

Tropes of Branding in Forms of Life

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the variable construal that brand fractions exhibit in social practices around the world and their implications for the study of brand semiosis in social life. Whereas brands are sometimes imagined to be unitary objects with inherent power, the discussion shows that the significance of distinct brand fractions is formulated by distinct metasemiotic practices, only some of which are the practices of brand corporations. When brand fractions like trademarks are taken up in distinct social practices around the world, their significance is routinely reanalyzed through locale-specific metasemiotic frameworks, which formulate varied forms of life in societies around the world.

Brands die every day and from their ashes many things are born, most of which are not brands; and yet this cycle of death and rebirth has little to do with what brand designers call “genericide,” or fear as a brand’s death (Moore 2003). Conversely, everyone encounters brand fractions all the time, often inside these ashes; yet no one has ever encountered the seemingly vast thing called “the brand”—or simply “brand” (Manning 2010)—in their own individual experiences, even if certain genres of brand talk do nowadays allege its existence and power over them.

I begin with these somewhat paradoxical statements because they provide the best initial approach to what I call “tropes of branding,” whose semiotic organization I describe below. But this is not the only way of introducing my theme. Here is another way of introducing it, less of a paradox than a puzzle: in

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An earlier version of this article was presented as a discussant’s commentary at the panel on “Brands, Counterfeiting, Authenticity, and Authority,” organized by Constantine Nakassis at the American Anthropological Association’s annual meeting in New Orleans on November 17, 2010. The panelists included Constantine Nakassis, Brent Luvaas, Magdalena Craciun, and Sasha Newell, who presented early versions of some of the materials published later in Nakassis (2012), Luvaas (2010), Craciun (2012), and Newell (2013). I thank them for the opportunity to participate in the panel and for the publications on which I comment here.

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many locales around the world, people engage in behaviors that recycle elements of brands into things that look like counterfeits and fakes to outsiders but are treated in altogether different ways by those whose behaviors these are. I discuss a number of cases below, all of which seem initially puzzling: What are we to make of “counterfeits” when Turks perform honesty by selling them, or Romanians feel authentic while wearing them, or Ivoirians perform secret selves by displaying them in dance? Why is the form and significance of such items reformulated in such varied ways in different locales? How do these items fit into cultural practices like Tamil style (Nakassis 2012, 2013), Ivoirian bluffs (Newell 2013), Guyanese foreignness (Halstead 2002), or Indie fashion (Luvaas 2010), or into varied formulations of authenticity in Turkey or Romania (Craciun 2012), or in Vietnam (Vann 2006), all of which I discuss below. And yet the real puzzle lies elsewhere: Why do anthropologists treat them as brand counterfeits at all, when the people they study treat them as something else? When homegrown intuitions falter in the field, it is useful to ask where they come from. The very idea that a unified object called “the brand” is a possible object of empirical study is the homegrown idea that falters first.

I have argued elsewhere that “the commodity (form)” —as classically conceived—is not an object of empirical study but an ideology that narrows our gaze to value projects that apply only to specific phases of the social lives of cultural forms (Agha 2011a), obscuring the rest of these lives and our own. What we can indeed study, however, is the relation between “commodity formulations” and their outcomes. What is nowadays called “the brand” is simply the most recent vintage of the commodity form, its “brand formulation” variant, which shares many family resemblances and family problems with its older cousins. But what exactly are brand formulations? How do they come about? How do we study their outcomes?

Every brand formulation is the precipitate of a metasemiotic discourse that groups disparate phenomena together as brand fractions, typifies their sign values, and makes them known to a social domain of persons through its own dissemination. Brand formulations differ among themselves in the sensory objects they treat as brand fractions, the sign values they formulate for them, and the social domain of persons capable of construing them as signs of such kinds. Specific brand fractions (e.g., logos, brand personae, product lines) are themselves formulated through “mediatized” semiotic practices, or practices that link forms of communication to forms of commoditization (Agha 2001b, 2011c), and through the coordination of communicative tasks among cate-

gories of personnel within a division of wage labor (including employees of advertising firms [Moeran 1996], but many others too), are linked to each other and assembled into unified brands, which, through mediatized artifacts like advertisements, press releases, and promotional campaigns become known to their target markets. Mediatized discourses and artifacts take a variety of forms in other institutional practices, such as practices of schooling, bureaucracy, the state, the media, and the law (see Agha 2010, 2011b, 2012). I am concerned here only with mediatized discourses that yield brand formulations as their artifactual precipitates.

Mediatized brand discourses take particular canonical forms in places like the United States and Western Europe, where the sign values they formulate for brand fractions are widely disseminated and highly salient to everyday awareness, and where they tend to be “naturalized” (Parmentier 1994) as inhering in the things these discourses formulate as signs, namely, the brand fractions themselves, rendering their defeasibility and reanalysis through uptake formulations less salient to decontextualized reflection, even though such reanalysis is common and routine in the contextualized activities of sign users. By staying away from places like these, the authors I cite above and discuss below are able to focus instead on everyday discourses that are altogether unlike familiar mediatized discourses of branding. The farther away you get from the latter, it might seem, the more salient the former become. But geographic remove is not the only way of achieving this, as we shall soon see.

What are the mediatized discourses through which ideas of brand authenticity emerge in places like the United States? And what replaces such formulations in faraway field sites? What happens, in particular, to the object-signs of these discourses when forms of uptake incorporate them into value projects and “uptake formulations” (Agha 2011c) altogether distinct in kind? Let us begin with the first question before turning to the rest.

Mediatized Brand Formulations

There are many kinds of brands: product brands, service brands, corporate brands, political brands, and others. All of these do not work the same way because they involve distinct metasemiotic discourses, which intersect in partly nonoverlapping ways in each of these branding domains. Most ethnographic studies focus on brands of some specific kind, most often product brands. They tend also to focus not on product brands as such, but on Western product brands and their sign fractions—such as logos—and with the analogues of these they find in their field sites. They thus come to focus not on tropes of brand-

ing of every kind, but on tropes that incorporate familiar brand fractions into unfamiliar value projects. Many studies focus on some specific type of branded product, such as apparel. Yet to speak of fractions of apparel brands is not to speak of fragments of apparel (like inseams, hemlines, or zippers) but to speak of sign fractions of a particular kind of semiotic object, the contemporary product brand, which has a very specific kind of semiotic design in places like the United States, and which produces analogous formulations of brand uniqueness in the case of many apparel brands and in cases involving other products, too.

In such cases, and places, mediatized discourses of branding imbue diverse sensory objects with brand-specific indexical values, which differentiate brands from each other and, through specific forms of dissemination, become known to the brand's target markets. The sign values they formulate are not intrinsic to any of the "things" they formulate as brand fractions, nor invariant for all observers. Yet they are quite systematic, nonetheless, for persons acquainted with them. Moreover, distinct types of sign value are linked to brand fractions by distinct mediatized practices (such as trademark law, product advertising, brand management, public relations), which bring specific target populations (their addressees) into participation frameworks of brand communication.

A product brand is thus typically a point of intersection of several meta-semiotic discourses, each of which regulates the sign values of specific brand fractions—a trademark, a logo, a product line, the social personae formulated for its users—which tend to be best known to those they routinely attempt to reach and are grasped less well, or not at all, by others. And when they are grasped well, what is grasped includes the stereotypic indexical values of specific products and what they convey about their use and users. I have described such processes in some detail for the case of "lifestyle formulations" of products, where highly specific mediatized practices (like psychographic lifestyle profiling in market research and product array groupings in lifestyle advertising) work together to formulate stereotypic indexical values for products of specific kinds, and such indexical stereotypes are always defeasible in the conduct of those acquainted with them and, indeed, are serially recycled into uptake formulations of remarkably varied kinds (Agha 2011a).

Let me focus here only on those mediatized practices that are flagged by talk of "brand authenticity" and "counterfeit brands," namely, those that formulate the brand fraction called "the trademark." From a communicative standpoint, trademarks are messages that convey something about products. But they convey different things to manufacturers and consumers. Trademarks have a num-

ber of sign functions in commerce, none of which are *sui generis* features of the object-signs that function as trademarks but, instead, are metasemiotically regulated by trademark law, which imbues diverse object-signs with the capacity to function as trademarks. In every such case, a *trademark* is a localizable sign (a name, a slogan, a logo, some other visual or sensory image) that can be found in advertising or product packaging texts. By contrast, *trademark law* is an extended metasemiotic discourse that is articulated by legal institutions. It is a branch of the law of intellectual property. Trademark law regulates a specific sign value that can be conferred upon otherwise diverse object-signs: it renders them capable of functioning as diacritics of a unique manufacturer, as indexicals of proprietary rights. But this cumulative effect—the capacity of a trademark to identify a unique manufacturer when it occurs as an imprint on product packaging, which you and the sales clerk can touch or read at the point of sale—presupposes a semiotic chain linking participation frameworks of entirely distinct kinds to each other.

Trademark law achieves this effect by regulating *who* uses a trademark, thus creating indexical connections between trademarks and firms. How? In the United Kingdom, rights to a trademark are often acquired through use. In the United States, such rights belong to the first successful applicant for registration. These proprietary rights are indexed in all public communications by superscripts (™ for ‘trademark’, ® for ‘registered trademark’) that make explicit to other manufacturers that the brand name receives proprietary protections under trademark law. The brand name (or logo or slogan) is now an object-sign in which certain sign functions have metasemiotically been incorporated by legal discourses and protocols. Yet brand logos and slogans effectively acquire these sign functions only if the relevant legal procedures (application and approval of registration) have appropriately been carried out in a legally regulated semiotic chain of events. Much can go wrong at any point in this chain: the process through which brand fractions (like logos and slogans) acquire proprietary sign values is defeasible in at least as many ways as there are protocols that regulate it. And once they are effectively acquired, infringements of these rights are actionable, and this again involves a legal procedure, which has its own semiotic chain segmentation and protocols. In short, any such semiotic artifact exists in space and time only through a sequence of criterial semiotic activities, and only as long as such criterial activities occur. Once it is incorporated into distinct activities, as we shall soon see, it no longer has the same sign values, no longer conveys the same thing, even if some of its durable exponents (some of its visible or legible features) remain

the same. But let us leave this issue aside for a moment. Before we turn to faraway places, let us focus instead on the fact that even when it is at home in places like the United States, the mark does not have the same sign values for everyone who encounters it.

From the standpoint of manufacturers, trademarks differentiate products made by different firms; they thereby function as *diacritics* differentiating manufacturers from each other (in a manner analogous to proper names). At the same time, the trademark is (historically) a legal mechanism for giving proprietary protections to an inventor's patent and to a manufacturer's exclusive rights to produce it. A trademark therefore holds a proprietary significance for manufacturers: it indexes one manufacturer's proprietary rights over a product to other manufacturers.

From the standpoint of consumers, however, the trademark typically indexes the attributes of the product as a replica: that every replica of the product that bears the trademark has certain characteristics that are, at least in principle, to be found in every other replica that bears the same trademark. This amounts to the promise of the *fidelity of the replica*, its conformity to a type that is standardized through consistency of manufacture under conditions of mass production.

Consumers are routinely aware of the diacritic function of trademarks but orient less directly (or less frequently, or not at all) to their proprietary aspects or to concerns of trademark infringement. For consumers, the trademark is chiefly an index of the fidelity of its product replicas. That is, if a product is configured under a trademark, it is presumed to have an indexical connection to a standardized (sometimes patented) process of manufacture; and this presumption suffices to convey a promise of fidelity of replication (product standardization) to the consumer. Thus, although most consumers effectively exhibit awareness of the diacritic function of a trademark through their own activities (such as their purchasing behaviors), they tend also to fractionally reanalyze or reconfigure its significance: a diacritic that indexes the proprietary rights of a manufacturer (to other manufacturers) is reanalyzed as an index of the fidelity of product replication in participation frameworks of consumer behavior. The same perceivable thing now has fractionally distinct sign values in distinct participation frameworks of communication for persons linked to each other through it.

It is now possible to discern two features of these metasemiotic processes. First, for any durable product (such as a pair of jeans or a toaster) the object fragment that carries the logo (a piece of leather or a metal plate) has the same

durable physical shape (qua sensorium) across these participation frameworks, but not the same sign values. It is the same physical object but not the same sign. It looks the same but is not treated or construed the same way. Once the thing is incorporated into distinct practices and brought under distinct meta-semiotic formulations by participants, it no longer has the same sign values, even if its visible or legible features remain the same. The physical object and its sign values have distinct identity conditions.

Second, any such durable product (the pair of jeans, the toaster) is, from a semiotic point of view, a composite artifact, where different sign values are sedimented into it (or formulated for it) through distinct metasemiotic practices and value projects, which need not have the same source or organization. In the typical case, its sign values are variably sourced: some are regulated by protocols of law, marketing, or advertising, and some are formulated in everyday practices; some are formulated before it reaches you, and some while it is in your hands; some are formulated by manufacturers and designers, some by owners and wearers. The object's sign values are incrementally altered across a chain of activities that link persons to each other through it: some are preserved across n distinct links in this chain of events and some are reanalyzed in an $n + 1$ th link in the chain. None of them is intrinsic to the durable sensorium nor salient to all observers because even when these sign values are conjointly embedded in a composite artifact, they have distinct identity conditions, are variably sourced, and are incrementally altered through a chain of activities involving it.

In order to make these issues clear, it has proved convenient thus far to focus on just a few participation frameworks of use and users (manufacture, legal incorporation, purchasing) and on sign values of a fairly familiar and rather generic kind, familiar and generic because the metasemiotic practices that formulate them are well known and commonplace in the United States. What happens when the thing-fractions of the brand are taken up in meta-semiotic practices of entirely distinct kinds?

Original and Fakes

Since anthropologists who study brands worldwide often speak of "originals" and "fakes" it is worth noting at the outset that an original is not just a thing. It is a *thing under a discursive formulation*. We can only speak of originals in relation to a discourse of authenticity that provides criteria on distinguishing authentic samples from nonauthentic ones. Similarly: a fake is never just a thing. It is also a thing viewed in relation to a source discourse of authentic-

ity. Thus art forgeries, counterfeit money, and pirated DVDs are not “fakes” in the same sense: they do not presuppose the same discourse of authenticity. Pirated DVDs do not exist except in relation to copyright law and the authentication protocols employed by institutions like the Federal Bureau of Investigation, whose presence is flagged at the beginning of every Blockbuster[®] movie you rent. To speak of counterfeit dollar bills is to presuppose criteria furnished by the US Treasury Department. To speak of art forgeries is to presuppose some methods of authentication of the kinds known to specialists in chemistry, archeology, and art history and to those in the retail art market who carry out authentication procedures before an auction. Take away the source discourses and the fake vanishes with the criteria that identify it, even as the thing persists, lingering under your touch.

A single object can in fact be a fake in relation to one discourse but entirely authentic in relation to another. The Prophet’s Hair and the Shroud of Turin are cases of this kind, and, insofar as the epistemologies of religion and science remain incommensurable, such cases will always remain both fake and authentic, but not to the same observers.

In special cases like the Shroud and the Hair, variably sourced protocols of authenticity are so deeply naturalized and so incommensurable with each other that even to invoke them explicitly is to risk tensions with people you meet. But most forms of disarray are more subtle and harder to notice, and such effects vary, depending on who invokes them, when, where, and before whom. Let us consider a few cases.

Fakes Here and There

When Craciun (2012) examines varieties of “fake” brand apparel in Turkey and Romania, the question remains: For whom are these fakes? Fakes of what? Under what formulations? Many Romanians or Turks do not describe them as fake brands. Some are unfamiliar with or indifferent to the forms that trademark law has taken in the West. But the central issue here is not one of nation-state geographies (i.e., Romania vs. Western Europe). The issues that arise here are quite distinct: one issue concerns the source discourses that a person presupposes in encounters with what *we* call branded products. A second issue concerns the phase of the object’s existence—whether the manufacture, exchange, or possession phase, for instance, or some other—in which it is encountered, and the source discourse that appears relevant to that phase (Agha 2011a, 25–29). A third issue concerns where the source discourse comes from. All three issues become perfectly clear when we compare Kerim, the

trader (in Istanbul) and Valentina, the shopper (in Romania), whose uptake formulations of brand counterfeits into ideas of what “fakes” are and what can be done through them are entirely distinct.

Kerim orients to branded objects from the standpoint of his position in the retail trade (as shopkeeper) to which he comes from a biographic trajectory of religious education (as a self-described “honest” person). As a manufacturer and retailer of fake branded garments, he orients to the criteria on brand authenticity on which both his local and foreign clients rely at the point of sale, and to the branches of Turkish law that attend to his illegal trade. And his interests in maintaining a reputation of honesty (for biographic reasons, but also because, like any retailer, he needs to encourage repeat purchasing behavior among clients) incline him to describe his products explicitly as “imitations,” and himself as an *imitasyoncu*, a maker and seller of imitations, where the explicitness of his self-descriptions mitigates any appearance of covert dissemblance. He is well aware of trademark-based criteria on product authenticity. And he formulates himself as an honest trader who sells imitation goods without dissemblance at a fair price.

Valentina, by contrast, is a homemaker and single mother, not a shopkeeper. She is attuned to criteria of good taste, physical comfort, and low price. For her, criteria furnished by Western brand discourses appear irrelevant to evaluations of authenticity. She orients to garments as things she will possess after the point of sale, which she will wear and display, and in which others will see her dressed. She uses criteria of “good quality” from the standpoint of personal comfort and social-interpersonal display in everyday encounters with others. She treats garments as social indexicals that reveal the characteristics of persons linked to them as owners and wearers, in this case herself.

To Valentina, persons appear more or less authentic (vs. fake) through what they wear, an object formulation of wearer that is indifferent to brand formulations (it applies to wearers of both branded and unbranded goods). It relies instead on locale-specific metasemiotic criteria for ranking garments as social indexicals of wearer characteristics: good quality products are ranked higher than those made with inferior fabrics or stitching. Goods manufactured in Western locales are ranked higher than Asian goods, a geosocial trope that ranks Turkish goods higher than Chinese goods because Turkey is to the west of China (even if east of Romania). Things ranked lower by these criteria appear “fake” to her, as do their wearers. Once equipped with locale-specific criteria on “fake”-ness, and to a reanalysis of “fake”-ness from product quality to person quality, Valentina avoids products ranked lower as fakes because they

index a persona “not true to who she was and still wants to be through clothing” (Craciun 2012, 855).

Both Kerim and Valentina reanalyze the sign values of what we would call brand tokens by incorporating them into value projects of their own, treating them as indexicals of their own personae. In each case the revalorization of product-focal authenticity into persona-focal authenticity employs criteria derived from biographic or locale-specific metasemiotic frameworks, not from the translocal frameworks of brand metasemiosis, nor from brand formulations themselves.

Meanwhile, something else is happening to clothing labels and logos in Indonesia. Brent Luvaas describes the cut 'n' paste practices of “Indie” logo designers (Luvaas 2010), who extract visual or verbal fragments from international brand logos and, through methods of digital editing, incrementally alter foreign-sourced elements by combining them with locally sourced elements. They thus formulate distinct composite images as labels for local brands. But what exactly are they trying to do? A brandcentric gaze can readily discern the deformation of foreign-sourced elements, which imply a form of brand vandalism. By contrast, Luvaas is careful to point out that Indie designers are engaged not just in acts of “resistance” to foreign brands or in creating “assemblage[s] of diverse forms” derived from foreign sources, but in acts of social self-positioning within Indonesia: even though Indie designers are producers of modest means, who cannot compete with large corporations, they are less interested in “subverting” international commerce than they are in “inserting themselves into it,” in achieving some degree of commercial viability for their own products. How? The increments they add to their logos are indexically selective for a specific urban youth market, for “young people [who] had gotten used to a consumerist lifestyle,” but after the Asian financial crisis of the 1990s “could no longer afford it” and thus began to seek “knockoff versions of designer brands” or “low cost alternatives” to them (Luvaas 2010, 3). By simulating the purchasing practices of their target markets in the incremental design of their own logos, Indie designers indexically formulate their products as items appropriate for purchase by this target market at the point of sale, and as indexically congruent with the preestablished lifestyle choices of these owners-to-be in the subsequent possession and display phase of the garment’s existence. The cultural logic of cut 'n' paste is best discerned by attending to the activities that serially organize its increments (what is preserved, what is not, by whom, for whom, why), which organize the interactional textuality of Indie logos in Indonesia. A focus on trademark criteria (which regulate only its

foreign-sourced fractions and do so effectively only elsewhere) simply obscures all this.

In the Vietnamese case discussed by Elizabeth Vann (Vann 2006), the very idea of a brand's identity is reformulated by criteria on authenticity that cross-cut the criteria of trademark law and dissolve its binary distinction between originals and counterfeits. In Ho Chi Minh City, formulations of the authenticity of goods involve two distinct dimensions of contrast: the contrast between *kieu* 'model' goods and *nhai* 'mimic' goods, and the contrasts between *hang* 'fake' goods and *that* 'real' goods. Famous Western brands are treated as "model" goods in the sense that they are models—for locally produced goods that try to "mimic" them. Mimic goods are not considered deceptive forgeries but products whose manufacturers aspire to make goods of the high quality that model goods exhibit, even if they differ among themselves in the degree to which they succeed in their aspirations. Since mimic goods are cheaper than model goods, they function as substitutes for model goods for purchasers of modest means. And their manufacturers are not stigmatized as dishonest but are viewed by purchasers—much in the way that Indie designers in Indonesia view themselves—as attempting simply "to gain footholds in a highly competitive market that is dominated by a few large, foreign corporations" (Van 2006, 289) and, indeed, as providing purchasers a valuable service in doing so. Although mimic goods correspond to what official brand discourses call "counterfeits," they are defined or characterized entirely differently in Vietnam: shoppers view them as normal and commonplace (not deviant anomalies) and as honest efforts (not attempts to deceive), and tend to rank members of this class of goods against each other by evaluative criteria of how well they manage to mimic their models, thus locating them in a distinct local hierarchy of authenticity.

By contrast, goods are judged *hang* 'fake' when their fine outward appearance or packaging conceals an inner inferiority, or a hidden defect of functionality (durability, etc.) that is inherent to the thing-fraction that counts as the product. Since the outward appearance of "fake" goods does in fact mislead shoppers, their makers/vendors are correspondingly stigmatized as dishonest or deceitful. Shoppers even say that "fake" goods are not "real" products at all in the sense that they should not even be on the market. By contrast, goods that are not insincere or deceptive (in this sense) are the "real" goods in the market, that is, are products that should remain on the market for potential purchase since people are able to make informed purchasing decisions on the basis of their evident and nondeceptive qualities.

Once again, the Vietnamese case involves locale-specific metasemiotic criteria for evaluating product authenticity, not the translocal criteria of brand metasemiosis. But here products are formulated not as social indexicals of an individual's persona (as in the Turkish and Romanian cases) but as indexing something about relations between entire social categories of persons, whether by indexing the aspirations of manufacturers in relation to each other (one manufacturer "mimics" another's product or treats it as a "model"), or by indexically making manifest what the manufacturer is trying to do to purchasers (whether to deceive them through a "fake" product or to allow its qualities to remain discernible in a "real" one). Both Indie and Vietnamese logos/products index relationships between discernible social categories (not just between individuals), but what they index is, of course, entirely specific to each locale.

In the case of products designed for Tamil youth in India, Constantine Nakassis examines both the practices of fake logo designers and the practices of the college age youth who are their target markets. In this case, manufacturers repurpose items that remain as a "surplus" from the Indian apparel export industry—which includes finished items of apparel (like T-shirts or jeans) as well as product fragments (buttons, zippers, logos, collar tags, etc.)—that cannot feasibly be used in the export trade itself for various reasons (and thus constitute its "surplus" or "overage") and assemble these items into products for sale to youth markets in Tamil Nadu. They also assemble distinctive local brand labels by extracting lexical items and visual shapes from international brand logos, as in the Indie case, and by serially altering them by adding wording and iconography of their own devising. And in their anxious efforts to gain an edge over their competitors, local producers also keep an eye on which among the hybrids produced by other manufacturers seem to work well in local markets, and thus they readily copy not just foreign brand fractions but also elements of the hybrid designs of their competitors. Their otherwise disparate activities are metasemiotically unified by a value project: the attempt to devise a "look" that might appeal to college age purchasers by being indexically selective for their practices. Or, as one designer says, "the question isn't the brand (identity), but whether the design looks good and has *style*" (Nakassis 2012, 711), now sourcing a lexical item, "style," which Tamil youth use to describe their own peer group practices.

If Tamil youth exhibit "indifference towards the brands they adorn themselves with," or "do not particularly know or care what the brands are, where they are from, or what they 'mean,'" or do not seem concerned about "questions of brand authenticity" (Nakassis 2013, 264), this is not simply a conse-

quence of their distance from discourses of trademark law, although it is that, in part. Rather, Tamil youth are already oriented to peer-group-centered discourses of “style,” which is itself a name for a trope of transgression (analogous to “cool” or “badass”) and which has nothing in particular to do with brands. Through this semiotic register of transgressive conduct, young men distance themselves from the norms of adult society in a great variety of ways (including whistling in public, riding on bus roofs, puffing shared cigarettes), thus marking their own liminality or exteriority in relation to adult society, and, at the same time, attempt more fully to belong within their own peer groups through these practices, while attempting also to stand out, through adeptness in “style,” as unique individuals among their peers. Style is also exhibited through the use of Tamil-English slang, not just through fake brands. When these otherwise disparate things are grouped together in this way, hybrid speech tokens and hybrid brand apparel both become object-signs under a unified metasemiotic construal as tokens of transgressive “style,” and, although otherwise distinct as sensoria, become indexically congruent with each other as signs under this construal: both are figurements of foreign otherness, of exteriority to adult Tamil society, of transgressions of local norms, and of liminal belonging to youth peer groups.

When brand fractions become incorporated within indexical frameworks of youth style, manufacturers and retailers orient to their target markets by describing the brand-sourced features of their garments as objects of aesthetic value for users, as indexicals of a locale-specific aesthetic of (youth) “style.” But they also naturalize their own practices within society-wide taxonomic frameworks that are widespread and long-standing, and have nothing to do with brands: manufacturers locate purchasers in a great chain of being—the lower class emulate the upper class, who emulate the West—and so, they feel, the authentic “export brand” (and its diacritics) guarantees the domestic sale of the fake (assembled from them). But since the emulation of the West was a feature of Indian middle-class aspirations even in British colonial days, the brand fractions they recycle today are simply being inserted into hierarchies of social reckoning that are far older than the brand, even if what they are doing with them today seems spectacular or strange to a brand-preoccupied foreign gaze. In this case, the metasemiotic frameworks through which the attributes of products are formulated through forms of reasoning about the personae (and aspirations) of their users are not merely locale specific (and not merely indifferent to translocal brand criteria) but also contain semiotic partials (youth style vs. foreign/local hierarchies) that have been specific to this

locale for different durations of social history (recent vs. long-standing, respectively) and are variably known to distinct social domains of local persons (Tamil youth vs. Indians in general). All of these semiotic partials come together in an internally motivated diagram of persona reckoning in the practices of Tamil manufacturers (and some in the practices of Tamil youths), and all of this remains invisible when foreign-sourced logos become salient to the brand-preoccupied gaze.

A persona-focal orientation to garments as elements of dress and display in the possession phase of their social existence is central to the Ivoirian practice of “bluffing” (Newell 2013) as well. The metasemiotic frameworks used to formulate garments as social indexicals are entirely distinct, of course, as is the manner in which these uptake formulations tropically transform in significance the brands on which they rely. The practice of “bluffing” in Côte d’Ivoire is a singular mode of displaying brand appurtenances, both in ritual performance (across the region) and in everyday life.

The most salient practice in which such display finds expression is a public ritual, the *danse de logobi* ‘dance of brands’, whose dancers are typically unmarried and unemployed men between 15 and 35 years old. Their dance performances rely on a number of audible and visible signs, including the danced display of Nike® and Dockers™ sportswear, a dance accompanied by dance music with a percussive beat and distinctive lyrics, often from the *coupé décalé* ‘scam and scam’ style of Ivoirian pop, and include other performance features too. In variants like the *danse des griffes*, ‘dance of designer labels’, performed by Congolese immigrants in Paris (and performed with higher-end brands, like Armani®), two dancers face off in ritualistic “duels,” where they “elegantly display the labels of the clothes they are wearing” (Newell 2013, 139), a duel that ends with one of them ritually exiting the dance in mock shameful defeat. The composite effect of such ritualized dance performances is understood as a performed illusion of wealth that relies on brand tokens, an effect achieved by a framing of brand tokens in ironic status displays, and performed by men of modest means, some living in poverty. Although this is a complex trope that has regional variants, a key feature of its significance involves the metasemiotic reformulation of brands as masks.

This feature of tropic significance relies on a widespread traditional practice in the region, where masked men perform public rituals in which they take on the personae of supernatural beings in front of audiences (which may include family members) who pretend not to know their true identities. Construals of secrecy and alterity take different forms in rituals across the region. In one Côte

d'Ivoire tradition, masks are associated with the Poro secret society and deployed in Poro ritual and dance. Young men traditionally learn these practices during a seven-year period of initiation, where they acquire various emblems of initiation to the secret society—learning to speak a secret register or argot; learning how to make ritual masks; learning to display masks in dancing styles, which, in funerary rites, include accompaniment by drum signals bearing coded messages; and much else besides—and, once they have acquired these emblems, they emerge seven years later as *colobele* initiates, a status conferred by a multisited and multiyear rite of passage (Förster 1993). And all of these things have nothing to do with brands.

When urban males in Abidjan perform their “dance of brands,” the reformulation of brands as masks therefore presupposes traditional ritual dance as a metasemiotic framework for construing the trope (and is only intelligible as such to someone acquainted with that framework), where the obvious substitutions—brand tokens for ritual masks, *coupé décalé* for drum signaling—index only the most superficial tropic analogies. Since brand tokens are presented as the dancers’ own possessions, they become emblematic of owner personae (unlike masks in traditional ritual, which are emblematic of spirit personae), but issues of veiled identity are common to both cases. The display of brand tokens in the dance of brands indexically foregrounds issues of authenticity, but authenticity of what kind? Brand discourses (like trademark law) do not supply criteria on authenticity, even if their criteria are fractionally preserved in some practices (as when audiences wonder whether *bluffeurs* are wearing real or counterfeit brands) as partials of local frameworks for reckoning authenticity.

Criteria on authenticity are explicitly formulated through a characterological discourse of social types, where terms from the urban *Nouchi* slang (Newell 2009) supply two contrastive role designators, *yere* and *gaou*, which index the urban youth identities of their speakers (since they are now speaking urban slang), while denoting specific attributes as typical of their referents: a *yere* is a modern, discriminating, tasteful person who cannot be scammed, whereas a *gaou* is a foolish, traditional person, easily duped. Under conditions of rapid urban in-migration, a *yere* is often a savvy urban citizen, and a *gaou* a rural immigrant. But since anyone can be likened to such personae, whether praised as *yere* or dissed as *gaou*, these terms formulate geosocial tropes (not locale-bound identities) that enable status ranking even among persons who live in the same locale, and even the criteria by which someone can be formulated as *gaou* can differ among residents of the same locale. Newell observes that one of

his Abidjan consultants, Benoît, ranks shoes by criteria of whether they are “good value” (low price) and disses the sartorial choices of his cousin, Christophe, by calling him *gaou*, while Christophe uses criteria that rank foreign brands as higher quality, as more “powerful objects,” than locally produced items (Newell 2013, 146) and is frustrated and upset when called a *gaou*. In both cases, criteria on the attributes of things supply criteria on the identity of wearers, but they are not the same criteria. And, as Newell demonstrates, contrasts among criteria can themselves become partials of emblematic contrasts of other kinds, such as affiliative groupings based on kinship tropes, contrastive groupings of citizens as “true” or “false” Ivoirians, and many others, while, at the same time, the very idea that masks link visible to invisible qualities (by whatever criteria) can be used to formulate places as having other places hidden inside them, such as invisible cities shimmering inside visible villages, a trope that treats migratory and capital flows across locales as indexicals of the locales through which they flow, now making one thing visible, now another.

Halstead (2002) shows that rather distinct laminations of places and identities are formulated through “brand-name talk” in Guyana. Although brands are used to distinguish “real” from “fake” personae, local criteria on what is real or fake are sourced not from brand formulations (although these are fractionally preserved) but from a highly specific history of colonialism, trade, and migration that is distinctive to Guyana itself. This history formulates the Guyanese as having multiple relations to “outside” (foreign) places and as having had different relations to them at different times. For instance, America is nowadays an “outside” from which certain brands come, and to which some Guyanese have already migrated, while others await migration.

Since the 1980s, the substantial growth in Guyanese out-migration to America has been accompanied by a correspondingly larger inflow of “real” American brands to Guyana (as remittances from abroad), as well as a growth in “fake” brands (purchasable in Guyana) that are brought from places like Brazil but marketed as American. Both real and fake brands are thus indexicals of “outside” places, but fake brands are cheaper. When brand-name talk involves discussions of quality, differences between “real” and “fake” things do matter, but when such talk formulates footings with outside places, “fake products are just as good” as real ones (Halstead 2002, 274).

Halstead observes that since many Guyanese arrived in colonial times as indentured labor from India, they have a long history of self-formulation as “foreign” and of performing varied other-focal footings with the many “out-

sides” to which they are linked by migratory and commodity flows at different times. Today, foreign brands (whether real or fake) permit varied forms of footing through brand-name talk, enabling distinct types of inside and outside self-formulations in distinct settings: youth waiting to emigrate are “waiting for their ‘real’ lives to begin elsewhere”; others can access their foreign parts without leaving Guyana, whether formulated as achievable through access to outside brands, or through access to the “real” through simulacra such as “fake” brands; those who can afford vacations to New York periodically access the “real” through Nike[®] and Calvin Klein[®] while abroad, and bring it back to Guyana when they return. When Guyanese living in America visit the home country and seek local foods to take back in preserved form, the locals assert national pride by saying that their own local goods (whether branded or not) are “the real brands” for these visitors. Meanwhile, Guyanese immigrants who live in New York formulate belonging to mainstream America through ownership and display of high-end brands like Lexus[®] but, at the same time, emphasize their ethnic distinctness by emphasizing their own “real” traditions in encounters with people they meet in New York settings.

Metasemiotic Frameworks and Object Formulations

The capacity of a trademark to function as an “indexical” is sometimes described (as in Lury 2004) as if protocols of trademark law or brand management suffice to determine its indexical values. However, an object that functions as a trademark has no determinate indexical values independently of a metasemiotic framework that regiments its construal, nor is any indexical value that it may have (under some given framework) immune from defeasibility or partial cancellation of indexical force by co-occurring signs, nor is it immune from systematic reanalysis under a distinct metasemiotic framework that formulates stereotypic indexical values entirely unrelated to those that constitute it as a trademark. To imagine otherwise is to imagine an entirely spectral thing.

I began by observing that a durable artifact (such as a pair of jeans or its logo) may have the same physical shape (*qua sensorium*) in many encounters with it, without having the same sign values across distinct participation frameworks of encounter, such as manufacture and purchase; and that, in any given phase of its existence, such a durable object is, from a semiotic point of view, a composite artifact, where distinct semiotic partials are serially sedimented into it (or formulated for it) by distinct metasemiotic practices, so that all of the sign values of the physical sensorium (which may be variably sourced

and asymmetrically distributed in society) need not be symmetrically construable by all who observe it in some instance. As long as current observers have fractionally congruent construals of its significance, they are nonetheless able to interact with each other through it, simply because they can always clarify their nonsymmetric partials to each other through a variety of occasion-specific metasemiotic practices, such as their own talk about it.

Hence neither the term *brand* nor the term *branding* helps clarify the social-semiotic processes in which brands play a part. The noun *brand* appears to designate a unitary bounded object, but the indexical values of brand fractions rely on variably sourced and incrementally altered object formulations that arise and change across locale-specific participation frameworks of social life. The gerund *branding* does name a process, of course, but it is the wrong process because the term narrows our gaze to specific mediatized protocols and value projects (like law and marketing) and thus reduces the social lives of brand fractions to some among their source formulations, while at the same time obscuring the enormous variety of uptake formulations that enable the actual social practices of their users, and these practices, as we have seen, even when they involve brand fractions, are not plausibly described as “branding.”

By distinguishing a brand fraction from the physical object to which a brand formulation is given, we are able to see brand fractions and their sign values as precipitates of indexically linked activity sequences, some of which may be occasion specific and singular, some of which may be organized as social practices, and some may even be organized as mediatized practices, although all of them never are, nor ever can be.

The above cases of brand-sourced semiosis from around the world illustrate a wide variety of metasemiotic practices, where things that we call brand fractions are given entirely distinct object formulations and are imbued with sign values that indexically reveal varied kinds of interpersonal-social realities for those acquainted with them. In some cases, the metasemiotic practices in question are the practices of specific individuals, such as Karim and Valentina, which may or may not be comparable to those of others they meet. In other cases, these practices have a wider social domain and are the practices of identifiable social groups, in which Guyanese appear “foreign,” or Tamil youth have “style,” or Ivoirian brand dancers are “masked.”

In each case, the metasemiotic practices in question and the sign values they formulate are locale specific. But so also are the metasemiotic practices of Western trademark law and the construal of their object-signs as trademarks. The difference is that the latter (but not the former) have a mediatized orga-

nization that enables their dissemination to many country locales that are distinct from the source locales in which they first emerged. When their mediatized organization is described as a fact about “globalization” such talk implies that they are symmetrically known around the world and that they symmetrically inform the practices of those who know them. But this is absurd, as we have seen. Mediatized practices of whatever design, and of whatever degree of complexity or composite elaboration, are always englobed by forms of semiotic mediation not anticipated by their design (Agha 2011c), and this is so both in the home country in which they are born and in every other locale around the world into which they are recycled.

A brand fraction lives only through the activities of persons insofar as they orient to its existence during them. It dies if no one pays attention to it any more, a fate that, given the rapidity of change in fashion cycles, is its most common and inevitable fate. It can have a fairly stable life too as long as (and insofar as) the activities in which it is sourced are indexically congruent across a series of uptake formulations. But some of its features are incrementally altered in current activities, too, displacing others. And some of these increments, such as the footings specific individuals inhabit through brand tokens (my iPod indexes my coolness, thank you, not yours) are vivid and alive during specific current encounters and die when they end. In other cases, incrementally altered sign values become routinized in locale-specific practices. In the locales we have just considered, a great variety of self- or other-focal forms of social indexicality are fashioned through metasemiotic discourses distinctive to each locale. They are treated as normal in the practices in which they occur and, as normalized tropes, constitute routine forms of life that differentiate locales from each other.

Such practices involve tropes “of branding” only insofar as mediatized brand formulations are sourced within them. But brand formulations are not the only norms these practices trope upon. The Ivoirian dancers, for example, are troping on rituals involving spirit masks, too. And Tamil youth are grouping counterfeit brands with Tamil-English slang, smoking, and other transgressive behaviors. In fact, in none of these cases do persons and groups evaluate brand fractions in isolation from other features of their social lives. Whenever they source brand fractions into their behaviors, they also source a number of other kinds of signs from other practices that have nothing to do with brands, and which, when they are brought together under locale-specific unifying rubrics along with brand fractions, reconfigure the significance of all source partials to yield semiotic composites of entirely distinct kinds.

As we begin to understand how metasemiotic frameworks of entirely distinct kinds can be laminated together to yield discrete forms of significance in human conduct, it is more helpful to begin to reason about these processes as involving a more general and visibly syncretic “dialectic of norm and trope” (Agha 2007): more general because multiple norms are sourced as inputs into tropes; visibly syncretic because distinct increments have distinct indexical values, which may in turn be variably sourced into distinct practices and become normalized into locale-specific forms of life in some of them. Once these issues become clear, the tropes of branding with which I began this article—including all talk of their “life” and “death” and “ashes”—can be dropped and left aside, handy though they may have been in helping us approach the tropes of branding to which the ethnographies I discuss here draw our attention.

Meanwhile, the best cure for brand anxieties in the currently fashionable literature is to pay closer ethnographic and semiotic attention to what the mouths and bodies that recycle brand fractions are doing to the brand fractions they recycle, or what they make of them, or remake them into, most of which has little to do with brands, and most of which tends to remain in, and thrive within, restricted social domains of semiotic practice around the world. And if we call what they are making “common culture” we may have a new way of thinking about the fortunes of the “culture” construct (as well as the “capitalism” construct) in this so-called age of globalization, but that’s another story.

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