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*Half Experiences: Building False Identities Since 1936*

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*Modernization has increased the frequency of “half experiences” which creates a wider breadth of possible experiences but also diminished the depth of our experiences. This changes how we develop a personal identity because it allows for the development of more facets but less defined facets at that. Identities continue to be shaped extensively by intimate interactions with an environment, but more importantly cognitively significant experiences. Many authors described how modernization influenced, changed, or hindered the development of a personal identity and a sense of placefulness and belonging, which is, in effect, correlated with the frequency of half-experiences over traditional experiences.*

*Introduction*

“In general terms, place identity can be defined as an interpretation of self that uses environmental meaning to symbolize or situate identity” (Cuba and Hummon, pg. 112). Throughout time, the shaping of a unique personal identity has been greatly influenced by the interactions we had on a day-to-day basis. As time has evolved, however, the exact ways in which we have been influenced by the surrounding environment has changed dramatically. “The materiality of space is inseparable from the various representations that are constructed to interpret it” (Guitart and Mendoza, pgs. 115-116). Modernization and urbanization have played key roles in altering our identity formation process since they have directly altered our

interactions with places by decreasing the frequency and necessity of face-to-face interactions. The decrease in traditional face-to-face experiences, many argue, diminishes the formation of a place related identity, but in fact it simply prompts the development in an alternate way. The rise of “half-experiences” has accompanied the trends of modernization and urbanization, which allows for a more multi-faceted place related identity, although it decreases the significance one of the “half-experiences” can have on one’s identity.

### *Half-Experiences*

The half-experience as I will acknowledge it in the entirety of this paper can be easily explained through the example of a phone call or a Skype video chat. In both of these cases, both results of the increasing commercialization of technology, a face-to-face interaction is neglected in favor of an alternate means of communication. When communicating via a phone call, one cannot see the other party or the environment around him/her, one cannot smell the surroundings, and one cannot physically interact with the environment. All of the spatial stimulation that is suppressed in such a scenario makes the interaction between the two parties less profound and memorable, thus making imprinting on one’s identity much more opaque. Via Skype, one may argue that visibility is provided so the authenticity of the interaction is bettered. While it does allow vision, it is limited vision. Even if a more full field of view was provided, it still remains an environmental connection that is one sided: the environment can influence you, but you cannot influence it.

In essence a half-experience, as used in this paper, is a situation in which some break occurs in the connection between the observer and the environment and possibly between the observer and other beings. With a fractured connection, influence on spatial identity

formation is reduced. This reduced influence in turn can lead to an underdeveloped place-related identity, a key portion of a person's unique personal identity. This type of experience has been increasing in frequency due to the rise of technology, and many times it is used as a substitute for traditional face-to-face experiences. John Fraser Hart, a professional geographer, described the Las Vegas Strip in a similar manner: "The strip is a place where every American can feel at home, no matter where he or she happens to be, because it is so familiar, so standardized, so universal—and so placeless" (219). The Vegas strip is a prime example of the modernized and commercialized world, it represents our society, yet somehow it's difficult for a person to experience intimate connections with the location because it isn't genuine.

### *Full Experiences*

Full experiences are much more encompassing than half-experiences. With the rise of technology, the frequency of full experiences has diminished significantly, mainly due to inconvenience. A genuine experience happens in "lived space," a space that encompasses both the physical environment and the sentimental perception of space: "Lived space entails a new conception of space that takes into account not only the material, but also the subjective experience of the individuals and therefore considers the emotions, feelings, memories, motivations, tastes, dreams, fears and desires (Guitart and Mendoza, pg. 115). The experience an individual has in a place is among the most important factors in shaping an identity because our identity is build on memories.

### *Memories and Identity*

Identity has long been one of the most debated yet common words. For many years it

has “carried the meaning of relational and mutable identifications, actuated either by the individual’s chosen identifications or by other who label individuals...” (Keywords, 124). One of the main components of identity is the individual’s idea of who he/she is as a person, which is greatly influenced by his/her memories. Studies have shown that while visual imagery is the most influential in retaining memories, auditory, emotion and narrative coherence play significant roles in determining memorization longevity and acuteness (Rubin, pg. 80). Dr. Rubin’s studies, focused mostly on the correlation between autobiographical memory and trauma and the evidence of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, demonstrated that people’s perception of their memories influence their sense of personal identity (also referred to as felt identity). Drawing off his data, one can conclude that a full-experience in lived space is much more influential than a half experience in determining one’s felt identity. Unlike the half-experience, the full experience allows for interactions and sensory memory to bolster the creation of genuine, place-related vivid memories, which in turn can have more prominent effects on identity formation.

His study also demonstrates, however, that there is a cognitive component to identity perception. Dr. Rubin noted that “the more a person makes a trauma central to his or her life story or identity, the more PTSD symptoms the person is likely to show” (81). The key word, “makes”, affirms that even half-experiences, if intentionally made central to a person’s life, can be displayed to a surprisingly large degree. Half-experiences, which lack the vivid visual memories more commonly associated with full-experiences, affect the identity through alternate means: notably through cognitive processing which values the pseudo-experience as significant enough to have influence equal to that of the typical face-to-face interaction.

The changing social tide and tendencies to urbanization especially have affected our identity formation. John Brinckerhoff Jackson describes the uniformity of the modern American landscape: “the long straight roads and highways, the immense rectangular fields and the lonely white farmhouses” spotted with indistinguishable cities and urban centers (152). Jackson describes how even the grid system has evolved to serve a more commercialized urban identity where the public park areas and marketplaces have been reduced to streets with big businesses and other commercial niceties. With the decreasing public spaces, traditional social interactions are limited as well. A city becomes a more industrial region rather than a hub of social interactions and a true identifying place. With the commercialization of cities, it is easy for a man or woman to commute to a city for work and never experience an intimate connection with the city (Oakes 511). A (wo)man can frequently be a part of the city without the city being part of him/her because the intimacy of the connections have been reduced so substantially that the city is just another existent place not a unique identifying locust.

The study of landscape and architecture has itself changed to emphasize certain characteristics about place. Students learn about “boundedness, distinctiveness, scale and proportion,” all of which are supposed to “enhance identification by providing significant, discreet place meanings for the articulation of self” (Cuba and Hummon, pg 113). Teaching the preservation of the built environment can be beneficial in many cases in creating unique locales that do indeed become strong locusts of place-identity. Many city residents do indeed identify themselves by the city, many also identify themselves by the neighborhood in which they live because the environment is such an integral part of their lives. To many visitors, however, the uniqueness is lost and the connection isn’t as strong as it may be in a European

city because the culture is all too similar from an outside perspective.

### *Coffee House Case Study*

In a study of the relocation of The Coffee House, a campus dining location, Melinda Mulligan analyzed the effects the change in location had on the employees. She discovered that “Although the organization itself continued after the site move occurred, as did the general category ‘Coffee House employee,’ the Coffee House identity, as employees understood it, did not” (382). When the location was changed, the environment was changed both physically and emotionally: not only did the location change from a cozy brick home away from home to an unwelcoming industrialized restaurant, but the employee experience changed from fun hardly-work to a more tedious job. Employee identification became polarized as a result of this change. Employees who embodied the spirit of the “old” Coffee House were considered “honorary old employees” had they not worked at the original location or simply “old employees” had they been part of the Coffee House staff significantly before the relocation and newer employees were dubbed “new employees” and scorned by their older counterparts.

The group identity was more than a label, it became, to many of the employees, a piece of their identity, thus affirming that place and identity are mutually affective to a significant degree. Mulligan broke identity down into “social”, “personal”, and “felt” components where the social identity is the outside perspective, the personal identity is how a knowledgeable person would identify someone, and felt identity is the identity someone feels he/she has. In the case of the Coffee House employee, all identity perspectives were shaped partially by the label that was given. Mulligan concludes, “the built environment often

shapes identities through learned understandings based on *locational socialization*, or ‘the meanings of locations, about what is expected to go on where and who is expected to be doing it’” (383).

In essence, the old Coffee House was much like a full-experience, while the new Coffee House was more of a half-experience because the employees were less dedicated to and involved in the Coffee House environment. The new Coffee House allowed employees to be physically present, but it prevented much of the interactions that occurred at the old location. The separation of employee stations and the isolation of employee subgroups minimized the power the environment could have on the employees identities. The new employees reported less interest in their jobs-- it wasn't much of an identity for them, rather it was just a job, while the old employees valued their identity as a Coffee House employee as a means of feeling “cool” and wanted. The individual perception of a person immersed in an environment and the environment's allowance of interpersonal and environmental interactions are directly proportional to the degree of influence a place will have on shaping a personal identity.

### *Ciudad de Mexico Case Study*

In a study on the placefulness in a foreign city, la Ciudad de Mexico, Guitart and Mendoza discovered that both the place of residence and the place of work influence a migrant worker's sense of identity. Similarly to the Coffee House example, the neighborhood a migrant lived in carried a stigma with it: it carried class association and in many cases cultural prejudices. The label was something that, pleasant or not, became ingrained in the minds of the migrant workers and, in order to avoid a sense of cognitive

dissonance, that is the lifestyle they adopted. They also adopted the stigmas associated with their chosen professions. This specific study focused solely on skilled migrant workers, who had above-average careers.

In a city such as la Ciudad de Mexico, security is a central issue for families. The trend of urbanization left the city community in a state of social distress, leading to the rise of unsafe, and in many areas unsanitary, living conditions. The security factor, although not tangible, is a sensation that accompanies the environment, and therefore influences identity formation. Family members of families with children especially have identities that have been greatly impacted by the presence of fear for security. One of the migrants who was interviewed, Jose, described how moving to an upper-middle class neighborhood allowed his children to go outside without fear of the streets: “[before] I wasn’t able to leave to walk calmly on the streets [and now my house] gives me a sensation of security” (Guitart and Mendoza, pg. 125). This changed environment and changed cognitive state undoubtedly altered the identity formation, especially those of Jose’s children.

The problem of security also supports the theory that cognition plays an important role in identity determination. Living a life in constant fear of the streets led many families to feel isolated, contained, and discontented with their living situations. With this concern persistently looming overhead, their perceptibility to negative experiences was heightened while their openness to find positivity was partially diminished. Similarly to Dr. Rubin’s studies on PTSD, the presence of fear correlated with negative ideas of local social identities. The cognitive aspect of spatial interactions thus cannot be ignored when considering the process of identity formation.



*Conclusion*

With our ever-modernizing world, our interactions with our surroundings are constantly changing. Recently, the increased technology and strides towards modernity have left us in an identity forming grey-zone of half- and full-experiences. As Gary Snyder wrote in his essay *Reinhabitation*, “There are many people on the planet, now, who are not ‘inhabitants’” (58). With easy access to pseudo experiences, we are able to experience a complete spectrum of involvements that wouldn’t all be possible in a face-to-face scenario, however these experiences tend to have less profound impacts on our personal identities. With diminished sensory exposure and a false sense of experience, we could be left with a fragmented identity. Identity formation, however, is a significantly cognizant process in which we are able to, to some degree, control the level of influence a certain experience has on our own identity. With this ability to partially determine and create our own identity, the substitution of half-experiences for full-experiences is less detrimental than it could be. In effect, we are able to determine our identity while our environment shapes it, through half-experience or whole-experience.

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