

Urban Studies

<http://usj.sagepub.com/>

Placemaking in a translocal receiving community: The relevance of place to identity and agency

Kelly Main and Gerardo Francisco Sandoval

Urban Stud published online 5 March 2014

DOI: 10.1177/0042098014522720

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://usj.sagepub.com/content/early/2014/03/05/0042098014522720>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

Urban Studies Journal Foundation

Additional services and information for *Urban Studies* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://usj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://usj.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Mar 5, 2014

[What is This?](#)

Placemaking in a translocal receiving community: The relevance of place to identity and agency

Urban Studies

1–16

© Urban Studies Journal Limited 2014

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0042098014522720

usj.sagepub.com



Kelly Main

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, USA

Gerardo Francisco Sandoval

University of Oregon, USA

Abstract

Recent case studies of receiving communities have established that translocal immigrants are transforming their neighbourhoods, producing spaces of identity. While these studies have focused on the reshaping of local power dynamics, less attention has been given to the spaces, themselves, and the qualities that influence identity. This study utilises place identity literature, from environmental psychology, to explore the remaking of MacArthur Park, a public space at the centre of a Mexican and Central American immigrant community in Los Angeles, California. We find that new 'place identities' are influenced by the specific physical, social, and cultural elements of the park, as study participants attempt to maintain identities influenced by important places in their sending communities. The result is a park that has emotional significance for participants, significance that leads to agency – everyday and political practices – to protect the park, sometimes in the face of immense challenges.

Keywords

Latino immigrants, place identity, public space, receiving communities, translocal agency

Received 5 September 2012; accepted 10 December 2013

Placemaking accentuates the importance of locality and gives 'concrete meaning to the phrase "globalization from below"' (Smith and Eade, 2009: 3). Scholars have also begun to identify translocal immigrants' reshaping of receiving communities and to characterise their actions as a form of resistance/agency (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011; Miraftab, 2012). Their research traces everyday practices that assert and produce translocal spaces of identity, sometimes in the face of

open rejection, marginalisation, and racism. Through these practices, sometimes as simple yet challenging as the act of being present (Bayat, 2010), or the acts of playing sports (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011), translocal

Corresponding author:

Kelly Main, California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo, City and Regional Planning, 1 Grand Avenue, San Luis Obispo, CA 93407, USA.

Email: kdomain@calpoly.edu

actors create places of 'belonging' in their receiving community (Hou, 2013). Although this literature highlights the importance of place as the focus of immigrants' reshaping of local power dynamics, it pays less attention to the difference that the qualities of place make in immigrants' transformation of receiving communities.

Studies of receiving communities have also reviewed the evolution of identity in specific localities, finding that initially immigrants tend to look for places where they can re-establish their traditional cultural identities and, ultimately, where they can form new hybrid identities (Butcher, 2009). For instance, immigrants establish spaces and activities, such as businesses and traditional religious ceremonies, and a social and cultural environment where they 'share common frames of reference' to their sending communities (Butcher, 2009: 1366). In the process of interacting with the host culture and/or immigrants from other sending communities, new frames of reference for identity are created. In these studies, place is valued for the social connections and activities it provides; however, specific ways in which the physical qualities of place, itself, matters are still relatively unexplored. For instance, how might the qualities of place factor into the new hybrid identities? How might the characteristics of places affect their significance to newer community members? Scholars continue to conceive of transnational mobility as a force that 'unsettles associations between people and place' (Butcher, 2009: 1353), despite limited documentation of the nature of associations with new places.

This study intends to explore the associations of people and place in a translocal community – associations related to identity and agency – utilising place identity literature from environmental psychology. This literature has explored and documented the importance of place in the formation of self- and group-identities and the need to maintain a

continuity of one's own place-based identities by seeking out or recreating places important in one's past (Cooper Marcus, 1992; Dixon and Durrheim, 2004; Droseltis and Vignoles, 2010; Proshansky et al., 1983; Twigger-Ross et al., 2003; Vignoles et al., 2000). In ethnic and immigrant neighbourhoods, studies have documented the ways in which specific places become 'imbued with public meaning' (Hummon, 1992), constitute 'an important aspect of an immigrant's place identity' (Mazumdar et al., 2000: 320), and strengthen the bonds between places and people (Altman and Low, 1992; Hummon, 1992; Low, 1992, 2000; Main, 2012; Manzo, 2003; Mazumdar et al., 2000; Milligan, 1998). More recently, this literature has begun to look at the relationship between place-based identities and civic engagement to protect places in which identity is embedded (Bonaiuto et al., 2002; Devine-Wright and Howes, 2010; Lewicka, 2005).

Using both quantitative and qualitative data, we intend to trace the relationship between place, identity, and agency among translocal immigrants using a public space, MacArthur Park, in Los Angeles, California. To do this we will assess: (1) the specific social, cultural, and physical elements of place – original and transformed – associated with identity and the identities – traditional and hybrid – described by participants; (2) the significance of the park for participants; and (3) the ways that agency influences/is influenced by elements and identities in the park. MacArthur Park is an appropriate place to review these relationships, as it is used by a primarily foreign-born population, approximately 50% of whom have lived in the neighbourhood for fewer than 10 years. While both park users and other local community members have immigrated from a number of Latin American countries, including Mexico, El Salvador, and Guatemala (US Census Bureau, 2010), the community has begun to identify itself as Central American (*Los Angeles Times*, 7 May 2007).

Most recently the park has gained attention as a focal point for immigrants' rights groups, but the park is also used for a number of prohibited/contested everyday activities, including informal soccer and vending. Identity and agency are evolving in and around the park, and this will make it possible for us to gauge the significance of these factors and this space in the everyday lives of its users.

Translocal placemaking and identity in receiving communities

Translocalism is increasingly accepted as 'an analytically nuanced way in which to think about contemporary forms of global mobility' (Conradson and Latham, 2005: 227). This framework provides a lens through which to view socioeconomic and cultural relationships that link sending with receiving communities via connections of finance, communication, and socio-political relationships (Carling, 2008; Landolt, 2003; Orozco, 2005; Portes et al., 2002; Smith, 2001; Vertovec, 2003; Waldinger, 2010). Michael Peter Smith makes a call to 'ground' globalisation by identifying the 'translocal (i.e. local to local) placemaking connections and processes' (Smith, 2001: 169). Social actors develop new forms of political capital as they 'actively pursue such strategies as transnational migration, transnational social movements, or transnational economic or cultural entrepreneurship to sustain or transform resources, including cultural resources' (Smith, 2001: 167).

Recent studies focusing on receiving communities explain the ways that new forms of political capital help translocal immigrants transform their new neighbourhoods (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011; Miraftab, 2012; Sandoval, 2013). The shaping of local politics and placemaking happens via networks on the ground that interact with more translocal networks of meaning and power (Sandoval, 2013; Smith,

2005: 235). Translocal processes 'form a multifaceted connection that links transnational actions, the localities to which they direct flows, and their points of origin' (Smith, 2001: 169). This translocal placemaking process consists of conflict, difference, and social negotiation, as immigrants reshape their new social spaces and places (Smith, 2001: 212). Translocal placemaking is a process of immigrants' exerting agency on their locality (via conflict, difference, negotiation) and the production of power, meaning, and new identities; that is, 'placemaking is a vehicle for cross-cultural learning, individual agency, and collective action' (Hou, 2013: 7). Rios et al. (2012) conceive of place as:

territorialized local communities, collective memories associated with territory, claims of authenticity by local actors, phenomenological associations with locales, and social relations among people in territorial communities. In other words, place is a setting for the everyday, the location of ideas and practices, and identity produced by place. (Rios et al., 2012: 5)

Along with documenting more formal forms of agency, studies of receiving communities have begun to trace the ways that immigrants' everyday practices are forms of agency, sometimes used to forge spaces of identity (Ehrkamp, 2005; Glick Schiller and Basch, 1995; Smith and Guarnizo, 1998; Miraftab, 2012; Smith, 2001). Miraftab's (2012) study of a rural meatpacking community in Illinois showed ways that Latino and African translocal immigrants reconstructed their identity in the receiving town to exert their control over racialised space. Building on Bayat's (2010) discussion of resistance as 'quiet encroachments' and 'the art of presence', Miraftab characterises the everyday instances of creating spaces of identity as resistance; these efforts are not large political acts against the state, but struggles to legitimise spaces of identity. However, while

the translocal scholarship documents the ways that agency, both formal and everyday, remakes place, it leaves relatively unexplored the ways that specific elements of place – social, cultural, and physical elements – may influence identity or agency.

The identities being asserted in receiving communities, whether through formal or everyday means, are not restricted to the cultural identities associated with the homeland of transmigrants. While evidence exists that migrants first form communities that adhere to normative cultural identity (Ommundsen, 2003; Werbner, 2005), ultimately there is a re-evaluation of identity that produces some degree of hybridity (Butcher, 2009; Werbner, 2005). This re-evaluation is ‘instigated by transnational mobility’s everyday cross-cultural interactions’ (Butcher, 2009: 1356–1357), interactions which challenge the everyday practices, values, and relationships that are components of identity (Butcher, 2009: 1354). The hybrid identities developed are neither singular (Hannerz, 1996) nor static (Butcher, 2009; Dolby and Cornbleth, 2001), but instead reflect the evolving multiple worlds in which identity is being maintained, re-evaluated, and asserted.

In translocal studies, place is important to identity because it provides a locale for social and cultural connections through which identity and belonging can be maintained, renegotiated and/or asserted (Butcher, 2009; van Liempt, 2011). Communal space, whether privately- or publicly-owned, is identified as a space where social and cultural connections can be made. Power dynamics related to rights to public space are identified as central to these connections in public space being possible, but beyond access very little else is said about the place itself (Levitt and Lamba-Nieves, 2011; Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995). In fact, studies of translocal migration continue to juxtapose mobility and place because, even as translocal networks ‘presuppose a common identity’ embedded in place

(Vertovec, 2001: 573), transnational mobility ‘unsettles associations between people and place’ (Butcher, 2009: 1353). The implication is that, while translocal placemaking is linked to the process of identity formation, ‘our affiliation with, and attachment to, place may not be tied to a fixed or singular location’ (Hou, 2013: 6). An exception to this is Ehrkamp’s (2005) study of Turkish immigrants in Marxloh, Germany. Ehrkamp (2005) documents the wide variety of places, including communal spaces of their neighbourhood, in which immigrants ‘place’ their identities and forge a sense of belonging. They accomplish this through everyday practices – establishing Turkish businesses, such as teahouses – and political practices, such as the development of mosques. Ehrkamp finds that through assertions of identity, immigrants create a new identity that becomes embedded and associated with place and, as a result, experience attachment to the places they have created (2005: 361).

Place identity and local action

Place identity literature, coming primarily from the field of environmental psychology, offers a lens through which to ground our understanding of place-based identity and agency in translocal placemaking. This literature reviews the underlying motivations for place-based identity and the role that the specific elements of place play in its formation, maintenance, and expression. More recently, this literature has begun to trace the relationship between place identity and civic or political action. Thus, while the translocal literature explores the role of agency in the production of spaces of identity, the place identity literature explores the influence of place on identity, the emotional significance of place, and the corresponding elements of place as a motivation for local action.

Defined as a concept by Proshansky et al. (1983), place identity expanded on traditional

ideas about the development of self-identity to include the influence that places play in its formation: 'In effect, the subjective sense of self is defined and expressed not simply by one's relationship to other people, but also by one's relationships to the various physical settings that define and structure day-to-day life' (Proshansky et al., 1983: 57). Cooper Marcus (1992) theorised place's link to self- and group-identity through three themes: control, manipulation, and continuity with the past. Physical reminders of the past allow one to maintain a sense of continuity with significant places of the past, so that the sense of control and identity experienced at an earlier age is supported by reproducing the essence of a significant past-environment. Continuity with past places is key to an individual's psychological well-being because of the significant role past places play in the formation and maintenance of self- and group-identity (Dixon and Durrheim, 2004; Droseltis and Vignoles, 2010; Twigger-Ross et al., 2003; Vignoles et al., 2000).

Place identity research has documented the ways that places become 'imbued with public meaning', and as such come to symbolise distinct social and cultural identities (Hummon, 1992). Research indicates that the personal and group identities associated with and communicated through the local physical environment strengthen the bonds between people and places (Altman and Low, 1992; Hummon, 1992; Low, 1992, 2000; Main, 2012; Manzo, 2003; Mazumdar et al., 2000; Milligan, 1998). For instance, in Little Saigon in Orange County, California, where the architectural styles of past places of emotional importance have been recreated and/or modified, Mazumdar et al. (2000) demonstrated that social, cultural, and physical elements of place support identity and, in turn, engender a strong attachment to place. Public spaces can be particularly important in these communities if they are places where community members can gather freely, at-

length, celebrate, and even influence the permanent content of the space. Thus, specific places can be seen as constituting 'an important aspect of an immigrant's place identity enabling him/her to simultaneously remain connected to the places left behind and yet appropriating and forging significant new place ties' (Mazumdar et al., 2000: 320).

Recent empirical studies have begun to demonstrate that place identity appears to affect local action. Research looking at proposed changes to the physical environment in several communities found that the consequences of these changes upon local and regional identity affected whether locals' responses took the form of political action (Bonaiuto et al., 2002; Devine-Wright and Howes, 2010). Lewicka (2005) found a consistent link between civic participation and neighbourhood identification. Lewicka's findings are consistent with findings that a stronger sense of community and neighbourhood ties leads to action, including participation in grass-roots organisations (Perkins et al., 1996; Rivlin, 1987).

Case study site and research methodology

Site

This article draws on a case study of MacArthur Park, a park located in the heart of downtown Los Angeles' Central American community. MacArthur Park was chosen as the case study site as it permitted the study of a diverse translocal community's use of a large public space within a neighbourhood currently undergoing political change. The park, for which the neighbourhood is also named, is a product of the 19th century, meant to be a natural space for passive activities such as strolling and picnicking. Originally covering two contiguous city blocks, the 32-acre park is now divided into a northern half and southern half by a large

boulevard (Wilshire Boulevard) that extends from downtown Los Angeles to the Pacific Ocean. The southern half of the park includes a lake that is surrounded by grassy areas. The northern half of the park includes a children's play area, informal soccer fields, an amphitheatre, and a community centre. Conditions in the park mirror the transition of the neighbourhood from one of Los Angeles' first streetcar suburbs to its present state. The once pristine landscaping, lake, and pathways now suffer from some lack of maintenance, and, until recently, the park was a site for violent crimes and the regional drug trade. The revitalisation of the neighbourhood by the local immigrant community has also revitalised the park, where children playing soccer and locals strolling, picnicking, and people-watching are common occurrences.¹

The neighbourhood surrounding MacArthur Park, referred to as both the MacArthur Park neighbourhood and the Westlake area, is a low-income immigrant community one mile west of downtown Los Angeles. It is a location with many community-based organisations that serve the Latino immigrant community providing immigration advocacy work, health care services for the uninsured, affordable housing, and cultural services. This neighbourhood has not always been seen as a vibrant immigrant space. For most of the early 1980s to the mid-2000s, it was viewed, like MacArthur Park, as the violent epicentre of criminal activity in the city. It was a neighbourhood filled with drugs, gangs, and a local corrupt police force. The City of Los Angeles' redevelopment agency, in conjunction with the construction of a subway station, initiated a large-scale top-down redevelopment project in the late 1980s. This project threatened the immigrant social networks, businesses, and the housing market in the community. The immigrant community, using endogenous social, financial, political, and cultural capital, were able to transform the project to a

more generative revitalisation effort and hence save the neighbourhood from displacement (Sandoval, 2010).

Methods

An in-depth, revelatory case-study method was conducted, as the research project represented a critical test of a significant body of literature (translocal identity and agency) and revealed relatively unexplored or unknown phenomena (place-based identity and agency in a receiving Latino community) (Yin, 2003). The case study was conducted from December 2004 to the present and included in-depth interviews (38), semi-structured interviews/surveys (180), site observations, and a review of published and unpublished documents. Thirty-two in-depth, semi-structured interviews (32), lasting 1–1.5 hours each, were conducted with various stakeholders involved with either the park or the neighbourhoods' regeneration and development. These included local officials such as politicians, planning, transportation, and redevelopment staff, leaders of community-based organisations, owners of small businesses in the neighbourhood, police officials (including highly-ranked officers and those working the streets), residents of the neighbourhood, and users of the park. The translocal relationships in the Westlake area were targeted in these interviews.

Related to the park activity and agency, six in-depth, semi-structured interviews lasting up to four hours each, and 180 shorter, semi-structured interviews using a survey form, lasting anywhere from 20 to 45 minutes each, were conducted.² Statements intended to detect identity associated with the park and emotional meaning (discussed later) were taken from quantitative studies used to test place identity and attachment (Ryan, 2005; Hidalgo and Hernandez, 2001).

Observations of the park were completed over a three-year period using a behavioural

mapping procedure (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1995). The park was divided into eight activity areas, which were observed throughout the day and on both weekdays and weekends. A coding sheet was used to track demographics (who was using the park) and activities (the determination of activity areas, the variety of activities occurring in these areas, peak periods of use, length of stay, and who was participating in various activities). As current meanings of the park were negotiated within a historical and social context, formal studies and newspaper clippings and articles regarding the park and the neighbourhood were analysed.

Participants

The 180 visitors to MacArthur Park surveyed for this research project partially reflected the cultural and national identity of the surrounding neighbourhood: immigrant, Latino, and Mexican and Central American. Immigrant status proved to be one of the most significant differences between park-goers and the surrounding community. While park-goers were almost exclusively foreign born (97.8%), 65% of the surrounding population was foreign born (US Census Bureau, 2010). And while almost 50% of the park's population had arrived in the last 10 years, 26% of the surrounding population (40% of the neighbourhood's foreign born population) had arrived in the same time (US Census Bureau, 2010).

To identify the existence of translocal social ties (ties from receiving to sending communities), the participants were asked a number of questions about the location of their extended families and the current contact they have with them. Survey results confirm that many park-goers have significant family ties and frequent contact with their homeland, primarily through telephone use. The most significant survey findings were that:

- 75.3% of the survey participants indicated that the majority of their family members were still in their homeland;
- 93.9% (169) were still in frequent contact with their homeland (and all but five of those used the telephone), with 61% (100) in contact two to four times per month; and
- 73.7% (118 of 160) indicated that they planned to return home at least once each year, while 64.7% (110 of 170) had not returned to their homeland since arriving in the United States.

Park visitors indicated that they also access information about their home countries through local newspapers, radio, and television, which also broadcast stories of MacArthur Park back to their homelands. Local television reporters were frequently observed in the park; when questioned, several of them indicated that their reports on the community were broadcast in Mexico and Central America.

Findings

Park elements and place identity

Place identity literature suggests that to achieve continuity of identity, people will seek out or recreate places that remind them of important places from their past (Cooper Marcus, 1992; Mazumdar et al., 2000; Proshansky et al., 1983). One of the purposes of this study was to determine if elements of MacArthur Park reminded participants' of their sending communities and, if so, in what ways they might be remaking the park to recreate places from their past. In order to measure this, survey participants were asked to agree or disagree with the statement, 'MacArthur Park reminds me of native land'. Respondents who answered yes were asked to respond further with 'a little', 'some', or 'a great deal'. A significant majority (76.4%/136) of the respondents indicated

that the park reminded them of their homeland and 43.3% indicated that the park reminded them of places in their homeland 'a great deal'. If respondents indicated that the park reminded them of their homeland, they were asked the open-ended question 'why' and given an opportunity to list and discuss as many things as they wished.

Suggesting the possibility that places can be spaces of identity prior to their remaking, participants frequently mentioned (51.5% of responses) natural elements of the park (the lake, birds, grass, trees, and other creatures) as reminders of their homeland. Many participants confirmed that landscaping and other 'natural' elements of the park were strong reminders of public spaces at home. In extended interviews, participants who indicated that the park reminded them of their homeland were asked to further describe the similarities and differences. When Veronica, a 40-year-old woman who frequently brought her children to the park, was asked about similarities between MacArthur Park and the plaza she visited as a child, she answered: 'The plants, trees, and the peacefulness' (Park interviewee, summer 2007). Another interviewee, Hector, mentioned 'the birds and their singing' and 'the sound of the water' (Park interviewee, spring 2007). When explaining that MacArthur Park reminded him of his childhood, Rogelio recounted, 'We grew up in the countryside. As you know, in the countryside there is a lot of vegetation, a lot of trees. We had a ranch and our hobby was to go play in trees'. Results thus demonstrated that without any transformation, the natural physical elements of the park remind participants of past places with which they identify (Hummon, 1992; Milligan, 1998).

The importance of placemaking – the transformation of the social, cultural, and physical environment of the park (Butcher, 2009; Ehrkamp, 2005; Mazumdar et al., 2000) – was also confirmed by the survey

(41% of respondents mentioned social or cultural elements as reminding them of their homeland). Social and cultural reminders of home included other park-goers. The survey and in-depth interviews with park visitors indicated that the mere sight of others from one's own culture contributed to continuity of identity. Twenty-eight respondents specifically mentioned 'people' ('Latin people', 'people from my homeland', 'many people from Mexico', 'many Latin and Mexican people') as the reason. Veronica spoke of feeling at home in the park: 'I am among my people' and 'I have never felt out of place' (Park interviewee, summer 2007). Rogelio indicated that 'people' and 'how we greet each other' reminded him of his homeland (Park interviewee, summer 2007). While some of the participants referred to feeling comfortable because others in the park were from their native country, some participants spoke of being comfortable because they were among 'Latinos' or 'Central Americans', suggesting some association with hybrid translocal identity and reflecting the specific population of the receiving community.

Several survey participants specifically mentioned informal street vendors as reminding them of their homeland and one of the reasons they come to the park. In observing the park, we found that informal street vendors also add to the cultural activities of the park. In any part of the park, one can observe one third to one half of the people buying something from passing vendors. Vendors in Latin America sell everything from toys and balloons, jewellery and clothing, packaged snacks such as gum and peanuts and popsicles to freshly prepared fruit and yogurt, roasted corn, and shaved ice. All of these informal activities can be found in MacArthur Park on weekdays and weekends. While walking through the park and talking of things that reminded her of her homeland, Veronica spoke about the variety of foods available in the park that are from Mexico

(Park interviewee, summer 2007). Zoraida, a middle-aged woman who said that she had spent a great deal of time in MacArthur Park when her children were small, indicated that the park reminded her of home because of the informal vendors 'selling fruits and snow cones' (Park interviewee, spring 2007).

Many survey participants noted the liveliness of the park when listing reminders of their homeland. When asked to describe what made the park lively, everyday activities of others in the park were discussed, such as people walking, playing with children, and playing soccer. Survey respondents specifically mentioned the community events and fiestas established by the Mexican and Central American communities. These major events that local communities hold 'in' the park – *Feria Agostina*, an annual celebration for El Salvadorans celebrated in early August, and Central American Independence Day celebration and parade, on 15 September – were mentioned by participants as reminders of home. The events provide an opportunity for park-goers to experience both traditional and hybrid culture. *Feria Agostina* takes place around the time of Las Fiestas Agostinas and la bajada, when thousands of Salvadorans gather in the streets of San Salvador celebrating the transfiguration of the Divine Saviour of the World, El Salvador's patron. On Central American Independence Day, Costa Ricans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans celebrate their independence in MacArthur Park. Together, these events are attended by thousands, as food and information booths, bandstands for music, carnival rides, and speeches fill the segment of Wilshire Boulevard that cuts through MacArthur Park.

When speaking about the area, Fernando, one of the neighbourhood interviewees, confirmed the association of a newly constructed Central American identity with the neighbourhood and the park:

The Westlake area still is, even with the changes that have taken place after the riots, the Meso American city of Southern California. For Central Americans, it's the Central American capital of the world, because there is no real capital in Central America, a region composed of seven countries, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. But here in Los Angeles, you find the Central American capital of the world as a living community, including Garifunas [African descendants in Central America]. (Salvadoran Community Leader, Neighbourhood interviewee, summer 2006)

In 2007, in an act to formalise Central American identity associated with the area, community members approached the City of Los Angeles to have the neighbourhood declared 'Central American Town' (Los Angeles Times, 7 May 2007).³

The significance of place

Survey results and extended interviews confirmed that the park's ability to remind participants of sending communities lent the park emotional significance for many study participants. To gauge this, participants were asked to respond to two statements: (1) The park is like a friend; and (2) I would miss the park if my family and I moved away. Greater than 80% of participants agreed with these statements, and more than 50% of participants strongly agreed – that the park was like 'a very good friend' and that they would miss the park 'a great deal'. The degree to which the park reminded participants of their sending communities affected the emotional significance of the park. Participants who were reminded of their sending communities 'a great deal' were twice as likely to indicate that the park was 'a very good friend' and that they would miss the park 'a great deal' as participants who were 'not at all'

reminded of their sending communities. Veronica explained:

When I think of MacArthur Park, I remember my childhood, my teen years. I think the park is a very important factor in the life of a child and an adult ... When you have a problem, when you feel sad, when you owe money, when you have a lot of stress, you come to the park and you feel calm.

Veronica related her experiences of MacArthur Park to her experiences in the plaza of her childhood:

I think that in some point in my life I cried there [MacArthur Park] out of happiness or sadness. When you cross the border you remember all of the things you lived there [in her childhood plaza] ... That zocalo [her childhood plaza] has been the park of my life.

When speaking of the importance of the park, several survey respondents specifically identified the soccer games that take place. Two prominent features of MacArthur Park are the weekend soccer games and weekday soccer practices played on the informal soccer fields in the north side of the park.⁴ The soccer field appeared to be a place where people could speak to strangers and meet new people in a fairly non-threatening setting. Several male survey participants and interviewees who described making friends as a result of watching or playing soccer confirmed this. One of the male survey participants in this study, who had been in the United States for only a few months, spoke emotionally about the importance of the park to him:

Without this park I don't know what I would have done when I first moved here. I found people from my town here, watching soccer. All of my friends play around with soccer here in the park. (Park survey participant, winter 2007)

Subsequent observations of the park revealed that additional physical changes had been made to MacArthur Park that paid homage to traditional identities related to the sending community. This, in turn, added to the park's emotional significance. In November 2013, the city and the El Salvadoran community celebrated the construction of a new plaza and statue in the park for Monsignor Oscar A Romero, the Salvadoran Catholic archbishop who was slain during El Salvador's civil war in the 1980s while giving mass (Rojas, 2013). Monsignor Romero is a key historical figure for those El Salvadorans who immigrated to the US because of the civil war in El Salvador. One community member attending the ceremony nicely summarised the cultural and emotional significance of the statue in the park:

I don't have words to explain to you what it means to me ... I came here [to Los Angeles] when I was 23 years old, running from the same people that killed Monsignor Romero in 1980. I want to cry, because I never thought that I was going to see him here. (Rojas, 2013)

Place identity and agency

One of the purposes of this study was to look at the relationship between place, identity, and agency associated with the park. The park provided numerous examples of immigrants exerting influence in and over the park (Smith, 2001). Overt political and civic action in the park, related to both Central American and broader immigrants' rights issues, includes everything from small press conferences to mass political rallies that are attended by thousands of people. Juan, a local activist, explains how members of various Central American organisations see the importance of the park as a political platform.

We are members of the Central American Coalition of Los Angeles which is formed by the Guatemalan Unity Information Agency, the Honduran and Nicaragua Alliance, the Guatemalan *Fraternidades* Federation (which is a hometown association), and *El Rescate*, six organizations. We monitor the state of civil rights in Central America and these organizations are all located near the park and we use the park to put on cultural and political events. (Neighbourhood interviewee, spring 2006)

The park has also become associated with immigrant identity and provides a space for assertion of immigrants' rights and resistance. The 2006 demonstration for immigrants' rights that took place in Los Angeles, one of the largest rallies in recent US history (an estimated 500,000 people participated), was designed to start at City Hall and end in MacArthur Park. A 2007 May Day rally ending in MacArthur Park concluded with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) forcefully removing demonstrators, reporters, and *palateros* from the park. The event became known as the May Day Melee, and made international headlines. It created a strong backlash against the LAPD (which was found by an independent panel to have overstepped its authority) and highlighted much of the tension in the city around immigration rights.

Study participants also confirmed that agency intended to influence identity in the park takes the form of everyday activities. Felipa, a key business owner and community organiser interviewed, discussed actions taken to create a space for the immigrant community within the park:

Now my job was to hold cultural events in the park, so you're bringing in something they are familiar with in their homelands and really try to have *this overall type feeling* that people come to stroll through the park to enjoy a *tamale* or *raspada* or whatever they are selling. To be able to sit in the park and enjoy entertainment from their country, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, try to really keep their

roots to Latin America. (Neighbourhood interviewee, winter 2006)

The 'overall type feeling' in the park, mentioned by Felipa, and the activities and relationships that take place in the park, sometimes require a form of everyday resistance. Visitors claim their space and carry out their daily activities, even when those activities lack official sanction. Soccer and informal street vending are two examples of everyday acts of resistance that take place in MacArthur Park. The unofficial soccer league, in which more than 1000 children play, holds practices on weekdays and games on weekends. At the time this research project was initiated, the City spoke of soccer as a prohibited activity in the park. The soccer league itself was not officially permitted to practise or hold games. No official soccer fields existed, and so the self-organised league must bring equipment and set up in the large open space in the north part of the park. According to one of the organisers, Abe, the park is designated as historic, and this designation prohibits anything but the passive activities for which the park was originally designed. Some long-time neighbours and historic preservationists wanted the park to be a passive space for strolling and relaxing, without the noise and 'wear and tear' of the soccer fields (Park interviewee, fall 2006).

Like soccer, street vending in the park (and surrounding neighbourhood) is prohibited. However, street vending in the park continues both out of economic necessity and because the remaking of the park has made it comfortable for vendors to continue and park-goers to patronise them, as Felipa made clear in describing one of the vendors who frequents the park daily:

You have some older people that are very comfortable, like Ramon [who takes pictures of recently arrived immigrants to send back to their families], who comes in every day. Now he is out there illegally. He does photographs.

He says he just loves coming to the park. Says, 'I've been here 20 years, with or without the permit, I'll be here'. (Neighbourhood interviewee, winter 2006)

Maria, a long-time community leader, related conflict over vending to issues of both economic necessity and identity: 'There were a lot of vendors in this area and they were being harassed by the police and their products confiscated; they were mainly Salvadorians and Mexicans' (Neighbourhood interviewee, winter 2006). The community saw the prohibition as both an issue of economic justice and community identity, as street vending is part of the commercial and community life in the sending communities of many of these migrants. Miguel, a staff person in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Agency explains, 'Street vending in Mexico, El Salvador, it's the economy in those countries. And in this economy here [in MacArthur Park] it has been criminalized and for us [informal street vending] was the vibrancy of the community' (Neighbourhood interviewee, winter 2006). These everyday practices that resist authority are a clear example of the type of translocal agency within this public space.

As park-goers continued with soccer and informal street vending in MacArthur Park, other groups petitioned City Hall to enforce their prohibition. Increasingly, the translocal community's agency was more overt, as they pressured their local political representatives to assert their rights to use this public space. In the summer of 2006, an annual event, Soccerfest, was initiated by California State Senator Fabian Nuñez. According to the Senator's staff, the event was meant to 'reinforce the importance of soccer to the community and to the park at a time when the appropriateness of the soccer fields and the league was being debated', officially or unofficially, by city politicians (Park interviewee, summer 2006). Activities included several

exhibition games played by semi-professional soccer teams, tournament games for the unofficial league, presentations of trophies by local politicians, and presentation of a grant by a local non-profit to the league's organisers. The event received significant coverage by Spanish-speaking television stations, one of which was a co-sponsor. Through Soccerfest, community members publicly asserted their right to control use of this local space.⁵

Similarly, community members organised to defend vending in and around the park. The criminalisation of the informal street vendors both in and outside the park was an issue around which immigrant rights activists in community-based organisations could rally. A Central American immigrant rights organisation, CARECEN, took the lead, ultimately forming The Street Vendors Association. The Street Vendors Association was the initial catalyst for political pressure on the local councilman's office to create LA's first legalised street vending district in MacArthur Park. In 1994, vending was approved by the City Council with the caveat that vendors use approved carts and obtain the appropriate business licences (Los Angeles Times, 1999: A1). This programme was hampered by bureaucratic red tape and discontinued, and hence informal street vending is as strong as ever in MacArthur Park, its prohibition going relatively unenforced.

Conclusions

Our study of MacArthur Park both confirms and expands upon findings from recent studies of placemaking in receiving communities. As literature and case studies on translocal communities suggest, immigrants seek out and remake places where they can form social and cultural connections that reconfirm past identities (Butcher, 2009; Ehrkamp, 2005). They remake places

through both everyday and political practices that reshape local power dynamics (Miraftab, 2012; Smith, 2001). In the process, they form new social and cultural connections that result in hybrid identities reflecting the receiving community (Butcher, 2009; Miraftab, 2012).

Place identity literature provides an additional lens through which we can view the processes of placemaking, providing a fuller understanding of the relevance of place itself. As the place identity literature suggests, our study confirms that place is not merely a container in which identity is re-established, embedded, and evolves. Identity is formed and defined in relation to place. Groups seek out and remake spaces to reflect significant places of the past, places through which their identity was formed (Cooper Marcus, 1992; Dixon and Durrheim, 2004; Droseltis and Vignoles, 2010; Twigger-Ross et al., 2003; Vignoles et al., 2000). Study participants verified that through the physical elements – trees, flowers, fountains – and social and cultural elements of the park – other park visitors, soccer games and cultural celebrations, music and murals – they were able to reconnect with important places in their sending communities and achieve continuity of place identity. For some participants, reminders of important past places were already in the park – the flora and fauna, for instance. Many of the reminders were the result of participants remaking the park through everyday practices, including the ‘quiet encroachments’ of just being there (Bayat, 2010).

Consistent with the place identity literature, we found a link between place identity and local action (Bonaiuto et al., 2002; Devine-Wright and Howes, 2010; Lewicka, 2005). Our study also found that the need to connect with and reproduce significant past-environments motivates immigrants to engage in the everyday and political practices of placemaking in receiving communities. As suggested by translocal studies, immigrants

had reshaped local power dynamics in order to create a space of identity, a sense of belonging and community in MacArthur Park (Butcher, 2009; Ehrkamp, 2005; Miraftab, 2012; Smith, 2001). Agency had taken the form of overt political acts, such as being an epicentre for immigrant rights activism in Los Angeles, and purposeful cultural practices, such as the establishment of annual celebrations of FERIA Agostina and Central American Independence Day. Practices include ‘everyday’ activities, many of which take place on the weekends – Latino families strolling in the park, people watching, buying traditional Guatemalan and El Salvadoran food from street vendors, and partaking in music festivals in the park, just as you would find in public places in Mexico and Central America. Everyday practices also include subversive acts of resistance – creation of an informal soccer league that brings hundreds of people to the park and informal street vending that has a long history of struggle with city authorities. The sense of community formed within and around MacArthur Park gave vendors, such as Ramon, the strength to engage in the everyday practice of coming to the park despite the prohibition of his business. It led to action on behalf of soccer (Soccerfest) and vending, including participation in grass-roots organisations (Perkins et al., 1996; Rivlin, 1987), such as CARECEN and the Street Vendors Association. Most recently, agency related to the park took the form of the construction of a new plaza honouring Monsignor Oscar Romero (Rojas, 2013).

Our study raises a number of questions about the reestablishment of place identity. MacArthur Park is a receiving community with a significant population of recent immigrants, immigrants with, one might argue, place identities originally formed in very similar places. Would the processes of placemaking and the nature of place identity be

different in receiving communities with fewer immigrants or more culturally diverse populations? If the aspects of identity associated with place cannot be re-established, what are the emotional consequences for immigrants and what are the implications for agency? For instance, while the park did not remind some of our participants of their sending communities, the surrounding neighborhood may have. How might this contrast have influenced the agency people were willing to exercise over the park? These unanswered questions suggest the need for additional studies that explore other ways place identity is formed in receiving communities and the subsequent consequences for placemaking and agency.

While there remains a great number of questions regarding the nature of place identity in receiving communities, we submit that this study has contributed to a deeper understanding of the importance of placemaking and of place, itself, in these communities. Place identity literature suggests that the continuity of identity related to place has significant consequences for well-being and strengthens the bonds between people and places (Altman and Low, 1992; Hummon, 1992; Low, 1992, 2000; Main, 2012; Manzo, 2003; Mazumdar et al., 2000; Milligan, 1998). We found that for the majority of our study participants, the continuity with past places that they experienced in the park lent it emotional significance. The identities formed in relation to the park's elements strengthened participants' feelings about the park, even leading some to characterise it as a very good friend. While it is frequently suggested that mobility is a force that 'unsettles associations between people and place' (Butcher, 2009: 1353), the place identity literature and this study suggest an alternative perspective on mobility – that, for some, it may mean that place matters now as much as ever.

Funding

This research was made possible by the Chicano Studies Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles, USA.

Notes

1. On Sundays, the peak population of the park just exceeded 2000. Weekday population varied from approximately 50 in the morning to approximately 800 at peak periods on Fridays.
2. Surveys/brief interviews were randomly gathered in the park by approaching every third person encountered and asking that person to participate in a brief interview. Surveys/brief interviews were conducted by one graduate student and two undergraduate students.
3. Local residents and business owners submitted a petition with 500 signatures.
4. On weekends, 200 to 500 people gather to watch the soccer games.
5. More than 1000 people attended the event.

References

- Altman I and Low SM (eds) (1992) *Place Attachment*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Bayat A (2010) *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bonaiuto M, Carrus G, Martorella H, et al. (2002) Local identity processes and environmental attitudes in land use changes: The case of natural protected areas. *Journal of Economic Psychology* 23: 631–653.
- Butcher M (2009) Ties that bind: The strategic use of transnational relationships in demarcating identity and managing difference. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35: 1353–1371.
- Carling J (2008) The human dynamics of migrant transnationalism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31(8): 1452–1477.
- Conradson D and Latham A (2005) Transnational urbanism: Attending to everyday practices and mobilities. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31(2): 227–233.
- Cooper Marcus C (1992) Environmental memories. In: Altman I and Low SM (eds) *Place*

- Attachment*. New York: Plenum Press, pp. 87–112.
- Devine-Wright P and Howes Y (2010) Disruption to place attachment and the protection of restorative environments: A wind energy case study. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 30: 271–280.
- Dixon J and Durrheim K (2004) Dislocating identity: Desegregation and the transformation of place. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 24(4): 455–473.
- Dolby N and Cornbleth C (2001) Introduction: Social identities in transnational times. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 22(3): 293–296.
- Droseltis O and Vignoles V (2010) Towards an integrative model of place identification: Dimensionality and predictors of intrapersonal-level place preferences. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 30(1): 23–34.
- Ehrkamp P (2005) Placing identities: Transnational practices and local attachments of Turkish immigrants in Germany. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31: 345–364.
- Glick Schiller N and Basch L (1995) From immigrant to transmigrant: Theorizing transnational migration. *Anthropological Quarterly* 68(1): 48–64.
- Hannerz U (1996) *Transnational Connections*. London: Routledge.
- Hidalgo MC and Hernandez B (2001) Place attachment: Conceptual and empirical questions. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 21: 273–281.
- Hou J (2013) *Transcultural Cities: Border-Crossing and Placemaking*. New York: Routledge.
- Hummon D (1992) Community attachment: Local sentiment and sense of place. In: Altman I and Low SM (eds) *Place Attachment*. New York: Plenum Press, pp. 253–278.
- Landolt P (2003) Salvadoran economic transnationalism: Embedded strategies for household maintenance, immigrant incorporation, and entrepreneurial expansion. *Peace Research Abstracts* 40(1): 3–118.
- Levitt P and Lamba-Nieves D (2011) Social remittances revisited. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37(1): 1–22.
- Lewicka M (2005) Ways to make people active: Role of place attachment, cultural capital and neighbourhood ties. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 4: 381–395.
- Loukaitou-Sideris A (1995) Urban form and social context: Cultural differentiation in the meaning and uses of neighbourhood parks. *Journal of Physical Education and Recreation* 14(2): 101–114.
- Low SM (1992) Symbolic ties that bind: Place attachment in the plaza. In: Altman I and Low SM (eds) *Place Attachment*. New York: Plenum Press, pp. 165–186.
- Low SM (2000) *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Main K (2012) Public space attachments for Latino and immigrant communities: A case study of MacArthur Park. In: Rios M and Vasquez L (eds) *Diálogos: Placemaking in Latino Communities*. London: Routledge, pp. 83–97.
- Manzo LC (2003) Beyond home and haven: Toward a revisioning of emotional relationships with place. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 23(1): 47–61.
- Mazumdar S, Mazumdar S, Docuyan F, et al. (2000) Creating a sense of place: The Vietnamese Americans and Little Saigon. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 20: 319–333.
- Milligan MJ (1998) Interactional past and potential: The social construction of place attachment. *Symbolic Interaction* 2: 1–34.
- Miraftab F (2012) Emerging transnational spaces: Meat, sweat and global (re)production in the heartland. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. 36(6): 1204–1222.
- Ommundsen W (2003) Tough ghosts: Modes of cultural belonging in diaspora. *Asian Studies Review* 27(2): 181–204.
- Orozco M (2005) *Transnational Engagement, Remittances and their Relationship to Development in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of International Migration.
- Perkins DD, Brown BB and Taylor RB (1996) The ecology of empowerment: Predicting participation in community organizations. *Journal of Social Issues* 52: 85–110.
- Portes A, Guarnizo LE and Haller W (2002) Transnational entrepreneurs: An alternative form of immigrant economic adaptation. *American Sociological Review* 67(2): 278–298.

- Proshansky HM, Fabian AK and Kaminoff R (1983) Place-identity: Physical world socialization of the self. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 3: 57–83.
- Rios M, Vasquez L and Miranda L (2012) *Dialogos: Placemaking in Latino Communities*. New York: Routledge Press.
- Rivlin L (1987) The neighbourhood, personal identity, and group affiliations. In: Altman I and Wandersman A (eds) *Neighbourhoods and Community*. New York: Plenum, pp. 1–34.
- Rojas LB (2013) *A statue to Salvadoran icon rises in McArthur Park*. Southern California Public Radio, 24 November 2013.
- Ryan RL (2005) Exploring the effects of environmental experience on attachment to urban natural areas. *Environment and Behavior* 37(1): 3–42.
- Sandoval G (2010) *Immigrants and the Revitalization of Los Angeles: Development and Change in MacArthur Park*. New York: Cambria Press.
- Sandoval G (2013) Shadow transnationalism: Cross-border networks and planning challenges of transnational unauthorized immigrant communities. *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 33(2): 176–193
- Smith MP (2001) *Transnational Urbanism: Locating Globalization*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Smith MP (2005) Transnational urbanism revisited. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31(20): 235–244.
- Smith MP and Eade J (2009) *Transnational Ties: Cities, Migrations, and Identities*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.
- Smith MP and Guarnizo L (1998) *Transnationalism from Below*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- Twigger-Ross C, Bonaiuto M and Breakwell G (2003) Identity theories and environmental psychology. In: Bonnes M, Lee T and Bonaiuto M (eds) *Psychological Theories for Environmental Issues*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, pp. 203–233.
- US Census Bureau (2010) *American community survey, 2006–2010*. Available at: http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_10_5YR_B05002&prodType=table (accessed 2 August 2010).
- Van Liempt I (2011) From Dutch dispersal to ethnic enclaves in the UK: The relationship between segregation and integration examined through the eyes of Somalis. *Urban Studies* 48(16): 3385–3398.
- Vertovec S (2001) Transnationalism and identity. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 27(4): 573–582.
- Vertovec S (2003) Migration and other modes of transnationalism: Towards conceptual cross-fertilization. *International Migration Review* 37(3): 641–665.
- Vignoles V, Chryssochoou X and Breakwell G (2000) The distinctiveness principle: Identity, meaning, and the bounds of cultural relativity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 4(4): 337–354.
- Waldinger RD (2010) Rethinking transnationalism. *Empiria: Revista de Metodología en Ciencias Sociales* 19: 21–38.
- Werbner P (2005) The translocation of culture: ‘Community cohesion’ and the force of multiculturalism in history. *The Sociological Review* 53(4): 745–768.
- Yin R (2003) *Case Study Research Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.