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Kelley A. McClinchey

*Department of Geography and Environmental Sciences, Wilfrid Laurier University*

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# Conceptualizing Sense of Place through Multi-ethnic Narratives at a Multicultural Festival

Kelley A. McClinchey  
Department of Geography and Environmental Studies  
Wilfrid Laurier University  
Waterloo, Ontario, Canada  
N2L 3C5

## ABSTRACT

Research on place meanings is explored in tourism and leisure research but most often through the concepts of place identity, place attachment and the measurement of these variables. Another concept having received some attention in tourism and leisure is sense of place. Sense of place in festival tourism research is exploratory and empirical research is limited. Few tourism and leisure studies explore in more detail the use of the narrative to interpret people's meanings of place. Through an inductive approach and subjective research methods, this study examined the sense of place perceptions of ethno-cultural group leaders at a multicultural festival. Themes emerged relating to sense of place perceptions and the role of the festival in contributing to a sense of place. Results were discussed in conversation with previous sense of place and festival tourism literature. A discussion emphasized the ethno-cultural constructions of sense of place and the need for more multicultural research on place meanings in the context of leisure and tourism experiences.

Key words: festivals, subjective research, inductive approach, sense of place, multi-ethnic narratives

## INTRODUCTION

*This may seem like a paradox, but I travel to belong; a sense of belonging is the ultimate gift a place can bestow* (Andres, 2009 p.92).

As Francis Mayes (1996) stated in *Under the Tuscan Sun*, a sense of place is entirely a matter of smell and instinct, we are looking for something but what? It is a journey to the far interior of the psyche and it either begins or it does not. It can be so simple yet extremely complex. Tourism, as well as leisure and recreation, are often about wonderful experiences in distinct places. Understanding the values and meanings of places, the intangible qualities, can give recreation and tourism managers a holistic perspective of place, one that provides contextual and descriptive data about people's emotional, spiritual and imaginative relationships with place (MacLeod, 2002; Puren, Drewes & Roos, 2007).

Festivals, along with other leisure experiences, are perceived as important components of vibrant, diverse and creative urban spaces. Cultural festivals, in particular, are rapidly becoming an acceptable form of urban tourism in that they allow for the consumption of ethnic culture and are part of the overall experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). Several researchers have examined festivals, politics of identity and place but with regard to large scale urban events (Waite, 2008; Atkinson & Laurier, 1998; Quinn, 2003), yet little is known about festival spaces with regard to multi-ethnic urban areas and community cultural festivals (Getz, 2007). While social constructions of sense of place have been explored in festival tourism research (Kyle & Chick, 2007), scholarly attention is lacking in the context of a multicultural festival in a mid-sized urban space.

What role do festivals have in connecting individuals, especially migrants, to place in an increasingly globalized urban space? How do individuals from different ethnic backgrounds perceive festivals? How do individuals of diverse backgrounds perceive a sense of place? Do festivals contribute to a sense of place, and if so, how? The present study explored these questions within the context of the Multicultural Festival, a two-day festival held in Victoria Park, a public park, in downtown Kitchener, Ontario, Canada for the past 44 years.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Cultural festivals have the potential to provide social benefits by contributing to a sense of shared identity, civic pride, cultural pride, community cohesiveness, place and belonging, and are also perceived as place image boosters (Quinn, 2003; Derrett, 2004; De Bres & Davis, 2001; Wood, 2005; Saleh & Wood, 1998). Ethnic festivals are often aimed at fostering better communications and understanding within and among cultures (Getz, 1997). While festival tourism research has analyzed perspectives of community residents, festival visitors, and festival organizers (Nicholson & Pearce, 2001; Gursoy et. al., 2004), little attention has been paid to cultural entrepreneurs. Cultural entrepreneurs are ethno-cultural or community group leaders who are organizers, leaders, directors or chairs of a cultural community group (McClinchey, 2010). Groups are not-for-profit and the purpose is to provide a venue for continuing cultural traditions and sharing information with others in the community. Cultural entrepreneurs' motivations for being involved in the festival centre around raising money for their organization in order to fund their continued operation, or to showcase, share and highlight their ethnic traditions for others (McClinchey, 2010).

Scholars have examined place attachment and place identity in the context of leisure and recreation for quite some time (Backlund & Williams, 2003). Tourism academics have shown an interest in exploring place attachment and identity through quantitative measurement (e.g. Gross & Brown, 2006; Bricker & Kerstetter, 2006; Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000; Wickham & Kerstetter, 2000). However, it is suggested that place meanings need also be acknowledged holistically and subjectively because places have symbolic content either in their own right or because of the sentiments they represent (Eyles, 1985).

People attach themselves or connect with specific places and have a distinct understanding of home (Mazanti & Ploger, 2003). But what about immigrants who are in need of establishing new senses of place even though they still have an attachment to another place? Or visitors, who are only in a place for a short period of time but may establish a fleeting appreciation for it (Hay, 1998)? What are the role of festivals in contributing to our understandings and meanings of place? Empirical research is needed on festivals, festival places and how they affect our sense of place (Quinn, 2003; Derrett, 2003; Getz, 2007).

## METHOD

This study focused on a multi-ethnic mid-sized urban area, Kitchener-Waterloo and its Multicultural Festival. The festival has taken place in Victoria Park, Kitchener for 44 years. Qualitative research often employs a variety of methods for data collection and subjective research involves naturalistic methods (Neuman, 2000). Personal interviews with key informants, not-for-profit ethno-cultural/community group leaders, through semi-structured and open-ended questions provided an in-depth analysis allowing rich descriptions and experiences to emerge. Wording of questions was obtained through a review of the literature as well as an initial testing of the questions (Schollman et. al., 2000; Quinn, 2003; Manzo, 2005; Hay 1998b; Shamai & Ilatov, 2005; Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Jorgenson & Stedman, 2005). Names of key informants were changed to protect anonymity.

Results were analyzed with the assistance of NVivo 8 software. This allowed for the strategic organization of primary data including semi-structured interviews, personal communications, journal entries and memos as well as secondary sources including news articles, Canada census data, web sources, contemporary texts and promotional literature. Data were systematically coded to allow themes to emerge (e.g. Charmaz, 2006; Glasser & Strauss, 1967). The following research questions were asked and the subsequent responses assisted with the generation of relevant themes (Table 1).

*Table 1: Questions Relating to Sense of Place*

- *What do you think it means to have a “sense of place”?*
- *Do you think the festival plays a role in contributing to a sense of place? If so, how?*
- *What do you think it means to have a sense of community?*
- *Do you feel you have a sense of place for any place(s) in particular? Of which place (s)? Why?*
- *Are there any (other) place(s) that are meaningful to you? If so, which place(s)? What makes them meaningful?*

**RESULTS**

Through qualitative systematic coding of the responses to the above questions in the interviews the following themes emerged explaining what cultural entrepreneurs perceived is the meaning of a sense of place (Table 2). The following themes also may describe the places that the respondents found meaningful, as this enabled them to express their general meanings more clearly. There were 43 total excerpts searched in NVivo for relevant themes.

*Table 2: Meanings of a Sense of Place*

Meanings of a Sense of Place	Frequency (43)	Percent (%)
• <i>Belonging</i>	8	19
• <i>Identity</i>		
• <i>Attachment</i>	7	16
• <i>Dual identity, duality of place</i>	6	14
• <i>Roots, Origins, Back Home</i>	6	14
• <i>Rooted, Like ‘Home’, Feeling Comfortable</i>	5	12
• <i>Difficult to Articulate</i>	4	9

Several of the respondents perceived that a sense of place meant a **sense of belonging**, a *place to belong* or where *you feel you belong*. Sandra, a school teacher and dance instructor explained, *to feel that you belong, that you’re valued, that you have something to contribute*. Andrea also explained how her work gives her a sense of place, *My work – for 31 years – I feel like I belong there*. Alani did not know what the term meant at first but then after it was described she gave her own opinion: *A sense of belonging with an individual group with the same language in your own community and from there you get involved. I don’t feel I belong to any places I belong to different places, experiences, like with Buddhism - Help places and learn other people’s cultures and not a sense of belonging to places*.

The theme of **identity** emerged and was conceptualized as having an attachment to a place, or identifying with one’s roots or origins or being ‘back home’. It was also conceptualized as having a dual identity or being attached to two places. Sandra very quickly mentioned her **attachment** to out west and could describe some aspects of why she finds it meaningful but it was personal. She found it difficult to really explain why:

*Out west in Saskatoon. I do really miss it. A sense of, well, I feel good in wide open spaces, I have a strong attachment to the west. I don’t know why, well, maybe because when I lived there, my friends were nice to me, there was fresh air and sunshine and open spaces. Oh I could remember – personal*

*things – attached to places I was seeing – that's who I am, I am Canadian and British, there is an identity there. I've lived in Waterloo for many years but I am not attached to the city. I am too busy maybe at one time I am not really attached to the neighbourhood either, it is a nice neighbourhood but I am not attached.*

Clearly, people know they are attached to a particular place, but they may not know why. They simply said 'it is part of who I am' or 'it is who I am'. Samuel, from Bulgaria described this **duality of identity and place** but also described it as being very individual:

*Well, something is always missing. But it changes – when you are happy where you are its mostly home but then when you become disappointed it is like you are in limbo. We have dual citizenship – I've been here almost 20 years so I feel we've built a home here but when you are in one place or the other you miss them both. Sometimes I think about going back home one day to Europe and think maybe we should have stayed.*

Marvin also did not know what a sense of place meant. However, as soon as it was explained he described how important it is to instil a sense of place for the next generation because they are really living in **two different worlds**:

*You see a sense of place for us is two different worlds – we need to be in touch with 2 different worlds but for kids sense of place is here we need to introduce the sense of place for the other place. There is always a possibility things will erode but it depends on the people who participate in our culture/arts.*

The concept of '**roots**' or **feeling 'rooted'** related to identity but in the context of being connected to one's country of origin. When Sonia from Jamaica was asked if she had heard of the term or knew what it meant, she did *not really know it*. But after the commonly held definition of the term was explained, she was then able to describe that she had a sense of place for specific places:

*Yes, home, back home; even though I've lived here longer than I have lived in Jamaica. Home will always be Jamaica. I'll tell you why. Here I'll never be me but when I return home I always feel I am who I am [pauses]. I can be me. [pauses] No one can take it away. [pauses] I can't really explain it, it's too deep [pauses] I mean, I hope that's good, it's just - too deep. [and]... Canada – I've spent most of my years here. Kitchener, it's beautiful, I love Kitchener. I've lived in Waterloo before but yeah I like Kitchener. It's comfortable living in the community.*

Another theme that emerged related to this concept of being rooted. It coincided with one's 'roots' but in a different way. This concept of being **rooted** had to do with **feeling comfortable** meaning if someone either spent a lot of time in a place or had lots of **family and friends** then they felt more rooted to that place and thus more comfortable. Manny, from Turkey, explained how a sense of place really meant comfort and ease of expression even though he described this in two places:

*To express yourself comfortably – just be comfortable and relaxed where you are. Here. I grew up here. I am able to express and live both my cultures at the same time without suppression by anyone I feel more liberal here than anywhere else – I have a Canada flag on my back pack. Feels more like home here than anywhere else. Other people feel that way too. Turkey – the way my family was raised – the culture from there – when I go live there I live there I live the culture. When I am there I feel part of the Turkish community.*

Karen, who very clearly understood the term found it **difficult to articulate** how she finds meaning in places:

*The places that have meaning to me and that I can relate to also have a sense of place. When my husband and I choose where to travel and spend our leisure time it is places that have a history, are very walkable with good urban design, and have a strong sense of community with great people. Two places we continue returning to are Savannah and New Orleans. My next door neighbour continues to visit New York City for the same reasons. She also says that NYC, it has a heartbeat. I find it fascinating that she longs to experience this, but continues to live in a bland suburb where you can't really walk to much of anything.*

### Sense of Place and the Festival

Respondents were asked whether they perceived that the Multicultural Festival contributed to a sense of place. Some of the respondents said, *yes*, but the majority of respondents' comments were along the lines of *I guess so, I think so, it depends on the people, a little bit, to people who want it to, it probably does* and so on. Ethno-cultural group leaders gave some suggestions as to how they perceived the festival contributing to a sense of place (Table 3). There were 22 excerpts searched in NVivo for themes.

Table 3: Themes for How the Festival Contributes to a Sense of Place

Themes for Contributing to a Sense of Place	Frequency (22)	Percent (%)
• <i>Individual</i>	6	27
• <i>Awareness</i>	5	23
• <i>Valuing Identity</i>	4	18
• <i>Sustain Culture</i>	3	14
• <i>Cultural Exchange</i>	2	9
• <i>Attachment</i>	1	5

The role of the festival in contributing to a sense of place was viewed by some cultural entrepreneurs as not substantial or significant. It really depended on the **individual** perceptions of each particular festival visitor. As Lou remarked, *it depends on the people. For tourists – they might say – I just come to see the festival and there is no sense of place for me in Waterloo. For long term residents yes maybe, we know in June every year there is the festival and we mark it on the calendar. We walk through the park and see the presenting stages – it joins the city.*

However, cultural entrepreneurs explained ways that the festival can contribute to a sense of place. For instance, the Multicultural Festival enables people to **value** their ethnic identity and **increase its awareness**. Karen agreed that the festival contributes to a sense of place and Sandra also commented that festival participation contributes to valuing one's cultural identity, *I think that when you participate you want to communicate who you are, when you hear the applause you feel valued.*

The Multicultural Festival also contributes to a sense of place by helping to **sustain culture**. Albert commented that the festival gives groups a reason to continue practicing the traditions you know best and allow for the opportunity of showing them to others, *Yes – it allows you to do what you know best. I believe you are welcome – they are in addition to what exists already – they are an opportunity to maintain something.* While Marvan explained that the festival contributes to a sense of place by giving children the confidence to hold onto their ethnic traditions by giving them opportunities to practice with others within their ethnic group:

*We always try to maintain a balance between western culture and preserving our culture. We really want to maintain good values. Yes, we will be exposed to western culture at some time but we need to help our next generation. We give these children a confidence and give them their culture.*

In addition to sustaining culture, the Festival enables ethnic group members to **exchange culture** which may contribute to a more positive sense of place. More importantly, the Multicultural Festival enables ethno-cultural groups the opportunity to, simultaneously, be more **attached** to their ethnic heritage while also connecting more closely to Canadian culture within the urban space. Krystina mentioned why she works at the festival: *I will work the festival because I am attached to my Croatian roots and for people that attracts say 50 000 people – they are going to feel attached to the community or for that feeling they are going just because of the great food they aren't going for the sense of community.*

## DISCUSSION

Perceptions of a sense of place of cultural entrepreneurs as coded by their responses to semi-structured questions connected with the themes of *belonging* and *identity* which were further acknowledged through the themes of *attachment*, *duality of place*, *roots/origins/back home* and *rootedness/like home/comfortable*. Generally people attach meanings to place, feel a sense of belonging to place and that place plays an important role in the formation of our identities (Holloway & Hubbard, 2001; Hargreaves, 2004). Relph (1976) described insiders as feeling at one with a place and having deep experiences with place as well as the intangible essences of a place. These respondents had a sense of place for places they experienced as an insider. Social attachment was more important than physical attachment in some instances (Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001), however, in this study respondents identified with places both socially and physically.

Places cultural entrepreneurs found meaningful were not extraordinary but were where they had strong feelings of belonging, identity and attachment (Manzo, 2005). Few respondents talked about their neighbourhoods and only a few mentioned the city. More importantly, references to particular places were holistic such as Croatia, Turkey, Canada, Jamaica and Australia.

'Home' emerged as an important theme but in two very different contexts as well. In one context, home was perceived as having a sense of place for one's origins, roots and being 'back home' in the country of origin. In the other, it is perceived as a sense of place for a place that is comfortable, a place to be rooted for a long time or with family and friends, being 'home'. Tuan (1980) suggested that rootedness, an unconscious experience, was different than a sense of place, a conscious experience. However, the perceptions of these respondents brought to light that even the concept of being 'rooted' has multiple meanings.

In these particular narratives, it was less about length of residency and more about memory, emotion, and personal connection that led cultural entrepreneurs to base their sense of place on needing to connect with one's roots. These respondents' experiences, their senses of place and connecting to one's origins, roots or to back home were deep, emotional, personal, individual and at times difficult to articulate. Some ethno-cultural group leaders described having a sense of place for two places; these two places were one, the country of origin and, two, where they live currently thus there was a dual sense of identity or a duality of place. This notion of a dual identity and duality of place has not been addressed in previous literature on sense of place.

## CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrated that festivals may contribute to a sense of place, but not substantially. The role of the festival was as a space for the showcasing and communication of culture, a connection that ethno-cultural group leaders needed to maintain throughout the year in order to connect to broader meanings of place and identity. The festival allowed cultural entrepreneurs to value their own ethnic identity, maintain their cultural traditions and increase the awareness of their culture.

The socio-cultural constructions of place meanings are processes that have been acknowledged for some time by researchers in a variety of disciplines (Stokowski, 2002; Williams, 2002; Hay, 1998; Kyle & Chick, 2007; Stedman et. al., 2004). Places are symbolic contexts imbued with meaning whether it is collectively through relationships with family and friends, individually through personal place experiences or politically through promotional materials or media sources. Additional empirical analysis is needed on social and political constructions of place meanings (Kyle & Chick, 2007; Stokowski, 2002; Dixon & Durrheim, 2000). Largely missing from interdisciplinary literature on sense of place is ethno-cultural constructions of sense of place. Cross-cultural research on sense of place, let alone multicultural research, is very limited and as such it is difficult to generalize whether the present findings are specifically related to language differences, ethnic backgrounds, up-bringing or other ethno-cultural constructions. More research is needed on how individuals or groups of diverse ethnic backgrounds conceptualize a sense of place in the context of leisure, recreation and tourism experiences.

The results of this research have demonstrated that the Multicultural Festival has contributed to varying conceptualizations of the meaning of a sense of place. It also showed that individuals of different ethnic backgrounds share understandings of its meaning but some differences did exist. While the festival itself may not contribute greatly to a sense of place for the urban space of Kitchener it connects cultural entrepreneurs with their own interpretations of place whether it is within the city itself or somewhere else. The presence of the festival may also conjure up nostalgia or memories or re-confirm pride, identity, and attachment one has to any place:

*I always advice people to go to the local market: that's where you are most likely to get the sense and the smell of a place, to really get under its skin.* (Lindblad, 2010 p.220)

Like a local market, a festival transforms a public urban space such as a main street, park, piazza, or square into a temporary leisure space conjuring up distinctive senses of place for individuals of varying backgrounds. A sense of place is individual, personal, intimate, simple yet extremely complex. When words like experience and adventure seem overused in the travel business (Lindblad, 2010) how do we continue to understand people's senses of place? Distinctive places, including tourist places and temporary event places need to remain meaningful and encourage strong senses of place so that people can continue to journey to their psyche, finding that something and making the place theirs, returning again and again and even sharing it with others.

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