INTRODUCTION

BRANDING THE AUTHENTIC

If there is, among all words, one that is inauthentic, then surely it is the word "authentic."

*Maurice Blanchot*

Welcome to the future of Los Angeles. It is a city made up entirely of brands, logos, and trademarked characters. Every visual landmark in the city has been stamped with a brand. Every resident is a branded or licensed character: Ronald MacDonald wreaks havoc on the city, the cops are the rounded, treaded lumps of the Michelin tire logo, crowds of people are depicted as the America On-Line instant message logo, Bob’s Big Boy is taken hostage and finds a love match in the Esso girl. Anonymous individuals walk around the city with the trademark symbol ™ hovering about their heads. Scanning the skyline, we see the U-Haul building, the Eveready skyscraper, the MTV apartment building.

Corporate logos—Microsoft, BP, Enron, Visa, and countless others—blanket the city’s infrastructure, including the roads, cars, and even the city zoo. The animals in the zoo are also brands: the lion of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film corporation, the alligator from Lacoste clothing company, and Microsoft Window’s butterflies, with the zoo tour bus driven by the iconic Mr. Clean.
This is the world of *Logorama*, a sixteen-minute animated short film written and directed in 2009 by the French creative collective HS, composed of François Alaux, Hervé de Crécy, and Ludovic Houplain. The film’s simple and familiar narrative—which replicates an age-old trope of good versus evil—takes place in a futuristic, stylized, war-zone Los Angeles, where a homicidal psychopath armed with a gun takes people hostage, wreaks havoc on the city, and leads the police in a prolonged, violent chase. After the hostages escape, a natural apocalypse ensues: an earthquake destroys LA, and
what is left is immediately drowned with a tidal wave of oil. Logorama, in its own quirky, campy way, is a warning about the future.

What are we warned about? Brands. The motivation behind Logorama, according to the filmmakers, is to demonstrate the extent to which brands are ubiquitous, embedded in every aspect of our lives and relationships. The violent film, crafted entirely out of brands (more than 2,500 are used in the film), is an indictment of their ubiquity. The filmmakers intend the film as a critique of how a rabid consumerism is now taken for granted in Western culture. In their “alarming universe,” they collapse the distinction between (and thus reinforce the connection between) brands and individuals, brands and violence, and brands and natural disasters.

In some ways, the subject matter of Logorama is also the subject matter of this book. The critique of consumer culture that is the heart of Logorama is also a critique of something else, equally important but perhaps even harder to define: the loss of a kind of authenticity. In the US, the 21st century is an age that hungers for anything that feels authentic, just as we lament more and more that it is a world of inauthenticity, that we are governed by superficiality. People pay exorbitant rents to live in the part of town that is edgy and “real,” that has not yet sold out to bland suburbia; we go to extraordinary lengths to prove we are not “sellouts”; we defensively define ourselves as “authentic.” Throughout, there is the looming sense that we are not real enough, that our world is becoming more and more inauthentic, despite our endless efforts to the contrary. Logorama fulfills our dark fears, epitomizes our great laments: it is a world where brands are everywhere, where even culture has been branded, where even authenticity has been trademarked.

I became interested in brand cultures because I was thinking about what consumer citizenship means within contemporary capitalism. In my previous work, I examined consumer citizenship from a variety of vantage points, such as postfeminist culture and the television industry, but the current moment felt different to me. Business models were now being used as structuring frameworks for cultural institutions such as the university, as well as for social change movements. My own students, eager for career advice, were now asking me about how to build a “self-brand.” I was struck by the use of market language in US politics, from the “Obama brand” to endless press accounts of how Democrats and Republicans have succeeded in trademarking their message, or protecting their brand. Perhaps most urgently, I was interested in, and dismayed by, the endless ways that people use the logic, strategies, and language of brands as a dominant way to express our politics, our creativity, our religious practices—indeed, our very selves.
This book is my attempt to define the processes that create the world of contemporary branding. Branding in our era has extended beyond a business model; branding is now both reliant on, and reflective of, our most basic social and cultural relations. First, then, a few definitions. I use the term “brand” to refer to the intersecting relationship between marketing, a product, and consumers. “Brand cultures” refers to the way in which these types of brand relationships have increasingly become cultural contexts for everyday living, individual identity, and affective relationships. There are different brand cultures that at times overlap and compete with each other: the brand culture of street art in urban spaces, religious brand cultures such as “New Age spirituality” and “Prosperity Christianity,” the culture of green branding with its focus on the environment. The practice of branding is typically understood as a complex economic tool, a method of attaching social or cultural meaning to a commodity as a means to make the commodity more personally resonant with an individual consumer. But it is my argument that in the contemporary era, brands are about culture as much as they are about economics. As marketers have continually relayed to me, brands are meant to invoke the experience associated with a company or product; far from the cynical view of academics, or beleaguered parents, brands are actually a story told to the consumer. When that story is successful, it surpasses simple identification with just a tangible product; it becomes a story that is familiar, intimate, personal, a story with a unique history. Brands become the setting around which individuals weave their own stories, where individuals position themselves as the central character in the narrative of the brand: “I’m a Mac user,” many of us say smugly, or, “I drink Coke, not Pepsi.” While brands are visible and often audible, through symbols and logos, through jingles and mottoes, through all means of visual and auditory design—and occasionally, even through a smell!—the definition of a brand exceeds its materiality. More than just the object itself, a brand is the perception—the series of images, themes, morals, values, feelings, and sense of authenticity conjured by the product itself. The brand is the essence of what will be experienced; the brand is a promise as much as a practicality.

Because a brand’s value extends beyond a tangible product, the process of branding—if successful—is different from commodification: it is a cultural phenomenon more than an economic strategy. Commodification implies the literal transformation of things into commodities; branding is a much more deeply interrelated and diffused set of dynamics. To commodify something means to turn it into, or treat it as, a commodity; it means to make commercial something that was not previously thought of as a product, such as a melody or racial identity. Commodification is a marketing strategy, a
monetization of different spheres of life, a transformation of social and cultural life into something that can be bought and sold. In contrast, the process of branding impacts the way we understand who we are, how we organize ourselves in the world, what stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. While commodities are certainly part of branding—indeed, commodities are a crucial part of these stories about ourselves—the process of branding is broader, situated within culture. It is this cultural process of branding—that marks the transformation of everyday, lived culture to brand culture—with which this book is concerned.

Even if we discard as false a simple opposition between the authentic and the inauthentic, we still must reckon with the power of authenticity—of the self, of experience, of relationships. It is a symbolic construct that, even in a cynical age, continues to have cultural value in how we understand our moral frameworks and ourselves, and more generally how we make decisions about how to live our lives. We want to believe—indeed, I argue that we need to believe—that there are spaces in our lives driven by genuine affect and emotions, something outside of mere consumer culture, something above the reductiveness of profit margins, the crassness of capital exchange.

In the following chapters, then, I examine cultural spaces that we like to think of as “authentic”—self-identity, creativity, politics, and religion—and the ways these spaces are increasingly formed as branded spaces, structured by brand logic and strategies, and understood and expressed through the language of branding. This transformation of culture of everyday living into brand culture signals a broader shift, from “authentic” culture to the branding of authenticity. Contemporary brand cultures are so thoroughly imbricated with culture at large that they become indistinguishable from it.

So I ask, in the ensuing pages: What happens to authenticity in a brand culture? What are the stakes for living in a world that resembles _Logorama_? While I resist the causal relationship implied by the film—brand culture unequivocally leads to global disaster—I do have grave concerns about the increasing presence in the West of brands as symbolic structures for crafting selves, creativity, politics, and spirituality. At the same time, I try to avoid the simple assumption that situates branding and consumer culture as oppositional to “real” politics and culture. Not all brand cultures are the same, nor do they contain the same pitfalls (or promises). Rather than generalize all branding strategies as egregious effects of today’s market, and think wistfully of a bygone world that was truly authentic, it is more productive to situate brand cultures in terms of their ambivalence, where both economic imperatives and “authenticity” are expressed and experienced simultaneously. Thus, this book looks at key cultural contexts where we craft our individual
identities—the realms of creativity, religion, politics, history—to see how brand cultures operate within them, and analyzes these contexts for their productive contradictions.

The Culture of the Brand

Everyone who lives in the US in the 21st century has a relationship with brands: the products that we recognize from an image or even just a font; the numerous items that we buy (or try to avoid buying) because they are made by a particular company. Coca-Cola, Apple, Starbucks, Levi’s, Visa, MTV, and thousands of others inundate the cultural, economic, and political landscape of everyday life.

The legitimacy of the brand is now established, regularized, and surveyed in a way that is unique to contemporary culture. But precisely because of the uniqueness of our branded landscape, it can be understood by looking at its connections to earlier histories of the market and culture. In the US of the 18th century, branding was the very literal process of creating and distributing a brand name that was protected by a trademark. This was signified, for instance, by the branding of cattle so that ranchers could differentiate their herds. The emergence of mass production as part of the industrialization of the 19th century, alongside changes in technologies (including printing and design), transportation, and labor practices, ushered in a new era of branding. As branding became more of a normative practice, commodities began to take on cultural “value” because of the way in which they were imaged, packaged, and distributed in an increasingly competitive commercial landscape. The attention (and money) paid to the way a product was branded and distributed only increased in the 20th century. By the mid-20th century, as I develop in chapter 1, companies recognized what Liz Moor signals as the heightened “necessity of cultural value for economic value” and leveraged branding as a way to market to a mass culture, a strategy that took shape in an America marked by immigration, persistent social and cultural conflict, and two world wars. Moor notes that after World War II, “People were encouraged to buy these brand-name products as a sign of their own loyalty to this new version of America, but the success of such injunctions appears to have depended in large part upon the fact that brand-name commodities would have fulfilled a pressing social need for common bonds, and for a common vernacular language, among socially disparate groups during a time of immense upheaval.”

My focus here is on the later 20th and early 21st centuries, when branding seems to be fulfilling an even more “pressing social need” in the US: arguably all areas of social relations and cultural life are commercialized, and
common bonds and common language are articulated and experienced, as corporations have longed dreamed, through consumption. Given the reliance of Fordist and post-Fordist capitalism on marketing and advertising, the eventual emergence of branding as a primary marketing strategy and cultural form makes sense. The connection between marketing, commercialization, and cultural values, however, is neither direct nor deterministic. The relationship between commerce and culture is formed obliquely, through a multilayered set of dynamic historical discourses. As Viviana Zelizer argues, historically there has been a general aversion to monetizing the relationships between individuals and culture; in law, social arrangements, and individual relations there has been a “resistance to evaluating human beings in monetary terms.” But changes in Western political economies, from industrialization to liberal capitalism to post-Fordist capitalism to neoliberalism, mark shifts not only in how culture itself is valued but also in how individuals themselves are given particular value.

As Zelizer reminds us, economic exchange is organized in and by cultural meanings. But contemporary brand culture also comes at this dynamic from the opposite direction: cultural meanings are organized by economic exchange. The process of branding is created and validated in these interrelated dynamics. As I discuss throughout this book, a number of entangled discourses and practices are involved in the complex process of branding: it entails the making and selling of immaterial things—feelings and affects, personalities and values—rather than actual goods. It engages the labor of consumers so that there is not a clear demarcation between marketer and consumer, between seller and buyer. The engagement of consumers as part of building brands, through such practices as consumer-generated content online and the coproduction of brands by consumers through customization, potentially engenders new relationships between the buyer and the bought, the latest in an ever-expanding catalog of branding logic and language.

Celia Lury points out that the invention of “social marketing” and the increasing reliance of contemporary marketers on nonbusiness approaches (such as anthropology and sociology) have encouraged a shift in perception on the part of both consumers and marketers as to what it means to “brand” a product. Indeed, Lury notes that one of the key stages in late 20th-century branding practices is “a changed view of the producer-consumer relationship: no longer viewed in terms of stimulus-response, the relation was increasingly conceived of as an exchange.” This changed relationship requires labor on the part of both consumers and marketers. This is perhaps most starkly demonstrated in the increasing corporate use of social media, such as when a corporation has a “personal” Facebook page; or uses of YouTube to promote
Branding the Authentic commercial endeavors, where consumers and marketers engage in “authent-
ic” exchanges that help to build corporate brands. Through the use of such social media, marketers increasingly assume (and exploit) the existence of consumers’ dialogic relationship with cultural products and emphasize an affective exchange between corporations and consumers. As a relationship based on exchange (even if this is an unequal exchange), branding cannot be explained as commodification or as the mere incorporation of cultural spheres of life by advanced capitalism. As Tiziana Terranova has pointed out, explaining the labor of consumers as commodification or corporate appropriation usually presumes the co-optation of an “authentic” element of a consumer’s life by a marketer: the creation of street art, for instance, when sponsored by a corporation is understood as “selling out”; a similar “crime” against authenticity is the manufacturing of T-shirts featuring the words “Jesus is my homeboy,” which are then sold at chain retail stores. Explaining brand culture as a sophisticated form of corporate appropriation, then, keeps intact the idea that corporate culture exists outside—indeed, in opposition to—“authentic” culture. Rather than thinking of incorporation by capital from some “authentic” place outside of consumerism, brand culture requires a more complex frame of analysis, where incorporation, as Terranova points out, is not about capital encroaching on authentic culture but rather is a process of transforming and shifting cultural labor into capitalist business practices. This channeling of labor into business practices is precisely what mobilizes the building of brand cultures by individual consumers and what distinguishes brand culture in the contemporary moment. It is also a hallmark of contemporary social media and consumer participation, which in turn distinguishes branding from more conventional marketing.

In a broad sense, one of the initial motivating factors for me in writing this book involved thinking through these kinds of politics within advanced capitalism. While I recognize how commodification works as a powerful corporate tool in advanced capitalism, it also seemed that the ubiquity of brand culture signaled something else. Brand cultures are not the same across all contexts. Commodities and money do not circulate in the same way in different spheres of life. I discuss these different modes of circulation in the chapters in this book and think about the ways brand cultures also authorize consumption as praxis—the act of buying goods that have a politics attached to them or critiquing consumer culture through corporate-sponsored street art.

In the contemporary US, building a brand is about building an affective, authentic relationship with a consumer, one based—just like a relationship between two people—on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations. Brands create what Raymond Williams called a
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structure of feeling, an ethos of intangible qualities that resonate in different ways with varied communities. We cannot productively think about brand culture, or what brands mean for culture, without accounting for the affective relational quality—the experience—of brands. These affective relationships with brands are slippery, mobile, and often ambivalent, which makes them as powerful and profitable as they are difficult to predict and discuss. It is through these affective relationships that our very selves are created, expressed, and validated. Far more than an economic strategy of capitalism, brands are the cultural spaces in which individuals feel safe, secure, relevant, and authentic.

Culture, in this sense, indicates the values and affect, the hopes and anxieties, the material artifacts and the power dynamics upon which we construct our individual lives, our communities, our histories. Williams, when writing about the “ordinariness” of culture in 1958, perhaps could not have predicted the ways in which capitalism would come to define global networks of production, consumption, and distribution. He situated culture and capitalism as related but not determined by each other; he opposed the idea that relations of production could somehow direct culture because culture is something made “by living.” And yet in a moment of global advanced capitalism, the making—and selling, and using—of things is often impossible to separate from the ways that we make our own lives. Brand strategies and logics are not only the backdrop but also become the tools for “living” in culture. Culture is some thing, some place, that is made and remade, and therefore depends on individuals in relation to a system of production. In the contemporary moment, branding is part of this making and remaking, and is part of culture that is produced and given meaning by consumers. There is of course much that is left out of culture if we rely on a static definition of capitalism as its central frame. Yet as brand logic and strategies become normative contexts for the forming of individual and social relations of affect and emotion, the relationship between culture and economic logic grows deeper and more entangled. Connecting brand to culture thus challenges a historical aversion to defining culture in economic terms, but not because brand culture simply “seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market.” Rather than positioning the market as my entry point in this analysis, following Williams I center culture, focusing on the ways in which it is continually reimagined and reshaped, a process inherently ambivalent and contradictory. US culture is predicated not on the separate domains of individual experience, everyday life, and the market but rather on their deep interrelation.

The interpenetration of brands and culture is not simply another logical stop on a capitalist continuum. Rather, a great deal is at stake in a life
lived through the culture of brands. When individuals invest in brands as “authentic” culture, it privileges individual relationships over collective ones and helps to locate the individual, rather than the social, as a site for political action (or inaction) and cultural change (or merely exchange).

**Clamoring for Authenticity**

The authentic is tricky to define. Its definition has been the subject of passionate debates involving far-ranging thinkers, from Plato to Marx, from Andy Warhol to Lady Gaga. I am not offering a new definition of authenticity. Nor am I arguing for a return to a “pure,” unbranded authenticity. I am, however, thinking about how, and in what ways, the concept of authenticity remains central to how individuals organize their everyday activities and craft their very selves. Moreover, in a culture that is increasingly understood and experienced through the logic and strategies of commercial branding, and in a culture characterized by the postmodern styles of irony, parody, and the superficial, the concept of authenticity seems to carry even more weight, not less. In the following pages, I explore the ways in which the “authentic” is brought to bear in brand culture. More specifically, I discuss the maintenance of authenticity in two, interrelated ways: as a cultural space defined by branding, and as a relationship between consumers and branders.

Many scholars of consumer culture, both historical and contemporary, have argued that in the face of brands and commodities we risk a loss of “authentic” humanity. The branded spaces I examine in Authentic™—the self, creativity, politics, religion—are precisely those spaces that have been historically understood as “authentic,” positioned and understood as outside the crass realm of the market. What is understood (and experienced) as authentic is considered such precisely because it is perceived as not commercial. Even when history bears out the fallacy of this binary, as it inevitably does, individuals continue to invest in the notion that authentic spaces exist—the space of the self, of creativity, of spirituality. Social theorists and commentators from Rousseau to Marx to Thoreau have contemplated the space of the authentic as a space that is not material. This arrangement is mirrored within individuals: the authentic resides in the inner self (or, for Marx, the unalienated self); the outer self is merely an expression, a performance, and is often corrupted by material things (and more specifically, as Marx points out so eloquently, by capitalism). Thoreau and Rousseau saw a clear distinction between the authentic inner self and the performative outer self and saw social and cultural relations as a potential threat to individual authenticity. For these thinkers, as well as Marx, this threat was not empty but had serious consequences, leading individuals to invert values and
fetishize commodities as if they were living things. The inauthentic, commercial world alienates us from social interaction and constructs such interactions as spurious and dehumanizing.\textsuperscript{21}

The binary link between commercial and inauthentic, and noncommercial and authentic, is no doubt too simple. But at the same time, it seems that even the theorizing of Marx and others is no longer adequate to describe the penetration of the material world into our inner lives. It is becoming more and more clear that brand culture shapes not only consumer habits but also political, cultural, and civic practices, so that, in the contemporary era, brands have become what Lury calls a “logos” that structures, rationalizes, and cultivates everyday life.\textsuperscript{22} The concept of brands as logos, and the idea that branding is a primary context for identity construction and creative production, indicates a shift in focus from our persistent frame of reference: instead of debating whether or not we fetishize the commodities we buy, and whether or not those commodities oppress the people who make them, I am now thinking through what it means that authenticity itself is a brand, and that “authentic” spaces are branded.

Some contemporary scholars use this perilous state of authenticity as a central focus in their critique of Western consumption. Naomi Klein published her manifesto against global consumer culture, \textit{No Logo}, in 2000, which resonated with a large audience, many of whom were nervous and angry at the sophisticated methods of contemporary advertising and branding and the seeming unstoppable presence of messages to consume, on billboards, in music videos, on the streets. Klein warned citizens to pay attention to “brands, not products,” asking us to think deeper than the discrete consumer purchase and to look at how global capitalism structures our lives.\textsuperscript{23}

And, indeed, within the 21st century, branding and advertising strategies are increasingly complex, especially in a digital media environment where viral ads, guerrilla marketing, online consumer campaigns and competitions, and user feedback mechanisms are ways for corporations to script advertising messages that feel distinctly noncommercial, and therefore authentic.\textsuperscript{24}

In this thoroughly branded landscape, two opposing schools of thought have emerged in the last few decades. I term these the “anticonsumerism” and the “consumer-as-agent” camps. The former is composed primarily of critical scholars, such as Klein, Kalle Lasn, Juliet Schor, Thomas Frank, and other anticonsumerism scholars and activists, who rightly point out the ubiquity of advertising, marketing, and branding in everyday life.

However, their critiques often maintain the same distinct boundary between a consumer capitalist space and an authentic one as Thoreau, Rousseau, and Marx did in earlier periods of capitalism.\textsuperscript{25} For these contemporary
thinkers, as with their predecessors, authenticity is still possible because they believe space exists outside of consumer capitalism.

This binary is particularly present in indictments over “selling cool,” where marketers and advertisers have a long history of appropriating counterculture aesthetics, reformulating an aesthetics of resistance into something marketable, thus dissipating any fear or anxiety about what might be the consequences of such resistance. Related to this, Michael Serazio, in his work on guerrilla marketing, makes a plea to citizens “for consumer restraint and reflection—advocating true discipline and real discovery external to commercial culture.”

Klein calls advertisers and marketers who sell cool “cultural traitors,” implying that the context for everyday living is one in which “selling out” is a viable, if undesirable, action to take. Lasn’s anticonsumerist magazine Adbusters features strategies (in a kind of updated Situationist style) to help us expose advertising as an elaborate hoax, which manipulates and trick consumers at every turn. These arguments all revolve around an accepted notion of corporate appropriation or a Marxist idea of alienated labor—either of which presumes a market determination and a dynamic of power that, albeit sophisticated and networked, nonetheless functions linearly.

Henry Jenkins, Clay Shirky, and Yochai Benkler (among others) are prominent representatives of the opposing camp. They argue that the anticonsumerism position gives too much power to advertisers and not enough to consumers. For these theorists, “selling cool” is not always a manipulative corporate hoax or a co-optation of the authentic. Instead, they recognize the complicated ways in which cultural dynamics and media converge. In these accounts, the relationship between consumers and corporate power might be about profit motive, but it also can pave the way for a range of other kinds of relations to consumers. Consumers and advertisers coexist (though perhaps in contradiction) in this landscape. The problem in these accounts is that power clearly does not function on an equal playing field within advanced capitalism, so that a singular focus on who has more power—the corporate brand or the consumer—misses out on how power is created as a dynamic, often contradictory force, and similarly maintains a pristine definition of the authentic. Concentrating on individual and corporate uses of power within brand culture obscures the ways in which other entangled discourses in culture are deeply interrelated within it. In other words, power does not always work in a predictable, logical way, as something either corporations or individuals can possess and wield. Power is often exercised in contradictory ways, and brand cultures, like other cultures, are ambivalent, often holding possibility for individual resistance and corporate hegemony simultaneously. Individual resistance within consumer
culture is defined and exercised within the parameters of that culture; to assume otherwise is to believe in a space outside consumerism that is somehow unfettered by profit motive and the political economy. This is nostalgia for authenticity.

I position the authentic differently from either an anticonsumerism or a consumer-as-agent position.\textsuperscript{29} Brand culture is not defined by a smooth flow of content across media platforms or cooperation between multiple media industries, nor is it a context for consistent corporate appropriation. What other explanations can be found if we look beyond the authentic versus the fake, the empowered consumer versus corporate dominance? This kind of explanation needs to begin with an understanding of brand cultures as culture, complete with competing power relations and individual production and practice. And, this explanation is largely missing from scholarly discourse on consumption and branding, and allows us to analyze the cultural meanings of branding without resorting to a binary that is often unproductive. Within contemporary brand culture the separation between the authentic self and the commodity self not only is more blurred, but this blurring is more expected and tolerated. That is, within contemporary consumer culture we take it for granted that authenticity, like anything else, can be branded. In the current moment, rather than representing the loss of authentic humanity,
the authentic and commodity self are intertwined within brand culture, where authenticity is itself a brand.

But authenticity is not only understood and experienced as the pure, inner self of the individual, it is also a relationship between individuals and commodity culture that is constructed as “authentic.” The organization of cultural meaning by economic exchange does not mean, by default, that the relationship individuals have with commodities is spurious or inauthentic; rather, that exchange is a construction of a relationship within the parameters of brand culture. Consider, for example, contemporary individuals’ relationship with religion constituted through branded megachurches and burgeoning industries such as yoga; the revitalization of urban cities as branded, creative spaces for people to “authentically” express themselves; the amplifying mandate to develop a “self-brand” as a way to strategically market oneself personally and professionally. Appending “brand” to “culture,” then, indicates not only the revaluation of culture but also a mapping out of the affective and authentic relationships that are formed within brand cultures—relationships that are unique to this historical moment, shaped by both the constraints and the possibilities of a brand-obsessed world.

While there is much to be said about how and why particular brand campaigns are successful and others are not, or about how marketers need to engage audiences through brand relationships, this book is not about how we react emotionally to particular brands like, say, Coke or Apple; nor is it about how to craft clever branding campaigns, or how to build a better or more fulfilling relationship between brands and consumers. Rather, I examine how areas of our lives that have historically been considered noncommercial and “authentic”—namely, religion, creativity, politics, the self—have recently become branded spaces. These cultural spaces of presumed authenticity not only are often created and sustained using the same kinds of marketing strategies that branding managers use to sell products but also are increasingly only legible in culture through and within the logic and vocabulary of the market. This book, then, is my attempt to think through what it means to live in advanced capitalism, to live a life through brands. The spaces I explore in the following pages are spaces that have been historically considered “authentic,” that are now increasingly formed as branded spaces, undergirded by brand logic and articulated through the language of branding. Above all else, my argument here is that branding is different from commercialization or marketing: it is deeply, profoundly cultural. As culture, it is ambivalent. To understand what is at stake in living in brand cultures, we need to account for this ambivalence, explore its possibilities, and think about what the emergence of brand culture means for individual identities, the creation of culture, and the formation of power.