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## **Transformation and Liverpool European Capital of Culture 2008**

### **Abstract:**

Liverpool, in the Northwest UK, held the title of European Capital of Culture 2008, using the award to celebrate the culture of the city and position itself as a destination for tourism and investment. Using ethnographic research undertaken in 2008-2009, the chapter draws on the concept of ‘the subjunctive mood’ (Turner 1988) and notions of performativity (using Butler, [1990] 2006, as starting point). By undertaking participant observation I was able to understand how local people performed identities. The chapter argues that it may be that the year becomes part of the myth of Liverpool looking to regain greatness of a time gone by, yet, it is in the lived-identities of people that we see the, “the made-upness of culture” (Moore and Myerhoff 1977: 13). Of course this making up of culture is done so within power relations, and these relations are what makes the constitution of identity possible. In these spaces of ambivalence, transformation is made possible.

## Introduction

The city of Liverpool in the Northwest of the United Kingdom was awarded the European Capital of Culture in 2008 (hereafter ECoC). The value of winning the award to host the year-long event has been researched elsewhere (see Impacts 08 project [www.impacts08.net](http://www.impacts08.net)) so it is not the intention of this chapter to assess the impacts of the ECoC scheme. The focus of this chapter will be on understanding how the award provided an opportunity to explore the performance of identities and whether there was the potential for transformation. However, it is worth noting, that the ECoC scheme had been, previous to Liverpool's reign, found to provide benefits to host cities, "as a catalyst for city change." (Palmer *et al.* 2004: 188).

Therefore the emphasis on 'change' was part of the bid that Liverpool put forward. The city aspired to not only present a world-class year of cultural activity but also hoped to transform opinion in the eyes of both local people and outsiders. They set out to achieve this through rebranding and cultural programming as well as a major scheme of regeneration and development. The city had aspirations to become more than it had been before as this statement from the ECoC bid suggests,

"By exploiting its creativity and developing its talent for innovation, while building on its great, inherited gifts and virtues from the past, the city will display a new image to the rest of the country [...] By no other means currently available to it, Liverpool can be transformed. That will be the legacy - a new Liverpool" (Liverpool Culture Company Limited 2002: 1011).

It was seeking transformation as a city, to go beyond what people imagine it capable of. It has been well documented that Liverpool was struggling with a poor reputation on a National scale (see for example: Boland 2008) and the award provided the potential for that image to be changed for the better.

The lived-identities of local people were investigated through ethnographic research undertaken in 2008-2009. By spending time with community groups and undertaking participant observation at official and unofficial Capital of Culture events

I was able to understand how local people performed identities which related to their sense of belonging to their neighbourhood and the wider city. The chapter will consider the balance between creative improvisation and the constraints of social and cultural norms in forming identities and provide a nuanced approach to understanding a large-scale cultural event by focusing on lived-identities. It will begin with an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of the research and then move into to a discussion around the data collected at an over 55s housing complex and a women's art workshop and how these two examples exemplify the small-scale transformations which are exposed in the ambivalence spaces between creativity and constraint. It will then consider the city-wide transformation whilst maintaining a focus on lived identities of the local people.

The theoretical framing for this analysis grew from the desire to understand how identities emerge and continue emerging. The chapter will draw on the concept of 'the subjunctive mood' (Turner 1988) and notions of performativity (approaches drawing on the work of Butler [1990] 2006 & and developed in cultural geography by, for example: Crouch 2003, Dewsberry 2000, and Nash 2000). Judith Butler (1993 & [1990] 2006) explores the constitution of the subject as being performative (as derived from speech-acts and not theatricality). Whilst much of Butler's work focuses on how gender is performatively produced, Borgerson (2005: 65) is adamant that Butler is primarily a phenomenologist and her theories are about processes of becoming beyond solely gender identity. She rejects the notion that gender is innate, but rather, "a kind of becoming or activity" ([1990] 2006: 152). This suggests that it is not a fixed idea but is a process. Butler argues that it is precisely through iteration that we present a normative identity, however, "[s]uch norms are continually haunted by their own inefficacy; hence, the anxiously repeated effort to install and augment their jurisdiction" (1993: 237). What she is stating is that the need to iterate identities suggests that the process is unstable and there is a space of, what she defines as ambivalence. This is the space that opens up when there is 'slippage' in the iterated performance, a space with transformative potential. Further, and in relation to this notion of ambivalence, Crouch succinctly defines performativity, "as 'going further,'

that is, in containing the possibility of the unexpected, the different, the risky” (2003: 1946). Thus, there is a transformative potential within the performance of identities.

However, Butler has been critiqued when it comes to the role of human agency in her theories. Her view of agency is considered negative and, “involves too much emphasis on resistance and not enough on the creativity of human action” (Jagger 2008: 105). Butler’s work, Nelson (1999) critiques, does not allow for the subject to be critically conscious. In order to address the concerns of Nelson, the work of Myerhoff (1984 & 1986) and Turner (1969, 1979 & 1988), and more generally in the project of the anthropology of experience, becomes salient here allowing the analysis to encompass reflexivity in the formulation of social action. Whilst Butler’s work on performativity allows us to make an analysis of identity, which opens up possibilities for resignification of cultural norms, we need to draw on the work of others to ensure the creative potential of the human character is considered.

In Turner’s anthropology of performance (1988), his notion of the ‘subjunctive mood’ encapsulates feeling of potentiality, the ‘what if?’ found in Butler’s notion of performativity. I argue that the ECoC was a liminal moment for the city of Liverpool, as per the definition of Turner (1988) developed from the work of Van Gennep. Liminality is the phase of a rite of passage which is, “a betwixt-and-between condition” (Turner 1988: 101). Within this liminal moment there exists a *communitas* where people are equal and liberated. However, this is a risky and unstable state and there is the eventual return to the structures and norms of social life (Turner 1969). Yet in the liminal moment exists the potential for reflexivity and experimentation with the ‘what if?’

Turning to Myerhoff, her ethnography of aging which focuses on a Jewish community in California (1978, 1984 & 1986), distinguishes her notion of definitional ceremonies from Turner’s (1988) social dramas (which have the four phases of breach, crisis, redress and reintegration/schism), as they intend to maintain the status

quo. Yet, at the same time, definitional ceremonies achieve a transformation in that the community of Jewish elders that she studied attempt to make themselves visible after one of their members is killed in a road accident. Her work is about the, “made-upness of culture” (Moore and Myerhoff 1977: 13) and the research presented in this chapter follows in this tradition.

Embedded within this analytical framework is the role of power. It will become apparent here and has been explored in more depth elsewhere (Platt, forthcoming) that the study of local identity of Liverpool is entangled with feelings of subjection by local people. Butler asserts that identity is formed through relationships with power, “[p]ower is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence” (1997: 2). The need to be made visible in Myerhoff’s definitional ceremonies also relates to this. Similarly, within Turner’s (1969) work, there is a distinction made between structure and anti-structure, and how the risky state of liminality will always make way for a return to structure, even if a feeling of renewal has been experienced. The spaces of ambivalence are evident within these analytical frameworks – the pull between creativity and constraint.

With the above underpinning in place the chapter will consider how the ECoC celebrations provided a site for ambivalence in relation to local identity performance and whether this facilitated transformation. Indeed, Turner comments that, “creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting “designs for living” (Turner 1988: 24). So how far did local people use ECoC as a site of exploring new ‘designs for living’ and what enabled and constrained this process? The chapter will now progress, drawing on the rich ethnographic data, starting with a look at small-scale transformative processes and then consider the city-wide transformation.

### **Individuals and communities transformation**

Transformation occurred in local people, whether in their confidence in their home city or in the way in which they performed their identity. I witness within a

women's art group that I attended over a period of several weeks in 2008, that many of the participants were looking for transformation, and occasionally found it, even if they did not expect it. The project took place at a centre specifically set up to both encourage artistic development of both established artists and also offer opportunities to those wishing to learn new skills. The centre aims to use, "arts and culture as a vehicle of challenge and change." A female artist set up a Social Enterprise in order to offer courses and workshops to women from the Liverpool area whom she defines, "from hard to reach groups." There were approximately 14 women on the course all aged 18 and over. The women had mixed abilities; some have never taken art classes before whilst others were looking to get back into creative activities after some time away. There were three parts to the course over a six-week period; photography, sculpture, and fine art/collage.

During the fine art workshop we all sit around a large table in the centre of a first floor room. The table is strewn with papers, paints, glue and other art tools. During the fine art workshop with Jenny there is more conversation about ECoC than throughout the rest of the course. Jenny's workshops are lively and noisier than previous sessions and the task to create a piece of work about Liverpool inspires the group to talk about their hometown. The task also allows reflection on the ECoC celebrations and Jenny tells the group about the work of Jamie Reid, the creator of the cover to the Sex Pistols album 'God Save the Queen' who now resides in Liverpool. Jenny talks about how even famous artists like Jamie, "are not involved in Capital of Culture and it's just ridiculous." This discussion acts as a catalyst for members of the group, sitting near Jenny, to speak candidly about ECoC.

In regard to the cultural programming for the year they are of the opinion that it is "elitist" (Jenny is the first to use this term and Katrina, Tanya, and Fran all use it afterwards). They feel that there is nothing that they want to engage with, "nowt<sup>i</sup> for us, not even a free bus," yet the women all have an interest in creativity as highlighted by their presence on the course. We are directed by Jenny to write words about Liverpool on a piece of paper. She comments, "Well no-one has written 'Capital of

Culture'. Oh no, there it is at the bottom, really small." Katrina comments that she is glad the course is "down to earth" because if, "I had come and you had started using long words that I didn't understand I wouldn't have come back."

Katrina, decides to create a piece of artwork which is inspired by Klimt. The Klimt exhibition is the blockbuster exhibition for the ECoC year at the Liverpool Tate. Katrina had found a flyer the previous day and loved the image used of a woman. She is inspired to go downstairs into the computer resource room at the centre and do some research on the Internet. Whilst she is gone, Jenny jokes at how quiet the room is, "ha ha, you can tell Katrina isn't here because it is so quiet!" When Katrina returns, her performance has altered from being brash and jokey to more serious and contemplative. She tells us what she has found out about Klimt and how he depicted women, "he loved women and they are painted as sensuous and strong." The theme of being a woman or mother is prevalent throughout the art course. The sculpture workshop brief about depictions of womanhood focuses this. Those that depict motherhood all draw strength from this role and when sharing our feelings about our work they make comments like, "it represents that as a mother and a woman you have to be strong for your family and those around you"; "the mother is at the centre of the piece which is what all mothers are like." Tanya asks Katrina what she is going to do for the Klimt inspired piece and helps her find tissue paper in the colours she wants and suggests she work on the floor at the other end of the room to have more space and more light (there is a large window here). Katrina places herself in a new space and works quietly, only speaking to other group members if they approach her. She has not enacted her identity in this way until this point.

Through the confidence instilled in her by the sense of *communitas* in the group she is able to transform perceived notions of her self-confessed, "typical gobby scouser"<sup>ii</sup> identity, which she iterated proudly (Butler [1990] 2006), into creating an identity which can appreciate the "elitist" high-culture she was initially so quick to dismiss. The encouragement of the group and the support of the activity leader enabled her to consider the, 'what if' and act upon it. Whilst it can be argued that she

transformed in order to engage with the dominant ECoC narrative (i.e. the Liverpool Tate Klimt exhibition) this was nonetheless a transformation from a typical 'scouse' identity to one which is able to appreciate the so-called "elitist" element of the ECoC programme. Whilst Myerhoff states that a definitional ceremony will, "allow things to remain the same, to permit people to discover and rediscover sameness in the midst of furor [...]" (1986: 268), the potential to transform and challenge lies within the heart of performativity, moments of 'slippage' from iterated behaviour or resignification, expose cultural norms as fragile and unfixed (Butler 1993) as displayed through Katrina's actions. The art workshops can be understood as liminal phenomena in light of the above discussion. In the safe environment of the workshop, amongst supportive women, Katrina was able to experiment with her identity performance. She took herself away from the group and worked quietly, quite unlike how she had behaved in the other workshops where she was active in discussions and part of the general banter.

Transformation for some members of the group was sought out rather than accidental. Tanya, for example, is "on a life journey" and meeting up with her and Pamela (another group member) a year after the art workshops had taken place proved that she has achieved individual transformation through the development of a friendship. Similarly, Pamela is looking for an opportunity to become more confident, "I wasn't going out into town, just being with my family. So I did just that, to go out and do something creative". They meet once a month in the same café in the city centre.

During the workshop Tanya performs a mother role and instructs people where to put the paint pots and warns me about the hot water. Being one of the youngest members of the group and an outsider she made me her maternal focus. This display of her identity of being a mother involves an embodied enactment and is complimented by a narrative of how her son is now grown up and has moved away; a performance of being a mother does not cease when children move away. Yet, like the case of Butler's (1993) example of drag performance where even when subverting the

norms, the drag artist often presents a typical performance of femininity, Tanya is iterating her motherly identity in a new way, yet still creates a normative performance of the maternal figure. Much of the discussion whilst working on our art is about family and being a mother and a woman, as I discuss above. Whilst Tanya and Pamela, looked to build a friendship that is apart from their familial responsibilities, their identities as mothers persists. When I visit them both in the café a year after the workshop, I arrive to find them looking at photographs of Pamela's family. They enact a motherly role towards me as a younger person. They check where I have parked and Tanya walks me back to my car to ensure I am safe and gives me a big hug as we part. Whilst this could be interpreted as them looking after me as an outsider to the city, the relationship I developed with them throughout the art course makes me understand it as maternal.

The safety of the group activity, the “spontaneous communitas” (Turner 1969: 134) that it creates allows for the participants to experience the, “mood of maybe” (Turner 1990: 11) free from the constraints of the normal social structures in which they exist. Within the performative framework it is possible to identify as Crouch explains, “continual tensions that individuals cope with between holding on and going further, between adherence to contexts and their protocols and moving away from them” (2003: 1958), suggesting that small transformations occur in the ways in which we make sense of the world. Like Myerhoff's Jewish community (1984 & 1986), the process of defining who we are to each other within a safe space is just as vital as large scale transformations for some marginal communities.

Similarly, a reading group at a North Liverpool social housing complex is a site for experimentation for its members. Based on a new over 55's housing development this group was made up of typically eight residents plus the social housing officer, Mary. I attended their group meetings over a period of 8 weeks in 2009, every Friday afternoon. The participants find that the opportunity to read as a group with the support of each other gives them newfound confidence. Prior to me attending the sessions they had been reading plays in conjunction with the season of

plays at The Everyman Theatre, a professional repertory theatre in the city centre. A local actress had come to the reading group and they mention this almost every time I attend, “wasn’t it brilliant when Eithne Brown came”; “wasn’t she brilliant and so funny”; and so on. This enthused the group and legitimises what they have been doing through external witness. Sarah, who always appears confident, taking a lead in discussions and who sat on various committees within the social housing complexes in the area, had initially been nervous about the whole venture and comments, “I thought ‘what are you going to make me do?’” The play reading inspires Sarah, as Mary’s comment explains, “ha, ha and you got into it in the end and doing all the voices and everything”. To this Sarah looks modest but has a grin on her face and it is clear that she had enjoyed the experience. Whilst confident in other areas of her life she is concerned when it comes to reading out loud, “oh I get the names wrong and end up looking foolish!” She is knowledgeable about protocols and systems in relation to the committees she sits on, but less comfortable to ‘let go’ and be creative. Once she does however, in the safety of the group environment, she thoroughly enjoys herself.

It is often the case that these experimentations and adventures into transformation are light-hearted; like Mary’s banter with Sarah or the jokes about the room being quiet in Katrina’s absence. Indeed, performance theorist Dwight Conquergood states, “[t]he trickster’s playful impulse promotes a radical self questioning critique that yields a deeper self-knowledge, the first step towards transformation” (Conquergood 1989: 83). There is a role of humour in identity construction and performance and in particular relevance to this case, the people of Liverpool as often known for their sense of humour (Belchem 2006, Boland 2008 & 2010, and Du Noyer 2007), making this an even more pertinent expression of transformation.

It was identified during the fieldwork that there exists a struggle between constraint and creativity. The creativity of the reading group for example is enabled by the structures of, in the first instance, the housing association and the structures of

the complex's community and in the second, ECoC, in the development of the initial play reading scheme. The *communitas* inspired by the group meetings also enables agency and transformation but there are, however, constraints which stop them taking their creativity forward. These constraints were perpetuated by their own lack of confidence outside of the security of the group.

For example, I take into the reading group on my last visit a selection of the ECoC seasonal publicity brochures for them to discuss. The initial comment I receive is, "first thing I want to say is, we've never seen these before have we?" This comment comes from Paul, a proactive community member and Sarah's husband. Mary reiterates this point after I tell them that I picked up the brochures at the '08 Place' which is situated in the city centre,

Mary – "My God, I never seen them anywhere like in 'The Asda'<sup>iii</sup> [...] You would pick one up wouldn't you if they were at the check-out when you paid for your shopping? Just for tourists, y'know. Because tourists make their way to the bus station, y'know honestly."

Sarah – "I didn't even know there was an 08 place."

Mary – "Y'know there (she points to a map entitled 'Liverpool Art Map' which is in the back of the brochure), where they have got all the attractions on a map there, that's great. I feel like I would want to take that home with me [...] It's absolutely brilliant. I don't think many people in Liverpool know where these things are. Ordinary Liverpool people y'know. Tourists would know more how to find their way round our city than what we would."

Alice – "If I went to London I would want something like that."

Mary – "What did we know about it, y'know Liverpool people?"

Paul – "Well that's right."

Similarly, when I speak to a pub landlord, a few months before joining the reading group, about the publicity of ECoC, he states,

"There are things that I have been to see in town, and I have gone out of my way to see them but I don't know if they were anything to do with

Capital of Culture [...] y'know I am not one of those blokes who will sit around, I will go and see something if it is there to be seen but I can honestly say that Capital of Culture hasn't entered my mind. If it is something I wanted to see I would go [...] What about the Liverpool people? They haven't advertised themselves to me to make me go to see anything and I have been to a lot of things."

This sense of exclusion felt by local people leading up to the ECoC has been identified elsewhere (Jones and Wilks-Heeg 2004) but the examples above suggest that local people were willing to engage with ECoC but did not engage with the discourse of it. The reading group uses their safe space in the complex as a site for experimenting but this creativity is stifled by a lack of information or confidence to carry it through beyond the realms of the group.

Similarly the support that the women in the art workshops receive from each other and the workshop leaders creates the safe site for transformation. Through the enactment of their identities and the engagement with each other and the artwork they are able to, "render visible actual and desired truths about themselves" (Myerhoff 1986: 261) just as Myerhoff's Jewish elders had. The final exhibition of artwork which is installed by the group themselves, "made themselves be seen and being seen they came into being in their own terms" (ibid: 263). On the day of the installation the group are excited as they are going to be featured in the local paper and Katrina was interviewed for BBC Radio Merseyside. Katrina comments, "I don't care, me, I just got in touch with them and made them talk to me, ha ha!" To have their creative work recognised is important to the group as they felt they had achieved something they never thought possible. I had missed the photography workshop but during the installation the discussion about the photographs sums up their pride,

Elaine - "I can't believe how brilliant they look."

Fran - "I never thought I could do something like that, you know?"

Through the artwork and the subsequent publicity they are sharing their 'truths', their versions of their Liverpool identities, with a wider audience.

Just days after the end of the workshops I interview BBC Radio Merseyside presenter and live artist, Roger Hill, and he commented that the ECoC year, “has touched upon the truths about itself (the city) but have been lost in the morass [...] give us our story”. Yet, the participants of the workshops are able to explore and present the truths about themselves and their city. Hill continues passionately, “epic gestures don’t seem to have produced much and the city has lost what is true about it [...] it is about a combination of personal truths and this would have to be supported by a cohesive cultural strategy”. The activities that may seem banal to outsiders, such as reading groups and art workshops, are more successful at creating a chance for rediscovery and finding new ‘truths’ or presenting ones that were there all along.

This idea of the transformation occurring successfully in ‘small’ spaces which seem ordinary can be summed up by Dewsberry, “[p]erformativity is the sense of experimentation that greets us everyday; it is our ongoing tentative endeavour to enact local utopias [...]” (2000: 493). To conclude this section I want to draw on this quote from Dewsberry and look at the idea of “local utopias” and address if transformation can lead to transgression and make a social impact. Dewsberry suggests that performativity is a low-key endeavour but can enactments that “sustain[s] and ease[s]” (ibid) also bring about a wider impact?

If we consider definitional ceremony, Myerhoff comments that, “their purpose was to allow things to remain the same” (1986: 268). However, Kaminsky offers a reading of Myerhoff which explores the potential within her ethnographic narrative for social change to occur. He places the definitional ceremonies that Myerhoff describes within the wider context of American society and the struggle for self-definition. Kaminsky identifies that despite attempts to depoliticise her earlier work, in later work she acknowledges that they are, “a politics of a last resort, a social assertion made by a powerless group with no other means of contesting the local powers-that-be through whom they encounter the larger society” (1993: 264). I would agree with Kaminsky that the success of the elders at the Jewish community centre in Myerhoff’s work, lies in their ability to prove their visibility. The death of one of the

group members in an accident with a bicycle not only provided, “determination to make themselves visible”, (Myerhoff 1986: 272) but also changes were made to the road junction where the accident had taken place. The display of the artwork by the women also has an impact on those outside the centre itself. A story was featured in the local press with the headline, “Novice Arts Show is an 08 Highlight” and within this story one of the participants is quoted,

“I feel like it has awakened a whole other side to me. The encouragement I got on the course was amazing and I truly feel I am a different person. I have changed. And the way I look at Liverpool has changed too.” (quoted in: Parker 2008)

This visibility of the women in the local press proves that women from ‘hard to reach groups’ as Ellen labeled them at the start, are capable of achieving more than they had imagined and that the exhibition is identified by the dominant discourse of the press as a “highlight” is a confidence boost to the woman but also shows a wider audience that what is happening on the peripheries on the ECoC official celebrations is just as vital and inspiring. Women, such as Katrina, transgress from what she is expected to behave like or belief in, even beyond her own expectations and habitus. Her creation of the Klimt artwork and her development throughout the course from confident and self-confessed, “gobby scouser” but with low expectations of herself intellectually, to a confidence which allows her to express ideas and thoughts is witnessed.

There exists a tension between the desire for utopian transformation and sacrificing identity, sense of place and belonging. The women in the art group love that their city is being improved but at the same time worry about their own communities and neighbourhoods changing; the reading group enjoy the chance to gather and share stories and read plays in their new complex but are nostalgic for the past. The reliance on stereotypes or myths to create a sense of identity, like in Katrina’s case, can be restrictive but also offers a chance for resignification. The chapter will now proceed to consider how transforming the image of the city in a wider sense impacts identity performance.

## **City Transformation**

The idea that ECoC was a panacea for the city's problems was prevalent in the discourse in the early stages of the bidding, especially in the bid slogan, "It's Our Time, It's Our Place" and the recognition of the judging panel of the community involvement in the bid<sup>iv</sup> but by the time the year was in motion this changed to a discourse of, "it is just culture" (Phil Redmond, the creative director of the Liverpool Culture Company, the organisation set up to oversee the ECoC year, speaking at an event as part of the Festival of Science held at University of Liverpool 10<sup>th</sup> September 2008). Redmond, we can presume here is meaning the aesthetic sense of culture, the cultural programme of events. The lived culture cannot be described as "just," as it is evolving and generative and the identity of the city is in a process of becoming during the ECoC and beyond.

In the introduction to this chapter I addressed how Liverpool was looking to transform its image on a national level. Through processes of rebranding the city presents an image, or a story about itself. This story was there to be interpreted, engaged with, or ignored by local people and visitors and this engagement is what shapes the meaning making. In this section I want to explore how the transformation or, and maybe more importantly, aspirations of transformation was manifested and created on a general, citywide scale.

I have explored elsewhere the rebranding of the city in relation to the identity of Liverpool (Platt 2011). I considered the use of the skyline in creating a sense of local identity in the city. The skyline imagery is important to local people in how they consider their sense of belonging. I argued that the use of the image in the ECoC logo was essential in this process of rebranding in order to present a cohesive image of the city and distract from the large scale regeneration of the city where the cranes were a feature of the skyline at the time. Thus, the skyline on the logo was idealised and imagined.

This distraction was also literally achieved through the use of building 'wraps'

where the logo would cover a “grot spot” (Coligan 2007), a disused or rundown building. The images become a, “vehicle for forgetfulness” (Selwyn 1996: 3), just as myths and stories can, “shift[ing] the difficulty elsewhere” (ibid). In this case, the wrapping of buildings in the ECoC branding moves the attention away from narratives of dereliction to narratives of future development and transformation.

The covering of buildings is referred to by Liverpool Culture Company as the ‘Look of the City’ scheme. The most notable use of images to disguise is along Edge Lane (see figures 1 & 2) which is the main road that leads into the city centre from the M62 motorway (leading to Manchester and Leeds). However, this scheme does not seem to create the, “sense of theatre”<sup>v</sup> that Kris Donaldson of the Liverpool Culture Company wanted to achieve according to a visitor to the city from neighbouring Manchester,

“Ohh all those boarded up houses along that really long road! I said to my friend who was driving, ‘where have you brought me to?’ It doesn’t really look very welcoming.”

The irony here is that the iterated branding on the hoarding is an attempt to disguise the dereliction but in fact there is a ‘slippage,’ re-signification of the branding and it reaffirms a stereotype of Liverpool as being dangerous and frightening. The transformation of the city is part of the reason why the buildings on this street are boarded up as delays to compulsory purchasing of the properties (the scheme is to widen the road) means a temporary ‘dressing up’ of the buildings<sup>vi</sup>. So whilst there is a sense of transformation, the hoardings on Edge Lane can represent a resistance to that transformation.



Figures 1 and 2: Images of Edge Lane (images by Platt taken in 2008)

The idea of the logo created by place-makers and marketers relates to the debates of official and dissonant narratives of ECoC. The narrative is not so simplistic however that there exists an official discourse from the institutions such as Liverpool Culture Company or The Mersey Partnership<sup>vii</sup> and a dissonant one from local people who felt marginalised by the ECoC award (for example Jones and Wilks-Heeg 2004 consider the stratification between the centres and the peripheries). Local people were capable of engaging with the discourse of the ECoC and presenting a veneer of transformation but at the same time performing a narrative of suspicion and dissatisfaction as will be seen in the following example.

I interview an NHS worker, Dan, who is in his late forties, at his place of work, a distribution centre for mobility aids. After collecting a visitors badge we go into a training room that is located off the cold main warehouse (an area filled with adapted beds and wheelchairs). The training room is similarly cold with a large table down the centre. Dan brings a large file to the meeting which is full of statistics and data relating to the performance of the NHS in the area during 2008, “I thought you were going to ask me about what the NHS had done during Capital of Culture.” It takes me some time to establish that I am interested in his personal opinions about ECoC rather than the impact of the event on the NHS and he keeps saying, “maybe I am not the best person to ask.” Once he relaxes he starts answering questions with his own opinions, “Well it has captured my imagination. I am a member of the 08 club! (takes an 08 Welcome Card out of his wallet to show me). It has given me some discounts and things.” He also speaks about the identity of Liverpool using phrases that sound like they are lifted from a promotional brochure,

“I think Liverpool is a unique place. We have the largest populated area of Chinese people outside of Manchester, we have one of the biggest Somali communities. In terms of multi-culturalism I think we are unique.”

Despite this, after the interview Dan shows me out of the room and comments, “I’m not that enamoured with Capital of Culture. A lot of money got wasted.” Whilst he does acknowledge that, “it ended with street parties and everything but now we are in

09, y’know, I am not sure how things will continue the same, I don’t know,” he performs an allegiance to the dominant narrative of the ECoC by showing me with pride his Welcome Card but, the ‘back region’ performance, once the dictaphone is turned off, cuts through this (Goffman [1959] 1969). He then enacts a dissonant narrative which is one of suspicion and disappointment.

In reverse of this, the *Liverpool Fringe* event crosses between dominant and unofficial narrative, eventually being subsumed by the official discourse. When I initially spoke to the *Fringe* founder he had used humour to distance the event from the official ECoC narrative,

“[t]hey created loads of bad publicity so they brought in (*makes a fanfare sound and motions a ta-dah action with his arms*) Phil Redmond! [...] [The Culture Company] have been so depressed by the cock-ups. So Phil Redmond wants us to take [the fringe/non-official events] over, without saying he wants us to take it over.”

However, the event became part of the official narrative with the presence of Council officials at the launch event. A fringe event, traditionally (i.e. Edinburgh Fringe being the most famous example), cuts across the main trajectory of a larger scale, more authoritative event. The title of ‘Fringe,’ in relation to Edinburgh is believed to have been coined in 1948 when a journalist commented, “around the fringe of the official Festival drama, there seems to be more private enterprise than before” (quoted in: Shrum 1996: 65). The title soon moved from describing the location of the events to come to mean that which is not mainstream. Yet many early ‘fringe’ theatre companies preferred the name ‘alternative’ theatre which means that ‘fringe’ theatre need not necessarily just be cutting-edge but simply that which is at the border of mainstream.

In theory, the *Liverpool Fringe*, could have transgressed the idea that ECoC was “elitist” as the women’s art group labeled it. I ask the founder about whether the *Liverpool Fringe* will be a ‘fringe’ event and take place at the margins of the main event,

“Oh yes it will, because over the past couple of years the Council (Liverpool City Council) and the Culture Company have been blamed for not including the *fringe element of society*. The little people. I am on the chair of some social clubs so we’re going to put acts, performers in social clubs *all over Liverpool*, St Helens everywhere. So it will reach the people who haven’t been reached. Erm, with the TUC they want us to help them do things in garages all over Liverpool, cake shops, in the very, very ordinary places...they are the fringe [...]So like I say, by linking up with a church hall in St. Helens where an individual painter, performer, dancer can be there. So we do hit all of the fringe yes. That’s what we are lacking in this city, a huge amount of criticism over it” (Sections in italic are where he emphasised vocally).

However, the launch event, which is held at the Jurys Inn Hotel at the Albert Dock, does not hold the spirit of this ambition. The hotel is a chain and the launch takes place in the bar area with soft seating and low tables. There is *Liverpool Fringe* merchandise available in the form of bottles of beer and smoothies. The entertainment comes from a group of singers who competently sing songs from musicals with smiles and choreographed moves. They are soon to perform their show at the Empire Theatre in the city, one of the main theatres in Liverpool. The event feels decidedly mainstream, compounded by the presence of the Mayor and Council Leader. I spoke to one of the volunteers and her comment suggests a desire to be part of the mainstream eventually, “even if no-one goes to see a single event all we care about is getting the publicity out there and for people to know all about the *Liverpool Fringe*.” Yet if a ‘fringe’ event is to be on the margins of the main event, even if it aspires to be part of it, this launch contradicts the spirit of that.

Whilst the aim of the *Liverpool Fringe* is to create social transformation in the city and the founder, interviewed again in 2009 comments that, “I can see a new confidence in the city definitely,” there is a lack of actual transformation, far from that which the founder envisaged a year earlier:

“So the way I see it because in Liverpool there is no ship building

anymore, there is no, erm, decent industry, the car plants are disappearing, we need something new so its like Turin, Barcelona, you know the main cultural arty cities of Europe, these industries that create a lot of income, business of the ordinary people, I think that we can create that here. Most people think it is just entertainment but I see it differently from that. I want to start a *full* industry. I want to start a *proper* union like the ones, what is it? Like the teachers unions or the Ford workers unions, exactly the same as that so ordinary artists who live in the vagaries and the mist of life can have the same protection as the people in the car plants and generate income for them and that way I think we can create a lot of business for Liverpool. Yeah so, to create a creative industry in Liverpool.”

Indeed, Adorno attacks the term ‘industry’ for being, “the standardisation of the thing itself” (2001: 100). There is a sense that the *Liverpool Fringe* is an attempt to create a definitional ceremony. To make the artists that are marginalised, visible. Yet its failure to do this lies in the constraints of the institutions to which they aligned themselves. Whilst the ECoC year may have instilled the local people with confidence about their abilities, the fringe event is an example of not grasping the opportunity for creativity and experimentation in identity performance. Whilst attempting to offer something that the ECoC lacks, the fringe ultimately becomes part of it. Whilst the above quote from the fringe founder states, “most people think it is just entertainment, but I see it differently than that,” yet the event fell into the discourse of, “it’s just culture” in Phil Redmond’s words, and offered no chance for transformation.

### **Transformative Potential?**

This chapter explored the potential for transformation within an event like ECoC. It considered both individual/communities transformation and also larger scale transformation. I argue that performances of local identities are dependent on the structures and norms of the dominant narrative and the perceived myths and stereotypes of the city. Therefore the performances are definitional (Myerhoff, 1986) in that they reaffirm these images of the city. Local people are intensely proud of their

home city, and their local neighbourhoods in most cases and the ECoC event would not alter this in their minds. As a result they wanted to perform *their* Liverpoolian identity, not in necessarily in defiance of the re-imagined image that the ECoC was portraying to outsiders, but in a way to make themselves more visible. The resultant “new Liverpool,” in the eyes of my research participants rather than an external audience, is one which they have created through their performances and experiences of engaging with ECoC.

It may be that the ECoC year becomes part of the myth of Liverpool looking to regain the greatness of a time gone by, alongside events like the International Garden Festival. Yet, as this chapter has argued from the beginning, it is in the lived-identities of the local people that we see the evolution of the culture of the city. Kaminsky in his analysis of Myerhoff’s work noticed that her words, “the made-upness of culture” (Moore and Myerhoff 1977: 13), presents, “an anthropology of the creative act [...] to theorise and describe the social-individual process of persons making culture that makes them the persons they are” (Kaminsky 1993: 272). Of course this making up of culture is done so within power relations, and in line with Butler ([1990] 2006), these relations are what makes the constitution of identity possible.

A city can perform a unique identity and local people’s interaction, participation and imaginative improvisation with their home facilitates this. Local people do not always necessarily want to challenge a dominant narrative presented but want *their* version of how they feel about being Liverpoolian to be made visible. This may lead to momentary transformations and something new, either intimate and personal or much wider in its impact, may emerge. Whether these transformations are sustained is not the issue here but the experimentation with the ‘subjunctive mood’ witnessed through ethnographic approaches allows a unique insight into the social and cultural aspects of large-scale events.

## Notes:

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<sup>i</sup> Colloquial terms meaning ‘nothing’.

<sup>ii</sup> Scouser is a colloquial term for someone who is from Liverpool.

<sup>iii</sup> A colloquial way of referring to the supermarket Asda is to precede with the definite article.

<sup>iv</sup> BBC Inside Out presented a scathing attack on the ECoC and its failure to live up to promises of renewal and revitalization in many peripheral communities. Aired on 19/09/07

<sup>v</sup> Press release relating to this scheme [www.nwda.co.uk/news--events/pressrelease/200701/look-of-the-city.aspx](http://www.nwda.co.uk/news--events/pressrelease/200701/look-of-the-city.aspx) [accessed 05/06/10]

<sup>vi</sup> This is now completed, houses have been demolished and the road widening scheme is nearly completed (April 2013)

<sup>vii</sup> The Mersey Partnership was the tourism and development agency for the city but has now merged to become the Local Enterprise Partnership Liverpool City Region Merseyside.

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