Staging a tomatoscape
A case study in place branding and/as semiotic reflexivity

Crispin Thurlow

University of Bern

A strategic, often spectacular intersection of semiosis and spatiality, place branding should be an obvious topic for linguistic landscape research. Isolated studies which do attend to branding seem insufficiently concerned with its conceptual and metasemiotic complexity, however. Part visual essay, my paper examines the small Spanish town of Miajadas which, in a performative act of scale-jumping, declares itself *Tomato Capital of Europe*. Drawing on fieldwork, and using a three-part analytic framework, I document the range of semiotic and sociomaterial tactics by which Miajadas stages itself as a "tomatoscape". Through its *mediatization*, *mediation*, and *remediation* the town maximizes its location in the global economic order. This case study underscores how place branding is a highly contingent mode of semiotic reflexivity which is seldom discrete or unilateral, but which can be highly effective.

Keywords: place branding, semiotic reflexivity, mediatization, mediation, remediation, linguistic landscape

This paper finds its inspiration in Extremadura, one of Spain's seventeen autonomous communities. Bordered by Portugal to the west and Andalusia to the south, Extremadura is Spain's most thinly populated autonomous community and, with some of the highest unemployment rates in mainland Spain, is also one of the poorest. Thanks in great part to the Guadiana river – Spain's fourth longest – and specifically its huge Orellana reservoir, Extremadura makes possible a massive viaduct, canal, and irrigation system which feeds a fertile region known as *Las Vegas Altas del Guadiana*. It is this highly managed supply of water which, amongst other things, makes Extremadura home

Figure 1. The natural landscape of Extremadura, Spain. (Photo: Daniel Rihs)

to the country's largest tomato agriculture and production.[1]

Spain itself is Europe's second largest producer of tomatoes (after Italy) and the world's third largest tomato exporter.[2]Within Spain, Extremadura is home to the country's biggest tomato output; in 2019, for example, it produced some 2.2 million metric tones of tomatoes. By my calculation, that is something like 5.5 billion tins of chopped tomatoes. In the Las Vegas Altas region, the epicenter of tomato production falls roughly within a triangular area demarcated by the capital city Mérida and the towns of Don Benito and Miajadas. With a population under 10,0000, Miajadas is a 20-minute drive from Don Benito which is actually four times bigger and also home to two large tomato production facilities. None of this, however, stops Miajadas from declaring itself *Tomato Capital of Europe*. Decided by the town council over twenty years ago, this performative act of scale-jumping (cf. Blommaert, 2007) is also a quintessential example of place branding, which is the conceptual and analytical focus of my paper.

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[1] In an already dry region, Extremadura has faced an increasing and potentially catastrophic water shortage in recent years; see, for example, El Salto (01 August 2022):
https://www.elsaltodiario.com/extremadura-/donde-esta-el-agua-de-extremadura

[2] For information about Spain and Extremadura's tomato production:
https://oec.world/en/profile/hs/tomatoes

Figure 2. A tomato-filed trailer in Extremadura. (Photo: Daniel Rihs)

Figure 3. Roadside sign on the outskirts of Miajadas. (Photo: Daniel Rihs)

1. Place branding and/as semiotic reflexivity

> The brand is a storied product: a product that has distinctive brand markers
> …through which customers experience identity myths. (Holt, 2005: 289)

> Place-branding projects are less about places than about the hopes and aspirations of
> people linked to places. (Agha, 2021: 337)

Place branding ought to be an obvious practice or ideological formation for proper discussion in linguistic landscape studies; it is here that we find the strategic and often spectacular intersection of semiosis and spatiality (cf. Theodoropoulou & Tovar, 2021). While there are a handful of isolated studies which consider branding in the linguistic landscape (see my potted review below), some restrict their focus to language/s and all appear to take branding for granted, leaving it largely untheorized or under-conceptualized. I will say more about this shortly, but there are a few other general points worth making beforehand.

First, Miajadas is not alone in this type of "produce-based" place branding. As it happens, there are other places which put themselves on the map with tomatoes too. In the USA, for example, Pittston, Pennsylvania promotes itself as the *Tomato Capital of the World.* Further south, Jacksonville, Texas (aka "Tomatoville") makes exactly the same claim. Across the border meanwhile, and in a somewhat more modest fashion, Leamington, Ontario claims to be the *Tomato Capital of Canada*. Even within Spain, there are other, often bigger, better-known places which assert their claim to the #1 tomato place. The city of Almería regularly declares itself – albeit for just one day – *Capital Mundial del Tomate* ('world tomato capital'). Even more famously, the small town of Buñol in Valencia has, since 1945, been holding the annual *Tomatina* tomato fight where something like 150,000 tomatoes are thrown (or wasted).

The fact is that just about anywhere can declare itself the capital of just about anything. This is precisely the kind of advertising "puffery" which Parmentier (1994) writes about. Parmentier argues that these sorts of outlandish claims were once commonly understood as obviously persuasive tactics; nowadays, however, they are approached with a "growing ideology of reference" (p. 146) – in other words, with an assumption that there is some legally verifiable and valid basis to the claim. In this regard, the various tomato "capitals" above would appear to sit somewhere in between a purely referential and purely non-referential claim. The towns can rightly – i.e., referentially – root their claims in a quasi-quantitative way: there really are lots of tomatoes about. Nonetheless, consumers ordinarily recognize and accept that these "world capital" claims are playful, aspirational messages rather than factual ones.

Not without coincidence, these rhetorical tactics find close parallels in other kinds of strategic place-making: in particular, the kind which happens frequently in tourism. My colleague and I (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2015) have previously documented the common practice of places capitalizing on their often naturally occurring extremities (locations, geographical features) or place names for branding themselves. Examples of this might include the "southern most tip of Africa" (South Africa), the "lowest place on earth" (Israel), and the "longest place name" (New Zealand). In Thurlow & Jaworski, (2015), we also discuss how tourists habitually seek out these places as a chance to locate themselves spectacularly too – a kind of reflexive, citational practice which is, as I show presently, central to branding too.

These touristic place-branding exercises can sometimes be even more tenuous or fabricated, as in the case of the Jungfraujoch, Switzerland which brands itself the "Top of Europe". Here, the claim is warranted by its technically being the highest railway-accessible place in Europe. This Swiss claim arguably entails less puffery than those made by, for example, Hayleyville, Alabama, USA which promotes itself as the first 911-emergency call in the USA, or Cawker City, Kansas, USA which has for some years put itself on the map with the *World's Largest Ball of Twine*. Perhaps requiring a little more of a stretch of the imagination, these two claims nonetheless remain grounded in some kind of material-cum-referential basis.

For all these otherwise out-of-the-way places, putting themselves on the map is quite literally what place branding is all about. Each is a quintessential realization of what Urry (2002: 24) calls *tourism reflexivity*: "the set of disciplines, procedures and criteria that enable each (and every?) place to monitor, evaluate and develop its 'tourism potential' within the emerging patterns of global tourism." Fabricated or not, referential or not, these acts of touristic place-making entail local communities capitalizing on their locational advantages or emplaced features in order to call attention to themselves. In doing so, place is reconfigured and resemioticized as destination (cf. Theodoropoulou & Tovar, 2021) – somewhere people will pay to visit.

Most place branding entails much the same "metasemiotic discourses" (Agha, 2015), all of which is essentially rooted in the type of "semiotic reflexivity" (Keane, 2018) inherent in all communicative action. In short, all sign-usage depends on users' understanding – partially or otherwise, consciously or not – how meaning is made, and how different semiotic resources afford different meaning potentials (see also Kress, 2010). In the case of place branding, the key metasemiotic or reflexive tactic deployed is that of "metonymic reduction" (Agha, 2020: 332; cf. also Aiello & Thurlow, 2006): places are depicted in terms of one or other of their actual – topographical or material – properties. In marketing terms, places identify a USP ('unique selling proposition') (Levitt, 1986), which is to say, a feature or quality which differentiates them from their competitors – in this case, every other place.

In terms of branding theory, the current case study orients most closely to the work of linguistic anthropologists like Manning (2010), Nakassis (2012, 2015) and also Agha (2015, 2020 – quote above) who has more recently written specifically about place branding. Although sometimes quite dense and abstract, this literature takes a properly conceptual approach to branding – the way it works in the world as a social semiotics. One key point is that branding should not be treated as a matter of discrete entities ("a brand") or only in terms of specific makers (e.g., an advertisement), but rather as set of socially distributed, discursive processes. In this regard, the linguistic anthropology literature feels oddly disconnected from otherwise long-standing scholarship in other disciplines. The well-known business studies scholarship of Holt (2004, 2005 – quoted above), for example, takes a similarly cultural, discursive or "symbolic" approach to branding.

Within linguistic landscape studies, there are a handful of precedents where scholars have directly addressed branding. Most notably, studies by Tufi & Blackwood (2010), Lanza & Woldemariam (2014), and Lou (2021) focus on the role of brand names and branding practices, although typically restricting the focus to language/s. I myself have previously written about place branding: for example, in Thurlow (2021) I examined top-down and bottom-up orthographic tactics used for projecting a particular image of my home city, Bern. In a similar typographic landscape study, Järlehed (2021) considers how lettering can be used as another semiotic (or meta-semiotic) resource for city branding. Taking a somewhat broader, multimodal approach, Aiello & Thurlow (2006) have documented a range of visual tactics which cities use in bidding for the *European Capital of Culture* scheme. In more recent work, Aiello (2021) demonstrates how the built environment is itself deployed as a semiotic resource for branding the city. Finally, Milani & Levon (2016) use a rhizomatic approach for connecting mediatized practices and semiotic materials used in the strategic but ideologically problematic Israeli nation-branding. In neither my own work nor that of these other colleagues is branding explicitly theorized.[3] As is so often the case (Ahga, 2021), branding is simply treated as a taken-for granted notion; it is also usually regarded as a solely mercantile and nefarious practice.

One last point is worth making. Almost all research to date privileges place branding in larger-scale, better-known urban centres – especially so-called "world cities" (cf. Flowerdew, 2004). By contrast, and with an explicit attention to branding

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[3] A noteworthy exception, Del Percio (2016) takes up some branding theory – specifically, Nakassis (2012) – and also situates nation branding as part of a wider political economy. Flowerdew (2004) paper also includes a brief statement about the core practices of branding.

theory, my case study here considers how a far smaller, decidedly rural town leverages similar practices. And it does so also by means of a somewhat different set of semiotic resources: its local produce – specifically, its tomatoes. To be sure, there is much else to be said about the political economy of this small town – most notably the conditions of labour – but this is beyond the scope of the current paper whose objective is limited to conceptual rather than critical matters.[4]

2. Staging a tomatoscape in Miajadas

Drawing on fieldwork conducted in August, September and October 2021, I now document a range of semiotic and sociomaterial tactics by which Miajadas stages itself as a "tomatoscape". I organize this material according to a three-part analytical framework demonstrated previously in Thurlow (2022; also Thurlow & Jaworski, 2014); the goal is show how Miajadas maximizes its location in the global economic order through the mediatization, mediation, and remediation of its *Tomato Capital of Europe* brand.

2.1 Mediatizing the brand

As I say, I start with the mediatized dimensions of Miajadas' place branding. Following Agha (2011), this concerns the range of institutional, corporate representations used for framing and "enworlding" the town.[5] As one of the council officials told me in an interview, the objective behind the *Tomato Capital of Europe* branding was two-fold: "to promote what is our star crop and to make ourselves known to the world." As he also went on to explain, this superlative claim is referentially grounded (or warranted) by there being four manufacturing companies based in a town of fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. This, I was told, is "la marca Miajadas" – the Miajadas brand. In Figure 4, I offer a sample of the official, usually commercial texts produced by the town council; this is where the tomato crops up everywhere: on the banner

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[4] In a sister publication (Thurlow, 2023 in press) my conceptual focus is somewhat more critical in considering working conditions in tomato fields and production facilities (cf. also Brandt, 2002).

[5] Mediatization is a thorny notion (Androutsopoulos, 2016). Largely for analytical convenience, I orient to Agha's (2011) take on mediatization while retaining the distinctiveness of mediation (cf. Scollon, 2001) and remediation (cf. Burgess, 2010). This approach helps me locate the role of digital media in wider circuits of culture (Du Gay et al., 1997) and show how, as Milani (2022:550) puts it, non-commercial agents become complicit in 'an intricate patchwork of moral and affective stances bound up with capitalist consumption.'

Figure. 4. Sample of mediatized texts from Miajadas. (Reproduced with permission)

of the town council's website (top left), in local and regional news stories produced by/for the town council (bottom left), and in the council's social media (bottom middle; more on this later). The town council also organizes two major events every year, including an annual tomato contest – advertised in the poster on the right which shows its 37th iteration from 2022. These various textual mediatizations pale by comparison with the town's most famous act of semiotic reflexivity and invention: *El Tomate de Miajadas* – the Miajadas tomato – shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. The Miajadas tomato "monument" (Photo: Daniel Rihs)

Mounted in 2001, this tomato sculpture – described locally as a monument - is six meters high, five meters in diameter, and weighs some three thousand kilograms. With financial support from a regional non-profit, this mediatized spectacle is undeniably part of a wider political economy. The monetary investment continues to be significant: in 2020, the "monument" underwent a major restoration and repainting. Then, in August 2021 – just around the time I was conducting fieldwork in the region – some €73,000 ($77,000) was spent creating a new rest and play area around the sculpture. This was all reported in the town council's monthly magazine which featured a piece about the sculpture's 20ᵗʰ birthday along with photos from the initial installation.

In the same magazine story, one can also read about some of the ways the *Tomato Capital of Europe* brand had been successfully remediated thanks to its most spectacular marker. (I return to remediation shortly.) The sculpture was, for example, mediatized anew and further afield by popular newspapers (*20 Minutos*) and on national television (RTVE 2's *Rutas Bizarras*). On the ground, however, and in the mediated spaces of everyday life, the tomatoscape is somewhat less dramatic, more patchy in its deployment, and unstable in its uptake.

2.2 Mediating the brand

By mediation, I follow the lead of Scollon (2001) in thinking about situated, on-the-ground actions by which the brand comes to be organized and given meaning. Although there is invariably an overlap with institutional/corporate mediatization, mediation is intended – if only for analytical purposes – to highlight spatialized and embodied (inter)actions. To this end, the town's *Tomato Capital of Europe* branding is unquestionably rooted in its referential basis, something which is hard to miss in the mediated landscape.

As noted, Miajadas is home to four or five major tomato production facilities run by some of the biggest tomato producers in Europe, if not the world.[6] Located at one of the main routes into town, the production facility shown in Figure 6 is run by Gallina Blanca. The town is also home to CONESA, the world's fifth largest tomato production company. It is putting things mildly when I say that tomatoes are big business in Miajadas. Near these major production facilities, tomatoes mediate and shape the landscape in other ways too: most notably when piled high in the backs of trucks constantly coming and going during harvest season.

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[6] Tomato News (16 March 2021). "TOP50 tomato processing companies worldwide in 2020". Available at: https://www.tomatonews.com/en/top50-tomato-processing-companiesworldwide-in-2020_2_1295.html

Figure 6. A tomato processing plant in Miajadas (Photo: Daniel Rihs)

Some of these tomatoes also spill out, littering the landscape in more banal, less intended ways – see Figure 7.
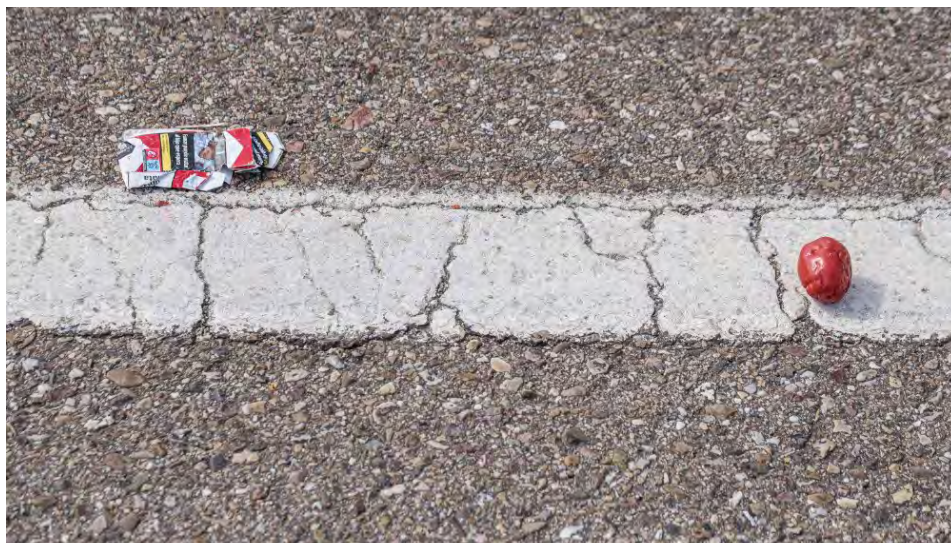

Figure 7. Litter and a wasted tomato (Photo: Daniel Rihs)

Outside these tomato-dense spaces, the tomatoscape is a lot less secure or stable. My photographer collaborator Daniel Rihs and I had to be quite determined in order to spot tomatoes. We did, for example, find the rather tattered, ill-maintained commercial welcome sign in Figure 8. With a little spatial context

(Figure 9 far left), the same sign looks somehow even sadder and the message even more half-hearted.

Figure 8. Welcome sign, Miajadas (Photo: Daniel Rihs)

Figure 9. Tomato signage, Miajadas (Photos: Crispin Thurlow & Daniel Rihs)

Tomatoes are otherwise barely or rarely in evidence; their presence is made only partially or fleetingly known: a grocery store sign (Fig. 9 middle left), the front of agricultural fertilizer business (middle right), and then a "Tomato Contest" poster in the town square (far right). These are still largely mediatized texts working to mediate the branded landscape of Miajadas. Shown in Figure 10, we did come across a painted tomato on a wall at the local (third-division) football club as a backdrop for the club's commercial sponsors, many of which are the large tomato production companies.

Figure 10. Miajadas football club grounds. (Photo: Daniel Rihs)

It is back at the town hall itself where the tomatoscape surfaces in its most concentrated form: for example, on posters in the public spaces and in old newspaper reports pinned to a noticeboard just outside the office of the mayor (Figure 11, far left & middle left).

Figure 11. Other on-the-ground tomatoes. (Photos: Crispin Thurlow & Daniel Rihs)

By chance, we also spotted – on every desk in the town council offices – a series of hand-knitted tomatoes. The one shown in Figure 11 (middle right) was in the office of the local police chief. When we enquired, it turned out that the town-hall receptionist had taken it upon herself to knit one for every colleague. In fact, she generously gifted me the one from behind her desk which is a prized possession in my university office. As we sat waiting to meet with some council representatives, we also noticed a replica of the tomato "monument" in an office bookshelf (Figure 11, far right). When we asked,

someone hurried off to fetch it for us as another gift. These models are given as prizes at the annual tomato contest. Once again reframed as "data", the one now in my office helps keep the tomatoscape on the move and in circulation further afield.

2.3 Remediating the brand

For analytical purposes, I use the term remediation in much the same way that Burgess (2010) does: to highlight the recycling and broadcasting of individually produced texts or personal actions by means of digital media platforms. This is how otherwise physically and temporally bounded practices end up being circulated for viewing by (potentially) much larger, otherwise dispersed or far-flung audiences. Nowadays, remediated texts/actions are quickly and almost inevitably incorporated into the realm of mediatization – effectively completing the "circuit of culture", to use Du Gay et al.'s (1997) famous formulation. More importantly, remediated texts/actions are precisely the kind of uptake that is essential for realizing the brand.

> Over time, as the brand performs its myth, the audience eventually perceives that the myth resides in the brand's markers. The brand becomes a symbol, a material embodiment of the myth. (Holt, 2004: 8).

Ultimately, and just as the theory suggests, the branding of Miajadas is only fully realized through its uptake: the extent to which, as Holt (quoted above) indicates, the tomatoscape and its various markers are noticed, recognized as meaningful, and circulated even further afield. Much the same point is made also by Agha (2020: 336) who notes how "the fragility of any branding campaign lies in the forms of uptake it enables among its audiences". What Holt (2004; also 2006) also argues, however, is that none of this is possible if the brand does not, from the outset, already tap into existing cultural discourses or myths. In other words, the "storied product" of any (successful) brand is always interdiscursively dependent on other stories and other forms of story-telling. This, I think, is most clearly evident in the link between the Miajadas tomato sculpture, well- well-established tourist placemaking practices, and the kinds of remediation afforded by social media.

Remediation is surely the *sine qua non* of contemporary branding and place branding. As Nakassis (2013: 121) observes, "all marketing turns on outsourcing itself to its consumers" and the success of any brand "depends on consumers generating social meanings through brand engagements". Ultimately, as he also argues elsewhere (Nakassis, 2021), this is the inherent "metasemiotics" of citationality upon which branding always depends, and which, in turn, helps to realize the performative power of branding. In other words, it is only through their being

repeatedly quoted branding can enact change in the world: which is to say, make audiences (targeted or potential) think, feel, and act in particular ways towards the product or, in this case, the place.

As the ultimate expressions of citationality, "clickabibility" and "instagramability" are, certainly key markers of success for contemporary marketing. This is something not always easy to predict or command, but so often strategically written into place. Perfect examples of this are dedicated selfie spots like the one in Florence, Italy (Figure 12, left) or the carefully located selfie frame at Guardian Peak, a vineyard restaurant in Stellenbosch, South Africa (right).

Figure 12. Dedicated selfie spots, Italy and South Africa. (Photos: Crispin Thurlow)

Visitors' encounters with places are nowadays seldom left to chance; the stakes are just too high for those places seeking to enter the economic flows of global capital or those wanting to maintain the access they already have. Another common tactic is the one seen in Figure 13.

Place name objects are eminently instagramable (see Jaworski & Lee, 2019), as with the one used by Almería as part of its once-a-year *World Tomato Capital* branding strategy. In this case, the usual heart is neatly traded out for a tomato. There is nothing subtle about the copycat tactics at work here; but then that's the point. The goal is to take up tried-and-tested place branding tactics – ones which clearly work. And, true to form, tourists enthusiastically seek out and enjoy these opportunities for spectacular self-locations (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2015). In doing so, these visitors not only circulate the brand they also help to fulfil it (Nekassis, 2014).

In fact, as the theory suggests, a brand is not a brand without this kind of uptake.

Figure 13. Tourist snapshot from Almería, Spain. (Used with permission)

The Miajadas town council has worked especially hard to mediatize the tomato sculpture on its social media profiles precisely to support the remediation and fulfilment of its *Tomato Capital of Europe* brand. (See, for example, the all-important #TomateDeMiajadas and @miajadas markers.) Most importantly, the remediation does seem to happen, although often not in the anticipated ways. In late 2009, the famous footballer Cristiano Ronaldo was pulled over by the national police (Guardia Civil) for speeding just outside Miajadas. The officers seized the opportunity for a selfie with Ronaldo: there, in the background, sat the Miajadas Tomato.[7] This was a priceless case of brand collision – or perhaps collusion. It was the kind of national-level publicity no small-town budget could otherwise afford.

There are other more expected ways in which the sculpture and thus the brand is remediated. With modest numbers of "likes" and three from one poster, some typical examples are shown in Figure 14.

As planned – or at least as hoped for – the tomato sculpture has become a tourist attraction, helping to produce Miajadas as a destination. To this end, the sculpture is subjected to the filtering, restaging and spectacular self-locations of

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[7] The Cristiano Ronaldo snapshot was reproduced by the online newspaper Hoy (20 January 2010); available at: https://www.hoy.es/20100129/sociedad/ronaldo-sombra-tomate-20100129 .html

Figure 14. Sample of Instagram posts from Miajadas.

tourists. It is not quite the Leaning Tower of Pisa (see Thurlow & Jaworski, 2014); but while the scale may be different, the general principle and practice is the same.

The remediation of Miajadas' tomatoscape has not always generated good news. With social media fame can come some unanticipated criticism too, some of which cycles back into mediatized domains. Of course, in the logic of marketing, bad news is also good news – free advertising all the same. In 2015, for example, the Miajadas tomato – and thus the town itself – became the center of some negative attention in a series of national newspaper stories about the poor state of urban development and the foolishness of small-town councils. Unfairly perhaps, the Miajadas tomato ended up a poster child for this mediatized discourse. One story – headlined "Ugliness prevails in urban development" (my translation) – bemoaned the "disasters" of Spain's real estate bubble and the "stupidities" committed in constructing roundabouts.[8] Meanwhile, another side story in the national *El Pais* newspaper focused on the "roundabout horror" of "awful" food-themed monuments.[9]

It is partly thanks to these mediatized news reports, however, that one also catches a glimpse into the way the Miajadas tomato has taken hold, and how the *Tomato Capital of Europe* brand is evidently working. In this regard, a handful

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[8] *El Correo* (15 June 2015). 'El feísmo se impone en el desarrollo urbano'. Available at: https://www.elcorreo.com/bizkaia/sociedad/201506/04/feismo-impone-desarrollo-urbano-20150603193512.html

[9] *El Pais* (27 May 2015). 'Horror de rotonda: los monumentos a la comida más tremendos de españa.' Available at: https://elcomidista.elpais.com/elcomidista/2015/05/27/articulo/1432702800_143270.html

of comments posted in response to these news stories include the following (my translations):

> *We are recognized for the tomato which many people live off and so have not had to emigrate ... I'm proud to have the tomato (as are many residents of Miajadas).*

> *Since I was a child, I've traveled to Miajadas several times a year to see my whole family and after a 5-hour trip my greatest joy was to see the tomato from the road ...*

> *I assure you, after today, countless others will know about the existence and the essence of Miajadas.*

The Miajadas brand has, it seems, not only been cited and circulated, but also taken up and bought into. We cannot know the scale of this achievement or just how well it will endure. What these isolated snippets of "customer feedback" do indicate, however, is that the "storied product" (Holt, 2005) is being listened to and that people sense how the myth of the brand – in this case, *Tomato Capital of Europe* – is located, at least partially, in its markers – in this case, the tomato sculpture. Furthermore, since each of these three commentors also appears to have a direct or personal connection with the town, we also witness how place branding distils and comes to express "the hopes and aspirations of people linked to places" (Agha, 2021: 337). This, as Holt (2005: 289) suggests, is how people come to experience their own "identity myths" through the cultural "symbolism" of brands.

3. Conclusion

While some place-branding makes claims to superlative status – the world's biggest, deepest, tallest, etc. – which can be verified, other claims are patently fabricated or engineered. Take, for example, the *World's Largest Chocolate Fountain* at the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas (see Thurlow & Jaworski, 2012: 506) or, in a case which clearly pushes puffery to its limits, the small roadside café in Barrengarry, New South Wales, Australia which sells *The World's Best Pies*. These branding exercises start life as overtly playful acts of semiotic reflexivity; more importantly, however, their uptake is also invariably structured by the semiotic reflexivities of audiences. Few people visiting the chocolate fountain would, I imagine, fail to grasp the game at hand; just as they probably get its role in supporting the luxury branding of the hotel itself. It is likewise hard to imagine anyone buying a pie in Barrengarry also expecting to see a certificate of authentication.

In branding terms, declaring one's town the *Tomato Capital of Europe* is no more absurd or outrageous than commodifying nature in the form of bottled water (cf. Wilks, 2006). This is not necessarily to condone either; it is certainly not to deny their inevitable role in the exploitative economies of capital and profit. Nonetheless, and as scholars like Holt (2005, 3006) and Ahga (2015, 2021) note, branding is neither a thing nor a discrete entity, but rather a multifarious, discursive process. Nor is branding a straightforwardly one-sided or top-down process. Any branding exercise can only succeed if it meaningfully taps into existing social meanings and identities; without this, brands remain unnoticed, unrecognized, and unfulfilled.

As I learned from one of the town council officials in Miajadas, the tomato industry directly supports some 500 jobs for local people, a number which triples during the harvest season. These are big numbers for a small community, but precarious, nonetheless. The International Mediterranean Association of Processed Tomatoes (AMITOM) produces a regular online resource called *Tomato News* which confirms the kind of raw economics Miajadas is up against. While Spanish tomato production may be the second highest in Europe, it is still three times smaller than that of Turkey and the USA, which are themselves five times smaller than that of China.[10] The business of tomatoes is not only huge it is also fiercely competitive. Perhaps this helps explain why a small, provincial town like Miajadas might feel compelled to enter the branding game. That it seems to be playing the game so effectively is all the more impressive.

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[10] *Tomato News* available at: https://www.tomatonews.com/en/

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Address for correspondence

Crispin Thurlow
Department of English
University of Bern
Länggassstrasse 49
3012 Bern
Switzerland
crispin.thurlow@unibe.ch
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3203-9255