room Librarian A.T., 11th November 2013).

In this case, we can observe how the obsession for Leichhardt’s ethnic flavour is translated into the mention of ‘doing yet another Italian thing’. During my fieldwork, this type of activities have ranged from the book launch of the Italian-born Australian historian Gianfranco Cresciani on the history of Italian migration to Australia; to a photographic exhibition of ‘three aspects of Italian migration’, exploring the settlements in Lismore, Griffith and Leichhardt; to the organisation of a free basic Italian language course for adults at the library’s premises. The organisation of cultural events is therefore one of the most consolidated strategies that highlights that the precinct is somehow ‘owned’ by the ‘Italian community’. However, the very absence of Italian people represents, in the librarian’s words, the main obstacle to the realisation of this sort of activities. In saying so, she suggests that the activities mostly target an Italian population and that, as I was able to witness during my fieldwork, the declining number of Italians in the precinct corresponds to scarce attendance to the activities which are organised.

The paradox elaborated by the interviewee, however, seems not to have hindered the activities pushed forward by the expanding collaborations between the library and several institutions, which have been particularly prolific in recent years. In 2008, for example, the library hosted a photographic exhibition on the shopfronts of fruit and vegetable businesses in Norton Street and immediate surroundings. Furthermore, in 2013 Leichhardt Council has installed three plaques in Iron Cove32 to honour the Italian fishermen who were active in this specific part of the municipality in the early 1950s. The initiative originated from the success enjoyed by a book edited by Leichhardt Council in 2006, which involved the collaboration of the Australian Centre for Public History and the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). The book, titled The Fishermen of Iron Cove: In un Mare Diverso (in a ‘different’ sea) is a collection of oral histories complemented by archival research that sketches out the characteristics of a community of Italian fishermen based in Leichhardt; The book reads that ‘at its peak in the 1970s, [the

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32 The Iron Cove is now part of the Lilyfield precinct, located in the northern part of the LGA.
community] comprised between thirty-five and fifty boats stationed in Iron Cove permanently’ (Salt 2006: 10).

In both these events we can notice how the mobilisation of heritage is a strategy adopted by Leichhardt Council – via the public library – to convey the association between its administered geographical area and the Italian migrant community, who used to inhabit it. The clustering of commercial activities has been systematically used, in this context, to express the contribution of Leichhardt’s Italians. Despite the absence of the community in the contemporary demographic composition of the precinct, policy makers have not abandoned the idea of what can be understood as the ‘ethnic ownership’ of Leichhardt and take advantage of cultural facilities to ‘resuscitate’ Italianness as the defining characteristic of the precinct.

Leichhardt Council is probably the biggest stakeholder active in the branding of the precinct. However, the influential role of other agents needs to be taken into consideration. The service provider and Italian language school Co.As.It, for example, is also very active when it comes to the use of Italian culture-related initiatives. The voluntary agency was founded in 1968 ‘under the auspices of the Italian Government’ (www.coasit.org.au) with the main aim of providing assistance to the high number of Italian migrants arriving in NSW at the time. The headquarters were originally located in Surry Hills, but were moved to Leichhardt in the early 1980s to meet a growing demand of assistance by the local Italian-Australian community. The establishment of the organisation’s activities in Norton Street significantly contributed to heightening the perception of Leichhardt’s ‘visible difference’ (see chapter 3). Although its original focus was limited to the teaching of Italian language and the provision of aged care assistance, today the organisation has consolidated its role and according to its webpage, it ‘continues to meet the ever-changing needs of the Italian-Australian community in NSW (...) through Australian and Italian government funding, thanks to the support of over 3000 volunteers and a growing membership base’ (ibid). The role of the organisation in the mobilisation of the ethnic place brand for Leichhardt is obvious as we observe the way in which Co.As.It promotes its activities by relying on the location of its headquarters in Norton Street.
The two pamphlets circulated by the organisation in 2012 and 2014 (figure 22) to promote its Italian language classes are exemplary in this context. In the first, a young woman rides a scooter and holds a shopping bag under her left arm; her figure is framed by the urban scene of an allegedly Italian city centre, with strollers walking behind her in a warm spring or summer day (as her casual dress code suggests). The second one depicts a quintessential tourist scenario of a mature woman sitting at a restaurant table: she wears a pair of sunglasses, holds a menu and smiles at the camera. The motto adopted by both campaigns is ‘speak the most beautiful language’, accompanied by a line that reads that Italian is ‘passionate, poetic and profound’. Here, we can start to glimpse a recurrent strategy adopted to market the ethnic essence of Leichhardt, which relies on Italianness mobilised as a relaxed and sophisticated attitude and packaged as an intangible set of qualities, or ‘a lifestyle’. 
In the company’s marketing strategy, the physical location of Leichhardt is also emphasised and it is treated as an asset for the services provided. In the 2012 pamphlet, for example, the bottom line reads that classes are held in ‘the heart of Little Italy’, while the 2014 advertisement campaign compares Leichhardt with the Meadowbank precinct (where the main building of the Italian bilingual school has recently been relocated). Co.As.It decided to offer classes in both locations, specifying how the Leichhardt campus of the school is situated in the ‘the heart of Little Italy’. The halo of difference constructed around Leichhardt represents here the main point of strength for the services offered by the organisation in this specific location. The advertising material produced by Co.As.It, in other words, activates an association between ‘ethnicity’ and ‘place’ via the type of marketing language analysed in chapter 2 and defined by a process of abstraction, association and spatial alignment, whereby a sophisticated attitude is linked to an essentialised meaning of Italianness and then overlapped with Leichhardt via mentioning ‘the heart of the precinct’. The strategy significantly aligns with the type of ‘vision’ for Norton Street elaborated in the projects of street beautification sponsored by Leichhardt Council in the 1990s, which ‘imagined’ the street as a space where ‘Italian language, and the sound of bells pealing will be heard, the scent of food and coffee will pervade’ (Leichhardt Council: 1994, see chapter 3).

The marketing strategy and the precinct’s ethnic distinctiveness are mutually beneficial in this context: on the one hand, the very fact of being located in the heart of the precinct increases the perceived quality of the language courses; it does so by endowing the cultural commodity with a significant halo of authenticity. On the other hand, the declining popularity of the precinct is somehow reversed by the circulation of such marketing material, which reinforces its uniqueness. In this context, the organisation positions itself as a source of [ethnic] knowledge by virtue of representing the centre of the Italian community. Marketing material such as that used by Co.As.It, therefore, contribute to the rigidity of the ethnic place brand for Leichhardt, which is based on essentialised images of Italianness.
This strategy can be particularly observed by looking at the ‘Living the Language Tour’, that Co.As.It. organises for primary school students. During the three hours walking tour in Leichhardt, students are provided with ‘numerous opportunities to practice the language in Sydney’s Little Italy’, as the activity is advertised. The idea of Leichhardt, and in particular the Norton Street commercial area as a self-contained theme park, is mobilised throughout the walking tour and the ethnic character of its business community is accentuated by the ‘traditional Italian’ restaurants that partake in the initiative. The tour, for example, usually ends with live cooking demonstrations in one of the oldest Italian restaurants. The whole activity in other words is made to conform to the narrative of metropolitan Sydney areas being the containers of authentic ethnic expressions, or contemporary examples of how the traces of visible difference have survived through the provision of food and urban tourism activities (see chapter 3). Despite the assertiveness with which Co.As.It markets its operations as an organisation that sustains the cultural life of Sydney’s Little Italy, the changing demographics of the precinct are still considered a factor looming over the efforts of the organisation. As the Co.As.It president says:

The Italianness of Norton Street has been diluted in the last…. Well, let me talk about the thirteen years that I have been at Co.As.It. I think that, if the institutions like the Council and the community do not fight to maintain that, then [the Italian character] can be lost. (...) Norton Street is suffering not only for its Italianness. It is not a busy place anymore. It is not a place to come and hang out. Young people do not really flock here as they used to. I remember fifteen years ago coming for coffee and dinner. Saturday night… it was busy, it was buzzing. It was the place to be. It felt Italian. It was full of Italians, full of Italian restaurants. That is gone now; people have gone. Concord has replicated that; Haberfield has replicated that. (...) I would like to see that coming back to Norton Street. And it will only happen if institutions like us and the Council stand up and start to do something about it (Interview with Co.As.It president T.C., 22nd October 2013).

The words of the interviewee connect the decline of Leichhardt’s ethnic character with the idea of competition and replication of the Little Italy concept in other inner-Sydney suburbs with a high population with an Italian background and, most importantly, with the absence of an ‘Italian feel’ evoked by the presence of Italian people and commodities in Norton Street. As we have seen, in response to this general trend of change, stakeholders such as Leichhardt Council and Co.As.It. ‘fight’ for the maintenance of the Italian theme by using a strategy of ethnic branding based on the adoption of essentialist images of Italianness overlapped with Norton
Street. This type of strategy, however, seems to encounter a number of hindrances related to the declining Italian ‘feel’ and, as a result, the ethnic place brand seems precarious despite these continued efforts. As a matter of fact, during the entire length of my fieldwork, the ‘Living the Language Tour’ has not been activated due to lack of interest.

My fieldwork in Leichhardt, however, reveals that some types of Italian-themed activities still do enjoy some popularity. In the remainder of this chapter I will focus on a number of them and I will use the way in which they are received by the local business community to tease out multiple instances in which complexity is ignored in favour of holding on to essentialism.

6.3.1 Norton Street: Soccer Idols and Improvised Ethnic Carnivals

So far in the chapter we have been able to observe that ‘heritage’ and ‘language’ are two common tools used to sustain the ethnic place brand for Leichhardt. These are vehicles through which a network of actors mobilises the idea of ethnicity and makes it spatially overlap with the precinct to market it as Little Italy. ‘Soccer’ can be discussed as another instance in which images of Italianess are made visible. By discussing soccer it is possible to notice, once again, the rigidity of the ethnic place brand for Leichhardt; this is defined by a wide spectrum of stakeholders, whose efforts converge in Norton Street as a stage where not only an essentialist, but also a groupist (Brubaker 2002) Italianess is mobilised.

The relevance of soccer in understanding the process of ethnic branding in Leichhardt is also due the fact that it allows us to gain a glimpse on the success enjoyed by initiatives organised on a ‘temporary’ or ‘ad hoc’ basis, as opposed to both the recurrence of the cultural activities previously discussed, and the permanence of a thematised Italianess that I will discuss in the next section. Events that involve the participation of the Italian national team, in particular, have been highlighted by many of my respondents as instances in which the Italianess of Leichhardt becomes widely acknowledged. The former Mayor, for example, explains how soccer is used as a strategy to capitalise on the ‘echo effect’:
Over the ten or fifteen years that I was in Leichhardt Council, we wanted to maintain Norton Street as an Italian centre, and sometimes that’s despite the facts on the ground, despite the fact that there was a tiny minority of Italians, despite the fact that the majority of the businesses now are non-Italian. So, for example, during the World Cup, the Council put big screens up, and all the Italians come to Norton Street. So [soccer] really has an echo effect, whereas thirty years ago there was a legitimate majority of retailers that were Italians. But that echo still remains. So Italians still want to go to Norton Street to watch Italy play the World Cup. They have that kind of yearning for a connection. It is like a melancholy. Do you know that word, melancholy? (Interview with former Leichhardt Mayor, J.P. 22nd April 2013).

The street carnival that took place in Norton Street following the visit of one Italian soccer celebrity in May 2013 is an illustrative example to understand the power of soccer as a branding tool for Leichhardt. The event happened when Sydney hosted a street-soccer tournament sponsored by the Singaporean beer brand Tiger. The competition featured a number of recently retired international soccer players – among whom the former captain of the Italian national team Fabio Cannavaro – and it showcased their talent during brief public soccer matches scheduled to take place in the city centre. On the weekend of the soccer tournament, a joint action of the Leichhardt’s local business community and the business chamber invited the Italian soccer celebrity to visit the precinct, taking the excuse of its role as brand ambassador to promote a hot sale for Tiger products at the biggest alcohol retailer in Norton Street.

In Leichhardt, Cannavaro’s popularity is due to his role as the captain of the Italian national team winner of the 2006 Soccer World Cup. The memory of the soccer player lifting the Cup was a fresh memory to many soccer fanatics, who followed the competition on the big screens installed by the Council in Norton Street only a few years before. Eager to capitalise on such an occasion as a way to revitalise the perception of the precinct’s point of differentiation, Leichhardt Council jumped in, and the beer-related initiative was soon brushed aside to make space for a ceremony, whereby the soccer player was awarded ‘honorary citizenship’ in Leichhardt. On the day of the event, the homepage of Leichhardt Council read:

Global football super star and World Cup winning Italian captain Fabio Cannavaro will visit Norton Street Leichhardt, the spiritual homeland of Italian Australians. (…) This is a unique opportunity for local families, the football community, and the Italian diaspora to witness a sporting superstar in action (www.leichhardt.nsw.gov.au, accessed 4th April 2013).
Like in the case of the cultural activities organised at the Leichhardt Library, the discursive emphasis placed on the event draws on the powerful image of the precinct as the ‘ownership’ of the Italian community. Terms such as ‘spiritual homeland’ and ‘Italian diaspora’ are made to converge in Norton Street as the ‘core of the precinct’ to convey this idea. In calling the people of the Italian diaspora to gather in ‘their’ spiritual homeland around ‘their’ national icon, the stakeholders involved in this initiative make current branding strategies align with the cultural initiatives promoted by the library; they also hark back – once again – to projects of beautification stressing the ethnicised dimension of the street, which envisioned Norton Street as the ‘place of interaction between Italo-Australians and other groups’ (Leichhardt Council: 1994). To an equally important extent, this example allows us to gain a glimpse on how the branding tools deployed for Leichhardt reproduce the idea of the precinct as a bordered container of Italian culture; in this context, the idea of the ‘honorary citizenship’ acts as a
powerful device to consolidate the image of the precinct’s Italianness, while at the same time it utilises the constructed symbolic centrality of the street as an appropriate site where an ‘outstanding figure’ is awarded membership of the Italian diasporic culture.

The way in which the event unfolded is also relevant to understand the impacts of the application of the ethnic place brand. For the occasion the street was made pedestrian for half a day, and a stage erected next to Leichhardt Town Hall created a carnivalesque atmosphere. Figure 23 is a collage of moments captured during the celebrations in Norton Street when soccer fans, Leichhardt residents and local politicians joined the celebration. Standing on the stage and weaving the Italian flag, the Mayor of Leichhardt spent flattering words about the precinct as the ‘internationally acknowledged Australia’s Little Italy’. He said: ‘It is only right that we are bringing the icon of Italian football here. Making Cannavaro an honorary citizen of Leichhardt will strengthen the bonds of friendship between our community and the people of Italy,’ the Mayor concluded his speech. The footballer intervened briefly and said (in Italian): ‘I know that it is hard to live away from Italy, but I am sure that your passion will help you to get over the distance’ (Fieldwork diary, 4th May 2013). A few metres from the stage, among a triumph of red, white and green flags and blue t-shirts, myriads of group photos and videos were taken around a man who played on the flute popular Italian jingles like That’s Amore and O Sole Mio. Hundreds of smart phones were raised to the sky and a long queue was soon formed underneath the stage in the attempt to get the footballer’s signature and snap a sensational selfie.

The analysis of soccer as a branding tool allows us to understand the crucial role played by Norton Street in the brand management strategy for Leichhardt. Soccer is used to produce an echo effect that captures the ‘essence’ of Italianness and that crystallises its meaning in a symbolic moment, connecting ideas of diasporic community and the precinct’s centre. In this context, the street provides a fundamental space for this process to happen, by virtue of having been at the centre of beautification and upgrading processes aimed at heightening its ethnic character. The street, in other words, is made to ‘radiate’ the precinct’s uniqueness.
Events such as the visit of Cannavaro also reveal how soccer represents a way in which the local authorities are willing to stretch their power as a governing body to privilege the ethnic place brand. The street carnival authorised by the Council, for instance, blocked a main street for half day and notice was given to the local community only one day prior to the event. This shows that the brand management strategy for the precinct incorporates impromptu, ad hoc events such as the visit of a footballer as viable ways to reproduce the idea of Little Italy by channelling it through what can be understood as ‘electro-shocks’ of recognisable Italianness. The Italian national flag, the blue soccer jerseys, the jingles played on the street, the use of Italian language as part of the celebration, in other words, all act as powerful devices that brush aside the increasing diversification of the precinct’s cultural makeup in favour of a consistent Italianness, which instrumentally focuses on symbols that conjure a uniform national culture. My point here is that, as a major component of the ethnic place brand for the precinct, soccer is treated as the receptacle of many resources, which are put into the mobilisation of ethnicity in Leichhardt.

Another example that illustrates this point is the type of attention that Italianness enjoyed during the World Cup that took place in 2014. For the occasion, businesses along Norton Street were granted extraordinary permission to set up little stalls outside their premises to provide on-the-go coffee and food, while national soccer team paraphernalia such as scarves, flags, t-shirts were sold by two men, who had set up an improvised stall on the front of the premises of a beauty centre in Norton Street. This time, the Council did not install big screens for public viewings of the matches; however, a number of cafes and bars in Norton Street anticipated their opening times for the occasion, as the competitions were broadcast with a considerable time difference. During the half time break of one of the games, a reporter from the TV channel SBS interviewed the owner of Bar Sport, one of the oldest Italian bars in Norton Street. The image broadcast on national television, which I captured on the screens placed outside the very same bar (see figure 24), depicted the man holding a cup of coffee and wearing the Italian national team jersey, while in the background another man held the Italian flag. The café owner proudly showed the signed version of Cannavaro’s jersey that he had collected the year before, and that was now framed above the bar.
The media propagation of such images is another relevant channel through which the ethnic place brand for Leichhardt is mobilised. This is represented by contingent and specific alignments (McFarlane 2011: 209, see chapter 1) between stakeholders who put ethnicity together during symbolic moments by means of consistent messages. The logic that drives the TV channel to report from Leichhardt is that Italian soccer matches are watched in Norton Street due to its constructed nature as the ‘spiritual homeland’ of Italian Australians, and because this is the urban area where Italianness is commodified and consumed through practices related to the food industry, displayed and embodied by means of national sport paraphernalia.

The point to be made here is that the ethnic place brand relies on the convergence of a number of symbols and practices that are assembled; this process of composition, however, does not happen in a vacuum but rather in a particular context that facilitates the emergence of ethnicity a relevant category (McFarlane 2011). Italianness becomes a consistent message because the Business Chamber, the Council and a segment of the business community come together in the case of Cannavaro’s award of the honorary citizenship; in the same way, the agreement over
shared versions of ethnic ownership and stereotyped Italianness between the journalist and the shop owner strategically consolidates Leichhardt’s image as the heart of Little Italy during the half time break of the Soccer World Cup match.

These efforts point to a ‘rigid’ ethnic place brand based on essentialised representations of ethnicity: the global achievement of a national team and the colour blue that represents it; the display of symbols of the nation-state such as the green, white and red flag; the image of a close-knit diasporic population that inhabited the precinct; and the remainder of the business community that maintains its legacy today. As we have already been able to observe, however, the street also hosts an increasing number of businesses that do not use Italianness as an instrument to market their operations and that are run by people who do not recognise themselves as Italian. They are part of that context of change considered to ‘hinder the consistency’ of the Italian brand. In the course of this chapter, I will discuss some of them and I will place their pragmatic appropriations of ethnicity against the objectified and stereotyped mobilisation of Italianness to exemplify the unresolved tension between essentialism and complexity that characterises the production of the ethnic place brand for Leichhardt.

6.3.2 De-Italianising Norton Street

Many of the non-Italian shops in the central part of Norton Street belong to a ‘generation’ of business owners that started their activities in Leichhardt in the last decade. In many cases, they took over restaurants or shops that were previously selling Italian commodities, or that were run by Italians. During my fieldwork I engaged with the stories of many of these activities; two of them, in particular, caught my attention: they are a café/eatery and a Greek restaurant located a few metres from one another. The accounts of the owners of these two businesses give voice to the local business community of the street at a time when the type of stereotyped Italianness forcibly associated with the precinct during the instances that we have observed so far is at odds with the everyday reality of a street in flux.
In 2007, Tom and his brother took over an Italian café previously owned by two employees of the nearby iconic Bar Italia (one of the oldest businesses in Norton Street, established in the 1950s). The two brothers, who are first generation Italian-Australian, have a long experience in the service industry. They started by working part-time in their father and uncle’s business in the CBD, who owned an Italian take-away shop in the 1980s. Tom comments on the experience by saying:

The industry at the time was a young one. Australians were still used to meat and veggies only, you know? But that was the moment of multiculturalism; they wanted certain people to specialise in their niche product. They wanted ethnic food provided by ethnics, because they were the only people who could do it (Interview with Tom, 10th April 2013).

After taking over their family business, working a few more years in it and expanding it until a point when the family owned three Italian businesses in the CBD, Tom and his brother started to find the working conditions in a shopping centre more and more difficult to negotiate. They decided to relocate to Norton Street, in a part of the city that was specialising in the same product that they knew so well. After an initial period of good business, Tom explains how the economic situation in the Leichhardt precinct has progressively declined. Having spent a considerable amount of time as business owner in Norton Street, Tom has also witnessed a gradual change in the precinct’s demographic and in the type of commodities provided. In his opinion, this changing trend – together with other factors related to the circulation in the precinct53 – started to challenge the concept of the Italian hub, which Leichhardt had enjoyed up to that point. Commenting on this situation of transition, he says:

[Norton Street] is still considered an Italian district, but the Italian people are no longer here. As the old ones are dying off, the younger ones are not coming back anymore. (...) Leichhardt is becoming more multicultural. And more fashionable. The Council is still attached to it [the idea of Leichhardt as an Italian district]; they still try to promote it that way. But it’s not real. I mean, I am half Italian and I can tell you, there is nothing Italian about Leichhardt. Apart from the old people who live in the area, there is nothing Italian about it (Interview with Tom, 10th April 2013).

53 Like many of his fellow business owners in Norton Street, Tom is very vocal about the changing parking arrangements in Norton Street after a sidewalk refurbishment in 2007. This, according to him, has contributed to the decision of many drivers ‘to not stop anymore’.
Tom’s account of Leichhardt’s change relies, like in many other stakeholders’ opinions, on the idea that the Italianness of Norton Street has ‘disappeared’ with the settlement of the older Italian generation to other suburbs. The change of Leichhardt’s demographic, in his words, is based on the diversification of the population’s ethnic background (hence a more multicultural street). However, this transition is also influenced by a changing status reflected in the consumer patterns in the street. According to Tom, Norton Street has passed from being ‘a working class suburb for the poor people, who couldn’t afford anything better,’ to a ‘fashionable’ inner-city precinct. His words also interestingly point to the tension between the Council’s ‘attachment’ to the Italian theme, and the perceived ‘un-Italianness’ from a business owner perspective. This cultural and social change that Tom articulates during the interview bears a big influence on the type of economic strategy that he and his brother understand as viable in a place like Norton Street. Asked about his opinion on the validity of choosing to establish an ‘ethnic business’ in contemporary Leichhardt, he answers:

It depends if the cuisine that you are promoting is fashionable. Italian [food] has been around since the 1950s. So it is no longer fashionable to have pizza or pasta, unless you are going to one of these pizzerias now, where they have the wood fire oven, and all the workers are Italian and they specialise and they are certified pizza makers from Napoli… that sort of thing. It’s really more of a fashion thing than anything else. Take Sushi; 15 years ago nobody knew what it was! You knew what it was if you went to an upmarket restaurant, where they had that sort of things for people who knew what it was. But definitely not to the average person on the street… Now you’ve got 4 or 5 Sushi restaurants that have opened up here in the last 4 years! That’s because it’s fashionable, it’s healthy. So… it’s just changing (Interview with Tom, 10th April 2013).

Tom depicts a scenario of transformation that draws on the demographic of the precinct and the type of commodity provided. Unlike the narrative of decline articulated by officials, who are engaged in the maintenance of the Italianness of Norton Street, he explores ‘change’ from the perspective of a business owner, who must assess the viability of his product and who is targeting his consumer market. He frames the emergence of Japanese food, for example, within a context of cultural differentiation, but also as the consequence of more knowledgeable consumers compared to when his father and uncle started providing ‘ethnic’ food, at a time when, in his own words, ‘no one knew the difference between good and bad’. The business
strategy adopted by Tom and his brother in this changing scenario is very illustrative. It points to the dissonance between the way in which policy makers and business chamber officials stick with the Little Italy concept and the business strategies adopted by local business owners:

They [still market Norton Street as an Italian shopping strip], but it really has no benefit. I mean… we are Italian, but we do not market our shop as Italian. We don’t, because we see that there are many Anglo-Saxon families, and we also see multiculturalism here as well. So, if you look at our menu, we try to do a bit of Indian, a bit of Malaysian a bit of modern Australian and then we also have a bit of the Italian twist to it. (...) I believe that the market is not as receptive to [Italian food] as it was 10 years ago, simply because Italian food in Australia now has become a staple food, whereas once upon a time no one knew what it was. (...) We do not market our business as Italian because our customers are not Italian; they are schoolteachers, they are kids, they are local business owners in the healthcare… (Interview with Tom, 10th April 2013).

The business strategy adopted by Tom is exemplary of the paradox that can be observed in the current brand management strategy in Leichhardt. His story is one of a business owner with a background in the Italian food industry sector, who moved from a food court/take-away business model in a shopping centre in the City CBD to a suburban shopping strip that enjoyed the reputation of being the ‘spiritual homeland of Italian-Australians’. After operating in the street for almost a decade, Tom’s decision to abandon the Italian food industry, despite being located ‘in the heart of Little Italy’, demonstrates that the contemporary business community in Norton Street, the diversification of the provision of commodities, the ultra-specialisation in the production of Italian food, and the changing type of clientele are only some of the factors that contribute to the decision of the business community to ‘de-Italianise’ Norton Street from within. This phenomenon takes place despite the continued attempts of a network of stakeholders to revitalise the reputation of the street by means of ad-hoc initiatives that echo the idea of Leichhardt as Sydney’s Little Italy, and Norton Street as the ‘core’ of the precinct.

The business strategy adopted by Tom and his brother does not only point to the increasing de-Italianisation visible in Norton Street. It also highlights the changing way of ‘doing ethnic business’ – which intersects with the conceptualisation of the suburban precinct being the home of an ‘ethnic community’ – and a contemporary ‘fashionable’ inner-city precinct – where ethnic diversification and increasing business sophistication challenge the uniform consistency of
ethnicity as a branded image. This tension is visible not only from the perspective of those business owners with an Italian background, who ‘abandon’ the idea of Italianness; it can also be noticed by looking at other segments of the business community.

The Greek restaurant that operates a few doors away from Tom’s café, for example, is owned by an old couple – Christina and Mihalis – who migrated to Australia in the late 1980s. They relocated to Norton Street in 2007 after years of co-owning a smaller Greek-style tavern in a neighbouring precinct. The couple started a Greek restaurant in Norton Street in the premises of a previous Italian Bar run by an Australian man with English background, who went bankrupt as a result of the economic crisis experienced by the area from the mid-2000s. Their restaurant is another example of how the Italianness of Norton Street has been progressively ‘undone’ by the establishment of ethnic businesses other than Italian and how, unlike in the Chinatown/Haymarket case, in Leichhardt changing cultural trends have not found a place in the brand management strategy for the precinct. As they are asked to reflect on the transition experienced by Norton Street since the establishment of their business, they say:

The area at that time was doing ok, but the place was dead. We took the shop and changed everything, from Italian café to Greek restaurant. (…) This area is not funky anymore. Before Leichhardt was like… alive. Now it’s empty. (…) The fact that we have Greek music keeps us going. Norton Street has slowly gone down. At least 50% down from when we started. People are not coming so often. We do not have as many customers as we used to. Blame parking, or the economic crisis, I don’t know (Interview with Christina and Mihalis, 17th April 2013).

Christina and Mihalis’ complaint about the declining popularity of Norton Street draws on some of the points made by Tom: bigger structural issues related to parking, for example, are mentioned by many interviewees as contributing factors to the crumbling vibrancy of the street as a place to be. In addition to this, a changing economic situation seems to play a key role in the perception of the shifting fortunes of a shopping strip that relies on the spending power of urban consumers. The example of Christina and Mihalis’ restaurant, however, is relevant as it shows the increasingly complex scenario that defines the operations of the business community in contemporary Norton Street. As a matter of fact, their business is defined by high levels of cultural complexity and hybridity that challenge that narrative of ethnic consistency about
Norton Street not only as the ‘heart of Little Italy’, but also about Leichhardt as a suburban precinct where bounded and non-complex notions of ethnicity are articulated.

This complexity is reflected both in the histories of the two owners, and in the way in which their ‘Greek commodities’ are provided at the premises of their restaurant. Mihalis was born in Egypt; he was educated in an Italian Catholic school in Cairo and moved to Italy as a young man to work as a kitchen hand in various restaurants. His wife Christina was born and raised in Poland from a Greek family of professional musicians who owned restaurants, where she used to work part-time before moving to Greece as a young woman. Their complex, hyphenated identities reflect the degree of superdiversity increasingly typical of the area and are represented in the restaurant’s little details, such as the use of béchamel sauce (an ingredient that Mihalis learned to cook during his experience in restaurants on the Italian-French Riviera) used in the preparation of the restaurant’s Greek staple moussaka; and the provision of Polish brands of cherry-flavoured chocolate among the traditional Greek desserts. The social makeup of their business is made even more complex by the recruitment of working-holiday visa makers and young students from a number of different countries as staff: an Italian dishwasher, a Nepalese barista, a Russian waitress and a general manager from Kazakhstan.

The role played by Christina and Mihalis’ business is fundamental as it brings to the discussion the perspective of a non-Italian restaurant in the context of the declining popularity of a precinct marketed as Italian. Despite not being officially part of the brand identity of Leichhardt the couple is strongly in favour of those street details and materialities that promote the perception of Leichhardt’s Italianness. In their opinion, the lack of ‘Italian attractions’ is as problematic as the increasing diversification of the business community and the type of commodities provided:

Leichhardt was like… whoever came from Europe, I used to bring them to the Italian Forum because of the Italian piazza and all that stuff. I used to tell them ‘you are going to feel like in Italy’. Now it’s empty. There is nothing attractive in the street. Why don’t they open new businesses? Why don’t they open nice boutiques that sell dresses from Italy, expensive ones? That would be attractive. At least people would design something different, something made in Italy, not made in China. I am talking about made in Italy; I am talking about Norton Street like… a real Italian street. (...) We have a lot of Japanese restaurants
now too. Which is good, but it didn’t happen before. It was all Italian. And they used to work…. (Interview with Christina and Mihalis, 17th April 2013).

The respondents echo the narrative of decline articulated by other stakeholders engaged in the marketing of Leichhardt. Their complaint draws on the increasing visibility of businesses ‘other than Italian’, particularly those run by Asian people. In this passage we can notice how diversity is interpreted as a hindrance to the process of place branding for Leichhardt by the same actors who are at the forefront of the precinct’s changing ethnic makeup. Furthermore, the way in which ideas of ‘real, expensive’ Italian items are mentioned as the possible solution to the identity crisis experienced by the street, reflects an understanding of Italianness as a specific commodified image: a visible, recognisable, sophisticated ‘experience’ branded with connotations of luxury and quality to counterpoise to the increasing diversification of the services provided in Norton Street. In other words, the account of the business owners of a Greek restaurant brings more evidence to the argument that the ethnic place brand for Leichhardt is based on a rigid understanding of Italianness, and that its production and application to the precinct reveals unresolved tensions between the need to essentialise Italian ethnic identity and the unwillingness to acknowledge the differentiation of the cultural expressions displayed in the commercial strip.

Christina and Mihalis’ comment also points to the tension between the different parts that materially compose the ‘stage’ of the precinct. It is to this point that I want to turn my attention now. The construction of the Italian Forum in the early 2000s seemed to respond to the vision of a permanent Italianness in the precinct, something attractive in the street – as articulated in the interview – and a way to revitalise the idea of Leichhardt as an ethnicised precinct. Today, the structure does represent an ethnic attraction and a type of Italianness reflected in the built environment that ‘remains’ permanently in Leichhardt. However, as I will show in the next section, it also points to an unresolved tension regarding the type of ‘stage’ constructed for the precinct as part of the brand management strategy. Here again the parallel with Chinatown/Haymarket is useful since it provides a ‘symmetric framework’ to operate within: unlike the way described in chapter 5, in which the Chinatown/Haymarket stage seems to have
‘organically’ diversified into two sections (enclavic and heterogeneous), the Italian Forum is an artificial construction and an overtly thematised space that does not communicate with the adjacent Norton Street. The point that I am starting to make here is that the Italian Forum does not represent the desired permanent stage onto which ethnic images can be articulated, but rather the permanent tension inherent in the brand management strategy for a street in flux.

6.4 The Italian Forum: Little Italy Against All Odds

The premise upon which the land in the southern end of Norton Street was originally donated to the Italian community of Leichhardt was that the recipient of the grant would realise a cultural centre. The development site was symbolically located at the intersection between Norton Street and Parramatta Road, as figure 25 illustrates, in a place of high significance for the ‘Italian history’ of the suburb. The project was initially put in the hands of Romaldo Giurgola, a famous Italian-born architect, who had designed the Australian New Parliament House in the early 1980s. The architect’s project, however, was soon dismissed due to a lack of funding; it was contracted out to a private developer who revisited the original ideas and then subcontracted the project to a number of different construction companies that opted for the realisation of a multi-purposed structure including a cultural component. This would feature a cultural centre and a public library that would benefit the whole of Leichhardt. When the Italian Forum opened officially in 2001, the structure featured fully functional commercial, residential facilities and a pedestrian-only square including restaurants and a public library; this was connected to Norton Street by an arcade flanked by shops. However, there was no cultural centre.54

A Business Management Committee (BMC) was formed to represent the interests of the different strata into which the Italian Forum was divided: commercial, residential, parking and cultural centre. The latter, spatially represented within the structure by the unfinished cultural centre.54

54 According to a former Leichhardt Mayor, the Italian Forum became characterised by a series of ‘problems behind the scenes’, which made the project turn ‘into a bit of a scam’ (Interview with former Leichhardt Mayor, J.P. 22nd April 2013).
centre and the square, or *piazza* as it is usually referred to, was called ‘Italian Forum Limited’. This decision suggests that, despite the incompleteness of the structure, the company (which was presenting itself as the voice of the Italian community) felt entitled to represent the whole project and that the ethnic component was envisioned to be the main focus of the complex.

![Aerial view of the Italian Forum development site in 1987. From community leader’s personal archive, reproduced with the consent of the owner.](image)

Eminent exponents from the Italian regional associations, who were active in social circles and whose profiles were connected to cultural endeavours, organised themselves in a board of directors. An Italian-born academic from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) was elected as the first president of the Italian Forum Ltd. His appointment was due to the prominent role he played in the drawn-out legal case against the developers that framed the entire story of the cultural centre since its inception, and that involved different segments of the community, the Leichhardt Municipality, and a number of creditors. Having devoted a big part of his life to the cause of the Italian Forum as ‘the living monument to a glorious immigrant past and a dynamic cultural future,’ (Italian Forum Ltd 2007: 1) he argues that the creation of the Forum was a turning point for Leichhardt.
There is a need to respond to the strong demand for Italian culture, which comes from Australian society. The idea [of the Italian Forum Ltd.] was to create a centre dominated by the notion of Italian culture in terms of representation, creation and promotion. There is also a call for representation of Italian culture in a zona identitaria (identity area). After all, for better or for worse, Norton Street remains Sydney’s Italian street, which makes Leichhardt the capital of the Italian community in Sydney. A community centre in the heart of Leichhardt means to have a centre, where the principles and the diffusion of Italian culture are emphasised. Lastly, this was also a way to revitalise a suburb. Leichhardt has never had a cultural centre before. The Italian Forum was the first one; that’s why I say that this place benefits the entire community (Interview with first president of Italian Forum Ltd., F.G 17th April 2013).

The way in which the respondent frames the idea of ethnicity highlights the contemporary role of the Italian Forum as a structure that neatly separates Italian and Australian cultures. It does so by embedding Italianess in a multicultural model characterised by a mainstream society and a number of ethnic minorities, which contribute to its ‘enrichment’ (Hage 1998). As we have been able to observe, according to this model Leichhardt emerges as an urban place that gives visibility to ethnicity, by virtue of being constructed as an ‘identity area’. The role of the Italian Forum, in this context, becomes that of a permanent tribute to the precinct’s Italianess (or a ‘centre within the centre’); in other words a significant asset to achieve the Little Italy concept.

The conceptualisation of ethnicity in this passage is also important in that it frames Italianess and its relation to the precinct at large as a product that needs to be managed – or, as the president puts it, ‘represented, created and promoted’ – via the Italian Forum. The strategy adopted for the promotion of Italian culture envisions mainstream Australian and Italian cultures as a kind of ‘joint venture within multiculturalism’, as my respondent has stated in an article published in The Australian; here, according to him, ‘you cannot promote Italian culture within the Italian community, you have to do that within mainstream Australia’ (Lane, 2013). As I will show throughout the chapter, this philosophy has been used to manage the Italianess of the Italian Forum, but it has also spilled outside of it to reflect the type of brand management strategy adopted for the precinct at large.

This strategy defined the first generation of management at the Italian Forum Ltd., which ended with the election of the former president as a senator for the newly elected Italian parliament in 2013 (in chapter 4 I briefly discussed how his election campaign significantly intersected with
the unfolding of my fieldwork). His election also coincided with the sale of the assets of the Cultural Centre ‘as its operations generated insufficient cash inflow to meet its operating expenses and non-current liabilities’ (SVPartners 2013: 2) in August of the same year. While the legal controversies that led to the declaration of a state of insolvency of the Cultural Centre will be analysed more in depth in chapter 7, here I want to focus on the Italian Forum as a mixed commercial, residential and public space and I suggest that its construction has paradoxically hindered the successful production of the ethnic place brand for Leichhardt.

I argue, in particular, that the Italian Forum negatively impacted on the ways in which Norton Street has been marketed as the ‘heart of the Italian community’. The type of themed Italianness displayed in the Italian Forum, and the way in which it has been managed, have failed to connect with some segments of the older business community in the same way that events such as the soccer carnival have. This has created a ‘permanent’ paradox, which represents on a large scale the type of contradictions between essentialism and complexity that are overlooked by the brand management strategy for the precinct. In the next section, I want to dwell on the material layout of the Italian Forum; my point here is that the way in which ethnicity is mobilised in this space is helpful to understand the pastiche of symbols that are made to converge in the concept of ‘Italianness’ as an exclusive and sophisticated image.

6.4.1 Commodified Italianness in the Themed Structure

The Italian Forum is accessible from the southern end of Norton Street via a galleria (passage) flanked by shops; this links the main area of the structure to the high street. At the end of it, a staircase leads down to the main area of the whole complex: a square of approximately 650 m² that resembles an Italian public space – or piazza – endowed with a clock tower recalling the structure of a ‘typical’ Italian city. A number of (mostly Italian) restaurants and the Leichhardt public library are located on this level of the structure. The square is surrounded by a first ring, which is occupied by a galleried walkway that hosts many vacant spaces and a few operating businesses, from cafes to massage parlours, from music record stores to medical clinics. On the
level above, residential apartments overlook the piazza; these are divided in blocks, each named after one of Italy’s most iconic cities: Roma, Bologna, Firenze, Napoli, Palermo, Milano and Venezia. The fact that the names of the cities are not translated into English highlights the same emphasis placed on the ‘linguistic landscape’ (Tufi and Blackwood 2010) used in the maintenance of Chineseness in the Dixon Street area in Chinatown/Haymarket; language, however, is only one of the elements that construct the Italian Forum as the enclavistic stage for Leichhardt.

The material features of the Italian Forum are defined by stereotyped images of ethnicity, which find their most visible legitimation in the design and the use of the space, for instance the town clock and the piazza, the Italian restaurants, and the Italian names attached to the apartment blocks. During my fieldwork, I was able to consult the official drawings of the Italian Forum prior to the passage of the project into the hands of various developers. Here, the emphasis on ethnicity does not seem to be as marked as it eventually turned out. The main concept
envisioned by the plan seemed to be mostly relying on the Forum as a public area rather than a themed space of consumption. The concept sketches depict a number of strollers walking across the square, leisurely sitting on the steps overlooking the piazza, or at the tables scattered across its perimeter. Although the drawings stereotypically recall a transplanted Italian public space (they, too, contain a clock tower), and envision a portion of the space occupied by commercial activities (the figures sitting at the tables could potentially be sipping beverages or indulge in consumer activities), a different usage of the space is notable when they are compared with the actual way in which the Italian Forum has been realised (see figure 26).

In order to describe the role of the Italian Forum in the Leichhardt context I return briefly to the work by Irazábal and Gómez-Barris (2008) that I mentioned in chapter 1. The authors discuss a recently opened Mexican themed shopping centre in the Los Angeles metropolitan area as an enclosed structure which bears the influence of Zukin’s understanding of a ‘dreamscape of visual consumption’ (Zukin 1991: 221 in Irazábal and Gómez-Barris 2008: 187). I draw on this case study to suggest that the Italian Forum is similarly ‘organised as a detached, inward-oriented island, (...) a corporate co-optation of the traditional ethnic strip model, which has been recreated within a private shopping centre’ (Irazábal and Gómez-Barris 2008: 189). My interest, in this context, is discussing the ways in which ethnicity is mobilised in this themed structure in conformity to the rigidity of the ethnic place brand for Leichhardt. Secondly, I want to dwell on its significance as a physical component of the precinct’s stage. The concept of Un Mondo Italiano (An Italian World) is used in the marketing material to describe the ‘Italian experience’ of the Forum. On its webpage, a descriptive passage of the structure reads:

Discover Italy, moments away... a galleried walkway takes you from Norton Street and magically transports you into Italy with touches of Tuscan architecture, colours of tan and burnt red, and a striking space that opens before you. Coming down from the galleria, there are also the Forum’s own version of Rome’s Spanish Steps, which make excellent amphitheatre-style seating for major events there. To complete this sophisticated European setting there is the galleria with designer boutiques offering the cream of European and Australian fashion. (...) They surround and overlook the stunning outdoor piazza – a generous space ringed by cafes and restaurants that provide a superb range to choose from, through cheerful trattoria style to fine Italian dining. The area also features a marble fountain dominated by the statue of Dante “the father of the Italian language”. Sunny and vibrant by day, the piazza is relaxing and romantic by night with its muted lighting. On weekends,
strolling musicians add the extra atmospheric touch and the Italian Forum’s relaxed ambience of easy living is emphasised by the six-hour clock up above everything which invites visitors to relax, literally, in another time. To come here is to truly experience *un mondo Italiano* (www.TheItalianForum.com.au).

The Italian Forum relies on the ‘multidimensional aspect of the [branded] product’ (Lury 2004: 23) to create a sort of ‘aesthetic hallucination’ (Baudrillard 1983: 58 in Featherstone 1987: 58) of ethnicity. The above mentioned passage aims to titillate the imagination of the consumers by depicting a quintessential Italianness via the ‘overproduction of signs and reproduction of images and simulations’ (Featherstone 1990: 7) that attempt to package and contain in a themed space the type of Italianness that has been diluted by the diversification of Leichhardt at large. The Italian Forum is a miniature park in which ‘an assortment of [Italian] façade architecture, open space landscaping, patriotic symbols’ (Irazábal and Gómez-Barris 2008: 189) operate within an enclosed stage of tourism and consumption. The material set out of the Italian Forum and its marketing material online are relevant to investigate this ‘pastiche of cultural icons,’ (ibid: 191), by means of which Italianness is commodified in the structure, and transformed in both material and intangible factors.

The delivery of the idea of ethnicity in the Italian Forum appears to be entirely dependent on neo-traditional and themed ethnic symbols and based on the visual impact produced by shapes and details illustrated in figure 27; the decorations in the structure collect a series of symbolic images and draw from disparate sources of Italian regional cultural expressions: from the adoption of the ‘Tuscan architecture’ and the colours used for the residential strata of the structure, to the symbols of the popular Neapolitan card game *briscola* printed on aluminium sheets, which are mounted among the iron bars of the entrance gate. Furthermore, the visual identity adopted by many of the marketing campaigns borrows the aesthetic of the Venetian carnival by capitalising on the longstanding presence in the Italian Forum of the only shop that imports goods made in Italy, in this case decorated carnival masks.
These material details represent a range of different versions of Italianness that are wrapped into the uniform image of ‘The Italian World’ through the process of commodification, whereby regional diversities are put aside, since the rationale for their existence is their being part of a monolithic and static Italian essence visualised and experienced as a singular category (Noble and Tabar 2002). The choice of the major Italian poet of the late Middle Ages Dante Alighieri, in the centre of the piazza, is another component of this pastiche. His statue is introduced in the marketing material as a tribute to the ‘father’ of Italian language. Here, we can read the intention to refer to the ‘source’ of Italian culture and to symbolise ethnicity as essence, the origins of
which are strategically represented in the Italian Forum. The construction of this simulacrum is
aided by the adoption of marketing language that amplifies the symbolic nature of the built
environment. We can understand this point by looking at the staircase that links the galleria to
the piazza. This acquires a totally different meaning once it is described by using ‘ethnic
marketing language’, which compares it with the Spanish Steps, a monument in Rome.

The type of Italianness represented by the Italian Forum and the way it is marketed also
incorporates an intangible element that transcends material shapes and details to include a more
comprehensive notion of ‘Italian way of being’. This is explicitly linked to a sense of
‘sophistication’ – which we already saw articulated in the marketing material published by
Co.As.It., and by the words of the owners of the Greek restaurant. In the case of the Italian
Forum, notions of sophistication are mobilised via the marketing material of the different strata.
For example, the images often used in the advertisement campaigns depict young, wealthy and
stylishly dressed figures walking confidently in the spaces of the Forum (see figure 27). The idea
of Italianness as a sophisticated lifestyle is also mobilised by the way in which ‘living in the
Forum’ is represented in the real estate material displayed in the vacant lots of the structure and
used as a way to attract investments. Constructed as opportunities to experience ‘the art of living
well’, the residential strata are advertised in one evocative passage that reads:

Think of lazy afternoons in the sun, catching up on gossip, a game of cards, a quiet cigarette,
and a glass of Sambuca – life’s small pleasures are richly multiplied when shared (Italian

A certain idea of Italianness is constructed in this passage that points to ethnic identity as a
commodified range of activities, beliefs and objects, while the Italian Forum represents a shrine
to an essentialised Italianness, packaged to facilitate this ‘sophisticated lifestyle’. The idea of
ethnicity here revolves around the enjoyment of the small pleasures of life, while at the same
time it constructs the shopping/living experience as ‘a matter of style’ imbued with European
notions of high class and quality. The mix of these material elements and intangible narratives
creates a halo surrounding ethnicity that is alternatingly encapsulated by the mottos ‘an Italian
world’, ‘a positively unique shopping experience’ and ‘the art of living well’. The sum of the
three seem to work as a ‘vehicle for the symbolic performativity (...) linked to a mythic homeland’ (Irazábal and Gómez-Barris 2008: 205).

In the Italian Forum a number of expressions related to Italianness are constantly domesticated, packaged and spatially contained in a public square/shopping centre, where symbols unmistakeably lead to the association of commodity and ethnicity. This is conveyed by a number of sensory experiences that are mobilised to appeal to the consumer’s sense of Italianness. Speakers, for example, are installed in the first ring of shops and play recognisable Italian jingles such as those heard during the soccer carnival in Norton Street; Italian flags are also often visible: they are sewed, for example, on the black uniforms of the cleaners, or flown on poles underneath the clock tower in the *piazza*. The practices of shopping or simply strolling around are framed, in other words, by a ‘make-believe architecture’, which operates to ‘naturalise a pre-formulated and formulaic model [of Italianness]’ (Irazábal and Gómez-Barris 2008: 205).

The role of the Italian Forum in the Leichhardt precinct is fundamental in that it permanently transports into a shopping centre the exaggerated version of that objectified Italianness that does not find legitimation in Norton Street due to the diversification of the business community. My point here is that the idea of the ‘joint venture’ – the core of the brand management strategy for the Italian Forum, which implies the creation of a ‘centre within the centre’ – has been adopted as a brand management strategy for the whole precinct to respond to the diversification of Norton Street, and it has multiplied the enclavist nature of the street via the management of an essentialised Italianness within a themed structure. The structure however, has not been organically included in the cultural and social dynamics of the precinct at large in the same way in which, for example, art installations, mapping practices and other upgrading to the public domain have rearticulated the meaning of Chineseness in relation to the Chinatown/Haymarket stage, on which ethnicity is mobilised. The public function of the Italian Forum has been completely overshadowed by the entrepreneurial approach to the structure, it has been centred on an essentialised version of Italianness that has permanently contained in a shopping centre
the tensions between essentialism and complexity which are usually played out in Norton Street and temporarily resolved by precarious assemblages.

I now want to dwell on another type of tension generated by the strategy of objectification utilised in the Italian Forum, namely the way in which ethnicity is mobilised inside the structure by some business owners. Here, the management of ethnicity (Italian and non-Italian) at a business level is often in the hands of non-Italian actors. The majority of the stakeholders in the Italian-themed structure, in other words, are a constitutive part of the narrative of change that I have presented so far in the chapter as the ‘disruptive element’ for the consistency of the Italian brand of Leichhardt, while they officially contribute to what is marketed as the ‘Italian world’.

6.4.2 Capitalising on the Theme Park

The Italian Forum seems to enjoy a significant popularity among Chinese tourists. Many of them can be observed in the afternoon while they alight from shuttle busses parked outside the shopping centre, and then access the Forum in big groups. During my fieldwork I became increasingly intrigued by how the majority of them seemed to head straight into a nameless business tucked in the most remote corner of the piazza. The tourists would appear again half an hour later to gather around Dante Alighieri’s statue, where endless sessions of group photos would be followed by a visit to the nearby gelato shop before they would diligently make their way back to the shuttle bus.

Following a conversation with a couple of tourists, I learned that their destination is a Chinese restaurant that provides low cost buffet-style lunch deals. Jiewei – the owner – is a young expatriate from Beijing who divides his time between a tourism agency, where he works part time, and the restaurant. Jiewei has been running businesses in the Italian Forum for an overall period of eight years; during the interview he reconstructs a narrative of protracted and steady decline that affected the precinct and that he sets against a ‘golden age’ for the economy of Leichhardt:
The first time that I have been here it was 2004. At that time there were people everywhere. You could get money everywhere. But now you can see it, it is pretty quiet (Interview with Jiewei, 13\textsuperscript{th} April 2013).

As Jiewei comments on the declining popularity of the Italian Forum, some of his words echo the narrative of decline of the ethnicised precinct due to its cultural diversification:

Things were pretty good at the start, and the landlords increased the prices of the shops in the area. Tenants decided to move out of the building, especially family-owned businesses. This is what I consider the death of the first generation in the Forum. Another generation came in: a more ‘multicultural’ one. Greek, Asian people came in to run Italian businesses like the gelato shops and cafes. Customers started to see that foreigners managed traditional Italian shops. This was disappointing for those who came here looking for fresh and authentic food. In my opinion, rent and management contributed to disrupt the atmosphere of the Forum (Interview with Jiewei, 13\textsuperscript{th} April 2013).

Jiewei’s interpretation of the Forum’s decline draws on the turnover in shop ownership. For Jiewei, the ‘freshness and authenticity’ of the services in the Italian Forum are highly dependent upon the ethnic identity of the business owners. Like in the interview with the owners of the Greek restaurant, this perspective constructs ‘anything non-Italian’ as an alien element in the context of the Italian Forum. Jiewei, in other words, contributes to constructing the rigidity of the ethnic place brand of Leichhardt as an image fixed in the strict and exclusive representation of Italianness, to which ‘only Italians’ are entitled to contribute. As he comments further on the Italian Forum, an interesting contradiction emerges between his idea of what kind of commodities should be provided, and the actual business situation that sees him part of the current economic activities of the Italian-themed structure:

Right now, if you want to enter in the Forum as a business owner, you have to open \textit{[a business]} related to Italy, Italian culture. Only can do Italian. Because this is the Italian Forum. People coming here want to have food. Every person that comes here expects Italian food: pizza, pasta. Not dumplings (Interview with Jiewei, 13\textsuperscript{th} April 2013).

In Jiewei’s opinion, it is not only the ownership of the business that needs to represent Italian ethnic identity; the commodity provided in the Italian Forum also has to be necessarily Italian. Here, the Italianness of the Forum can be observed as the consequence of a specific brand management strategy that encapsulates ethnicity in a cultural pastiche of images that excludes anything that does not represent Italianness. The history of Jiewei’s professional career in the Italian Forum, however, provides an interesting exception to this. As an entrepreneur who ‘ran
all sorts of businesses in the Italian Forum’ – as he recollects his experience as a business owner in Leichhardt – he is a custodian of memories related to all the activities that have come and gone in the last eight years. As we talk, he points to one of the many vacant shop fronts at the ground level of the piazza, and explains:

I don’t know if you have noticed that Indian restaurant, which is always closed, on the opposite side of the piazza. Before them, there was a Mexican place; before them, it was my business. And when I took it over it was an Italian restaurant. So I designed a set menu for tour groups. Pasta, salads, pizza. Our waiter came from Italy; another waitress was Australian with an Italian background. We had one Italian chef; then we replaced him with an Asian chef that had many years of experience in the Italian food industry. But then, the economic crisis broke in. And then the competition became extremely fierce. Until I realised that, if I really wanted to do traditional Italian food, the cost could not be so low, otherwise I could not have afforded the prices to keep the business running (Interview with Jiewei, 13th April 2013).

Jiewei’s argument is that businesses that do not produce traditional Italian food are deemed to fail. The way in which he describes his economic activity as the owner of an Italian restaurant also relies on the necessity to display a degree of ‘authenticity’. He articulates this idea by justifying the recruitment of any of his previous staff members according to degrees of Italianess (the Italian born, the second generation Italian-Australian, the Asian chef with experience in the Italian restaurant). In this context, his decision to shift to a ‘Chinese buffet style’ business can be read as much dependent on the economic crisis and the competitive economic environment, as it is on his non-authentic Italianess. Today, Jiewei’s business strategy in the Italian Forum does not capitalise on the provision of Italian commodities anymore, but on the image of the Italian theme park in the context of a specific assemblage that targets the Chinese tourism market:

I have worked for the tourist industry for a couple of years now, and I know every agent, everybody from the Chinese market. Some tours include the Italian Forum as part of their itinerary [because] this is something special in Sydney. This is real multiculturalism. This is Italy Town (...) Visitors from China think that Australia is a European country. In China there is a big need to satisfy the imagination of the West. You know, in China there is still a strong awareness of the ‘East’ as opposed to the ‘West’ (Interview with Jiewei, 13th April 2013).

Jiewei works in partnership with ten travel agencies, mostly based in Western Sydney, which target the Chinese tourism market. The travel agencies offer packages that include accommodation in hotels located in suburban Sydney and organise whole-day excursions to
Sydney CBD landmarks such as Darling Harbour, Opera House and the Queen Victoria Building. Jiewei capitalises on the Italian Forum as a point in between the Western suburbs and the City centre; he proposes a ‘strategic stop’ at the Forum to show ‘something special’ in the Inner-West. He charges each tourist $10 for a standard buffet meal,55 and leaves tourists some extra time to indulge in shopping activities in the nearby Norton Plaza shopping mall (since the Venetian carnival mask shop is currently the only active ‘Italian shop’ in the Italian Forum) where, says Jiewei, ‘they can buy things to bring back to China’. The consumerist experience includes opportunities to photograph memories of ‘real multiculturalism’, for example by standing next to the pastel-coloured walls of the residential buildings in the Forum. The whole episode is timed ‘strategically’ during peak hours to avoid the annoying experience of being trapped into a jam-packed Parramatta Road on the way back to their accommodation in the Western suburbs.56

The strategy used by stakeholders such as Jiewei somehow aligns with the conceptualisation of the ‘Italian World’ as the marketing material for the Italian Forum points out and, most importantly, with the ‘joint venture’ as it satisfies the demands of multiculturalism by providing a stereotyped image of Italianness to tourists, who are interested in its ‘visible difference’. However, the way in which Jiewei sustains the ethnic place brand for Leichhardt also shows a separation with the type of initiatives promoted in Norton Street and the ones that take place in the Italian Forum. The way in which the few surviving businesses in the Forum continue their operations in the tough business environment of a declining precinct is based on a precarious assemblage, sustained by business owners who interpret the meaning of the ‘strategic precinct’ in their own way. As a matter of fact, instead of relying on the ‘official’ conceptualisation of the Italian precinct offered by the Parramatta Road Urban Renewal Strategy, Jiewei capitalises on the precarious assemblage composed by the strategic position of a theme park located along a congested thoroughfare, half way between the western suburbs and other, more successful

55 Jiewei’s business is based on a non-transaction model: tourists only need to show a voucher given to them by the tourism agency. At the end of the month, Jiewei collects a percentage from the agencies that partake in the initiative.
56 He comments ironically on this point by saying that this is the real, authentic taste of Sydney that tourists should get.
touristic precincts in the Sydney CBD, the boom in Chinese tourism, and his strong connections with the tourism industry targeting the Chinese market.

Given that the official brand management strategy for the precinct relies on Italian products and symbols, and that the diversification of the business community is regarded as an obstacle to the achievement of a successful brand for Leichhardt, Chinese businesses like the one run by Jiewei are not officially included in the ‘vision’ for Leichhardt. However, Jiewei is not an isolated case. As a matter of fact, the functioning of the ethnic business industry in the contemporary scenario of the Italian Forum is largely dependent by people without an Italian background.

The general manager of one of the few operating restaurants in the Italian Forum – the only Italian business that has managed not to go bankrupt since the inauguration of the Italian Forum in 2001 – for example, is a young Nepalese man named Kiran. Kiran moved to Sydney five years ago, after spending three years working in an Italian restaurant in Singapore while he was completing his degree in hotel management. He got a job in the Italian Forum ‘straight away’, thanks to his degree and previous work experience. Like in the case of Jiewei’s business, the restaurant where Kiran works capitalises on tourist packages, mostly targeting tourist groups from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan. Kiran worked his way up in the business, from ‘running the food’ to ‘pretty much managing the whole restaurant’ (Interview with Kiran, 1st August 2013). Asked about the current situation for businesses in the Italian Forum he says that, although things are not as good as they used to be, the restaurant where he works still enjoys a satisfactory number of customers. He does not hide, however, that competition between restaurants in the Italian Forum exists and that it is exacerbated by the fact that the number of visitors is not very high, especially in low season. The key to attract customers, in Kiran’s words, lies in the capacity of the business to display and perform a certain degree of Italianness, as he states:

You need to compete to look good, to be different, to be sophisticated in the Italian way. You have to look more Italian. You have to put flags, Italian paintings. We make our own fresh pasta, you know what I mean? (Interview with Kiran, 1st August 2013).

Kiran’s understanding of Italianness as a sophisticated attitude conforms to the type of image
marketed in the Italian Forum. The way in which he describes the process of competition between stakeholders who are involved in the mobilisation of Italianess at a business level echoes Becker’s (2015) analysis of the ‘maintenance’ and ‘mystification’ of New York’s Little Italy by recently arrived Albanian-Kosovar migrants, who have taken up the ethnic businesses left behind by Italians in the urban ethnic place in a context described as ‘the takeover of the ethnic market’ (Becker 2015: 113). Similarly, the emphasis placed by Kiran on the necessity to put flags, painting and to make pasta, alludes to a reference made by Becker to Goffman’s (1959) concept of ‘props’: elements that facilitate the decoration of a ‘fully fledged front stage’ (Becker 2015: 115) and used to elevate the appeal of a restaurant in the heart of Sydney’s ‘Little Italy’ to the eyes of tourists who are interested in the ethnic experience.

The display of exaggerated ethnic symbology is not the only consequence of the pressure to conform to Italianess on the business strategies of the owners/managers and workers who are active in the Italian Forum. The interview with Kiran also shows how performativity is a crucial component. As our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a group of Japanese tourists, Kiran jumped from the chair to attend to them. The image of the young Nepalese man tossing them menus, scooping out chocolate while energetically moving his hands, dispensing generous ‘mamma mia’ and posing for group photos under the neon light signage reading ‘Authentic Italian Gelato’, exemplifies what Becker understands as the ‘instrumentality of multiple identities’ (ibid: 119) in a thematised context of the ethnicised urban precinct. Drawing on Becker’s study, my point here is that a big part of the economic activities of the Italian Forum involves the agency of ‘identity entrepreneurs’ like Kiran, who ‘create transmutable selves through a combination of structural, performative and cultural opportunities’ and, despite not being Italian, ‘facilitate everyday [touristic] encounters (…) by switching to assumed,57 “real deal” Italian ethnicity’ (ibid: 120). However, as my analysis of Leichhardt has suggested, these increasing types of appropriation of Italianess by ‘others’ do not officially find a space in the production of the ethnic place brand for the precinct. This suggests once again, that the rigidity of the ‘essence’

57 In her article, Becker ‘plays’ with the double meaning of the word ‘assuming’ (to pretend to have or be; and to take as granted or true), to describe how ‘one ethnic group strategically presents itself as another ethnic group,’ and how, in doing so, it neither assimilates into mainstream society, nor validates place of origin ethnicity (2015: 110).
which drives the place branding practice in Leichhardt hinders the same diversification of meanings, the process of appropriation, borrowing and creative reworking that has characterised the ‘flexibility’ of the Chinatown/Haymarket’s brand.

So far in the chapter I have described the process that leads to the branding of Leichhardt by looking at two main spaces: Norton Street and the Italian Forum. Norton Street is defined by ad hoc initiatives (or electro-shocks) that aim to revitalise (or resuscitate) the idea of ethnic ownership to the street. These efforts involve a number of stakeholders and rely on the conceptualisation of Italianness as a series of stereotyped practices – among which soccer is certainly a privileged one – that construct Italianness as an essence overlapped with ‘the heart of the precinct’. The Italian Forum, on the other hand, is framed as a detached ‘centre within the centre’; here, Italianness is permanently translated into a comprehensive, multi-dimensional experience and conveyed through symbols that recall Italianness as a sophisticated lifestyle that do not find legitimation outside of the shopping centre. My fieldwork in Leichhardt also points to a third instance in which the ethnic place brand for the precinct is mobilised: this is a street festival during which, like in the case of the Chinese New Year, the ethnic character is ‘intensified’.

6.5 Brand Intensification: Norton Street Festa

The Norton Street Festa takes place in Leichhardt every year on the last Sunday of the month of October. The festival has consolidated its prominent role in the economy of the precinct, having been celebrated since 1986. For the occasion, stalls are set up on both sides of Norton Street and activities including cooking demonstrations, exhibitions and live entertainment are organised to receive, according to the festival’s website, a crowd of approximately 100,000 people every year. The event is supported by main sponsors such as Leichhardt Council, Leichhardt and Annandale Business Chamber, Palace Cinema and two Italian car companies – Fiat and Alfa Romeo. The festival is marketed as a ‘celebration of community spirit and
everything that makes Australia great, with an Italian slant, in the heart of Little Italy’ (www.nortonstreetfesta.com.au).

The main motto of the celebration is ‘all things Italian,’ with special attention to those products branded with ideas of sophistication, luxury and exclusiveness that constantly echo during the festival. All kitchen gears used during the Norton Street Festa, for example, are provided by the Italian company SMEG, which states on its website that the ‘identity of its products’ stems from the main characteristics of Italian design, such as inventive elegance, originality and high quality (www.smeg.it). During the 27th celebration of the festival, held in October 2013, food and cars emerged as the most prominent elements used to display Italianness. The street as a stage for the precinct’s theme was activated on the day of the celebration, and the assemblage of objects and enactments of ethnicity produced a carnivalesque atmosphere that recalled the celebrations for the arrival of Cannavaro a few months before.

A food exhibition took place around the main stage, which was set up at the intersection of Marion and Norton Street; here, cooking demonstrations and workshops were carried out, involving some elders of the Italian local community. The production of food in the heart of the precinct with the participation of ‘ethnic people’ recreated an aura of ‘ethnic authenticity’ that was soon capitalised upon. On the day of the festival, the popular TV show My Kitchen Rules dedicated one of its 2013 season episodes to Italian cuisine and, for the occasion, it used the Norton Street Festa as a stage on which to legitimise the authenticity of the culinary products realised during the show.

From the central stage of the festival, a pedestrian area stretched for several blocks along Norton Street until Pioneer Park. Here a collection of old, vintage and contemporary Italian-made cars, motorbikes and scooters transformed the northern end of the street into an outdoor museum. The use of automobiles as a way to brand Italianness illustrates how goods and services in the space of the Festa are functional in making the type of Italianness celebrated during the event align with the brand management strategy based on the idea of Italian sophistication. Asked about the collection of cars displayed in Pioneer Park, for example, the
FIAT club NSW president declared that: ‘Italians are passionate by nature and they are the descendants of Renaissance sculptors, so every time they make a car they make it with a genetic passion’ (Carey, 2013b). This suggests that the brand management strategy for Leichhardt relies on a mix of branded products and an intangible sense of ethnicity, which is mostly associated with the quality and elegance of goods, and with the embodied ethnicity of the ‘community’ (an issue to which I will return in chapter 7).

The Norton Street Festa is an instance of ‘brand intensification’ for several reasons: firstly, the whole festival is underlined by the philosophy of the joint venture, which is visible in the motto used to advertise the event. The ‘celebration of community spirit and everything that makes Australia great, with an Italian slant, in the heart of Little Italy’ mobilises a series of images encapsulated in the brand management strategy discussed so far: according to it, the display of Italianness in Leichhardt is based on the exaggerated difference of the precinct, which has to communicate its uniqueness ‘within mainstream Australia’. The festival, therefore, is a vehicle
for the mobilisation of the ethnic place brand on a large scale that aims to communicate a uniform ‘Italian identity’ from ‘the heart of Little Italy’.

Secondly, the Norton Street Festa intensifies the circulation of the symbols used to market the specificity of Leichhardt; the celebration connects with the brand management strategy as the commodified practices of Italianess during the event are based on ideas of both branded luxury and embodied difference. The exhibition of cars and the mention of the inborn passion with which Italians realise their branded objects, for example, refers to the type of Italian sophistication mobilised in the Italian Forum. The cooking demonstrations, on the other hand, validate the notion of ethnic authenticity channelled through the provision of ethnic commodities by ‘real’ ethnic people. In this case, the role of the TV show My Kitchen Rules is comparable to that of the SBS journalist during the half time break of the Soccer World Cup match at Bar Sport in that is uses symbolic moments to ‘put ethnicity together’.

The relevance of the temporal dimension in the mobilisation of the brand is also highlighted in the case of the ethnic performances that take place during the Norton Street Festa: the assemblage composed by the media production and the event organised to sustain the ethnic brand for the precinct successfully reproduces the idea of Leichhardt as an Italian urban ethnic place. It does so, however, because it is organised by a stakeholder like the popular TV show, and because it is connected to another electro-shock of ethnicity organised ad hoc to intensify the perception of authenticity of the precinct’s ethnic theme. It is interesting, for example, to compare the success of initiatives such as the cooking demonstrations during the Norton Street Festa and the public screenings of the matches that involve the Italian national team during the Soccer World Cup, with the unsuccessful nature of the ‘Living the Language Tour’ organised by Co.As.It. The three events all feature ethnic performances and are ultimately based on the same concept (‘authentic’ Italianess displayed in ‘the heart of the precinct’). However, while the first two are framed in a temporary carnivalesque aura, the latter is held in the everyday context of a precinct defined by a declining popularity.
Whereas the stubborn adoption of Italianness as a permanent feature of the precinct is not received favourably by an increasing number of figures – for instance the idea of ‘resuscitating a dead horse’ in relation to the organisation of Italian activities articulated by the local librarian, and the decision by business owners like Tom to de-Italianise their operations in Norton Street since the Italian theme ‘has no benefit’ – the temporary events that ‘revitalise’ Leichhardt’s Italianness via stereotyped celebrations enjoy a considerable success. The Norton Street Festa, in this context, occupies a liminal space between permanence and sporadic recurrence. The festival shares the permanence of a stereotyped Italianness recurrently celebrated, as well as the ad hoc and temporary nature of the ethnic carnival, as it blocks the precinct’s main spine for one day only.

The geographies of the precinct activated during the celebration of the Norton Street Festa represent another point that demonstrates how the event can be used to understand the logics of place branding in Leichhardt at large. As a matter of fact, the entire celebrations take place in Norton Street (more specifically from the intersection of Norton and Marion Street to Pioneer Park), while the Italian Forum is completely unused for the occasion. This adds evidence to the argument that there is a dissonance in the place branding initiatives that take place in Leichhardt due to the lack of alignment between the Street and the Forum despite the fact that the two spaces work to send a type of ethnic image that draws on the same pool of Italian stereotypes. The brand management strategy for Leichhardt, in other words, is based on the application of stereotyped images of ethnic identity to two spaces (a themed piazza and the faded picture of a ‘visibly Italian’ shopping strip) that do not communicate with each other. On the opposite, they seem to compete in the production of essentialised images of Italianness.

Lastly, the festival is crucial to the understanding of the ethnic place brand for the precinct, as it exemplifies not only the kind of image that the place branding efforts aim to achieve, but also what they want to efface. The Norton Street Festa, in fact, is the ultimate celebration of Leichhardt’s Italianness, but also the amplified statement that whatever is not Italian is not included in the conceptualisation of the precinct’s uniqueness. As a consequence, once the stalls
are pulled down and the Italian cars are driven away from the outdoor museum, the Street falls back into the liminal space of ‘flux’. This generates a sense of cultural loss, and it consolidates a narrative of decline on the ground that is articulated in particular by those business owners, who have continued to market their operations in the street as ‘Italian’ despite the precinct’s declining popularity and changing demographic.

6.5.1 Longstanding, ‘Authentic Italianness’ in Norton Street

Marco is the owner of the most longstanding Italian restaurant in Norton Street. He came to Australia as a baby and retained his Italian cultural heritage as he grew up in Sydney’s inner-west. Unlike many of his friends with an Italian background ‘who changed their names by Anglicising it’ Marco’s upbringing was defined by a very assertive belonging to a diasporic Italianness, which he explains with the expression ‘we were proud to be Italians’ (Interview with Marco, 31st July 2013). One of the defining factors of this pride is his family’s ability to speak Italian, and the strict way in which the cultural capital was handed down through the generations: ‘When my mother heard me speaking in English,’ he says, ‘she threw shoes at me’.

Marco’s Italianness was not only nourished by a bilingual upbringing, but also sustained by a physical connection with his parents’ homeland. At the age of sixteen, he ‘went back’ to Italy, where he attended high school and university while working at his uncle’s restaurant in central Italy. As he got back to Australia, ten years later, he started to work at his mother’s (Italian) restaurant in Five Dock; he then opened another restaurant in the city, where he worked for four years, before taking up a derelict business in Kings Cross, setting it back up and then leaving it. Having gathered a considerable amount of experience, and with sufficient funds, it was at this stage that Marco decided to open his own business in Norton Street. The location of this business was not casual, as he states that:

I grew up in these areas. Haberfield, Five Dock, Leichhardt. And I always wanted to come back here to run my business. The rest was only a temporary base (Interview with Marco, 31st July 2013).
The immediate success of his business, and his steady increase in popularity was due to several factors. First was the location of his Italian restaurant in ‘the epicentre of whatever is Italian,’ as he states. Secondly, the specialty of his business provided an important point of differentiation from the more common Italian food commodity traded in the area: Marco’s restaurant specialises in ‘traditional Roman pizza’ (usually thinner than the more common Neapolitan-style pizza, and cooked at a different temperature) and enjoyed a high level of popularity ‘with our Italians’. The restaurant’s success, however, was not deemed to last for much longer, as Marco identifies a phase of steady decline that affected Norton Street from the early 2000s.

In his analysis, the negative changes that happened in Norton Street are due to the decreasing quality of the commodities provided after a generational turnover in the shop ownership: ‘the businesses that were here,’ he says, ‘started to sell their properties and, quality-wise, the people that took over were half as good’. The structural changes affecting the circulation in the precinct are blamed by Marco – as by many others – as another factor: ‘parking meters came in, restaurants shut down one after the other and the majority of restaurants were rented rather than owned’. Most importantly, however, Marco identifies the changing ethnic composition of the business community as the main reason of Leichhardt’s decline:

Where once upon a time you would find Italian restaurants there are now Chinese, Greeks and Brazilians. It has become… it is no more the Italian street where one would find only Italian. Now you find everything. It has completely changed. It has changed because the good business owners have not come back. Nobody works. Only two or three restaurants in the whole Norton Street still work, including us. As a restaurant, we are the point of reference. (…) Ten years ago, if you looked out of this window you would see thousands of people walking back and forth. Today you do not see anyone (Interview with Marco, 31st July 2013).

Marco’s story opens up a space to explore Leichhardt as a precinct defined by a declining ‘Italian character’ especially visible in the changing makeup of Norton Street. His articulation of a life spent in between the Inner-Western suburbs of Leichhardt, Haberfield and Five Dock constructs a symbolic location for the diasporic culture in which he grew up. This produces in Marco the awareness of ‘being Italian’ that passes through the capacity to perform culture in terms of language, and also – unlike Tom – to specialise in a specific product such as a Roman-style pizza. These factors informed his decision to return to Leichhardt after having spent part
of his professional formation elsewhere in the city. This decision is due to his interpretation of the area as the epicentre of Italianness. The argument that he makes about the declining quality of the products provided in Norton Street draws not only upon the unexperienced nature of the new entrepreneurs who established their business in the street, but it extends to encompass anything that is not Italian as a marker of poor quality. Referring to the new businesses, he says:

Unfortunately they are not Italian. They have no Italians working in their restaurant. They do not have that Italianness that you look for. If you go and eat in those places you will notice the different products and quality. As if you went to the Chinese restaurant and you saw a Roman person in the kitchen, right? (Interview with Marco, 31st July 2013).

Three points are worth highlighting from these two passages: the first is Marco’s re-assertion of his authentic Italianness, not only predicated on his upbringing, but now also defined by a stoic permanence in the street amidst a context of change. The second is the consecration of Norton Street as a space where Italianness is the only legitimate cultural expression. Anything else is considered out of place, or even nonsensical. By the end of the interview, the non-Italianness of the businesses in Norton Street does not only equate to poor quality, but is used as a necessary explanation of why the area suffers from economic decline (‘the good [Italian] business owners have never come back = nobody works’). In Marco’s opinion, the Italian character of the street is something that transcends the commodity produced, to encompass its true raison d’être. His perspective exemplifies the perceived ownership of Leichhardt by the Italian business community.

Lastly, it is interesting to point out that Marco’s sense of custodianship and ownership of Leichhardt, to which he is automatically entitled by virtue of embodying Italianness, demonstrates a certain detachment from the contemporary dynamics that hold together the precinct’s business community. As a matter of fact, his analysis of the declining economic activity of Leichhardt does not include figures like Jiewei, who are also involved in the maintenance of the ethnic place brand, despite not embodying the same degree of conventional Italianness articulated by Marco. From this perspective, I argue that several versions of Italianness are in competition in the branded landscape of Leichhardt, which are not reconciled by the ethnic place brand. On the contrary, the brand management strategy accentuates these
contrasts, which crystallise in specific spaces and moments. In particular, the themed, artificial Italianness marketed in the Italian Forum seems to jar significantly with the more ‘organic’ type of Italianness rooted in the memory of community life exemplified by life histories of constructed custodianship. Furthermore, the success of temporary ad hoc carnivalesque celebrations of Italianness based on the ‘community spirit’ underlines the artificial nature of more permanent attempts to market the precinct as Italian on a regular basis.

6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that the ethnic place brand used for the Leichhardt precinct is the rigid product of a networked effort based on the representation of Italianness as a spatialised essence. I have diagnostically looked at three main material/symbolic spaces in Leichhardt to describe the production of the ethnic place brand: Norton Street, The Italian Forum and the Norton Street Festa. The first represents the romanticised notion of the ‘heart of the precinct’, which is revitalised by means of ad hoc initiatives that celebrate diasporic Italian culture; the second has ‘fixed’ these efforts permanently within the thematised space of a faux-Italian piazza; the third alternates the temporary and permanent efforts of ethnic branding by reproducing, once every year, the effect of an Italian carnival.

As we have been able to see, the distinctiveness of Leichhardt has been reworked using the traces of Italianness that the precinct displays, and that are the consequences of the past concentrated settlement of a diasporic community and its economic activity. However, continued relocation from the late 1970s and business diversification in more recent years have challenged the conceptualisation of Leichhardt as a distinctively Italian precinct, despite the introduction of key players in the street that have continued to market Norton Street’s Italianness through a series of cultural initiatives. In the interviews with policy makers and business chamber representatives, there was a shared emphasis on how the ethnic branding in Leichhardt as a process of urban development faces the challenge of cultural complexity, in a context where the increasing diverse urban scenario highlights the redundancy of ethnicity.
pig}eholed into strict categories. This ambiguity was articulated by two statements in particular made by two key stakeholders in the branding of the precinct:

Surely it would be easy to call it ‘Italian’ even if it does not reflect the reality of things. It is a lot more difficult to grapple with complexity. And I think, from a policy maker’s perspective, the reason why we are so stuck with the Italian thing, is because we know that people love it, people have an association with it and… quite frankly… how else would you call it? Like, if you do not call it Italian, what else do you make special out of Norton Street? There is a real need for thoughtfulness, which I think is missing from a lot of these discussions (Interview with former Leichhardt Mayor J.P, 22nd April 2013).

It is just too complex; and so deep… and so in a way undefinable, because there are so many layers to it, and yet we continue to ignore them all our planning (Interview with Leichhardt and Annandale business chamber representative A.M., 29th April 2013).

The majority of actors who are involved in the mobilisation of the ethnic place brand increasingly acknowledge that Leichhardt is a place undergoing significant transition. Yet, as I argue in this chapter, ‘change’ and ‘complexity’ are not embraced in the place branding process. I have suggested that the ethnic place brand for Leichhardt is based on a rigid and exclusionary understanding of ethnicity that effaces anything that does not represent Italianness. This change has been referred to as the ‘twist’ and conceptualised as the increasing cultural diversity of the precinct that is disavowed in the place branding effort. As a result, the efforts that lead to the mobilisation of Italianness in Leichhardt are mostly oriented towards an essent}ialised Italianness, a choice that is rooted in the necessity to highlight the point of differentiation of the precinct.

As the former Leichhardt Mayor stated:

A differentiation, yes. It is important that a community is identified. The City of Sydney calls it ‘the city of Villages’, and what is the differentiation point of Norton Street? It is its Italian heritage. (…) And the reason why this is important is because it provides a point of difference. If there were no Italian heritage, what would make Norton Street special? Nothing, It would be just another shopping strip. (…) The approach to bring Norton Street into a broader context is to appeal to people’s sense of ethnicity and what they believe Italianness means. That’s a very important question: what does Italian mean for non-Italians in Australia? It means pasta, so Italian food, and it means coffee. So this is what Italianness means (Interview with former Leichhardt Mayor J.P, 22nd April 2013).

Here, the Italian theme is almost described as a ‘necessity’. The fact that Leichhardt conforms to the precinct-centred model of urban economy means that something special and unique about the precinct has to be discovered, managed and maintained. Regardless of how ‘untrue’ the
adoption of the Italian theme for Leichhardt is, it is the only thing that prevents Norton Street from being ‘simply’ another shopping strip. The stereotyped, flat and highly essentialised understanding of Italianness reflected in the brand management strategy for Leichhardt is based on the effort to appeal to ‘people’s sense of ethnicity’. The clear-cut meaning of Italianness is conveyed by the most stereotyped practices and essentialised images that force the association between ethnicity and place. These images ‘absorb’ the heterogeneity inherent in the meaning of Italianness into specific forms that convey ethnicity as essence. We have been able to observe how notions of authenticity, sophisticated lifestyle, and diasporic connection with the spiritual homeland are the main images mobilised in Leichhardt that help to convey this association. Through these images, the centrality of the Italian experience of the Leichhardt precinct is constructed by inconsistently alternating Norton Street and the Italian Forum as the spatial centres of Italianness.

These representations do not always reveal the alignment between the stakeholders involved in the branding process. A shared version of Italianness as the theme for the precinct is certainly not reflected on the ground: here new, precarious assemblages are activated that rely on ad hoc mobilisations of Italianness. Alternatively, a shared sense of cultural loss or bewilderment is articulated by the actors that mobilise ethnicity in their day-to-day operations. The owner of an Italian restaurant in Norton Street, for example, comments on the place branding strategy that markets Leichhardt as Italian by saying:

I think that the Council wanted to improve Leichhardt (…) but something went wrong. It got lost, it got stuck and now it’s there in between, it’s not moving forward, nor backwards. It’s liminal. It’s not going anywhere (Interview with Nick, 30th March 2013).

The words of the owner of the restaurant, an Italian-born man who employs Italian working holiday makers as waiting staff, Italian-Australian and Korean immigrants as chefs, reflect the current situation that defines Norton Street and Leichhardt at large. The type of cultural complexity that characterises the precinct is framed in terms of an annoying background noise to the place branding strategy; it is considered an unresolved tension in the formulation of a consistent ethnic image.
Assembling the Ethnic Community

in Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt

7.1 Introduction

The production and application of ethnic place brands to the Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt precincts rely, to a significant extent, on the mobilisation of a recurrent paradigm: the ‘ethnic community’. In the previous chapters I have described how the ethnic community is evoked in the Chinatown Public Domain Plan, the aim of which is tracing links with the local Chinese population; the community also features in the mapping activities that are sponsored by the Haymarket Chamber of Commerce, where interactive apps for mobile devices market the distinctiveness of the precinct by following the footsteps of a diasporic Chineseness. In Leichhardt, the official documents that introduce the strategic nature of ‘Little Italy with a twist’ mobilise the concept of the Italian ownership based on the ethnic group that inhabited the area; similarly, the visit of the Italian footballer sparked an initiative promoted by the Leichhardt Council and the Business Chamber, which called on the Italian diaspora to gather around its idol.

All these instances are characterised by ‘the commonsensical equation of (…) clear-cut cultures and commonly shared categories of identity’ (Wimmer 2013: 204). Referring to the Chinese and Italian communities as ‘owners’ of the ethnicised precincts, or simply as collective categories that ‘naturally’ converge in them in specific occasions, works to strengthen the specificity of
Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt. Put differently, the ethnic community confers credibility to the place identities constructed for the ethnicised precincts. Here we can see an ‘essentialist discourse of culture’ (Baumann 1999: 94) at play, one that serves the ‘reification of culture, which is wanted by majority media, majority politicians and many minority leaders’ (ibid). Diaspora emerges as a powerful image in the characterisation of collective groups of shared identification; this, according to Ang, is due to its ‘imaginary orbit [that] is demarcated ultimately by the closure effected by the category of the diasporic identity itself’ (Ang 2003: 4). I am suggesting that the understanding of ethnic community mobilised as part of the brand management strategies for the two precincts refer to ‘groupist’ (Brubaker 2002), closely-knit collective notions of ethnic identity conceptualised as social units and, most importantly, mobilised as such.

In this chapter I draw on ethnographic material collected via the engagement with the Chinese Youth League of Australia (CYL) and the Federation of Italian Migrant Workers and their Families (FILEF) – two self-professed community-based organisations in Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt – to explore the tensions between the discursive mobilisation of the ‘ethnic community’ in the place branding discourse, and the lived experience of cultural relations. Inspired by the revived interpretation of the constructivist approach of ethnic boundary-making, I reject the idea of the community as a natural category that ‘travels down the road of history’ (Wimmer 2013: 26), and set out to explore how it ‘comes into being and how it later dissolves’ (ibid; Tampio 2009). In doing so, I ask not what the ethnic community is, but how does the ethnic community work ‘as a category of practice, a political idiom, [and as] a claim’ (Brubaker 2004: 116). In other words, in this chapter I want to make the ‘category of [community] the object of analysis, rather than use it as a tool of analysis’ (ibid).

To achieve this goal, I concentrate specifically on the modalities through which the ethnic community is assembled through a series of acts of strategic positioning. These modalities extend and give nuance to the idea of assemblage, and prevent this theoretical approach to be just ‘applied’ to the analysis of a social category. My analysis unfolds in two main parts: firstly, I
look at the strategies used by the Chinese and Italian organisations to ‘package ethnicity’: here I concentrate on implicit or explicit acts of agreement (*consensus*) and disagreement (*dissent*) over the representation of ethnicity; secondly, I focus on the extent to which the mobilisation of ethnic images is more or less included in the brand management strategies for the two precincts. In this case, analysing different extents of *alignment* and/or *divergence* help me to convey how the ethnic community is a paradigm that emerges in relation to the mobilisation to the ethnic place brand, not a category that exists a priori, or a repository of ‘ethnic culture’ separated from a national majority. My argument is that the ethnic community is an assembled component of the ethnic place brand and that it is highly dependent on both the internal workings of a series of actors and the links that they trace and sustain with a wide spectrum of human and non-human factors.

### 7.2 The Chinese Youth League of Australia

The Chinese Youth League of Australia Inc. is one of the most active community organisations in Chinatown/Haymarket. It was founded in 1939, when a group of Chinese patriots gathered in Sydney on the backdrop of the Sino-Japanese War with the aim of collecting funds to support the resistance to the Japanese invasion through theatre-related activities. In the following two decades, the Chinese Youth League (hereafter CYL) turned into a workers’ association, which provided all sorts of general support to the Chinese workers in Sydney. As the Chinese Communist Party consolidated its power in a political scenario dominated by the Cold War and the disastrous impact of the Cultural Revolution throughout the 1950s and 60s, the organisation was forced to set up a small cultural group to overcome the shortage of available information due to the diplomatic isolation forced upon China. However, following the increasing opening up of Sino-Australian political and economic relations, and after Australia made its diplomatic relations with China official in 1973, the CYL welcomed the head of the Chinese diplomatic mission and China’s first ambassador to Australia; as a result, the organisation progressively consolidated its role as a bridge between the two countries. Its cultural activities soon flourished.
and a synergy grew between the CYL and the City of Sydney. In 1986, the Wran State Government donated to the organisation the building in Chinatown where, since then, the CYL has operated permanently, at 1 Dixon Street.

By the beginning of the 1990s, the CYL had developed into an active and influential organisation; what started as a group reacting to a turbulent foreign political scenario in the first half of the century, had by this time transformed into a locally rooted organisation seeking partnership with the institutions of modern multicultural Australia. Throughout the years, the CYL’s focus has increasingly shifted to a more ‘performative’ nature; in 1988 the members of its Chinese Cultural Dance group were invited to participate in the celebrations for the Australian Bicentenary by staging a piece titled ‘Dragon Down Under’ at the Sydney Opera House, while the Lion and Dragon Dance group was recruited for participation in the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in 2000.

Today, the CYL positions itself as a cultural organisation whose main aim is to ‘embrace all-round cultural, sports, social and welfare activities connected to the promotion of Chinese culture’ (www.cyl.org.au). The scope of the association is achieved by means of two main factors: the first is the maintenance of the ties between the organisation’s leaders and the Haymarket-based clan society, owner of the Sze-Yup clan house in Dixon Street. This connection is due to the fact that the clan-house members and many of the exponents of the CYL share the same provenance from the city of Zhongshan, in the southern Chinese region of Guangdong. The second way in which the CYL has become a vehicle for the propagation of Chinese culture in Sydney is through the participation in cultural events aimed at ‘mobilising Chineseness’ in the context Chinatown. This becomes clear when we observe the way in which the organisation has strengthened its role as one of the main actors involved in the Chinese New Year celebrations in Sydney.

58 A golden plaque hangs in the main hall of the CYL that reads the name of the most outstanding figures associated to the Zhongshan society.
7.2.1 Getting Ready for the Year of the Horse

Many workshops that are usually organised for the members of the CYL (such as Cantonese Opera, table tennis and Chinese cultural dance) become part of the wider offer of cultural activities during the Chinese New Year celebrations. This demonstrates an alignment between the cultural events organised by the local community organisation and the instance of brand intensification for Chinatown/Haymarket that I have described in chapter 5. The amount of work for the CYL increases significantly during this time of the year, forcing the organisation to employ extra staff. This was the case in 2014, when a young Mainland Chinese woman was recruited full-time for the entire duration of the festival. The main focus of the organisation during the Chinese New Year is the preparation of the Twilight Parade, in which the CYL partakes by ‘staging’ a performance as part of the quirky carnivalesque carousel. The performance organised by the CYL in 2014 was based on Journey to the West, a Chinese novel written by Wu Cheng’en and published in the 16th century.

Figure 29. Cantonese Opera Workshop at the Chinese Youth League. Photograph by the author.
The novel narrates the adventures of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang, who lived during the Tang Dynasty (618-907) and travelled to the ‘western regions’ of the empire to obtain the sacred texts and returned to the capital Luoyang as a hero. The work contains references to a multiplicity of Chinese cultural expressions: firstly, by taking place during the Tang Dynasty, the book represents a period of Chinese history when the empire stretched geographically from the Tarim Basin in central Asia to the Korean Peninsula, and from Mongolia south into what is currently Vietnam. The novel is also a reference to trade routes such as the Silk Road, which were consolidated during this period of Chinese history and that were the vehicle for cultural and religious exchanges. During my ethnographic engagement at the CYL I asked many of the exponents of the organisation whether part of the reason for the selection of this piece of literature as the basis for the staged performance during the Chinese New Year Festival was a desire to stress the heterogeneity of Chineseness inherent in the novel that is also currently reflected in the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct at large (specifically in the northern part of Dixon Street, where the headquarters of the organisation are located). One of the elders, a woman with a Cantonese background that I will call Amy, replied:

It doesn’t matter. These are all things related to Chinese culture. They are very Chinese things anyway (Fieldwork diary, 2nd February 2014).

Here I was introduced to the most recurrently used strategy by the CYL, namely the mobilisation of traditional/imperial/mythical Chineseness in their activities to achieve a widely accepted, unanimous version of ethnic identity to display. I argue that the imagery of an essentialised ancient Chinese culture is the result of a first ‘consensus’ among the organisation members to package heterogeneous elements of Chinese culture into a consistent set of performances, images, symbols and activities. *Journey to the West* is the vehicle through which the CYL exhibits ethnicity. It does so by suggesting that, despite the diversity of cultural expressions that coexist within the catch all term ‘Chinese culture’, the imagery of ancient and traditional China is a common denominator that brings together all those things that ‘are Chinese anyway’; it flattens them out and packages them into an understandable common Chineseness.
This imagery was evoked during many of the brief interactions that I had with the organisation’s members. During one conversation with another elder of the CYL, the woman told me that she was born in Jiangsu province and grew up closer to the bordering Zhejiang; as she mentioned this detail she immediately quoted from the Song Dynasty poet Fan Chengda and, like Amy, she drew from figures of ancient China to reinforce the type of Chineseness displayed at the CYL, in this case by quoting a line from a poem related to the beauty of her hometown:

_Shang yu tiantang, xia yu suhang _[up above there is heaven, down on earth there are Suzhou and Hangzhou] (Fieldwork diary, 5th February 2014).

The printed and online material circulated by the CYL provides a number of other examples that enable us to understand how a monolithic Chineseness is used by the organisation as a way to mobilise a generic version of ethnic identity. Firstly, the advertisement of the cultural offerings at the CYL highlights a tendency toward mobilising the temporal dimension of culture, where the organisation’s role becomes that of preserving a generic ancient Chineseness. The Martial Art classes, for example, are introduced as the teaching of a set of disciplines, which ‘may be traced back to 4000 years ago, and used in military training in ancient China’ (www.cyl.org.au). The description of the cultural disciplines taught by the organisation also dwells on the practice of spatializing the source of Chinese culture. It is highlighted, for example, how some of the Wushu group members have attended cultural training camps in China, where different diasporic organisations from around the world ‘send their representatives to learn Shaolin traditional Wushu, to attend talks on Zen and to visit various cultural spots in southern China.’ The mention of such details serves to highlight that the CYL is a recipient of a tradition imported directly from the epicentre of Chineseness, which legitimises the transmission of Chinese culture through the organisation’s channels.

The use of myths and images connected to ancient China to mobilise a consistent Chineseness is also apparent in reports of some of the activities of the organisation. In the booklet edited for the 75th anniversary of the CYL, for instance, the trip to Xinjiang organised in 2013 by 25 members of the Social Welfare group was reviewed as ‘an exciting and magnificent journey through the Silk Route, the most well-known trading route of ancient Chinese civilisation’
The highlight of the journey, according to the publication, was the experience at Tianshan Tianchi, ‘the fairyland where it is said the Queen of Heaven takes baths in ancient Chinese myths’ (ibid). The politically charged dimension of the place where the visit took place in this case is completely brushed aside to package a coherent version of a flattened, dehistoricised and depoliticised Chineseness. As a matter of fact, Xinjiang, or ‘eastern Turkestan’[^59] is an autonomous region in the northwest of China and it is home to a majoritarian Uyghur population. In recent years, Xinjiang has been a focal point of ethnic and religious tensions that have challenged the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party as the legitimate governing body of the region. Significantly, it is the mythical/ancient aspect of Chinese culture – within which the organisation constantly attempts to position itself – that events such as this highlight. This choice connects once again with the recurrent strategy adopted by the CYL to mobilise an imagery connected to ethnicity, where notions of tradition and ancient culture overshadow any (cultural/linguistic/political) heterogeneity in order to advance the organisation’s aim of transmitting Chineseness.

Lastly, intergenerational transmission of essentialised Chinese culture is used as a device to trace connections between Chinese and Australian cultures through initiatives nested under the agenda titled ‘never forget our Chinese heritage’ (www.cyl.org.au) in the publications that advertise the cultural programs offered by the organisation. A longstanding project called ‘back to the roots’, for example, has been organised for years; as part of the program, the children of CYL members are sent to China to tour major attractions and ‘learn about [their] Chinese culture’. Shortly before the beginning of my fieldwork, the webpage of the CYL was redeveloped and the program was renamed ‘Youth Cultural China Tour’; the description of the tour as ‘an unforgettable way for youth to immerse into Chinese culture and history,’ however, was not changed.

The complex linguistic landscape of the Chinese-Australian diasporic membership of the CYL is another relevant factor to take into consideration to describe the way in which a consensus over

[^59]: A term preferred by the local population, as I understood from a conversation with the business owner of the Uyghur restaurant located a few doors next to the CYL’s headquarters in ‘young Chinatown’.
a shared version of Chineseness is achieved via the strategic use of language. I started to take note of this issue while observing the daily interactions of the organisation’s members, where Mandarin, Cantonese and English were interchangeably used. At the CYL’s headquarters, English is the language mostly used with what Gans (1962) called the ‘outside world’. This is the case, for example, when the intern – a young Chinese woman with an Australian university degree – picks up the phone in the office. English is also used when logistical and bureaucratic issues are discussed, in which case the oldest members, or those who have recently arrived in Australia and lack English proficiency, are largely excluded from the conversation and need a simultaneous translation service from the Cantonese-speaking staff. The Cantonese Opera and Chinese Cultural Dance teachers, for instance, are two middle-aged women who, despite having lived in Australia for many years, do not speak English. However, as the first is Cantonese and the second is Northern Chinese, they also lack of a common Chinese language.

Furthermore, as the majority of the elders of the organisation are southern Chinese, Cantonese is usually the main language used in conversations, which means that the few members from other mainland Chinese regions are generally not part of the conversation when Cantonese is the language spoken; here, the role of the intern becomes again the point of connection between different Chinese linguistic spheres by virtue of her being able to switch confidently from Cantonese to Mandarin. Lastly, when Chineseness needs to be presented to outsiders (such as to the researcher) or in ceremonial occasions within a wider context (as will become clearer in the next section), Mandarin becomes the main language used by the representatives of the CYL. I observed this issue for the first time when I was introduced to the president of the organisation, a Chinese-Malaysian woman who grew up in a Hakka speaking environment and migrated to Australia in her late twenties. As Amy introduced us, she turned to the president and said:

60 In his work he uses this term with reference to the body of bureaucracy belonging to the American ‘mainstream society’ against which the ‘otherness’ of the inhabitants of the ethnic neighbourhood clashes while dealing with matters such as health, housing and education.
61 She was raised in Shenzhen, a city in Guangdong province with a majoritarian bilingual Cantonese-Mandarin population given that the city has developed in the last three decades thanks to a massive influx of internal migration. Despite the official language of the region where the city is located is Cantonese, the majority of the population born and grown in Shenzhen has received a Mandarin education.
He is a student doing research on Chinatown, ta hui shuo zhongwen [he can speak Mandarin].

Here it can be observed how Mandarin is chosen as a diplomatic code, which is functional to the wrapping of internal differences within the Chinese cultural sphere into an official language to propose to the outsider’s scrutiny. My point here is that the use of Mandarin on behalf of some of the community members needs to be considered another part of their (implicit) agreement upon a shared sense of Chineseness mobilised by the CYL. The president’s expected capacity to speak Mandarin, in fact, highlights how the display of Chinese culture by the organisation passes through the flattening of a series of internal cultural differences that are strategically folded into a uniform expression of Chinese identity.

However, the ways in which this consensus among the CYL members is achieved in the everyday operations of the cultural organisation (by means of a strategic use of language) and in the organisation of cultural initiatives (through the discursive emphasis placed on a monolithic ancient/mythical Chineseness), constitutes only part of the process of ethnic display that defines the process of assembling the ‘ethnic community’ that I want to describe in this chapter. As I will demonstrate in the next section, the packaging of consensual ethnicity also depends on the ways in which ‘culture’ and ‘community’ are made to overlap in wider discourses that involve the participation of external human and non-human actors and that intersect with the application of the ethnic place brand to the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct.

### 7.2.2 Celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the CYL

A few months after the 2014 Chinese New Year Festival a dinner party took place at a Yum Cha restaurant in Chinatown to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the CYL. The event became an interesting occasion to observe a wide, complex network of stakeholders in action, who partake in the assemblage of the ethnic community. ‘We would like to invite you to join us in celebrating our 75th anniversary,’ read the homepage of the organisation:
Since its inception on 1st July 1939, the Chinese Youth League has tirelessly worked to promote friendship between Australia and China. (...) Our objectives are to promote Chinese cultural activities, foster friendship and goodwill between Australia and China, undertake welfare and charitable work and participate in community activities to promote multiculturalism (www.cyl.org.au; accessed 30th June 2014).

Although the event took place after the end of the Chinese New Year and months before the Moon Festival – the only two events celebrated by the local Chinese community organisations and that involve the use of decorations – on the night of the event figures dressed up in the same costumes used during lion dance performances greeted the participants at the venue’s main door in a ‘traditional way’. Past the entrance, red lanterns and paper figurines of the zodiac that hung from wires above the tables were used to decorate the restaurant, the whole of which was hired to host the dinner. A rectangular table was set up beneath a stage formed by an elevated platform in the centre of the room. Here sat a Councillor from the City of Sydney, the President of the CYL, some members of the honorary board and a few other politicians. By looking at the spatial layout of the venue and the symbols displayed at the entrance, in other words, it became clear how the focus on performativity and display would become paramount during the event.

Each attendee found a souvenir booklet sitting on top of their chopstick set; the booklet was wrapped in a paper bag, which also contained a ‘red envelop’ – a monetary gift which is given in most Asian countries that celebrate the Lunar New Year – and a pamphlet of St. George Bank, the major sponsor of the booklet. The first section was dedicated to well wishes to the community organisation, including a greeting by the Lord Mayor of Sydney, which read:

The Chinese Youth League has done important work fostering friendship between the Chinese and Australian communities. The League has enriched our society (...) and deepened their understanding of their own culture by touring China. (...) On behalf of the City of Sydney I thank Chinese Youth League for its significant contribution to our society. As Australia becomes home to a growing Chinese community, and our relationship with China deepens, your organisation will continue to play an important role.

As the rest of the guests arrived, the event finally started. After the first course was served, a man and a young woman walked onto the stage, greeted those present in English (the man) and

62 I had previously noticed the Councillor representing the City of Sydney during other ‘multicultural events’ – such as the Harmony Festival – that involved the participation of the ‘Chinese community’.
Mandarin (the woman), and gave a brief introduction of the CYL’s achievements throughout its history. They then handed the stage over to the Consul General of the People’s Republic of China, who was followed by a member of the House of the Representatives for the Liberal Party. The first praised the CYL for its contributions to the ‘enrichment of multiculturalism’, and highlighted how the organisation was crucial in fighting discrimination. His speech, delivered in Mandarin, focussed on the importance of the promotion of Sino-Australian relationships and the mutually beneficial economic collaborations between China and Australia, with a special mention of the Twilight Parade as an example of a cultural event that fosters such collaborations. The second speaker celebrated the CYL’s success past and present in promoting cross-cultural relationships and in fostering friendship between Australia and China. ‘I thank the Chinese Youth League of Australia,’ he concluded, ‘as it is organisations such as this that continue Australia’s status as a multicultural nation’ (Fieldwork diary, 4th July 2014).

By looking at the first speeches delivered during the event, it is possible to notice how the anniversary of the CYL became a symbolic moment where notions of Chinese culture were constantly evoked, then made to overlap with the idea of the community and included in the wider discourse of multiculturalism. The congratulations on behalf of Australian politicians to the ‘Chinese community organisation’ exemplifies Baumann’s argument that ‘the discourse about ethnic minorities as communities defined by a reified culture bears all the hallmarks of dominance: it is conceptually simple, enjoys a communicative monopoly, offers enormous flexibility of application, encompasses great ideological plasticity, and is serviceable for established institutional purposes (1996: 30). Here it is also important to bear in mind the relevance of Australian multiculturalism as the context in which the idea of the Chinese ethnic community is made to fit. Ang’s argument that multiculturalism is a system that is ‘limited by its implied boundedness’ (2005: 16) is relevant for this purpose; Ang argues that, unlike its proposed transgression of cultural homogeneity in favour of the idea of cultural diversity, multiculturalism is predicated upon the maintenance of ‘the boundaries between the diverse cultures [it] encompasses, on the one hand, and the overall boundary circumscribing the nation-state as a whole, on the other’ (ibid).
The separation of distinct cultures as a core principle of multiculturalism is a discursive and performative practice that was articulated from different standpoints during the celebration of the CYL’s anniversary. The ‘power of definition’ (Anderson 1991: 10) over the description of the ethnic community was spread across a series of actors: on the one hand, the praises made by politicians worked to reconstruct the existence of distinct ethnic communities defined by shared cultural traits, that operate within multiculturalism by ‘enriching’ and ‘contributing’ to Australian society (Hage 1998). The Lord Mayor’s mention of the contribution of the ‘Chinese community’ to ‘our society’ [meaning Australian society], in particular, can be seen as an internalisation of what Hage understands as white multicultural tolerance, ‘a strategy aimed at reproducing and disguising the relationships of power in society, or being reproduced through that disguise’ (Hage 1998: 86). The congratulatory discourses staged by the Australian politicians worked simultaneously to strengthen the difference of the ethnic community and to inscribe it within what Back and Sinha (2012) call ‘hierarchy of belonging’. This is understood as a specific type of ‘regulation, scrutiny and surveillance of migrant communities’ (ibid: 139), which is premised in this case on the drawing of lines of essentialist difference around the ideas of an (Australian) national, dominant community, and the (Chinese) ethnic one.

The performative dimension of Chineseness that was enacted from within the cultural organisation, however, also enabled the visibility of the community. The speeches by the two political figures were followed by a lion dance performance (including a live drum show around the tables) and a martial arts demonstration by one of the CYL’s youth clubs. After the demonstration, the president of the CYL was welcomed on the stage by a round of applause. As the silence was restored she praised the achievements of the CYL by saying that ‘at present, the organisation counts some thousands of members’; she then expressed her thankfulness for living in such a wonderfully multicultural community, stressing that Chinese culture has become a big part of Australian multiculturalism. At this point, she paused and sarcastically added that she would continue in Chinese ‘so not to upset some of the people in the room’. The long remainder of the speech, which she read out loud from a paper, was based on the foreword

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(that she authored) of the celebratory booklet that each attendee was provided with. Here the Chinese text was also accompanied by an English translation, which read:

I am pleased that the wider society has been supportive of our organisation. (…) I am confident that through the continued interdependence and unity between organisations together, we will serve the promotion and inheritance of Chinese culture within the wider community and for the generations that follow.

This passage shed light on a number of relevant issues. It enables us to note, for example, how the reconstruction of the Chinese community defined by reified culture is not only mobilised by figures that are external to the cultural organisation, but is also appropriated and constantly sought after as a raison d’être by the organisation’s members themselves. Chineseness as an essential, static and monolithic cultural attribute, in other words, is self-imposed. The president’s way of framing the activities of the CYL contributes here to the reconstruction of the idea of Australian society (the ‘wider community’) – a context within which the Chinese community operates but not fully belongs to – and Chinese culture – an ‘essence’ that needs to be promoted and ‘handed down’ from generation to generation. The speeches by the politicians, the dance performances, the foreword to an edited booklet, therefore, all represent different elements that, when mobilised together during symbolic events, contribute to assembling ‘the Chinese community’.

Finally, by referring to the ‘interdependence and unity between organisations,’ the president pushed forward the idea that the type of Chineseness promoted and displayed by the CYL depends on the collaboration among ‘a series of communities,’ which come together under an agreed notion of Chineseness; this issue can be noted by describing the symbolic placement of the guests during the dinner. The network of associations that collaborate with the CYL were distributed across thirty ‘satellite tables’ set up around the main one (which can be interpreted as the ‘core’ of the friendship between the Chinese and the wider Australian communities). One of my tablemates, the secretary of a Chinese community organisation based in Sydney’s western suburbs, pointed out each of the tables around the room and explained to me who the people sitting at those tables were, and what their connections with the CYL were. My table, for
example, was largely occupied by members of the Chinese Australian Service Society (CASS),
whose president had recently become a Committee Member of the CYL.63

The next table was the one of the Chinese Masonic Society, an organisation which has been
connected to CYL from its early stages, as it was at its premises (still located in Surry Hills) that
the theatrical performances of the CYL – at the time called Chinese Youth Dramatic
Association – were staged when the organisation lacked a permanent space at the beginning of
the 20th century.64 Lastly, members of the Zhongshan community were sitting a few tables away
from us. Their presence at the event was highly symbolic: one of the longstanding members of
the clan society was sitting at the main table by virtue of having been the first president of the
CYL and was now honorary member of the CYL Committee.65 At the end of the dinner, I was
introduced to some of the elders of the Zhongshan community by my tablemate, who politely
greeted them and introduced himself and myself in Mandarin. He was interrupted after the first
two lines by one of the men, who said:

‘Sorry mate, I don’t understand. Speak in English.’

The 75th anniversary of the CYL represents a symbolic event that highlights the process of
assembling the Chinese community. This is framed within the rhetoric of Australian
multiculturalism as a system defined by distinct cultures that form collaborative communities in
the wider society. As we have been able to see, the ethnic community paradigm was mobilised
by a series of actors both external and internal to the community organisation. Crucial to the
aim of this chapter is the fact that the event was deployed as a stage where a ‘consensus’ was
achieved on the outward presentation of Chineseness. This consensus was translated into the
performance of traditional and exotic dances that invigorates a Chinese atmosphere, and also via
the use of a strategic linguistic code that packages the heterogeneity of Chineseness within the

63 Through the channels of the Chinese Australian Service Society, the CYL also collaborates with the Australian
Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (ACPPRC) at initiatives such as ‘Eyes on China’, which
sends volunteer medical teams to rural areas of China to provide free cataract surgery.

64 In an interview with the ‘Grand Master’ of the Chinese Masonic Society, which took place a few weeks after the
75th anniversary of the CYL, I was told that the members of the Chinese Youth League affectionately refer to those
of the Chinese Masonic Society as dage (big brothers).

65 His figure is linked to one of the association’s most memorable moments when, in October 1949, its members
proudly raised the five stars red flag of the newly born People’s Republic of China over Sydney’s Chinatown.
CYL’s membership for the purpose of display. The adoption of Mandarin, in this context, is fundamental as it interestingly sanctions an authoritative, consistent Chineseness, even though it excludes fundamental segments within the Chinese community itself. As a matter of fact, more than half of the speeches were delivered in Mandarin, a language which is not understood by the old Cantonese participants at the dinner, as it was proved by the reaction of the elders of the Zhongshan community to the attempt of introduction on behalf of my tablemate.

However, as I have discussed so far, this disjunction is deemed as secondary, since the internal differences and the complexities that define Chinese culture are tacitly brushed aside by the workings of the CYL. The outcome of this process, which I have described by looking at both the micro-narratives of cultural negotiation at the community organisation’s headquarters and the discursive and performative practices at a celebratory event, become central to the way in which the ‘Chinese community’ becomes part of the brand management strategy for the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct. In the next section I will focus on this point by expanding the frame of my observation to include a wider range of stakeholders included in the process of assembling of the ethnic community.

7.2.3 Market City and the Branding of Chineseness: Putting on the ‘Asian Twist’

During my fieldwork in Chinatown/Haymarket, it became increasingly evident to me that the shopping centre Market City was particularly active in the marketing of ethnicity in the precinct. The company not only promotes itself as the ‘Chinatown shopping centre’ on social networks; it also works in close association with Chinese community organisations such as the CYL. The Yum Cha restaurant where the 75th anniversary of the community organisation took place, for example, is located in the shopping centre. Moreover, the name of the company often appears in the list of sponsors that support the publication of annual booklets and newsletters of the CYL in return for a free page of advertising. This, for instance, was the case with the publication of a booklet titled ‘70th anniversary of the Chinese Youth League’ that I was able to consult in my early engagement with the community organisation. Here Market City was mentioned as one
of the main funding bodies together with the Australian Hokkien Huaykuan, the company China Book, the China Travel Service Australia, the Chinese Australian Service Society, Elderly Australian Chinese Homes Inc., Healthpac Medical Centre and the Teochew Association.

The activities organised during the Chinese New Year festivities also suggest the relevance of the shopping centre in Chinatown/Haymarket. In 2014, for example, the carousel of the Twilight Parade ended its choreographic itinerary right outside the side entrance of Market City, a few meters away from the ‘Chinese’ archway at the southern end of Dixon Street. Furthermore, the company decided to print promotional banners on the side of the light rail carriages that travel from central station and across the southern end of Chinatown/Haymarket; these read the name of the shopping centre and the simple tagline ‘Chinatown’ underneath. During the Chinese New Year Twilight Parade, the sight of the carriages running alongside the props of the Twilight Parade carousel and stopping underneath the shopping mall’s awning ‘where the East meets the West’, clearly proved that Market City is an active stakeholder in the process of branding the precinct.

Figure 30. The end line of the 2014 Twilight Parade in Harbour Street, Haymarket. Photograph by the author.
Here it is important to stress a fundamental difference with the Italian Forum in Leichhardt. The two spaces of consumption undertake completely different roles in the production of the ethnic place brand for the precincts. Unlike the Italian Forum, Market City is not just the spatial background and container for essentialised symbols and practices of consumption, which I have described in chapter 6 with the case of ‘The Italian World’. Its role in the branding of the precinct includes a more complex network of activities outside of the shopping mall (as for example the mobile marketing strategy that activates the association of the shopping centre with ‘Chinatown’). Furthermore, as I will show in this section, the role of the shopping centre stretches as far as to include the mobilisation of ‘multi-Asianness’ in a number of marketing activities as well as a sort of appropriation of the ‘Chinese community’ paradigm.

The shopping centre is a landmark in itself and a magnet for shopping and tourism in the Chinatown precinct. Although Market City and Paddy’s Market, Sydney’s biggest downtown market complex, share the same building, they are two separate commercial entities. Paddy’s Markets includes a big array of fruit and vegetable stalls, a flea market and cheap gift shops in the basement of the structure; Market City, on the other hand, develops on three levels that can
be accessed via escalators from the main entrance at the intersection of Thomas and Hay Streets, and a side entrance facing the Sydney Entertainment Centre. Promotional materials printed by the marketing directory of the shopping centre indicate that ‘the centre is infused with the flavours of Asia’ and that ‘Market City is located right in the heart of Chinatown’. The way in which Market City advertises its operations positions the shopping centre in a context defined, to a significant extent, by cultural difference as a ‘resource’.

The intersections between the commercial activities of Market City and the application of the ethnic place brand for Chinatown are also significant. They are determined by two main factors: the first is the location of the shopping centre in an area of significant urban development that is recognised in the Chinatown Public Domain Plan as ‘Chinatown South’ (see chapter 5). The second is the way in which the shopping centre has included a specific management of ‘multi-Asianness’ in its marketing operations. This issue in particular becomes evident by looking at the marketing campaign adopted by the company in 2013, when a young Irish man was employed as the new marketing director in charge of developing Market City’s brand awareness. In his words, the strategy used by the shopping centre to create a stronger identity has been to brand itself as the ‘Chinatown shopping centre’. This status has initially been achieved by using a visual identity conveyed through the adoption of images strongly recalling ethnicity, as the marketing director explains:

We progressed from ‘shopping with a market feel’, where we were playing on the continuation of Paddy’s Markets downstairs, to produce a series of illustrations; we wanted to change our main branding. We came up with the idea of calligraphy, which is obviously an Asian, mostly Chinese [practice], but is used in Asian cultures. This is the way in which we put the brand out there. Everything we do, we like to have an Asian twist on it (Interview with Market City marketing director J.W., 23rd July 2014).

The development of a visual identity has been considered the first step to develop a distinct character for the shopping mall, with the main aim of detaching itself from Paddy’s Market downstairs. This was done by appropriating a notion of ethnicity connected to the precinct in which the shopping mall is located; an act of grounding itself in the ethnic place brand and

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66 At the time of writing, a further beautification of the Chinatown streetscape has included part of Market City in a project called ‘Thomas Street Plan’. This has extended the pedestrian-friendly area in the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct from the Chinatown South archway to Thomas Street in the southern part of the precinct.
realised by a series of marketing initiatives heavily influenced by what seems to be an ambiguous Chineseness/Asianness. The concept of the ‘Asian twist’ in this context represents the aesthetic adoption of a visual language based on Chinatown/Haymarket’s ethnic place brand: an unspecified multi-Asianness, which is nevertheless rooted in an exotic Chineseness. This stylistic choice gives to the marketing operations of the shopping centre an Asian slant based on Orientalist coherence and aided by the ‘contextual’ and ‘symbolic’ location of Market City in proximity to the heart of Chinatown.

The concrete application of the ‘Asian twist’ – in the interview used alternatively with the expressions ‘feel’ and ‘a little bit of an effect that is based on Asian culture’ – is visible in the way in which the company customised and copyrighted a font that was applied to its marketing materials. According to my respondent, the adoption of a ‘quirky’ style as opposed to ‘conventional photography’ was a second step made to realise the shift in the marketing campaign. In this context, the use of calligraphy as a way to give the ambiance of the shopping centre a Chinese (or, as it is loosely explained in the interview, ‘obviously Asian’) ‘feel’ is illustrative. The folded pamphlet that can be consulted at every information point inside the shopping mall, for example, features a shopping cart realised with a graphic technique that recalls the tool with which the calligraphy discipline is ‘traditionally performed’ (the brush) and, visually, vaguely resembles an actual Chinese character (see figure 32). Furthermore, in the room normally used by the marketing team for their meetings, a big drape hangs on the main wall depicting a Bodhisattva with a thousand arms sitting on a lotus flower; each arm holding a commodity – a cupcake, a cup of coffee, a piece of fruit, a pair of sneakers (Fieldwork diary, 23rd July 2014).

The adoption of a visual identity influenced by notions of ethnicity as a way to ‘put the brand out there’ is only part of the strategy adopted by the marketing team of the shopping centre. The interpretation of the concept of ‘community’ in the marketing operation of the shopping centre is also worth noticing.
As the interview with the marketing director of Market City reveals, this concept has been implemented in the operations of the shopping centre in two main ways: the first has been positioning the company in the context of the ethnically marketed precinct, the second has been the appropriation of the ‘Chinese community’ as part of the operations of the company itself.
The marketing team has recognised that, to make its commercial activities more successful, the shopping centre should become an extension of Chinatown itself or, to put it in the marketing director’s words, ‘be part of the community’:

There are two big times in the year: one is coming up in September, the Moon Festival, which is a big Chinese event. All of the Asian cultures celebrate it; the other is Chinese New Year (…), which is such an exciting time in the area and it’s just a huge celebration. So, during those celebrations, the shopping centre is decorated; lanterns are big part of the celebration and… as I said, we are part of the community so… people are going to have lanterns in their homes. Since this is our home, we put up lanterns, we decorate (Interview with Market City marketing director J.W., 23rd July 2014).

The celebration of traditional festivities is one of the ways in which the company attempts to market itself as a member of the Chinatown community. This becomes an opportunity in which the shopping centre’s marketing initiatives increasingly make use of, and simultaneously strengthen the precinct’s ethnic brand. ‘Decorating’ is, in the marketing director’s words, one of the actions that achieve the status of community membership. During the Chinese New Year and the Moon Festival, for example, the main hall of Market City usually features installations, which make use of iconic objects and colours – such as the red and golden lanterns – to create a suggestive atmosphere (see figure 32). Moreover, in recent years the intersection of the shopping mall’s decorations and the marketing strategies adopted to promote the company’s operations has been defined by the introduction of inventive, interactive technologies. In 2014, for example, a mobile app could be downloaded and used in the spaces of the shopping mall. The app consisted of the image of a horse – the ‘hero’ of that specific year – printed on the advertising boards scattered throughout the various levels of the structure. If scanned with a mobile device, the figure would ‘come alive’ on the user’s screen and ‘run around’ the mall. As the marketing director pronounces:

We always want to introduce something new. We want to try to bring some new technology, set different things up, and that’s another part of the celebration that we have. So keeping the traditions there (…), but also see what else we can do to… just evolve it (Interview with Market City marketing director J.W., 23rd July 2014).

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67 The application makes use of an optical illusion called ‘augmented reality’. According to my respondent, many companies increasingly use this effect for marketing purposes.
Celebrating and decorating are strategies used with the aim of positioning Market City in line with the culture of the precinct, in an attempt to stretch the commercial activity to encompass the fabrication of an identity for the shopping mall that reflects Chinatown/Haymarket’s ethnic place brand. The act of becoming part of the community, however, happens at different levels. The maintenance of ‘tradition’ is, according to the marketing director, another way to achieve the same goal. It is precisely in the notion of tradition that the nature of the shopping centre’s collaboration with community organisations such as CYL is rooted. By looking at this collaboration, it is possible to understand how the shopping centre becomes a fundamental actor in the assembling the ‘Chinese community’.

The ties between the CYL and Market City are evident simply by looking at the shopping centre’s main meeting room, where a framed jersey of the community organisation hangs on the wall (the jumper could be bought with a top up to the ticket for the 75th anniversary dinner). The jumper is signed by the CYL’s president, and a metal plaque underneath it reads words of gratitude on behalf of the organisation’s members towards the generosity for the support showed by Market City. Commenting on this collaboration, the marketing director of the shopping centre states:

We have been sponsoring them for a number of years. They are going to be here in September together with another group [another Chinese community organisation]. The two of them are collaborating with us this year for the Moon Festival. They will be sharing the responsibility to organise the dance and the entertainment for our centre. We don’t want to find someone else from other parts of Sydney; we want entertainment to be from locals. It’s more genuine, more authentic (Interview with Market City marketing director J.W., 23rd July 2014).

The ‘community’ features in the activities of the ‘Chinatown shopping centre’ as part of the entertainment organised by the marketing team and that is offered to customers with the scope of granting the commercial spaces of Market City the status of legitimate local cultural actor. The spectacularised practices related to ‘Chinese culture’ are organised in conjunction with highly symbolical moments for the precinct. During the Moon Festival in October, for example, Market City hosts the Lion Fest, an annual showcase of dance performances and various martial arts. The CYL is invited for the occasion to perform in the shopping centre’s main hall. The
dance performances attract a large number of spectators and reproduce an indoor version of the
type of exotic Chineseness that reinforces the symbolic epicentre of the New Year Festival
underneath the Chinatown archway in the southern end of Dixon Street (see 5.4).

Crucial to the aim of this section is the argument that Market City provides another stage to
display a consensus over the meaning of Chineseness as a branded cultural identity and that,
most importantly, it is an instance of alignment between the assembled Chinese community and
the aims of the brand management strategy for the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct. The reach
of the CYL in this context is extended as a local, self-professed Chinese community organisation
that performs a ‘traditional dance’ in a commercial space that positions itself as ‘Chinatown
shopping mall’ and that consent with this version of Chinese culture. On the one hand, this
consensus enables the Chinese community organisation to find between ‘tradition and
innovation’ enough room to mobilise the type of ‘invented tradition’ (Ranger and Hobsbawm
1983) that is constantly reworked and achieved in its backstage operations. On the other hand,
the shopping centre consolidates its position as an authentic stakeholder in the mobilisation of
the ethnic place brand for Chinatown/Haymarket. It is the convergence of all these actors, the
non-human instruments that they utilise during symbolic moments and the level of consensus
they stage in different situations that assembles the ‘Chinese community’.

What I have implicitly argued in this first part of the chapter, is that the consent over the
meaning of Chineseness that assembles the Chinese community becomes an integral part of the
ethnic place brand for Chinatown/Haymarket. More specifically, I have demonstrated that the
‘Chinese community’ is successfully included in a part of the precinct’s ethnic place brand which,
as I have shown in chapter 5, is based on a celebration of an ambiguous Asianness somehow
connected to exotic Chineseness. The assemblage of the ‘Italian community’, as I will suggest in
the next section, has the opposite effect to the ethnic place brand produced for Leichhardt. In
particular, I will suggest that the type of inconsistency of the message sent via the branding
efforts that I have described in chapter 6 is also produced by an unsuccessful attempt to
mobilise uniform images of ethnic identity on behalf of the community organisations that label
themselves Italian, and to permanently incorporate the ‘Italian community’ into the brand management strategy for the precinct.

7.3 The Federation of Italian Migrant Workers and Families

The Federation of Italian Migrant Workers and Families (FILEF) is a non-profit progressive organisation established in Italy in 1967. At the time of its foundation, its aim was to assist Italian migrant workers inspired by the Gramscian political philosophy based on solidarity, social justice, equality and auto-determination. In 1972 FILEF was established in Australia, the first headquarter was opened in Melbourne, followed by other major Australian cities. FILEF was founded in Sydney when the number of Italian migrants in the city reached the unprecedented number of 300,000. Here, the organisation started to work in collaboration with unions in the factories that employed Italians, and it targeted issues of welfare and assistance to the workers who, in most cases, faced scarce linguistic competencies, blatant discrimination and low levels of education. The organisation soon started to publish the bilingual newspaper *Il Nuovo Paese* (The New Country), which became an important tool to make its outreach more efficient, especially in the workplaces.

During the next two decades, in the 1980s and 1990s, FILEF reached out to seek connections with other politically active and left-oriented migrant associations and it strengthened its position as a mature community organisation in the Sydney context; its cultural production flourished with the management of courses on Italian culture, the direction of a radio station and the curation of art exhibitions, the publication of Italian language books and the foundation of a theatre group. The last one, in particular, became a vehicle for the transmission of FILEF’s core philosophy by addressing in its plays themes related to social issues, worker’s rights, the promotion of the Italian language, the fight against racism and the advocacy of pacifism.

By the 2000s the organisation had become more and more embedded in the Australian social and political landscape, and its main focus shifted toward environmental issues and human
rights, with a particular interest in the situation of asylum seekers and the debate on ‘reconciliation’ with indigenous Australians. FILEF has progressively gained the reputation of one of the most active associations in the Leichhardt area due to the connection between the precinct and the history of Italian migration in Sydney. Its involvement with the politics and the cultural economy of Leichhardt has significantly intensified in the past few years. As a matter of fact, FILEF has played a major role in the recent events organised at the Italian Forum Cultural Centre, while in 2013 the historian Gianfranco Cresciani (already author of several books on Italian migration to Australia) has received a grant from the Leichhardt Council towards the research and writing of the history of the organisation and its contribution to the political, cultural, social and welfare life of New South Wales.\footnote{In addition to this, in 2013 FILEF has deposited the bulk of its archival records, comprising 37 boxes inclusive of 371 files, to the archive of Leichhardt Municipal Library.} FILEF, in other words, plays a central role as a key community organisation active in the promotion of Leichhardt’s Italian heritage.

For the past five years FILEF members have rented a room at the headquarters of the Neapolitan Association (a cultural organisation based on the shared origin of its members from the southern Italian region of Campania) for their monthly meetings. Here, the riunioni di comitato (advisory board meetings) take place on a monthly basis. During my fieldwork, the meetings became opportunities to observe the ways in which the association works for the ‘promotion of Italian culture’ while collaborating with a series of other groups. At the time of my participation, the projects \textit{Vacanzascuola} (School Holiday) and \textit{Radici} (Roots) were being discussed. The first is a holiday program for primary school children either of Italian background or with a basic level of comprehension of Italian aimed at ‘language development and enrichment’ (www.filefaustralia.org). It allows children to ‘maintain, practice and learn the language,’ as they take part in activities which are conducted in Italian. The second is a socio-linguistic research project sponsored by Leichhardt Council that the organisation is carrying out in collaboration with a Sydney-based academic and two Italian institutes. The aim of the project is to document the maintenance and transformation of the most commonly spoken Italian regional dialects in Sydney, based on interviews with first and second generations Italian-Australians. Like in the
case of the Chinese Youth League, we can see how FILEF is interested in the idea of cultural origins (the term ‘roots’, suggesting the firm and static nature of culture, is used in both cases) and with their self-positioning as a vehicle for cultural transmission.

In 2013, a series of events called *Pomeriggi Culturali* (Cultural Afternoons) were also organised on a fortnightly basis at the Neapolitan association. The spring session program included the screening of a number of documentaries followed by a commentary; it also featured invited guest speakers, other performances and open debates with the audience (mostly Italian-Australian elders) at the end of each screening. The first event, titled *Il Corpo delle Donne* (the Women’s Body), tackled the objectified representation of women in Italian contemporary media and entertainment industry; it was organised in collaboration with the Department of Italian Studies of Sydney University and the Italian-Australian Women’s Association Inc., and featured the participation of the director of the documentary.

![Figure 33. The member of a theatre group reads a passage from ‘Terramatta’ in the Sicilian dialect during one of the cultural activities organised by FILEF. Photograph by the author.](image)

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69 The documentary denounces the type of information proposed by the media industry monopolised by the former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and based on the grotesque, vulgar and humiliating representation of women.
The second week was dedicated to the memory of an Italian Catholic missionary in the Philippines, who was engaged for many years in the support of local indigenous communities and who was brutally killed in 1997, and a southern Italian priest who was victim of a murder perpetrated by a mafia cartel. The last screening of the series was a documentary titled Terramatta (Mad Land); a film based on an unpublished manuscript written by a half illiterate man born at the end of the 19th century, who narrates his story against the backdrop of the First and Second World War in Sicilian dialect. Following the screening, a member of a theatre group and leader of one of the local Sicilian community organisations recited a passage from an Italian classic novel, also written in Sicilian dialect.

The themes addressed during the cultural activities organised by FILEF shed light on the fact that the promotion of understanding Italian culture and society is at the forefront of the organisation’s agenda. This relies on the mobilisation of Italianness that is dependent on several factors: the first is a strong political dimension connected to its expression. Politics is used by FILEF to introduce a general debate on Italian current affairs; it becomes a way to define Italianness in terms of progressive political perspectives related to contemporary Italy. A particular political inclination defined by the organisation’s background rooted in Italian leftist politics becomes therefore a lens through which the reflection on Italian culture is filtered and presented to the attendees of the events. This implies a detachment from understandings of Italian culture that are framed in other political perspectives; in other words, by overtly acknowledging the political dimension of its cultural expression, FILEF shows a fundamental dissensus over a uniform representation of Italianness.

Language also emerges as one tool which is frequently used by FILEF in its cultural offerings; here it can be noted how the organisation’s highlighting of the role of dialects relies on the celebration of cultural heterogeneity that is expressed by the multiplicity of local and regional associations, which in turn define themselves as the repositories of neatly separated cultures and

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70 This is a point that has been made by one of the organisation’s members during an intervention at the ‘Round Table’ for the celebration of FILEF’s 40th anniversary. He stated: ‘FILEF Sydney was born in this way, taking advantage of the connections between our community and the unions who shared only two things: the Italian languages – despite the multiplicity of its dialects – and the ideological belonging to the Italian left’ (www.fileaustralia.org, translation by the author).
languages (the Neapolitans, the Sicilians) and that escape the conceptualisation of a homogeneous Italianness. By making this point, I do not wish to overlook the same degree of internal differences inherent in the Chinese community organisation (hence the highlight of the complex linguistic landscape of the Chinese cultural sphere that is played out at the Chinese Youth League). What I want to stress in this chapter, however, is how the assemblage of the ethnic community as part of the creation of ethnic place brands for the two precincts has the potential to highlight or downplay this heterogeneity.

In particular, I want to dwell on the fact that the Leichhardt context does not consistently provide a space – like Market City – where different types of Italianness (be they linguistic or political) can be temporarily suspended by the alignment of a number of organisations that consent to a shared version of ethnic identity. In the rest of this section I will demonstrate that the type of assemblage that puts the ethnic community together in the Leichhardt context is marked by a dissensus related to the management and promotion of Italianness in the precinct. This last issue, in particular, signals another difference between the two case studies of this thesis: the fact that a fundamental ‘divergence’ marks the operations of the ethnic community as part of the Leichhardt’s brand.

7.3.1 The Objectification of Italianness through Theatre-Related Activities

The theatrical production that emerges from the collaboration between FILEF and a Leichhardt-based independent theatrical company called ‘Fools in Progress’\footnote{FILEF has collaborated with a number of other Italian-based theatre and dance companies, to name a few: ‘Bella Ciao’ and ‘Vento Del Sud’ (two groups specialising in traditional southern Italian music and dance); and ‘Bottega dell’Arte Teatrale’ (theatre groups that have based their production on the works of famous Italian authors).} is a crucial example for understanding the dynamics that assemble the ‘Italian community’. Alice, the director of the company, has increasingly worked with FILEF since the organisation’s own theatre group ceased its operations due to a lack of a generational turnover (the majority of FILEF members are Italian immigrants from the post-World War II period and belong to a migration trend that, as we have seen in chapter 2, slowed down significantly from the 1970s).
Alice’s presence at most of the FILEF meetings and her active participation in some of the cultural initiatives promoted by the organisation has made of her somebody more akin to a proper member than just ‘a friend of FILEF’ – an expression used to refer to all those figures (mostly politicians) on whose support the community organisation can allegedly ‘count’. Fools in Progress was founded in 2006\textsuperscript{72} and it has since then specialised in a niche discipline called ‘Commedia dell’Arte’, a form of theatre that began in Italy in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century and that is based on ‘funny stories’ revolving around specific masks, or ‘types’. This form of theatre and the occasions in which it was performed during my fieldwork became opportunities to observe, for the first time, the promotion of Italianness in the Leichhardt context based on a consistent, integrated version of ethnic identity, which evens out its internal differences.

The first performance of 2013 took place in an Italian restaurant in Norton Street. The play, titled \textit{The Unthinkably Unsinkable Ship}, was advertised through a synopsis reading that ‘the buffoonery of the play’s classic stock characters’ is ‘grounded in the traditions of Italian Commedia dell’Arte’. Notions of tradition and Italian culture were loosely adopted in this case without references to the internal differentiation articulated, for instance, during FILEF’s meetings. On the night of the event, the alternation in the use of English and Italian during the play pointed to the relevance of the performance as part of a series of activities aimed at promoting a uniform Italian culture. The caricaturesque way in which the character of the play ‘performed Italian culture’ also suggested that a specific idea of stereotyped Italianness was an integral part of the theatrical piece. This was reflected in a series of actions during the play designed to appeal to a generalised perception of ethnicity. Examples included the mockery of Italian stereotyped behaviours (constant loud arguments accompanied by sleazy jokes) and the nonsensical way in which Italian sentences were used in the performance; in the middle of the conversation between two of the main male characters of the play, for example, one of the two asked to the other: ‘do you like it when a woman is “fettuccine” or “carbonara”’?

\textsuperscript{72}The original name of the company – ‘Carbonari della Commedia’ – was borrowed from an old Leichhardt-based Italian theatre group active in the 1970s. The name ‘Fools in Progress’ was adopted to overcome linguistic issues when the theatre company had to perform outside of the Italian community circles.
The same play was staged a few weeks earlier by students who participated in a 5-day workshop, that had been organised by the same theatre company and that was led by a maestro di commedia (commedia master). The workshop was sponsored by FILEF, which took the opportunity to show its symbolic support for another Italian community organisation, and Leichhardt Council, which granted the free usage of the Town Hall theatrette for the rehearsals during the entire duration of the workshop. The workshop demonstrates how the theatrical company positions itself as an agent that protects ‘the heritage of (…) what is a significant part of the Italian culture’ (foolsinprogress.com) and it points to a significant parallel with the operations of the Chinese Youth League by presenting the Italian theatrical group as a legitimate channel through which ‘ethnic culture’ is handed down via a ‘traditional discipline’. At the core of this process of ethnic packaging by the cultural organisations in Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt, in other words, lies the interest in addressing the ‘source’ of culture that can be imported and transmitted via the reconstructed channels of ‘tradition’ (Ranger and Hobsbawn 1983). The patronage of Leichhardt Council, on the other hand, is crucial as it embeds the cultural performance of the theatre group in a more complex landscape, where a wide range of stakeholders is mobilised and where the role of the community is also called into play within the brand management strategy for the precinct.

The role of theatre-related performances as ways in which the ‘Italian community’ is entangled in the branding of Leichhardt appears clearly by looking at the role undertaken by Fools in Progress as part of the entertainment organised during the Norton Street Festa (see figure 34). At this occasion, the masks of Commedia dell’Arte are used as symbols that strengthen the ethnic character of Norton Street by providing moments of performativity embedded in a context of visible difference. Here, a ‘traditional Italian discipline’ is reproduced to an audience of urban consumers and performed by taking part in a mix of practices, which are sponsored by the Council. There is an agreement, in other terms, over the type of Italianness represented by the theatre group. In turn, the way in which the characters of Commedia dell’Arte perform during the Norton Street Festa – by uttering random Italian expressions – works to reinforce the ‘enclavic’ (Edensor 2000) nature of Norton Street as a ‘stage’ for the ethnic place brand.
Figure 34. Masked characters from Commedia dell'Arte entertain visitors during the 2014 Norton Street Festa (top, bottom); a scene from the *Unthinkably Unsinkable Ship* (middle). Photographs by the author.
A number of points can be made based on this example: the first is that the partnership between the theatrical company and the Council demonstrates an ‘alignment’ of community expression with the brand management strategy for Leichhardt. The collaboration between Commedia dell’Arte and the Norton Street Festa can be read in parallel with that of the CYL’s Lion Dance group and Market City in Chinatown/Haymarket. It is part of the assemblage that sustains the process of ethnic branding by providing entertainment that promotes (Italian) culture and that emerges from the local ‘(Italian) community’. Secondly the consensus between different stakeholders – in this case the organisers of the Norton Street Festa and the theatre company over a consistent expression of Italianness that is displayed in moments of community celebrations – strengthens the boundedness of culture and its ‘logical’ association with the ethnicised precinct. This is explained by Alice when she reiterates how legitimate and ‘authentically Italian’ Commedia dell’Arte is, and how much its presence in Leichhardt is just ‘a natural fact’:

Commedia dell’Arte is one of the ways in which our Italian culture fits perfectly in the Australian system, because it is both culturally and linguistically relevant. This is for us a great way to transmit our culture in a pretty natural way. Leichhardt Council literally worships us (Interview with Alice, 27th September 2013).

The objectification of Italianness via theatre-related activities offers a type of branding tool that we have already observed in the Chinatown/Haymarket case. The participation of Fools in Progress in the Norton Street Festa in fact reveals how ‘art’ is part of the ethnic place brand for the Leichhardt precinct the same way in which it is in the Chinatown/Haymarket case. However, whereas in Chinatown/Haymarket the role of art has been implemented in a brand management strategy that highlights multiplicity and ambiguity connected to the meaning of Chineseness, the role of art in the Leichhardt context is to strengthen the stereotyped image of Italianness associated to the precinct. Therefore, if on the one hand art has an active role in contributing to the production of both ethnic place brands, its impact on the meaning of ethnicity in the two precincts diverges significantly.

At the time of the interview, Alice was gathering funds to support the organisation of a festival of theatrical performances based on Italian-Australian culture, and was negotiating the
sponsorship of the Council. As she explained the aims of the project, she specified how her goal was to help rediscover the Italianness of Leichhardt and she added that this move had been enthusiastically approved by some of the delegates of the Council, who saw in theatrical activities a successful attempt to regenerate the ‘culture of the precinct’:

I presented them this idea of the festival and they said: ‘this is beautiful’. And I said: ‘this will bring the Italianness back to Leichhardt; it will bring the Italian culture back’. This is what we locals can construct from a cultural perspective here in Australia (Interview with Alice, 27th September 2013).

It is therefore hard to understand how Fools in Progress, a local theatrical group that partakes in major events sponsored by the Council and that occasionally collaborates with other community organisations in the promotion of Italian culture, still lacks a permanent rehearsal space and has to rely on restaurants and yearly-organised events to perform despite the existence of an exceptional cultural venue such as the Cultural Centre73 in the Italian Forum. Alice stressed this point during the interview:

The Cultural Centre would have been our most natural house. It would have been exactly the place where we should have set up a school of Commedia dell’Arte. It would have been full of opportunities. And yet, the opportunity to access the structure was totally denied to us. I am f*****g furious.

Despite the level of consistency in terms of ethnic display achieved via Commedia dell’Arte and the type of consensus over the representation of Italianness during the Norton Street Festa, in the next section I will suggest that, by looking at how the Leichhardt-based independent theatre company positions itself in the context of the Italian Forum Cultural Centre, it is possible to notice a divergence of different and competing notions of Italianness from the brand management strategy for Leichhardt. This divergence is based on a conflict over the meaning of Italianness articulated by various segments of the local population and by a number of figures interested in the functioning of the Italian Forum. In particular, I will dwell on the events that led the Cultural Centre to declare a state of insolvency during my fieldwork in Leichhardt and how they represent a fundamental aspect to consider in the assemblage of the Italian community.

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73 At the current stage the Cultural Centre features a 249 m2 gallery foyer accessible directly from the upper street level; a 30 m2 demonstration kitchen with overhead cameras to facilitate the view of food preparation demonstrations; a main performance hall with the capacity of hosting up to 300 spectators; four multi-purpose rooms equipped to host meetings and dance performance rehearsals.
Here, again, I want to suggest that the ‘ethnic community’ and the ethnic place brand are two mutually entangled concepts.

**7.3.2 Friends of the Italian Forum Ltd.: Wider Dissensus within the ‘Italian Community’**

The construction of the Cultural Centre occurred separately from that of the residential and commercial strata of the Italian Forum. The ‘shell’ of the building was erected by the original developer of the site; he, however, failed to honour the contract and did not bring the project to completion. The legal case into which he was dragged resulted in a settlement in favour of the Italian Forum Ltd. and, following the court case, a new construction company was appointed to finalise the project. This phase occurred between August 2008 and July 2009. The first performance – which involved the participation of a number of Italian theatrical companies including Alice’s group – was staged in July 2009, at a time when the interiors of the Cultural Centre were not yet completely fitted out (the performance took place in the *piazza*). The Cultural Centre was officially opened shortly after in September, and in March 2012 it became fully operative thanks to an additional Federal Government grant received after the Leichhardt Council had lodged a successful application on behalf of the Italian Forum Ltd. in 2010. Thanks to this last contribution all areas of the Cultural Centre were completely fitted out and all professional equipment envisioned by the initial project were eventually installed.

Only one year after its official opening, however, the Italian Forum Ltd. declared a state of insolvency and the company was placed into voluntary administration as its operations surprisingly ‘generated insufficient cash flow to meet its operating expenses and non-current liabilities’ (SvPartners 2013: 2). The news started to appear in local newspapers from September 2013 and stirred up several Italian community-based organisations, which had been up to that point involved in the history of the Cultural Centre. In October of the same year, Alice and a member of another Italian regional association – both had been actively involved in the project since the early stages – decided to call a general meeting with several exponents of the ‘Italian community’, which were addressed in the promotion of the event as ‘friends of the Italian
Forum Ltd.’. The message was drafted by the two and directly mailed to the Italian language newspaper *La Fiamma*. A few weeks later, the invitation was published both in the newspaper and on Leichhardt Council’s website.

The mobilisation of several actors following the decision to call a meeting to discuss the events that led to the Cultural Centre’s state of insolvency highlights the expanding network of stakeholders that are concerned about the fate of what appears to be a ‘community asset’. From the Leichhardt Council, to newspaper editors, theatre groups directors and representatives from Italian regional associations the history of the Italian Forum and, in particular, the Cultural Centre seems to be able to attract a wide spectrum of actors all partaking in the assemblage of the ‘Italian community’. The editor-in-chief of *La Fiamma* commented on the issue of the Italian community and its relation with the Italian Forum by saying:

We [referring to the ‘Italian community’] do not necessarily get along that well under many circumstance, (…) yet, when we face important people, or significant moments we can be a community, we come together. (…) The Italian Forum implies economic interests. The Italian community is not divided for what concern the Cultural Centre itself. On the contrary, the community is very united. *La Fiamma* delivers a collective voice that the place needs to be maintained under the property of the Italian community. (…) The Italian Forum as a project was the acknowledgement awarded by the Australian Government of the achievements of the Italian community. The Government wanted to acknowledge that the Italian community did outstanding things in Australia; that is contributed greatly to the development of this country, of this nation, of this state (Interview with Editor-in-chief of Italian language newspaper *La Fiamma* A.T., 3rd March 2014).

Like many of the people interviewed during my fieldwork, the editor-in-chief relates the history of the Italian Forum to the notion of ‘contribution to the nation’, which automatically strengthens and validates the idea of the Italian community as a unified body of collective identification, reflected in the construction of the cultural asset. According to him, despite the variety of voices and perspectives that gather around the notion of Italian community, the fate of the Cultural Centre is ‘one of the symbolic moments’ in which a collective voice is delivered. From these words, the Italian Forum and the Cultural Centre seem to point to a consensus over the meaning of Italianness and Italian culture and how they are reflected in the structure. The way in which the meeting called by Alice unfolded, however, suggests the complete opposite.
Initially scheduled to take place at the premises of one of the regional associations normally hosting community events, the performance hall of the Cultural Centre was eventually made available for the meeting by the appointed administrators of the company (as the Italian Forum Ltd. was referred to for the entire length of the meeting). The administrators were at that time running the Cultural Centre on behalf of the last board of directors, who had resigned shortly before. They saw the meeting as a chance to explain their role, as they were attempting to find an appropriate buyer to operate the Cultural Centre so that creditors could be paid out. At the time of the meeting, according to a report edited for the occasion, the Italian Forum Ltd. had secured and unsecured debts based on the existence of recorded mortgages signed with third parties. Leichhardt Municipal Council, NOVATI construction, and the union of three Italian regional community organisations named AFVC (Abruzzi, Friuli, Veneto Sports Club Limited) had a claim against the company in respect to more than 1 million dollars74 (SvPartners 2013:12).

The heterogeneous group that walked into the main hall of the Cultural Centre on the night of the meeting included members of the Italian Families History Group, Leichhardt business owners, university lecturers, general managers, spokespersons and presidents of various community organisations, journalists and political activists, reporters from local newspapers, correspondents from radio stations, politicians, local residents and members of local business chambers. By looking at the variety of professional backgrounds included in this group it is possible to appreciate the number of personalities engaged in the maintenance of the Cultural Centre and the promotion of Italian culture in the Leichhardt context.

As the meeting began, the first of a long series of arguments arose around the issue of what language should be spoken. One of the men sitting in the first row – a representative of the Apulian association75 – argued that the meeting should be conducted in Italian. By saying so, he suggested that the meeting was an intimate event dominated by the Italian-speaking members of

74 The document circulated during the meeting read that, should the cultural centre cease to operate, the Municipality would become liable to repay all or some of the grant (3,671,672 AUD) that the community was awarded on the premise of providing a fully functional cultural centre. As a result, pursuant a subcontract agreement for the grant between the company and Leichhardt Municipal Council, if the latter became liable to repay the grant, the company would have to pay those amounts to the Council’ (SvPartners 2013: 12).

75 Together with the Neapolitan Association, this is the only Italian regional association to have maintained (and expanded) its headquarters in Leichhardt.
the community. At the beginning, the attendees seemed to agree; however, following the complaint of a group of people advocating for the use of English, a woman from the audience volunteered to provide simultaneous translation for the non-Italian speaking cohort, spatially relegated to the far right corner of the room and formed by a few (non-Italian) residents of the Italian Forum and local business owners. The moderators seemed not to welcome this idea and they were backed up straight away by a couple of women sitting in the first row. Only after a few minutes of heated discussion could the first points be finally addressed. ‘Which language to use’ appeared as the very first issue during the meeting; a sign that the various stakeholders involved in the community event were disagreeing on a very basic communication issue. In contrast with the Chinese Youth League celebrations in Chinatown/Haymarket, where there was an easy consensus about the flexible use of both English and Mandarin even though many community members could not understand the latter, here the issue of language was subject to passionate intra-communal discord. This was an initial indicator that belied the conceptualisation of a ‘common voice’ mentioned in the interview with the newspaper chief-in-editor.

Alice introduced the meeting as an opportunity to discuss the recent mismanagement of the Italian Forum Ltd. The reason that drove her to call the meeting, she said, was that since 2009 the Cultural Centre had been run like a private property, with problematic issues such as the skyrocketing prices charged to attend the cultural events or to rent the premises of the Cultural Centre. This, she argued, was unacceptable since the asset ‘should be available to us artists, to us Italian associations, to us independent associations’ (Fieldwork diary, 13th October 2013). In Alice’s opinion, the past administration of the Cultural Centre should be denounced for not managing the company according to what was stated in the constitution of the Forum. ‘We represent the community,’ she claimed, ‘and the board should represent us. Yet, we have been completely ignored.’

Alice’s analysis of the major parties involved in the ‘debate’ around the Cultural Centre can be summed up as a clash between a group including independent/local associations and Italian
community groups, and a detached ‘corporate’ administration of the Italian Forum, whom she accuses to have taken a different path from the legitimate communitarian ownership of the structure. The clash between these two parties therefore indicates that the Cultural Centre does not bring the ‘Italian community’ together. On the contrary, the divergent views regarding the management of the structure seem to highlight that there are different stakeholders with contrasting ideas on how the Cultural Centre should be run. Once again, this issue is ultimately at odds with the conceptualisation of a ‘united community’.

At this point, one of the residents of the Italian Forum who attended the meeting – a woman with a marked Australian accent – intervened and said that, despite having lived in the Italian Forum for 11 years, she never saw any of the people who were present at this meeting; the fact sounded in her opinion rather controversial, especially given the alleged interest and passion for the Italian Forum from the Italian community. ‘I moved here as soon as 2001, when the Italian Forum opened. We were all very enthusiastic about this thing, but nothing ever happened. Who are you in the first place?’ she asked Alice, ‘you are a bunch of ghosts for me,’ she concluded bitterly. This intervention reinforces the idea that a sense of cohesion within the Italian community was never achieved in the management of the Italian Forum complex. It also suggests that Italianness is just seen as one of the many elements that partake in the maintenance of the Italian Forum and that there seems to be a clear detachment between the various parts that constitute the totality of the structure. In other words, the same incompatibility between the various elements of the Italian stage that I have described in chapter 6 seem to be translated into the space of the Cultural Centre and played out as a dissonant dynamic between the various actors involved in the meeting. The representatives of the cultural strata and the residents of the Italian Forum, for example, emerge as two separate entities which are once again not brought together by a putative common Italianness. Here, in other words, we can start to glimpse the consequences of the divergence of different types of ‘community’ from the aims of the brand management strategy for the structure, and for the precinct at large.
Another community leader jumped into the conversation at this point and argued that the main problem triggering the arguments was that ‘people in the room did not know each other’. The man therefore proposed that each one of the audience members would stand up and introduce themselves. Initially the proposition seemed to be received favourably, as from the left hand side of the auditorium the first two people started to speak about how they got involved in the Italian Forum, why they were so passionate about it, and how they proposed to change its current mismanagement. They did not miss the chance to add some anecdotes on how their families got involved in the initial project. This can be read as an attempt by the attendees to intensify their sense of connection to the place, or simply to justify their sense of attachment by strategically resorting to their Italianness.

The initiative did not last long, as another man – representative of the Five Dock business chamber, Leichhardt’s ‘competing’ Little Italy – resisted the idea; he argued that the limited amount of time at disposal for the event wouldn’t allow the meeting to unfold following a monologue-centred format. This, however, did not impede him from setting out with a narration of his own version of the story; he gradually overtook the stage, as his enthusiasm grew due to the visible support by the majority of those present that he seemed to enjoy. He said that the main point of the meeting should not become the condemnation of incompetence of the past administration, as ‘it is useless to dig too deep into the history of the place’. He stressed that the task at hand was to make sure that the venue would not go to private hands, because of the public money with which the place was funded; ‘the community should not be left in the dark anymore; we were unaware until today that there is such a huge debt,’ he concluded and sat back down among the applause of the crowd.

The central part of the debate on the night of the meeting highlighted that the divisions within the taken-for-granted ‘Italian community’ are not only to be found in the conflict between the ‘corporate’ management of the Cultural Centre and a ‘local culture’ formed by independent Italian community organisations; the dissensus can also be found within the local Italian community itself, and between the Italian community representatives and segments of the local
non-Italian population. Furthermore, the last part of the meeting was characterised by multiple and disconnected interventions by various personalities attached to the symbolic Italianness of the structure, who took turns in taking up the stage during the meeting. The conceptualisation of the ‘Italian community’ as nothing more than various units defined by often conflicting interests, seemed to be widely accepted by many local personalities who are active in the Italian circles. One of them – the president of a regional association – commented on this point by saying that:

The Italian community is formed by different clans. It is like a series of beehives. Each beehive has a queen bee. If you cannot make an alliance with the queen bee of that particular beehive, you do not have them on your side. It is important to network with the queen bees of the various beehives, so to have success in the social context (Interview with Apulian Association leader F.M., 19th October 2013).

The beehive metaphor describes the cacophony of voices, perspectives and interests that contribute to a ‘thick’ layer of dissensus to add to the one related to the mobilisation of ‘what type of Italian culture’ previously explored by looking at the initiatives organised by FILEF. Unlike the conceptualisation of the Italian community as a cohesive body of collective identification, the Italian community is described here as an assemblage of conflicting personalities, in a context in which the success of social interaction between the various exponents cannot be taken for granted, but needs to be framed within different interests. This perspective, once again, challenges the ‘cohesion’ of the community paradigm loosely adopted in many marketing initiatives that construct Leichhardt’s ethnic brand.

7.3.3 The Cultural Centre and the Problems of Brand Management

When the administrators were called in, after thirty minutes of heated discussion, they seemed to understand the uneasiness with which their position was received, as if they were illegally taking over a symbolic space to which they were not entitled. They spoke in a very defensive tone and specified the ‘interim nature’ of their appointed position as professional figures hired ‘just’ to conduct an investigation into the business affairs and circumstances of the company.
From the beginning of their intervention the two men were made the target of a number of questions regarding the functioning of the company, which contributed to an escalation of tension that reached its climax when a woman asked: ‘what I want to know is: who owns the Italian Forum? Who takes the decisions here?’

Being interrogated in such a confronting way, one of the administrators started to lecture the audience on corporate management. He explained that the Italian Forum is a company limited by guarantee and that, as such, it is registered and it has responsibilities under the 2001 Australian Corporation Act; he added that the Cultural Centre is a property limited company and that it functions according to a corporate constitution, which implies that its membership needs to be renewed in order for the company to survive. This intervention, and the comments from the audience that followed an initial silence, highlighted the dissonance of interpretations between what the members of local community organisations understood as a ‘space dedicated to the contribution of the Italian community’ and the reality characterised by the incorporation of ethnicity in the context of a multi-purpose structure defined by a more complex management system.

On more than one occasion during the meeting, perplexed remarks were made that the intricacies within the company did not reflect the apparent simplicity of the original statement of the grant, and that ‘the land was donated to the community to realise a cultural centre’. The realisation of the Italian Forum and the inclusion of the structure in a corporate dimension, seem to have contributed to both underlining the inherent pre-existing tensions within the loose concept of the ‘Italian community’, but also to underpin a gap between two different discourses in which ethnicity is understood: one related to community life and the other interested in the management of the company. In order to understand the difference between the two, it is useful to jump back to the paradigmatic shift for the analysis of ethnicity that I have described in chapter 3.

76 Among the 65 members that the Forum had at the time of the meeting, only 6 had decided to renew their memberships. This meant that, if the number of members did not reach a satisfactory quota, the assets had to be sold.
The Cultural Centre as a ‘community asset’, a perspective pushed forward by part of the attendees, can be discussed in relation to the system of representation that understands the Italian Forum as a visible tribute to Leichhardt’s Italianness, endowed with a type of ethnicised essence (Anderson 1990), which is believed to reside in people with Italian origin living in Australia. It is characterised by a linear idea of embodied ethnicity whereby the ‘Italian minority’ reclaims its ‘visibly different’ asset. The Italian Forum as a company, on the other hand, needs to take into account a Corporation Act and the disaggregated, complex and networked system of ethnic mobilisation that characterises the ethnic place brand; this inscribes Italianness in a type of abstract, dynamic and indeterminate representations that escape the linearity of the claims made in regards the ‘community asset’.

This friction became increasingly noticeable throughout the meeting in the contrasting ways in which the Italian Forum Ltd. was addressed: as a cultural community centre, by Alice, and a company, by the administrators. ‘Debts need to be sorted out if you want to be sure that your company keeps going,’ the appointed administrator concluded. ‘This is a cultural centre!’ Alice attacked him, ‘a cultural centre! And you are treating it as a private enterprise!’ The point that I am trying to make here is that the misunderstanding between the parties involved in the debate regarding the maintenance of the Cultural Centre highlights a dissensus regarding the systems of representation and the type of management of Italianness as a branded entity.

The attacks on the administrators of the Cultural Centre appeared to be rooted in the detachment demonstrated by the community members from a corporate language, where the explanation of a strategy adopted to ‘secure the ship’ – an expression repeatedly used by the administrators to refer to the needed solution that would ensure the correct functioning of the company at a financial level – significantly clashed with the primary issue advocated by the community members, which was based on the plain need to acknowledge the Italian community’s ownership of the Cultural Centre. In this context it is not the financial issues that prevail, but rather a straightforward reflection on ethnicity (who is part of the Italian community and who is not) as the simple factor that defines all levels of inclusion and exclusion. However,
the disagreement on the mobilisation of ethnicity in the space of the Cultural Centre was not only to be found in the debate happening between the ‘friends’ of the Italian Forum Ltd. and the appointed administrators, but could be analysed by widening the analytical framework. The appointed administrators were only the temporary representatives of a wider managerial structure related to the functioning of the Cultural Centre, which deserves closer consideration.

It is relevant to mention, for example, that the former general manager of the Cultural Centre – a young Italian expatriate with previous experience in theatre management, who had recently stepped down from her position – emphatically deserted the meeting called by the coalition led by Alice. Her perspective had characterised the first generation of the Cultural Centre and it heavily bore the influence of the Sydney-based Italian academic who had dragged the original builders of the Italian Forum into a legal case and who had appointed her as the first general manager of the structure. Their ‘mandate’ officially ended with the sale of the assets of the Cultural Centre in August of the same year.

Their perspective makes the discourse significantly more complex, as it brings to the discussion the way in which Italianness was defined prior to the events that led the Cultural Centre to declare the state of insolvency. By analysing their management strategies, it is possible to notice a disjuncture between the Italian Forum Ltd., managed according to the ethnic place brand strategy for Leichhardt, and the ‘Italian community’ of the local cultural organisations. The formation of yet another disagreement, in other words, can be observed by looking at the Italian Forum issue from another perspective. According to the former general manager of the Cultural Centre, the management strategy for the Italian Forum Ltd. was based on different factors:

The [Italian Forum] project was supposed to realise a place that would express the lifestyle of Italians. It was supposed to represent a tiny corner of Italy in Australia, and, by doing this, it would reconstruct the typical way Italians live. Therefore, from its origins, the cultural component was its core. (…) First of all this place must reflect Australian culture, and inside Australian culture, Italian culture has a prominent space. (…) This is the objective of the Cultural Centre, and of all those entities and organisations outside Italy dedicated to the production of culture, commerce, economy and relations with other countries (Interview with former general manager of Italian Forum Cultural Centre, M.S. 31st October 2013).
The core philosophy for the management strategy of Italianness explained by my respondent reflects entirely the concept of the ‘joint venture’, which is the way in which the Italian Forum has been positioned in the Leichhardt context with the aim of highlighting the precinct’s ethnic difference (see chapter 6). The mobilisation of Italianness in the Cultural Centre happens by means of several expedients: first is the placement of ethnicity in compartmentalised spaces; the second is the overlapping of the concepts of ‘culture’ and ‘society’ in a representational mode. The third is the recognition of a multicultural system in which the Italian Forum – and by extension the Cultural Centre – operate as contributing agents to the ‘wider Australian society’.

During the interview, a sense of ‘authenticity’ was evoked as a fundamental part of the process aimed at reaching a satisfactory level of cultural representation in the Cultural Centre:

When people walk into this space they notice that there is something related to Italian culture. Colours express in a strong symbolic way an Italian atmosphere; the aesthetic of this place is conveyed through a contemporary Italian design. Everything in this place is Italian: from the spotlights to the coffee machine. The kitchen is a beautiful Italian brand: Electrolux. This space speaks Italian because it has been built with love and care, involving machinery, lights, architecturally designed spaces, colours which are… Italian. This is Italian culture, where everything is a show. (…) We express a lifestyle and a social model that has no equal (Interview with former general manager of Italian Forum Cultural Centre, M.S. 31st October 2013).

The use of colours, shapes and branded commodities is functional, in my respondent’s words, to express Italianness. This image is entirely made to overlap with the intangible idea of sophisticated lifestyle that aligns with the type of brand management used in the Italian Forum, as we have seen in the previous chapter. Italianness is also related to branded commodities used to fit the interiors of the Cultural Centre, a choice that echoes the promotion of Italianness during the Norton Street Festa. The adoption of lifestyle as a way to express Italianness, however, has proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it has enabled the Cultural Centre to convey the sense of glamorous sophistication associated with the notion of Italian culture that is usually proposed during the activities organised in the precinct. On the other hand, it enacts a sort of detachment from the local environment in which the structure is located, as the cultural expression interpreted by the management of the Cultural Centre is not reflected in the socio-cultural context in which the structure is embedded. This is articulated in the remark that the former general manager makes about Leichhardt, where she sees an
anachronistic and semi-primitive parochialism in the type of Italianness outside the notion of branded sophistication:

My opinion is that there is no need any more for Little Italy in the world. Reason being that Italian culture is present in everyone’s mind [anyway]. Be it because of the strong connotations of food culture, as Italian cuisine is the most appreciated in the world. Wherever you travel in Australia, Australian vocabulary contains fundamental Italian words, which are used on a regular basis. (...) We do not need a Little Italy; we live beyond it. The level of Italian culture is at the top: it is mainstream culture. (...) I think that it is useless to struggle to maintain this Italianness in Leichhardt. What is Italianness at the end? An Italian shop? Go to Opera House. There is more ‘Italy’ there than in Leichhardt, much more (Interview with former general manager of Italian Forum Cultural Centre, M.S. 31st October 2013).

A tension arises here in the mobilisation of Italianness, as the management strategy is at the same time embedded in a context of ‘difference’ that the former general manager of the Cultural Centre both embraces (‘everything in this place is Italian’) and refuses (‘there is no need any more for Little Italy in the world’). Italian culture, in other words, is understood here as ‘high culture’, or a ‘style’ denoted by disembodied ideas of ‘sophistication’. As a result, the type of Italianness fostered in the Cultural Centre is predominantly embedded in the discourse of branded luxury and fashionable way of living, while it significantly takes a distance from Italianness as ‘ethnic difference’ embodied by a migrant minority. This type of ethnicity seems to be considered by my respondent the defining trait of the ‘community’, which includes the Italian cultural organisations active in Leichhardt. She seems to frame this type of ethnic expression as part of the backward ‘Little Italy’ enclavic world, which sustains ethnicity in unsophisticated ways (for instance the ‘Italian shop’). The management adopted for the Cultural Centre, on the other hand, relates to an understanding of Italian culture detached from ethnic communities, histories of migration, and parochial local and regional cultures. This, in turn, defines a significant disjuncture between the management of the Cultural Centre and the representative of the local Italian organisations, as the former general manager comments,

Generally speaking we have always been considered something ‘other’ … not even something ‘antagonist’. This is why this place often hosts much more non-Italian, rather than Italian, organisations. They are all mainstream organisations working in the cultural sector here in Australia, who necessitate professional spaces. (...) Obviously though, it would be important that this space retained its original mission, which is the promotion of Italian culture.
Figure 35. One of the Italian Forum flags hanging in the galleried passageway accessible from Norton Street (top); a photograph of the main performance hall of the Cultural Centre retrieved from the company’s promotional material (middle); the Cultural Centre photographed from the first level of the Italian Forum (bottom). Photographs by the author.
The analysis of the Cultural Centre highlights the fractured nature of the ‘Italian community’, the conflicted relationship between local Italian cultural organisations and the highly problematic role that the Italian Forum plays in the context of the ethnically branded precinct. The Italian Forum is a symbolic space in which the community converges (to echo the words of the editor-in-chief of La Fiamma): here, various segments can be observed that are interested in the promotion of ‘Italian culture’. It also highlights, however, the numerous factors that determine the divided nature of the ‘community’ itself: from basic linguistic conflicts to contrasting interpretations of management (where communitarian and corporate ideals seem to exclude each other), and the unsuccessful conception of the Cultural Centre as a beacon of sophisticated Italianess that goes beyond the confines of the locally based, politically and regionally divided cohort of Italian ethnic organisations. The Cultural Centre, in other words, provides a stage where all dissensus over the mobilisation of Italianess is displayed; furthermore, the brand management strategy used to make the structure conform to the brand for the precinct results in the institutionalisation of ‘Italianess as a lifestyle’: an intangible essence, which excludes all those locally based community organisations, while allegedly representing ‘their culture’.

7.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how the ethnic community and the brand management strategies for both Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt are interrelated. I have argued that a language of ‘strategy of display’ and ‘positioning’ defines the differing ways in which several stakeholders assemble the ethnic community by mobilising ethnicity in various symbolic moments related to the production and application of the ethnic place brand to the precinct. The reading of the ethnic community that I have proposed in this chapter is dependent on the quality of the assemblage that constitutes it, and focuses on how various actors are involved in tying together ‘layers of extended relations of interchange and more or less abstract forms of association’ (James 2006: 199). My analysis has not just simply dealt with the coming together of several
actors in their process of assembling the Chinese and the Italian ‘communities’. By moving across different spaces, expanding and restricting the lens of investigation, and involving specific times of brand intensification, I have aimed to expand the idea of assemblage rather than simply concluding from it.

In Chinatown/Haymarket, the community becomes the product of a wide consensus over the meaning of Chineseness that converges in the figure of the Chinese Youth League of Australia, consolidated by the collaboration of this cultural organisation with the Haymarket-based shopping centre Market City. Despite the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the notion of Chinese culture the internal operations of the CYL successfully mobilise a consistent Chineseness, which is negotiated through the navigation of a complex series of cultural heterogeneities and packaged in terms of a mythical, ancient Chinese culture. The Chinese New Year Festival becomes one of series of symbolic moments of ‘intensified branding’, where the community organisation is provided with the chance to perform. The way in which the efforts of the community organisation successfully align with the brand management strategy for the Chinatown precinct is also visible in its collaboration with Market City. The self-professed Chinatown shopping centre strengthens the consensus by sponsoring the activities of the CYL as a valued representative of the Chinese community in Chinatown. In this way it grants the community a symbolic stage, where the consensus can be echoed and staged in celebratory events, such as the 75th anniversary of the CYL. Lastly, a marketing strategy that includes the creation of a visual identity for the shopping centre includes the Chinese community as part of the ‘Asian twist’ and recruits it as ‘authentically local entertainment’. This is another way in which the community is assembled, in a context where the CYL can promote ‘Chinese culture’.

The initiatives promoted by FILEF in Leichhardt can be taken as starting point to observe how multiple conflicting interpretations of Italianess are not always able to be packaged as a uniform representation of ethnic identity. The internal differences, mostly related to political inclinations and the various regional/linguistic/cultural systems within the Italian cultural sphere, are highlighted in the cultural production that is sponsored by FILEF. A uniform, consistent
Italianness, however, finds expression through theatrical productions, where ethnicity is transmitted as a ‘traditional’ Italian practice in contexts of intensified branding sponsored by the Leichhardt Council. Theatre is the primary link between the operations of local Italian community organisations and the brand management strategy adopted for Leichhardt; the Norton Street Festa is one instance, whereby the aims of the community organisation align with the brand management strategy for the precinct. The way in which theatre-related activities produced by independent Leichhardt-based Italian groups like Fools in Progress have been denied access to the Cultural Centre in the Italian Forum, however, highlights a wider dissensus regarding the management of Italianness as part of the ethnic place brand for Leichhardt. This dissensus reveals the fragmented nature of the landscape of stakeholders involved in the promotion of Italianness in the precinct. In particular, there is a significant disjuncture between the management of the Italian Forum Cultural Centre and a communitarian expression of ethnic identity. This friction arises from diverging interpretations of Italianness as a style signifier, which becomes part of a global ‘high culture’, as opposed to the type of Italianness articulated via the community identity, the old fashioned ‘Little Italy’ concept, which is dismissed by the managerial group of the Cultural Centre as simply ‘ethnic culture’. Paradoxically, even though both expressions are embraced as part of the brand management strategy for the precinct, they reveal a huge discrepancy between the various local interpretations of Italianness.

Most importantly, the aim of this chapter connects with the overall scope of this thesis in showing that a comparative analysis between the production and application of ethnic place brands can illustrate ‘variations of ethnic phenomena’ (Wimmer 2013: 3) and instances of ethnic ‘re-signification’ (Dávila 2004: 6). Here, in particular, I have demonstrated that the ‘ethnic community’ is at the same time an ethnic groupist component (Brubaker 2002) pragmatically appropriated in place branding practices, and a malleable concept that needs to take into consideration how ever-changing assemblages reconstitute themselves around the strategies adopted for different precincts. It is on the potential of comparative analysis to reinscribe the relations of ethnicity and/in the city starting from the analysis of ethnic place brands that I now wish to shift my attention in order to conclude this work.
Conclusion: Comparative Urbanism and Ethnic Place Brands

8.1 Introduction

In this thesis I have analysed the practice of place branding applied to the Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt precincts as a way to produce an account of contemporary Sydney that does not fall prey to essentialising narratives of ethnic diversity and bounded conceptions of urban space. I have developed a theoretical framework and discussed empirical data to ‘better understand the subtleties of how identities are shaped, experienced, negotiated and performed in the city’ (Jacobs 2008: 243), while trying to show ‘a sensitivity to heterogeneity and an ability to discern the multiply mediated logics of urbanism’ (ibid: 245). My focus on ethnic place brands is an attempt to shift away from groupist and bounded ideas of ethnicity (as for example in the case of Chineseness and Italanness as embodied essences of ‘diasporic communities’) and to move toward a more relational, networked and assembled conception of how ethnicity is made to ‘stabilise’ (Latour 2005) in provisional shapes, spaces and moments. At the same time, I have hinted at the necessity to think about city spaces in a relational way, one that is largely effaced by spatial vocabularies of demarcated difference (such as ‘Chinatown’, ‘Little Italy’). This last chapter dwells on how the comparative approach adopted in this thesis has enriched the analysis of ethnicity and the city in a way that a singular case study could not have explored enough in depth.
McFarlane and Robinson write that, due to urban researchers’ interest in tracking traveling urban processes, urban studies is currently witnessing both a revival and a reorientation of comparative research (McFarlane and Robinson 2012: 765). The logic of the comparative method, according to Denters and Mossberger, is that ‘by comparing (...) countries, cities, or any other units that are most similar in some aspects, the researcher is able to control for the variables that are similar and isolate other variables as potential causes of observed differences’ (Denters and Mossberger 2006: 553, my italics). Put simply, this tactic of comparative analysis across units takes a specific instance of urban phenomenon, which is fixed in the test-case and compares it with other case studies. According to Anderson, ‘lurking inside the idea and logic [of comparing cities] seem[s] to be the buried presumption – that there is some essence internal to each city – (...) that [can] be elicited by the comparison’ (ibid: 9). Anderson refers to this essence in terms of ‘static essentialism’ (K. Anderson 2006: 8) and argues that it is a factor that risks erasing ‘the complexities of the histories and geographies of the cities under inspection’ (ibid).

A series of studies (Dunn 2003; Johnston et al. 2001; Poulsen et al. 2002) have adopted this tactic of comparison, where “indices of similarities” (...) are rallied, measurements of levels of congregation undertaken, and findings declared about patterns of assimilation, polarisation and pluralism of different ethnic groups relative to each other’ (K. Anderson 2006: 18). The same can be stated about the works on ethnicity and public space (Collins 2007, Collins and Kunz 2009) that I have discussed in chapter 1; here ethnicised urban places are selected across Sydney based on their ‘ethnic’ demographics and the differing perceptions of authenticity are compared. We can see here the type of static essentialism critiqued by Anderson: urban places defined by their ‘ethnic difference’ are juxtaposed, but the ‘essence’ that lies at the core of their selection for the comparative analysis remains un-interrogated. In this thesis I have suggested that the use of assemblage thinking is a way in which the static essentialism of thinking about ethnicity can be ‘dynamised’ in the analysis. This concluding chapter stretches this claim and suggests that

77 These include ‘the globalizing and “inter-referencing” of urban policy or models; the circulation of architectural, consultant, and developer expertise; the workings of transnational urban activism; or the shifting global resonances of urban cultures and milieu’ (McFarlane and Robinson 2012: 765).
comparative urbanism is another analytical tool that enriches this dynamic analysis of ethnicity and/in the city.

My argument is that the comparative analysis of ethnic place brands highlights the ‘productive inventiveness’ (K. Anderson 2006: 6) of urban places. As a matter of fact, the process that leads to their production and application to Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt suggests the existence of a similarity in the way in which these two urban places are revitalised, which is influenced by globally circulating cultural-economic entanglements and applied by means of the same process of ‘abstraction, association and spatial alignment’ described in chapter 2. However, my analysis has also significantly shown that the exploration of ethnic place brands needs to take into consideration the contingency of the places to which they are applied. Describing the malleability of the concept of ethnicity in Chinatown/Haymarket, in other words, makes sense only if juxtaposed to the rigidity of ethnicity as applied to the branding of Leichhardt, because the role of context-specific factors in shaping the ethnic place brand is revealed through the comparison – such as the precinct’s history (how did it become a precinct in the first place?), its current demographics (how has cultural differentiation impacted upon the formulation of the ethnic place brand?) and its geography (where is the precinct located? How are its boundaries framed?). Comparing, in this context, is better understood as a continuous shifting of the level of urban analysis, which looks at the ‘strongly interconnected nature of (…) urban phenomena’ (Robinson 2016: 40) – in my case the processes of revitalisation that target different locations and makes urban places ‘similar’ – while it simultaneously remains attuned to their peculiarity. The ‘comparative gesture’ (Robinson 2011) in this case is an attempt to understanding localised urban phenomena (ethnic place brands) ‘through elsewhere’ (Robinson 2016) by ‘placing insights gained in one context in relation to a multiplicity of urban experiences’ (ibid: 4).

To put it more simply, the comparative analysis adopted in this thesis has looked at specific parts of the city brought to the same level of analysis due to the similar process in which both are embedded; however, in comparing the production and application of two ethnic place brands, this thesis has not focussed on the ‘static essentialism’ that drives the similarity between
the two places (*why* are these precincts ethnicised?), but rather on the ‘inventive productiveness’ of these places (*how* are the two ethnic place brands produced and applied?). This fundamental difference is highlighted by the conclusion that I have drawn based on the empirical chapters, that place branding is a process which produces different outcomes depending on where the ethnic place brand is applied. The relevance of the comparative approach in this thesis is that it contributes to disentangling the straightforward equation of ethnicity and place by suggesting that ethnicity is not inherent in places, but rather a tool that is subject to a number of re-elaborations based on the contingencies of different brand management strategies.

### 8.2 Place Branding is not a Uniform Process

The comparative approach adopted in this thesis is ‘modest and disaggregated’ (K. Anderson 2006:10) in that it shows that ‘there are multiple urbanisms within and across cities’ (ibid: 12) and that the set of influences that give cities their dynamic character cannot be ‘folded into a singular logic that reduces their specificity from place to place (ibid: 13). I have demonstrated a way of tracing comparisons in a ‘flexible and analytically rigorous way’ (Robinson 2011: 16) with the hope to have added to a series of ‘methodological experiments’ (McFarlane and Robinson 2012: 768) that foreground ‘new urban imaginaries and understanding’ (ibid) of the complex relation between ethnicity and the city. I have started with the awareness that place branding practices rely on ethnicity as one of the tools that drive urban revitalisation projects and I have selected two precincts as the point of departure (not of arrival) of my analysis. From this point, the thesis has looked at the possibility to re-signify ethnicity (Dávila 2004) beyond static representations and to analyse space beyond its conceptualisation as a ‘static backdrop with fixed coordinates’ (Allen 2011:286) by framing the production of ethnic place brands as a differentiated process.

As we have seen, in Chinatown/Haymarket the branding of Chineseness creates an ambiguous precinct with blurred boundaries that is entangled in global, cultural and economic flows. Figure 35, a photograph taken in proximity to Town Hall during the 2014 celebrations of the Chinese
New Year Festival, illustrates how the effects of the ethnic place brand have significantly stretched beyond the confines of a demarcated precinct. The brand that drives the transformation of Chinatown/Haymarket is a Chineseness that morphs into multi-Asianness (within which an essentialised, orientalised Chineseness remains an integral component). Chineseness has been discussed as a flexible brand that confers complexity, vitality and dynamism to the precinct; it is managed by the convergence of an increasingly large network of stakeholders that embrace the ambiguities related to its meaning. While Dixon Street remains the designated ‘core’ of the ethnic experience of the precinct, an increasing porousness has characterised the revitalisation of Chinatown/Haymarket, which is transforming this part of the city into a space defined by a ‘multiplication of Asian mobilities, hybridities and trans-generational traces (...) [and that] exceeds all senses of enclosure’ (Anderson, forthcoming).

![Figure 36. A snapshot of the busy intersection of George and Druitt Street (outside the Chinatown/Haymarket ‘official boundaries’) during the 2014 celebrations of the Chinese New Year. Photograph by the author.](image)

The ethnic place brand for Leichhardt, on the other hand, is defined by the opposite characteristic: the ethnic theme of the precinct seems to be deemed to disappear due to the rigidity of the brand that has been applied to it in a context of increasing cultural differentiation.
This is based on two main components: a partisan version of Italianness rooted in the cultural dynamics of a local community defined by marked linguistic and political differences, and a cosmopolitan, sophisticated formulation of commodified Italian identity. These competing forms of Italianness are underlined by a series of tensions related to the politics of representation and by the frictions between the stakeholders involved in the mobilisation of ethnicity. They are highlighted, not reconciled, by the spatial division between Norton Street and the Italian Forum, two ‘stages’ for the brand that seem to be mutually exclusive. The application of ethnicity as a brand for Leichhardt, in other words, is fixed in the unresolved question of how to cope with complexity while maintaining ‘Little Italy’. Figure 36 is emblematic of the stubborn pursuit of a stereotyped Italianness displayed in an unsuccessful, highly thematised space. It depicts the improvised stage decorated with the Italian national flag, which was set up by a duo of street performers in an empty Italian Forum on a Sunday afternoon during my fieldwork. The woman seemed hesitant as I asked her if I could take a picture, but her partner intervened and urged her to strike a pose and ‘pretend to sing something Italian’ to conform with the tourist expectation of ‘The Italian World’.

Figure 37. A street performer sets up an improvised stage in ‘The Italian World’. Photograph by the author.
This thesis has borrowed instruments from assemblage thinking to tease out and dynamise the meaning of ethnicity in the two precincts. Interpreting Chineseness and Italianness as assemblages has worked to destabilise the meaning of ethnicity and/in the city and it has proposed two main ways of looking at ethnic phenomena: the first investigates the precarious assemblages drawn together at particular conjunctures that make of ethnicity a significant category; the second interprets ethnicity as managed tensions between essentialism and complexity framed by the particular aims of the brand management strategies. By looking comparatively at the production of two ethnic place brands, a specific way of analysing ethnic phenomena has been proposed in this thesis that discusses the similar relations between stakeholders involved in the branding processes in different parts of the precincts and at specific times. This is a type of ‘moving within and between’ (Simone 2010: 2) that has taken the focus of my comparative approach onto a complex – at the same time abstract and concrete – process that makes two otherwise distant parts of Sydney constantly refer to each other given the way in which ethnic place brands are produced and applied to them.

8.3 Comparing is a Way to Simplify Complexity

I have repeatedly mentioned throughout the thesis that the production and application of ethnic place brands involves acknowledging the ‘disjoined, messy and irregular’ series of ethnic representations that are mobilised by assemblages of human and non-human actors. This understanding is particularly rooted in the acknowledgement that ethnic place brands are embedded in complex systems of representation and value production (Lury 2004). In this context I have argued that ethnicity can be analysed only when a disparate set of research strategies are adopted. In chapter 4, for instance, I have made the argument that street ethnography is a ‘creative’ response that allows responding in practice to this complex phenomenon. In this concluding chapter, I want to suggest that a comparative approach is an analytical filter that enables a mode of ‘conceptual and discursive simplification’ (Ang 2011: 788) to their analysis. My point here is that the comparison adopted in this thesis has a pragmatic
methodological outcome in that it allows ‘plotting a course through’ (ibid) a complex phenomenon.

The simplification of complexity through comparison has involved tracing parallels between the two case studies or, as I have understood it throughout my research process, finding a way to construct a symmetric scaffolding for the analysis of the two ethnic place brands. A comparative perspective has validated the data produced throughout the thesis because it has shown that there are recurrent branding strategies and images that are utilised for these two ethnic place brands and that, in both cases, an ethnographic engagement with the production and application of ethnic place brands sheds light on more nuanced, complex and changing relations that are not captured by the straightforward equation of ethnicity and place. To put it in Abu-Lughod’s terms, I have chosen ‘a causal path that leads across levels of analysis, acknowledging the different contribution each level makes to explaining similarities and differences’ (2007: 403). Abu-Lughod describes the complexity of the comparative endeavour as one that begins ‘at the widest macroeconomic level, (…) then examines how common changes are filtered through (…) different ideologies,’ to conclude by tracing ‘how [consequent] policies affect different groups’ (ibid).

My comparative analysis has unfolded in a similar way: I have started by describing a globally inspired model of urban revitalisation (the emergence of the precinct and the entanglement of city and culture) that is applied to two different cases (Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt). This, as I have shown, has specific consequences for the understanding of ethnicity starting from the observation of how ethnic place brands are constructed and how they impact social relations at different levels. Following Robinson’s argument that ‘the choice of the scale of analysis needs to be carefully justified in relation to the particular study, rather than assumed a priori as the basis for comparative thinking (Robinson 2011: 14) the two precincts have been selected because it is here that a series of similar forces of ethnic representation and value production converge, that can be traced back to a network of stakeholders.
Both precincts, for example, have been discursively framed in a specific context of urban development that has driven processes of revitalisation based on ethnic brands: the ‘priority precinct’ discussed in chapter 5, and the ‘strategic precinct’ in chapter 6 are discursive expedients to highlight the constructed specificity of the two urban places and inscribe them in a specific context of urban growth driven by the claim that, among a series of urban areas defined by cultural points of differentiation, the uniqueness of Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt is their ethnic ‘theme’. In chapter 3 I have explored how these points of ‘competitive differentiation’ (Anholt 2006) have been similarly reworked through multiple discourses on ethnicity and/in the city to become a tool of urban regeneration. Secondly, the branding strategies that involve Chineseness and Italianness produce the same pool of images of both essentialised, groupist difference and static space: I have dwelled, in particular, on a specific spatial reorganisation of the two precincts focussed on the imposition of simplistic ideas (Ang 2011) such as ‘the heart of the precinct’ and the ‘ethnic community’.

The modality of the application of the two ethnic place brands, too, reveals relevant parallels in terms of the branding tools utilised. For instance, art and mapping have been discussed as instruments to achieve the branded image for both precincts, while having differing outcomes: whereas in Chinatown/Haymarket public art installations highlight the ambiguity of a putative Chineseness, in Leichhardt the theatrical performances work to strengthen an essentialised, uniform Italianness displayed in Norton Street. Lastly, the idea of ‘brand intensification’ is similarly considered in the two ethnic place brands by means of big celebrations such as the Chinese New Year Festival and the Norton Street Festa. With this idea I have described the process that takes several dimensions of the brand on a larger scale: from the geographies that it activates, to the commodities that are made to circulate, and the impacts that these moments of brand intensification have on the way in which ethnicity is understood by the economic actors who are active in the precincts. I have referred to this last issue in particular with the idea of ‘shared narrative’ and I have shown that the type of ‘flexible’ brand applied to Chinatown/Haymarket celebrates ambiguous, open-ended and hybrid forms of identification, while the ‘rigidity’ of Leichhardt’s ethnic place brand reinforces a narrative of decline once the
precinct transitions back to a state of normality after ethnic carnivalesque events. Methodologically, the intensification of the ethnic place brand has been a fundamental focus of the exploration of the two ethnic place brands and it has shown how, by starting from cultural events it is possible to plug into a wide network of institutions, actors and practices that assemble the ‘ethnic community’.

Chapter 7, in particular, has highlighted how these assemblages are formed around specific actors that play a paramount role in the production of the ethnic place brands. These are the shopping centre Market City in the case of Chinatown/Haymarket, and the Italian Forum Cultural Centre in Leichhardt. The analysis of how the ‘community’ is assembled around these spaces has shed light on two other relevant issues connected to the comparative analysis. The first, as I have explored at length in chapter 4, is that the type of cultural capital brought by the researcher to the field shapes the degree of access and exclusion in relation to a number of fieldwork sites; the second is that there is a significant difference related to the temporal dimension of the mobilisation of ethnic place brands in the two precincts. This factor leads me to include in this concluding chapter a brief reflection on the fact that my description of the ethnic place brands is a ‘temporal simplification’ of how ethnic place brands are mobilised; my account, in other words, is a snapshot fixed in time, which necessarily underplays the fact that ethnic place brands are ‘partial, provisional and indefinite [assemblages], with uncertain and indeterminate outcomes’ (Ang 2011: 779-780).

8.4 Assemblages Change

Things and people come and go, intensify and withdraw their engagements and, in the end, every arrangement is temporary. Connections break down, and collections generate unanticipated outcomes, penetrate across territories and situations for which they are unprepared. Because certain collections aim to build more monumental, inclusive, efficient, all-encompassing, and far-reaching operations, they also bring together larger numbers of heterogeneous elements, processes, and histories into their ambit. Instead of proficiently coordinating these different compositional elements into a regular and thus predictable pattern of interaction, the very power of these operations destabilised the relationships the collected elements have with other environments and networks. Rather than conveying stability, these major urban developments impart a sense of their own temporariness and insufficiency (Simone 2010: 8)
In *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar*, Simone (2010) describes different types of ‘cityness’ understood as the ‘capacity for [cities’] different people, spaces, activities, and things to interact in ways that exceed any attempt to regulate them’ (2010: 3). His way of comparing cities does not start from a bounded conception of spaces and culture, but treats the city ‘as a thing in the making’ (ibid). The comparative effort that I have undertaken in this thesis draws inspiration from Simone’s problematisation of the ‘units’ of comparison and the way in which he juxtaposes different types of urban life without reproducing, through the comparative analysis, fixed conceptions of ‘city’. Similarly, I have attempted to talk about ethnic place brands without relying on the essentialised understanding that drives ‘conventional’ forms of comparative analysis (Robinson 2011; 2016) between spaces of difference in the city, but rather on the complex assemblages of ethnic representations converging within such spaces. Seen in this light, the idea of ‘regulation’ or ‘city coding’ (Simone 2010: 1), used by Simone to indicate all the instances by which the urban experience is structured in specific shapes, can be understood in the same guise in which I have looked at brand management strategies, which are nothing but precarious attempts to ‘fix’ heterogeneous representations of difference into consistent images through the collaborative effort of a wide network of stakeholders. The different ways in which ‘cityness’ is regulated into ‘city’, in Simone’s view, risks ‘wiping out those confident portrayals of a city capable of taking on the unexpected, of dealing with almost anything that anyone brings to it’ (ibid: 13). What the author wants to describe here is the opposite of regulation, fixity and all the static features that make up cities as ‘real deals’ (ibid). To an equally important extent, I want to consider the temporal partiality of my own analysis, and briefly reflect on the way in which the assemblages that I have described have kept transforming after the end of my research. The images that feed into the brand management strategies that I have described, I argue, are temporary stabilisations of ethnicity that constantly change.

In stark contrast with the past, for instance, the 2016 celebrations of the Sydney Chinese New Year have not been characterised by the iconic Twilight Parade due to the closing of the CBD’s main artery George Street for the ongoing expansion of the light rail system (Gorman 2015, Needham 2015). The redevelopment of Sydney’s Entertainment Centre into a mixed-use
development and part of a $3.4 billion revitalisation of Darling Harbour has also forced the organising committee to look at other parts of the city for the unfolding of the celebrations. For the first time, in other words, the event has not been concentrated in the lower end of George Street, with the focus on Haymarket that I have described in chapter 5. The centrepiece of the 2016 Festival has been the installation of 12 giant lanterns representing the signs of the lunar zodiac that created an illuminated pathway across the city and that bypassed any notion of a ‘symbolic centre’. The lanterns have been scattered through a range of locations across the City of Sydney LGA – from Circular Quay to Martin Place, from Pitt Street to Queen Victoria Building – resulting in the activation of an exciting urban labyrinth made of broadened footpaths, beautified laneways and underground passages connected to pedestrian malls. The Festival, in other words, is defined less by the pre-determined pathways (like the George Street Parade through the City centre ending next to Market Place) and related more to the multiplication of stages of celebration across the City.

Furthermore, the launch party of the Festival in proximity to Sydney Opera House – featuring spectacular dance acts performed by professional crews, live music and a beautiful firework show framed by the Sydney Harbour – has taken the place of the more community oriented celebrations in Belmore Park in previous years, which included amateur performances of community groups coordinated by the Chinese Youth League. A representative of the CYL, whom I met during the 2016 celebrations, minimised on the loss of the Twilight Parade, but made sad remarks on how the importance of the community organisation has been drastically diminished due to the professionalisation of the overall Festival.

In Leichhardt, after the meeting with the appointed administrators described in chapter 7, the Surry Hills based acting school Actor Centre Australia (ACA) took on the lease of the Italian Forum Cultural Centre and has been given the official role of managers of the cultural facility since mid-January 2014. The Cultural Centre, in other words, changed administration (for the first time a non-Italian one), but it remained without an official owner. The sale of the asset happened almost one year after, following a number of other meetings that involved local
residents, policy makers and exponents from Italian local organisations. The Cultural Centre was officially sold to the Italian community organisation Co.As.It (see chapter 6) in November 2014 for the sum of $2.8 million (Koziol, 2014). After the sale, a media release signed by the Leichhardt Mayor was published on the Co.As.It webpage. This read that: ‘the Council has worked long and hard to save the Cultural Centre for the community. (...) The unanimous decision by Leichhardt Council [to sell the Cultural Centre] means that Co.As.It. can make a permanent home for the Italian community on Norton Street in Leichhardt’ (www.coasit.org.au, accessed 6th January 2015, my italics). The sale to Co.As.It. initially seemed to bring stability to the fate of the Italian Forum. However, the passage of property created an additional problem, since the structure was now owned by one organisation, while being bound to a lease agreement to another party. The tensions related to the use of the structure and the rent price of the Cultural Centre increasingly became a bone of contention between Co.As.It. and the Actor Centre and eventuated in another ‘legal stoush’ (Carey, 2014).

One of the conditions for the lease to the Actor Centre was that, in conformity with the Constitution of the Italian Forum, the company should ‘afford opportunities and facilities for the exhibition and encouragement of and instruction in art, literature, music, science, language and culture, and particularly whether directly or indirectly that of Italian origin or connection’ (Italian Forum Ltd 1988: 1). The new management of the Cultural Centre became the perfect opportunity for Alice’s Commedia dell’Arte company, Fools in Progress, to finally claim its right to access the structure. The festival of Italian-Australian culture that she was organising at the time of my fieldwork eventually saw the light as a collaboration between Fools in Progress, FILEF, and the National Italian-Australian Women Association. By 2016, the Double Belonging Festival has been celebrated at the Cultural Centre for two consecutive years already and it has been sponsored by ACA.

The changing dynamics around the Chinese New Year Festival and the Italian Forum Cultural Centre lead to a number of conclusions. The increasing professionalisation of the Chinese New Year Festival can be read as a consequence of the Festival becoming a more general, city-wide
event. The dispersal of urban spaces activated by the 2016 celebrations suggests that new types of assemblages need to be drawn to sustain a distinctive image of Chineseness or multi-Asianness connected to the Chinatown/Haymarket precinct. In fact, the scattering of the celebrations across the city poses the question of whether or not the Festival belongs to a specific precinct anymore and, if not, what the consequences are for the ethnic place brand for Chinatown/Haymarket. Furthermore, the shifting role of the CYL from a key actor in charge of orchestrating the participation of smaller Chinese community organisations to a minor actor in an increasingly more professional Festival implies that new stakeholder-assemblages are being created.

The changing management body of the Italian Forum Cultural Centre, on the other hand, shows how the dissensus that I have described in chapter 7 has morphed into a new assemblage that sees Fools in Progress passing from a marginalised actor to a privileged interlocutor between local Italian cultural organisations and the Actor Centre. As a FILEF leader mentioned during a conversation, the relationship between the two parties is mutually beneficial, since the acting school can justify its legitimate presence in the Cultural Centre and fend off the ‘attacks’ of Co.As.I to reclaim the complete usage of the facility. Furthermore, the participation of the National Italian-Australian Women Association as one of the organisers of the Double Belonging Festival introduces a new main actor in the assemblage of the ‘Italian community’, while the repositioning of FILEF from the margin of the issues around the Cultural Centre to an active stakeholder suggests that the cultural organisation has accepted the role of ‘representing Italianness’ beyond the fragmented and politicised versions that it has tended to advance during its meetings (see chapter 7).

By mentioning these changes in the conclusion of this thesis I do not want to invalidate my findings or frame my discussion in a context of total partiality that admits impotence in the analysis of ethnicity. On the contrary, the transient nature of the assemblages and the provisional unities achieved by ethnic place brands reinforce both my comparative approach and my overall argument. Robinson suggests that a new and expanded ‘comparative gesture’
must include ‘new, non-territorial foundations’ and ways of thinking about the spatiality of the
city itself ‘as a site of assemblage, multiplicity and connectivity’ (Robinson 2011: 13). My way of
looking comparatively at the ways in which two ethnic place brands are produced and applied
draws on this perspective; it highlights that ‘the ways in which cities inhabit one another often
have less to do with relationships that can be mapped in physical space – such as flow of
dispersion or location – and more to do with the experiential and imaginative ways in which
places are drawn together or kept apart’ (ibid: 16). Here I am suggesting that the ‘new territorial
foundations’ discussed by Robinson are translated in my work by means a specific relational way
of addressing the spatialisation of ethnicity and the mobilisation of ethnic images that ‘prompts
us to think (…) about such things as scale and territory, networks and connections in a less rigid
manner’ (Allen 2011: 284).

8.5 Towards New Vocabularies to Describe the Urban

What we are attempting to do is to redraw the map of the city in such a way as to show (…) new
channels of disempowerment and empowerment. Crucially, this task involves charting
spatialities, which exceed the old territorial stereotypes in which one scale intersects or nests
within another. In other words, a good deal of what is needed in order to understand the
modern city consists of the invention of sociospatial vocabularies that can unlock new insights
(Amin and Thrift 2002: 77 my italics)

By making the point that the complexity of ethnic phenomena needs analytical and
methodological strategies to enable their exploration beyond a static understanding of ethnicity
and bounded notions of space, this thesis has taken part in an ‘imaginative’ exercise that looks
for new ways of conceptualising a ‘city’, one which ‘takes circulation, hybridity and multiplicity
as key urban moments, and fixed boundaries as temporary allegiances and alignments’ (Amin
and Thrift 2002: 77). According to Amin and Thrift, this is the type of ‘cityness’ (to return to
Simone’s argument) the needs to be captured ‘without any corresponding desire to reduce the
heterogeneity of urban phenomena to any essence of systemic integrity’ (ibid: 8), but rather with
the intent of describing a place with no ‘completeness, no centre, no fixed parts (…) an
amalgam of often disjoined processes and social heterogeneity, a place of near and far
connections, a concatenation of rhythms; always edging in new directions’ (ibid). This goal, as I will suggest in the next section, is reflected in the vocabulary that has emerged from the approach that I have used in this thesis to describe the production of ethnic place brands in the Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt precincts, which has focussed on the relations that sustain the mobilisation of ethnicity.

The description of Chinatown/Haymarket as a ‘flexible platform’, for example, has demonstrated that the branding of Chineseness produces an urban space that transcends the bounded conceptions of ‘Chinatown’; it privileges the networked collaboration between a number of stakeholders that re-interpret the meaning of the (ethnic) theme of the urban area targeted by revitalisation process and that open the space to multiple uses and new pathways that contest the immobility of a ‘baseline Chineseness’. Similarly, the idea of the ‘street in flux’ to refer to Norton Street invalidates the straightforward association of ethnicity and space performed, for example, by ‘the heart of the precinct’; it implies the understanding of multiple, incompatible ‘enclavic stages’ (Edensor 2000) that are being shaped according to essentialist conceptualisation of Italianess despite the increasingly visible differentiation of the business community and the local population. The ‘flexible platform’ and ‘the street in flux’, in other words, are concepts that propose a way of interpreting the geographies of the precincts in ways that ‘push up against the limits of conventional geometric thinking’ (Allen 2011: 287). They highlight how ‘we should not take any concept of space for granted’ (Paasi 2011: 301) and strive toward a ‘perpetual’ conceptualisation of ‘open yet contextual worlds’ (ibid).

The same can be stated by discussing the tools used for place branding purposes: here, an ethnic essentialist language represented by terms such as Chinese and Italian ‘cultures’ and, Chinese and Italian ‘communities’ as the images of ethnic difference that confer the ‘ethnic quality’ to the precincts has been replaced with ideas such as ‘the echo effect’ and ‘electro-shocks of Italianess’ (in the Leichhardt case), and ‘the Asian twist’ (in relation to Chinatown/Haymarket). These ideas open up new windows to think about how ethnicity and urban spaces become provisionally entangled, as instead of taking for granted the spatial containment of the ethnic
‘essence’, they refer to a multiplicity of stakeholders (policy makers, business chamber representatives, local shopkeepers, marketing teams, community organisations) that coordinate their efforts and mobilise ethnicity as an assemblage of human and non-human factors (marketing pamphlets, soccer paraphernalia) at specific moments of ‘intensified branding’ (the celebrations of the Chinese New Year and the Soccer World Cup) through symbolic practices (the lion dance performed by CYL, the ceremony for the citizenship award to a soccer player). Here, following Allen once again, ‘territory is conceived as an achievement, not as a given; something that is actively produced and practised, relative rather than absolute in its geometry’ (Allen 2011: 286).

The point that I am trying to make here is that the socio-spatial vocabularies highlighted by my analysis of ethnic place brands speak more to complex, networked relations than to fixed ideas of territory. To return to a point that I made in chapter 2, where I argued that precincts are ‘points of departure’ for the analysis of ethnic place brands, the modalities in which ethnicity is mobilised in Chinatown/Haymarket and Leichhardt suggests that, in this relational way of looking at ethnicity, ‘the way networks hold certain things together, is considered more important (...) than either territorial or scalar integrity’ (ibid 288). The search for a different vocabulary to describe the relations between ethnicity and the city ultimately links to the discussion that I have started in this chapter about comparativism as an analytical lens for the simplification of complex phenomena with pragmatic implications; it is a conscious attempt to return to a methodological reflection, with which I shall conclude.

Framed in terms of ethnic place brands, the relations between ethnicity and the city can be conceptualised beyond ‘patchworks of different communities’ (Amin and Thrift 2002: 81) and toward ‘a swirl of forces and intensities, which traverse and bring into relation all kinds of actors (...) in all manner of combinations of agency’ (ibid: 83). My attempt throughout this thesis to flag heterogeneity is not just ‘a simple statement of multiplicity’ (ibid: 3), nor, the pursuit of complexity as an end itself (Ang 2011). Rather, they are the recognition that ‘urban life is the irreducible product of mixture’ (Amin and Thrift 2002: 3) and that ‘on a daily basis, in urban
contexts, an ever-changing set of networks, interests, encounters and relationships define the notion of space [and ethnicity], which in turn become (...) complex construction[s] pointing at different directions’ (ibid: 10).
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