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Where Is Portland Made? The Complex Relationship between Social Media and Place in the Artisan Economy of Portland, Oregon (USA)

Steve Marotta, Austin Cummings, Charles Heying

Abstract

Exposition

Portland, Oregon (USA) has become known for an artisanal or 'maker' economy that relies on a resurgence of place specificity (Heying), primarily expressed and exported to a global audience in the notion of 'Portland Made' (Roy). Portland Made reveals a tension immanent in the notion of 'place': place is both here and not here, both real and imaginary. What emerges is a complicated picture of how place conceptually captures various intersections of materiality and mythology, aesthetics and economics. On the one hand, Portland Made represents the collective brand-identity used by Portland's makers to signify a products' material existence as handcrafted, place-embedded, and authentic. These characteristics lead to certain assumptions about the concept of 'local' (Marotta and Heying): what meaning does Portland Made convey, and how is such meaning distributed? On the other hand, the seemingly intentional embedding of place-specificity in objects meant for distribution far outside of Portland begs another type of question: how does Portland come to be *discursively* representative of these characteristics, and how are such representations distributed to global audiences? How does this global distribution and consumption of immaterial Portland feed back into the production of material Portland?

To answer these questions we look to the realm of social media, specifically the popular image-based service Instagram. For the uninitiated, Instagram is a web-based social media service that allows pictures to be shared and seen by anyone that follows a person or business' Instagram account. Actions include posting original photos (often taken and posted with a cell phone), 'liking' pictures, and 'hash-tagging' posts with trending terms that increase visibility. Instagram presents us with a complex view of place as both material and virtual, sometimes reifying and sometimes abstracting often-contradictory understandings of place specificity. Many makers use Instagram to promote their products to a broad audience and, in doing so, makers participate in the construction of Portland's mythology. In this paper, we use empirical insights to theorise makers' role in shaping and cultivating the virtual and material aspects of place. Additionally, we discuss how makers navigate the complex relationships tied to the importance of place in their specific cultural productions. In the first section, we develop the notion of a curated maker subjectivity. In the second section, we consider the relationship between subjectivity and place. Both sections emphasize how Instagram mediates the relationship between place and subjectivity. Through spotlighting particular literatures in each section, we attempt to fill a gap in the literature that addresses the relationship between subjectivity, place, and social media. Through this line of analysis, we attempt to better understand how and where Portland is made, along with the implications for Portland's makers.

Action

The insights from this paper came to us inadvertently. While conducting fieldwork that interrogated 'localism' and how Portland makers conceptualise local, makers repeatedly discussed the importance of social media to their work. In our fieldwork, Instagram in particular has presented us with new opportunities to query the entanglements of real and virtual embedded in collective identifications with place. This paper draws from interviews conducted for two closely related research projects. The first examines maker ecosystems in three US cities, Portland, Chicago and New York (Doussard et. al.; Wolf-Powers and Levers). We drew from the Portland interviews ($n=38$) conducted for this project. The second research project is our multi-year examination of Portland's maker community, where we have conducted interviews ($n=48$), two annual surveys of members of the Portland Made Collective ($n=126$ for 2014, $n=338$ for 2015) and numerous field observations. As will be evident below, our sample of makers includes small crafters and producers from a variety of 'traditional' sectors ranging from baking to carpentry to photography, all united by a common identification with the maker movement. Using insights from this trove of data as well as general observations of the changing artisan landscape of Portland, we address the question of how social media mediates the space between Portland as a material place and Portland as an imaginary place.

Social Media, Subjectivity, and Authenticity

In the post-Fordist era, creative self-enterprise and entrepreneurialism have been elevated to mythical status (Szeman), becoming especially important in the creative and digital industries. These industries have been characterized by contract based work (Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin; Storey, Salaman, and Platman), unstable employment (Hesmondhalgh and Baker), and the logic of flexible specialization (Duffy and Hund; Gill). In this context of hyper individualization and intense competition, creative workers and other entrepreneurs are increasingly pushed to strategically brand, curate, and project representational images of their subjectivity in order to secure new work (Gill), embody the values of the market (Banet-Weiser and Arzumanova), and take on commercial logics of authenticity (Duffy; Marwick and boyd). For example, Duffy and Hund explore how female fashion bloggers represent their branded persona, revealing three interrelated tropes typically used by bloggers: the destiny of passionate work; the presentation of a glam lifestyle; and carefully curated forms of social sharing. These curated tropes obscure the (unpaid) emotional and aesthetic labour (Hracs and Leslie), self-discipline, and capital required to run these blogs. Duffy and Hund also point out that this concealment is generative of particular mythologies about creative work, gender, race, and class. To this list we would add place; below, we will show the use of Instagram by Portland's makers not only perpetuates particular mythologies about artisan labour and demands self-branding, but is also a spatial practice that is productive of place through the use of visual vernaculars that reflect a localized and globalized articulation of the social and physical milieu of Portland (Hjorth and Gu; Pike).

Similar to many other artists and creative entrepreneurs (Pasquinelli and Sjöholm), Portland's makers typically work long hours in order to produce high quality, unique goods at a volume that will afford them the ability to pay rent in Portland's increasingly expensive central city neighbourhoods. Much of this work is done from the home: according to our survey of Portland Made Collective's member firms, 40% consist of single entrepreneurs working from home. Despite being a part of a creative milieu that is constantly captured by the Portland 'brand', working long hours, alone, produces a sense of isolation, articulated well by this apparel maker:

It's very isolating working from home alone. [...] The other people I know are working from home, handmade people, I'll post something, and it makes you realize we're all sitting at home doing the exact same thing. We can't all hang out because you gotta focus when you're working, but when I'm like ugh, I just need a little break from the sewing machine for five minutes, I go on Instagram.

This statement paints Instagram as a coping mechanism for the isolation of working alone from home, an important impetus for makers to use Instagram. This maker uses Instagram roughly two hours per workday to connect with other makers and to follow certain 'trendsetters' (many of whom also live in Portland). Following other makers allows the maker community to gauge where they are relative to other makers; one furniture maker told us that she was able to see where she should be going based on other makers that were slightly ahead of her, but she could also advise other makers that were slightly behind her. The effect is a sense of collaborative participation in the 'scene', which both alleviates the sense of isolation and helps makers gain legitimacy from others in their milieu. As we show below, this participation demands from makers a curative process of identity formation.

Jacque Rancière's intentional double meaning of the French term *partage* (the "distribution of the sensible") creates space to frame curation in terms of the politics around "sharing in" and "sharing out" (Méchoulan). For Rancière, the curative aspect of communities (or scenes) reveals something inherently political about aesthetics: the politics of visibility on Instagram "revolve around what is seen and what can be said about it, who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time" (8-9). An integral part of the process of curating a particular identity to express over Instagram is reflected by who they follow or what they 'like' (a few makers mentioned the fact that they 'like' things strategically).

Ultimately, makers need followers for their brand (product brand, self-brand, and place-brand), which requires makers to engage in a form of aesthetic labour through a curated articulation of who a maker is—their personal story, or what Duffy and Hund call "the destiny of passionate work"—and how that translates into what they make at the same time. These identities congeal over Instagram: one maker described this as a "circle of firms that are moving together." Penetrating that circle by curating connections over Instagram is an important branding strategy.

As a confections maker told us, strategically using hashtags and stylizing pictures to fit the trends is paramount. Doing these things effectively draws attention from

other makers and trendsetters, and, as an apparel maker told us, getting even one influential trendsetter or blogger to follow them on Instagram can translate into huge influxes of attention (and sales) for their business. Furthermore, getting featured by an influential blogger or online magazine can yield instantaneous results. For instance, we spoke with an electronics accessories maker that had been featured in Gizmodo a few years prior, and the subsequent uptick in demand led him to hire over 20 new employees.

The formulation of a 'maker' subjectivity reveals the underlying manner in which certain subjective characteristics are expressed while others remain hidden; expressing the wrong characteristics may subvert the ability for makers to establish themselves in the milieu. We asked a small Portland enterprise that documents the local maker scene about the process of curating an Instagram photo, especially curious about how they aesthetically frame 'site visits' at maker workspaces. We were somewhat surprised to hear that makers tend to "clean too much" ahead of a photo shoot; the photographer we spoke with told us that people want to see the space as it looks when it's being worked in, when it's a little messy. The photographer expressed an interest in accentuating the maker's 'individual understanding' of the maker aesthetic; the framing and the lighting of each photo is meant to relay traces of the maker to potential consumers. The desire seems to be the expression and experience of 'authenticity', a desire that if captured correctly grants the maker a great deal of purchase in the field of Portland Made consumers. This is all to say that the curation of the workspaces is essential to the construction of the maker subjectivity and the Portland imaginary. Maker workshops are rendered as real places where real makers that belong to an authentic maker milieu produce authentic Portland goods that have a piece of Portland embedded within them (Molotch). Instagram is central in distributing that mythology to a global audience.

At this point we can start to develop the relationship between maker subjectivity and place. Authenticity, in this context, appears to be tied to the product being both handmade and place-specific. As the curated imaginary of Portland matures, a growing dialogue emerges between makers and consumers of Portland Made (authentic) goods. This dialogue is a negotiated form of authority in which the maker *claims* authority while the consumer simultaneously *confers* authority. The aforementioned place-specificity signals a new layer of magic in regards to Portland's distinctive position: would 'making' in any other place be generative of such authority? According to a number of our interviewees, being from Portland carries the assumption that Portland's makers have a certain level of expertise that comes from being completely embedded in Portland's creative scene. This complex interplay between real and virtual treats Portland's imaginary as a concrete reality, preparing it for consumption by reinforcing the notion of an authoritative collective brand (Portland Made). One bicycle accessory maker claimed that the ability of Portland's makers to access the Portland brand transmits credibility for makers of things associated with Portland, such as bikes, beer, and crafty goods. This perhaps explains why so many makers use Portland in the name of their company (e.g. Portland Razor Company) and why so many stamp their goods with 'Made in Portland'.

This, however, comes with an added set of expectations: the maker, again, is tasked with cultivating and performing a particular aesthetic in order to achieve legitimacy with their target audience, only this time it ends up being the dominant aesthetic associated with a specific place. For instance, the aforementioned bicycle accessory maker that we spoke with recalled an experience at a craft fair in which many of the consumers were less concerned with his prices than whether his goods were handmade in Portland. Without this legitimization, the good would not have the mysticism of Portland as a place locked within it. In this way, the authenticity of a place becomes metonymic (e.g. *Portlandia*), similar to how Detroit became known as 'Motor City'. Portland's particular authenticity is wrapped up in individuality, craftiness, creativity, and environmental conscientiousness, all things that makers in some way embed in their products (Molotch) and express in the photos on their Instagram feeds (Hjorth).

(Social) Media, Place, and the Performance of Aesthetics

In this section, we turn our attention to the relationship between subjectivity, place, and Instagram. Scholars have investigated how television production (Pramett), branding (Pike), and locative-based social media (Hjorth, Hjorth and Gu, Hjorth and Lim, Leszczynski) function as spatial practices. The practices affect and govern experiences and interactions with space, thereby generating spatial hybridity (de Souza e Silva). McQuire, for example, investigates the historical formation of the 'media city', demonstrating how various media technologies have become interconnected with the architectural structures of the city. Pramett expands on this analysis of media representations of cities by interrogating how media production acts as a spatial practice that produces and governs contested urban spaces, the people in those spaces, and the *habitus* of the place, forming what she dubs the "media neighbourhood." The media neighbourhood becomes ordered by the constant opportunities for neighbourhood residents to be involved in media production; residents must navigate and interact with local space as though they may be captured on film or asked to work in the background production at any moment. These material (on site shooting and local hiring practices) and immaterial (textual, musical, and visual representations of a city) production practices become exploitative, extracting value from a place for media industries and developers that capitalize on a place's popular imaginary.

McQuire's media city and Pramett's media neighbourhood help us understand the embeddedness of (social) media in the material landscapes of Portland. Over the past few years, Portland has begun experiencing new flows of tourists and migrants—we should note that more than a few makers mentioned in interviews that they moved to Portland in order to become makers—expecting to find what they see on Instagram overlaid materially on the city itself. And indeed, they do: 'vibrant' neighbourhood districts such as Alberta Arts, Belmont, Mississippi, Hawthorne, Northwest 23rd, and downtown Portland's rebranded 'West End' are all increasingly full of colourful boutiques that express maker aesthetics and sell local maker goods. Not only do the goods and boutiques need to exemplify these aesthetic qualities, but the makers and the workspaces from which these goods come from, need to fit that aesthetic.

The maker subjectivity is developed through the navigation of both real and virtual experiences that contour the social performance of a 'maker aesthetic'. This aesthetic has become increasingly socially consumed, a trend especially visible on Instagram: as a point of reference, there are at least four Portland-based 'foodies' that have over 80,000 followers on Instagram. One visible result of this curated and performed subjectivity and the place-brand it captures is the *physical* transformation of Portland: (material) space has become a surface onto which the (virtual) Instagram/maker aesthetic is being inscribed, a stage on which the maker aesthetic is performed. The material and immaterial are interwoven into a dramaturgy that gives space a certain set of meanings oriented toward creativity, quirkiness, and consumption. Meanings cultivated over Instagram, then, become productive of meaning in place. These meanings are consumed by thousands of tourists and newly minted Portlanders, as images of people posing in front of Portland's hipster institutions (such as Salt & Straw or Voodoo Donuts) are captured on iPhones and redistributed back across Instagram for the world to experience. Perhaps this is why Tokyo now has an outpost of Portland's Blue Star Donuts or why Red Hook (Brooklyn) has its own version of Portland's Pok Pok. One designer/maker, who had recently relocated to Portland, captured the popular imaginary of Portland in this conversation:

Maker: People in Brooklyn love the idea that it came from Portland. People in Seattle love it; people in the Midwest love that it came from Portland right now, because Portland's like the thing.

Interviewer: What does that mean, what does it embody?

Maker: They know that it's local, it like, they know that maker thing is there, it's in Portland, that they know it's organic to Portland, it's local to Portland, there's this crazy movement that you hear throughout the United States about—

Interviewer: So people are getting a piece of that?

Maker: Yeah.

For us, the dialogical relationship between material and immaterial has never been more entangled. Instagram is one way that makers might control the gap between fragmentation and belonging (i.e. to a particular community or milieu), although in the process they are confronted with an aesthetic distribution that is productive of a mythological sense of place that social media seems to produce, distribute, and consume so effectively. In the era of social media, where sense of place is so quickly transmitted, cities can come to represent a sense of collective identity, and that identity might in turn be distributed across its material landscape.

Denouement

Through every wrench turn, every stitching of fabric, every boutique opening, and every Instagram post, makers actively produce Portland as both a local and global place. Portland is constructed through the material and virtual interactions makers engage in, both cultivating and framing everyday interactions in space and ideas held about place. In the first section, we focused on the curation of a maker aesthetic and the development of the maker subjectivity mediated through Instagram. The second section attempted to better understand how those aesthetic performances on Instagram become imprinted on urban space and how these inscriptions feedback to global audiences. Taken together, these performances reveal the complex undertaking that makers adopt in branding their goods as Portland Made. In addition, we hope to have shown the complex entanglements between space and place, production and consumption, and 'here' and 'not here' that are enrolled in

value production at the nexus of place-brand generation.

Our investigation opens the door to another, perhaps more problematic set of interrogations which are beyond the scope of this paper. In particular, and especially in consideration of Portland's gentrification crisis, we see two related sets of displacements as necessary of further interrogation. First, as we answer the question of where Portland is made, we acknowledge that the capturing of Portland Made as a brand perpetuates a process of displacement and "spatio-subjective" regulation that both reflects and reproduces spatial rationalizations (Williams and Dourish). This *dis-place*-ment renders particular neighbourhoods and populations within Portland, specifically ethnic minorities and the outer edges of the metropolitan area, invisible or superfluous to the city's imaginary. Portland, as presented by makers through their Instagram accounts, conceals the city's "power geometries" (Massey) and ignores the broader social context Portland exists in, while perpetuating the exclusion of ethnic minorities from the conversation about what else is made in Portland.

Second, as Portland Made has become virtually representative of a deepening connection between makers and place, the performance of such aesthetic labour has left makers to navigate a process that increasingly leads to their own estrangement from the very place they have a hand in creating. This process reveals an absurdity: makers are making the very thing that displaces them. The cultivation of the maker milieu attracts companies, in-movers, and tourists to Portland, thus creating a tight real estate market and driving up property values. Living and working in Portland is increasingly difficult for makers, epitomized by the recent sale and eviction of approximately 500 makers from the Town Storage facility (Hammill). Additionally, industrial space in the city is increasingly coveted by tech firms, and competition over such space is being complicated by looming zoning changes in Portland's new comprehensive plan.

Our conclusions suggest additional research is needed to understand the relationship(s) between such aesthetic performance and various forms of displacement, but we also suggest attention to the global reach of such dynamics: how is Portland's maker ecosystem connected to the global maker community over social media, and how is space shaped differentially in other places despite a seemingly homogenizing maker aesthetic? Additionally, we do not explore policy implications above, although there is significant space for such exploration with consideration to the attention that Portland and the maker movement in general are receiving from policymakers hungry for a post-Fordist magic bullet.

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