

# **(Re)branding Somerville: Immigrant Business in a Changing Community**



In the fall of 2011, Fasika, an Ethiopian restaurant in East Somerville, began renovating its storefront with a grant from the City of Somerville's Storefront Improvement Program.

Photo: Jessica Kulig

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## Table of Contents

<b>Preface</b> .....	3
<b>Introduction</b> .....	4
Methodology.....	5
Theoretical Framework.....	7
Narrators.....	10
<i>William Pamphile, Fiesta Bakery &amp; Restaurant</i> .....	10
<i>Geraldo Magela Silveira, Capital Br</i> .....	11
<i>Gus Da Cunha, Ola Gifts Café</i> .....	11
<i>Carrie Dancy, East Somerville Main Streets</i> .....	12
<b>Ch.1 Somerville: A Changing Community</b> .....	13
History of immigration in Somerville.....	13
Gentrification following Red Line extension.....	13
Ongoing changes.....	14
<b>Ch. 2 (Re)branding Neighborhoods</b> .....	16
Definitions.....	16
Overview.....	16
Somerville’s Neighborhoods.....	17
Initiatives.....	19
<i>City of Somerville</i> .....	19
<i>East Somerville Main Streets</i> .....	22
Carrie Dancy.....	23
<b>Ch. 3 Self-Representation and Individual Branding</b> .....	27
William Pamphile.....	27
Geraldo Magela Silveira.....	30
Gus Da Cunha.....	33
<b>Ch. 4 Bridging the Gaps</b> .....	38
Community (re)branding and immigrant business.....	38
<b>Conclusion: The Future of Immigrant Business in Somerville</b> .....	45

## Preface

Before presenting my research, it is important to explain a bit about my personal background. I was born and raised in Windham County, Connecticut, a place known only for being one of the least-urbanized areas along the “Northeast megalopolis” stretching from Boston to Washington, D.C. My parents are small-town family lawyers who own an office together in the house I lived in until I was five years old. I am a white female, and I am the descendant of immigrants who arrived in New England, mostly from Italy and Poland, at the beginning of the twentieth century. My paternal great-grandfather came when he was sixteen, and after spending a few years working in various restaurants opened a bar of his own in Central Falls, Rhode Island. According to family members, during prohibition, instead of closing down the place, he opened a second bar down the street. Thus, as a researcher, I feel both connected and disconnected from the topic I have explored this semester. I came to Somerville a little over three years ago to attend Tufts University. In contrast to my hometown, Somerville is one of the most densely populated cities in the country, and I have only just begun to understand some of the complexities of the city. Furthermore, before this semester, my knowledge of Somerville had only reached into the neighborhoods of West Somerville. My approach to this topic, the connections I made with the people I interviewed, and the conclusions I drew from this experience were all shaped by these circumstances.

## Introduction

*East Somerville is going to change. Every neighborhood in Somerville is going to change. [The question is] how do we capitalize on what's special and unique about our neighborhood when we do change?*

Carrie Dancy, Executive Director, East Somerville Main Streets



Los Paisanos, a restaurant located in East Somerville, serves a mix of Mexican and Salvadorian cuisine  
Photo: Jessica Kulig

The city of Somerville is no stranger to change. Now the most densely populated city in New England, Somerville sits atop of land that was largely rural until a little over a century ago. Rapid industrialization in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries created a new, dynamic physical and social landscape, which led the city through two major waves of immigration, industrial decline, and gentrification. It is no surprise that the city continues to reshape itself – through its distinct and varied neighborhoods – on almost a daily basis. But, as the city changes, it is important to consider how different populations in the community are affected: who is moving forward with the changes and who is being left behind?

Throughout the semester, I have been exploring how one specific process of change – branding – impacts the immigrant community in Somerville. I have based my research on the idea that there are

two levels from which branding activities are initiated, the individual level and the community level, but that “branding” as a whole cannot be thought of as an aggregation of these distinct parts; rather, the individual and community images are closely linked. Using this model, it is easy to begin seeing what potential problems may arise when *goals* at the individual and community levels conflict. What happens when the individual and community “brands” don’t match up? Which one wins out? *Who* is being represented and *how* are they being represented? In this report, I explore the idea of branding in the context of community change, cultural commodification, and gentrification. I attempt to uncover some of the issues that both positively and negatively impact the immigrant communities at the foundation of the “changing city” of Somerville.

## **Methodology**

The purpose of this community-based research project is two-fold. First, it serves to contribute a small part to the complex, yet often overlooked, story of immigration in the United States. Although more than twelve percent of the country’s population is foreign born, it is rare that we hear their stories, and even rarer that we hear them from the first-person perspectives of immigrants. I hope my research will help to begin piecing together this history in a way that is both respectful and informative. Second, in completing this research, I hope to contribute to building a more inclusive community by connecting current events in Somerville with the experiences of immigrants who live here. Since the topics that I have explored have real policy implications for Somerville’s immigrant community, this report will serve to help bridge the gap in knowledge about how to include the immigrant community in such processes of community change. In designing this project, I have kept these two objectives in mind.

The core of my research for this project is four interviews that I conducted with members of the Somerville community between September 2011 and December 2011. In selecting these narrators, I attempted to acquire a wide variety of perspectives. Thus, I chose to interview three immigrant restaurant owners originating from Haiti, Brazil, and Portugal, whose varied backgrounds and

experiences I believed would bring knowledge about a wide variety of issues affecting immigrant business owners. For my fourth interview, I approached Carrie Dancy, the Executive Director of East Somerville Main Streets, an organization that works to build and promote the East Somerville Business District. Because of her position in the community, I thought that Dancy would have extensive knowledge about branding in East Somerville and the impact this process has on the immigrant community, in particular.

In each of my interviews with the restaurant owners, I asked a series of questions, which ranged across several different categories including food, culture, community participation, relationship with the Somerville immigrant community, and self-representation. I began by asking each of them general background information about where they were born, why they came to the United States, and how they started their restaurants. I then went more in depth on various topics, depending on the narrator. This was helpful in providing context to each of their experiences as business owners in Somerville. I tried to relate each of my interviews back to the idea of branding, both on an individual level and on a community level.

Since I collaborated heavily with my Urban Borderlands class throughout the semester, I also drew extensively from interviews my classmates conducted for their own research projects. Among the other narrators included in my report are Befekadu Defar from Fasika, Rachael Plitch from Shape Up Somerville, and David Guzman from the City of Somerville. The information I collected from these interview reports serves to provide additional support to the ideas that I present throughout my paper.

To supplement my interviews, I also utilize a number of other primary and secondary sources, which include restaurant and organization websites, local newspaper articles, books, and journal articles. I do this in order to link the experiences of the narrators together and to position them appropriately in the larger Somerville community. In this way, I hope to have gathered a diverse and comprehensive perspective on these issues.

## Theoretical Framework

Although scholarship that explores the complex intersections of culture, ethnicity, entrepreneurship, and neighborhood transformation is limited, it is important to contextualize my research within a broader body of literature on these topics. Thus, I build a framework for this paper from three main works: “Culture at Work” from Frederick F. Wherry’s book *The Philadelphia Barrio – The Arts, Branding, and Neighborhood Transformation*; “Tourism, migration and place advantage in the global cultural economy,” by Michael Hall and Ann Rath, from the book *Tourism, Ethnic Diversity and the City*; and “The Impact of Gentrification on Ethnic Neighbourhoods in Toronto: A Case Study of Little Portugal” by Robert Murdie and Carlos Teixeira.

In Wherry’s book *The Philadelphia Barrio*, he explores how a Latino neighborhood in Philadelphia transformed its image from one of a “devastated place whose ‘shameless’ residents lacked dignity and respect” (Wherry 1) to a place “teeming with arts and culture” (Wherry 1). In Chapter 1, he outlines two major ideas, which I use to frame my own research on branding in Somerville: the *process* of branding that contributed to the transformation of this Philadelphia neighborhood and the cultural and social *constraints* on branding.

As Wherry explains, in the context of a neighborhood, “the brand is apparent from what businesses sell, how their storefronts are designed, what kind of music emanates from open neighborhood windows and passing cars, and what kinds of themes are depicted in the neighborhood’s plentiful murals” (Wherry 4). Community branding efforts, in turn, must come from a number of arts and culture-based initiatives that contribute to the overall image. In terms of social and cultural constraints, the process of branding that Wherry describes could more accurately be labeled as ‘rebranding’ because, as he explains, “the narratives that branders construct about the neighborhood rely on the accumulated narratives that have characterized the community and its inhabitants” (Wherry 7). The neighborhood, in a sense, has already been branded – the rebranding process attempts to alter

outsider perceptions by highlighting positive aspects of the pre-constructed conceptions of the neighborhood. According to Wherry, these perceptions “shape the types of branding projects that will resonate as authentic” (Wherry 7).

Although he is referring to this specific neighborhood in Philadelphia, the same ideas resonate with Somerville’s neighborhoods, particularly East Somerville and Union Square. However, in applying this chapter to my own research, I must be careful not to overlook the differences between Somerville’s communities and the neighborhood Wherry describes. There are two major factors that differentiate neighborhoods like Union Square and East Somerville from the Philadelphia barrio that Wherry has written about. First, the neighborhood in Philadelphia is, for the most part, an ethnically homogeneous Puerto Rican community, whereas Somerville’s neighborhoods consist of many different immigrant groups. Second, the branding efforts in the Philadelphia neighborhood are initiated by members of the community, whereas in Somerville they are led by organizations like East Somerville Main Streets. These two factors contribute to the *type* of branding that goes on and to the intentional and unintentional *outcomes* of these efforts.

In “Tourism, migration and place advantage in the global cultural economy,” Hall and Rath examine tourism and the commodification of culture in the context of a changing urban environment. The authors argue that immigrants are playing an increasing role in the urban tourism economy. According to Hall and Rath, “authorities [...] now strive to present their localities as attractive places for potential investors, employers, inhabitants, and tourists” (Hall 9) through “the manipulation of place images and the projection of a high quality of life” (Hall 9). One way they pursue these re-imaging strategies is through a process the authors call the “commodification of culture,” whereby cities promote certain ethnic enclaves, like San Francisco’s Chinatown, as centers of culture, which offer some kind of “unique” experience to the cultural tourist. Hall and Rath argue that this commodification of identity, which is now “an intrinsic component of place promotion” (Hall 20), should not be rejected



outright because it has numerous potential benefits to immigrant communities. Yet, it can also be problematic if this process of commodification relies on the “otherness” of immigrant communities and if it is meant to represent ethnicity and culture in a way that will promote economic development by professionals and white-collar workers, who are often *not* the people living in these communities. The underlying question is: who benefits? In examining branding and imaging strategies in Somerville, I will consider the idea of commodification of culture and how it impacts immigrant communities.

Finally, I use Murdie and Teixeira’s work to frame processes of branding in the context of gentrification. In their journal article “The Impact of Gentrification on Ethnic Neighborhoods in Toronto: A Case Study of Little Portugal,” the authors explore the positive and negative effects of gentrification on ethnic neighborhoods. As I do in my paper, they frame their research by the question “who benefits?” I use two sections of their piece to contribute to my overall understanding of neighborhood change. First, they discuss the implications of rising housing prices. On the one hand, for people who own houses, it provides an opportunity to capitalize on appreciating property values, especially if they want to move to lower-cost housing in the suburbs. However, as one individual caught in the middle of this process of change explained:

Houses are selling for a very good price ... but what is the point ... most of the first-generation Portuguese don’t want to move ... they want to die where they spent most of their lives ... here in ‘Little Portugal’. What’s the point to sell for good bucks, cash some money and go to the suburbs ... far away from the Portuguese community? That’s not what they want. So ... what’s the point of having this huge housing prices here. ... who benefits? Not the Portuguese seniors because they still need a roof to live. (Murdie 74)

Change in this context can be beneficial, but it certainly comes at a cost, and in Somerville, where many immigrants rent housing, rising prices simply displace individuals who are no longer able to afford them.

Second, Murdie and Teixeira discuss the effects of gentrification on commercial and industrial activities, an area that relates more directly to my research. They explain that gentrifiers with different tastes from the current population “demand more upscale goods and services, resulting in what Lees et al. (2007, p. 131) call ‘retail gentrification’ or ‘boutiqueification’” (Murdie 75). While this can contribute

to the “stabilization” and “development” of the area, it can also result in the displacement of industry and businesses on which people in the community rely to make a living. In East Somerville, efforts to improve the business district through branding have the potential to draw customers who otherwise would not venture outside of Davis Square - but only if their tastes are in line with what the business offers. In the end, some of the immigrant-owned restaurants may not be able to survive or may have to fundamentally change their business in order to compete with newer, more up-scale venues. In my paper, I explore the factors that influence a restaurant’s ability to endure these products of gentrification that the authors describe.

### **Narrators**

#### *William Pamphile, Fiesta Bakery & Restaurant*

William Pamphile is the owner of Fiesta Bakery & Restaurant in Union Square. He was born in Haiti but moved to Boston in the mid-1980s for his last year of high school. He had family living here at the time, which he noted was his main motivation for coming here. After high school, he studied at Northeastern University, where he received his Bachelor’s degree in business. He then worked at the Federal Reserve Bank for eighteen years. During that time, his sister owned Fiesta, but when she decided to move to Florida, she encouraged Pamphile to buy the business from her, which he eventually did. The original restaurant was in Dorchester, but after it caught fire about two years ago, he decided to move the business to Somerville. When he first acquired the restaurant about five years ago, he began conducting a survey of his customers – he realized that most people came from Somerville, Everett, and Malden, so he thought it would be easier and better for his customers if the new location was in Somerville. Pamphile wants to be able to have something for everyone that comes in his restaurant, no matter how old the person is or where he or she is from. At the moment, Pamphile is studying to be a pastor at Gordon College – he will complete his degree this fall after he finishes two more classes. He

also recently started a non-profit organization, Vision Youth-Builders of Haiti, which has led him to travel back to Haiti frequently over the past year.

*Geraldo Magela Silveira, Capital Brasil*

Geraldo Magela Silveira is the owner of Capital Brasil. He is twenty-six years old and was born in Brazil, where he lived most of his life until coming to the United States. He left Brazil in 2007 when he received a green card through the American Green Card Lottery. When he first arrived, he went to North Carolina, where two of his uncles were already living. However, the work in North Carolina was not very good for him, and there were few Brazilians besides him and his uncles. So, after staying there for a little while, he decided to come to Somerville, where one of his friends was living. The work here was better, and there was a larger Brazilian community. He got a job at an aluminum company in Somerville, where he continues to work while running the restaurant. About four months ago, he opened up Capital Brasil on East Broadway with his mother, who also recently came to the United States from Brazil. He thought that the Brazilian population in East Somerville would really appreciate being able to buy traditional Brazilian burgers and other items from him. Silveira is responsible for running the restaurant, while his mother does the cooking. So far, business has been good for Capital Brasil, but Geraldo hopes to make improvements in the future to make the business more efficient.

*Carrie Dancy, Executive Director, East Somerville Main Streets*

Carrie Dancy is the Executive Director of East Somerville Main Streets. Dancy was born and raised in the United States, but directly before coming to East Somerville Main Streets, she spent a year abroad in Argentina where she did an environmental education service project for six months. While she was there, she observed that community life was very important and that the downtown centers there were incredibly vibrant and provided a lot of life for the cities. Coming back to the United States, she really wanted to use the new language skills she had acquired. She found the East Somerville Main Streets Executive Director position in the newspaper and thought that it would be perfect for what she

envisioned herself doing. She had become familiar with the Main Streets Model in New Hampshire, where it is closely tied with environmental issues, while she was interning at the Department of Environmental Services. Through this position, she reencountered the Main Streets concept and realized it was a perfect fit. As Executive Director, Dancy is responsible for most of the day-to-day work of the organization. She does program development and fundraising and works directly with the board of directors – since it's a small organization, she is involved in almost every aspect of the organization.

#### *Gus Da Cunha, Ola Gifts Café*

Augusto (Gus) Da Cunha is the owner of Ola Gifts Café. He came to the United States with his family from Portugal in 1966, when he was a child. His family had been waiting close to eight years for visas, and so they left the country soon after they received them. His parents already had brothers and sisters living in the United States (California and Massachusetts), so they were sponsored by one of his uncles, and they settled in Massachusetts. According to Da Cunha, immigrating to the United States was an incredible opportunity. Coming from a country that, at the time, was under the rule of a repressive government, his family experienced freedoms of speech and religion for the first time. When Da Cunha arrived in Massachusetts, he originally went to Cambridge. Sometime in the 1970s, he moved to Somerville, where he has been ever since. He served in the American military and is a veteran of the Vietnam War. He opened Ola Gifts Café about six months ago because he saw a need for a coffee shop in East Somerville. The closest one is the Dunkin Donuts near McGrath Highway, and Da Cunha thought that people going to work in the morning or coming through Sullivan Station would really appreciate being able to stop for a cup of coffee. Additionally, there are large Spanish and Portuguese-speaking communities in East Somerville, and Da Cunha thought that he would be able to reach out to them with his proficiency in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Since the café is new, Da Cunha is continuing to make changes – to his menu, his advertising strategies, and the café's appearance. He hopes that with continued work and improvements, he will establish a solid customer base.

# Chapter 1

## Somerville: A Changing Community

### History of Immigration in Somerville

Somerville has a long history of immigration, which extends back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As Anna Smith explains in her thesis “Capital, Comunidad, y Cultura,” “The history of Somerville, Massachusetts reflects a common, northeastern urban narrative of industrialization, immigration, post-industrial decline, and urban revival through the parallel processes of gentrification and immigration” (Smith 2). The first wave of immigration, largely from Europe, coincided with the onset of the industrial revolution. Immigrants arrived from Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, and soon after from Italy and Portugal. By the turn of the twentieth century, writes Smith, “the population of Somerville had reached 61,643 residents, 28% of whom were foreign born” (Smith 3). The Immigration Act of 1924, which placed a quota on immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, as well as Asia, slowed the overall number of immigrants coming to the United States. However, the abolition of National Origins Formula by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 ignited a new wave of immigration, which this time included many immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean, many of whom settled in Somerville. People came for a variety of reasons, some of which included “economic and political strife” (Smith 3) in their home countries, but they all had the common goal of establishing a better life for themselves in the United States. Because many of these populations established communities for themselves in Somerville, the city has continued to attract large numbers of immigrants over the years. However, with the ongoing changes that the city of Somerville is experiencing, there are new challenges that many of these people will face in the coming years.

### Gentrification following the Red Line Extension

Once a predominantly working class neighborhood, Davis Square today is distinctly different from its not-so-distant past. Following the 1984 extension of the Red Line to Davis Square, the social and

economic composition of the neighborhood changed drastically. Many new residents came to the area looking for a home that offered accessibility to Boston but lower housing prices than some of the other surrounding cities. The new middle class population sparked economic growth and development in the neighborhood. Yet, this increased desirability led to higher rent prices, which, for many long-time residents, became too expensive. As a result, these people, along with their businesses, left. The story of Davis Square serves as a cautionary tale for individuals and organizations involved in community development in Somerville, and it raises the question: do the benefits outweigh the consequences?

### **Ongoing Changes**

This story is relevant to my focus on “immigrant business in Somerville” for a number of reasons. First, much of Somerville’s immigrant community is concentrated in areas of the city that, like Davis Square a few decades ago, are working class and generally less well-off than the now gentrified neighborhoods in West Somerville. Second, the city is now in the process of some very major changes that have the potential to affect communities in very different ways. Many of these changes are intentional, while others are completely unintentional.

One such change is the extension of the Green Line to parts of Somerville that, at the moment, have no access to the MBTA subway system. Some of the proposed stops are in Union Square and Magoun Square, two neighborhoods that have large immigrant populations. While it is undeniable that greater access to public transportation will greatly benefit anyone living in those areas, there are very real challenges. Access to the T will unquestionably make these neighborhoods more desirable, just as it did for Davis Square in the 1980s. These unintentional changes have the potential to very negatively impact the current residents of these areas. Will they even benefit or will they be forced to leave too? The anticipation of the Green Line has already impelled people to buy up property along the proposed route. How much longer will it be until these areas are no longer affordable?

Aside from the unintentional effects of such things as the Green Line extension, there are also intentional changes that the city is making on various levels. Two articles that appeared in the Boston Globe in the past year are evidence of the city's role in this. The first, "Stand-off in Somerville," which appeared in January 2011 tells how one man's proposal to bring the discount retailer Ocean State Job Lot to a vacant building he owns on Winter Hill was rejected by the mayor. Jim Cohen, the man who proposed the store, said that although it would provide several dozen jobs and offer inexpensive products to the neighborhood's residents, the mayor told him, "Over my dead body. I don't want a dollar store in my town" (Ross, Stand-off). Later in the year, another article, "A project to change the retail landscape," appeared in the Globe. This time, it discussed the new outlet stores that Assembly Square's developer will bring to Somerville, which will eventually include IKEA. The mayor's response to this is very different: "'People will want to come to Assembly Square to experience its ambiance,' said Somerville Mayor Joseph Curtatone, who is a fervent supporter of the project" (Ross, Project). In this instance, the city is very obviously supporting a specific *type* of business in Somerville and making it extremely difficult for others. But decisions like these affect more than just people like Jim Cohen, for example. They have the potential to completely change Somerville's demographics, just like the Red Line did to Davis Square. Furthermore, because of their position in the wider Somerville community, immigrants are likely to be one of the groups most impacted by these decisions.

## Chapter 2 (Re)Branding Neighborhoods

### Definitions

According to the “East Broadway Business District Brand, Identity and Marketing Guide,” the definition of a ‘brand’ is as follows:

In a word, it’s your reputation. A brand is everything that people think about you, your products and services— “good” and “bad.” A brand is the emotional connection between you and the audiences you serve. Strong brands stand out in a crowded marketplace. People fall in love them. They trust them and believe in their superiority because they represent promises made and promises kept. (Dancy 2)

Thus, the process of ‘branding’ a neighborhood is the creation and promotion of this ‘brand,’ through, as Wherry explains, various activities that may include cultural festivals, art displays, discounted food for community events, storefront renovations, and theatrical, musical, and dance performances. All of these separate activities serve to work cohesively at presenting a neighborhood from a certain angle, one that highlights the positive aspects of the area and minimizes the negative aspects. As I discussed earlier, branding in the context of neighborhoods might be more accurately described as ‘rebranding.’ Neighborhoods already have brands, or reputations; rebranding draws from these preexisting stories of the place, and it tries to capitalize on its unique characteristics. While I will use ‘branding’ and ‘rebranding’ interchangeably throughout this paper, it is with the recognition that almost every neighborhood has already been branded; the ‘branding’ activities that go on in neighborhoods are really concerned with altering images.

### Overview

Over the past several years, communities in Somerville have been increasingly concerned with community branding, to the extent that new organizations like the Somerville Arts Council, Union Square Main Streets, and East Somerville Main Streets have grown in number and in their ability to make change in the neighborhoods they are working. In the last few months alone, these organizations



have hosted such events as the East Somerville Foodie Crawl, What the Fluff in Union Square, and the Illuminations Holiday Tour. Likewise, the City of Somerville has contributed to the community branding process by implementing new initiatives, like the Storefront Improvement Program, which assists business owners in renovating their storefronts. It is difficult to anticipate the long-term effects, both positive and negative, of these branding activities, but it is helpful to look at how and by whom these events are organized, the purpose of the branding activities, how the immigrant business community is responding, and the short-term impacts of these initiatives. I will do so in this chapter by taking a closer look at the branding efforts of the City of Somerville and East Somerville Main Streets, where I will draw heavily from my interview with Carrie Dancy.

### Somerville's Neighborhoods

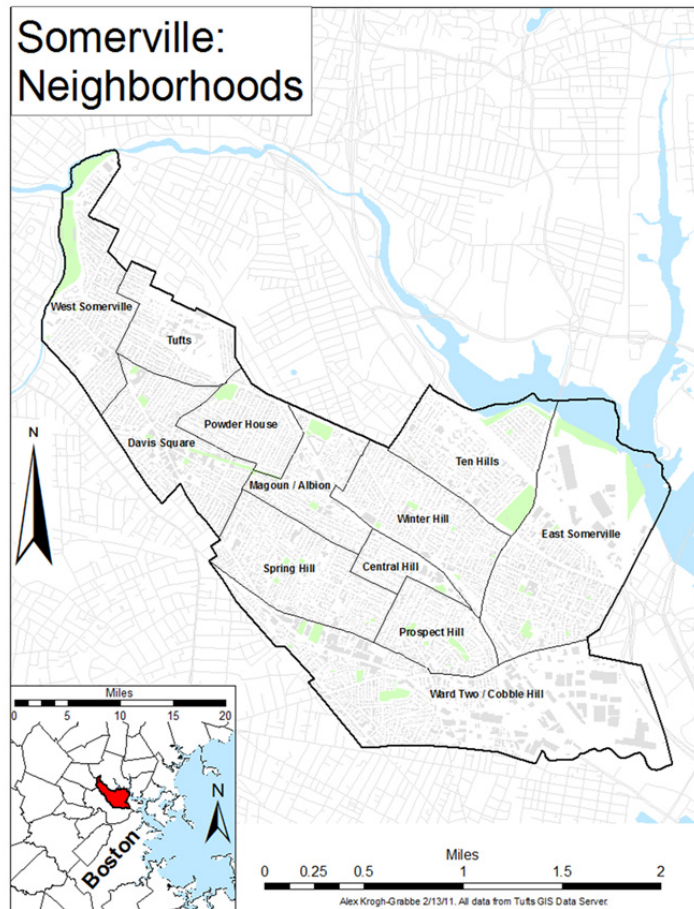


Photo: Alex Krogh-Grabbe

Although Somerville as a whole has an ‘image,’ the community branding activities in the city really focus on individual neighborhoods – Union Square, East Somerville, Davis Square. Most of the organizations that initiate branding activities have a neighborhood focus. Union Square Main Streets, for example, focuses on community development in the Union Square area of Somerville. East Somerville Main Streets, likewise, works specifically at building and promoting the East Broadway Business District. There are many reasons why this is the case, but the most significant is that, despite its small geographic size, Somerville’s neighborhoods are very distinct. Each one has different demographics and, therefore, different needs. In the context of community branding, it also means that they have different “collective stories,” reputations, and constructed images. When I asked Carrie Dancy, Executive Director of East Somerville Main Streets, what she thinks about each of Somerville’s neighborhoods, she gave the following description:

I see Davis Square as a kind of like young, hip destination with a lot of restaurants, a lot of places I would go if I didn’t really have a plan in mind. Union Square is funky and up-and-coming and really very international. East Somerville is more Latino, Brazilian, a lot of old-school vibes, very authentic, very welcoming. Ball Square is really a destination for breakfast, and Teele Square is kind of like a neighborhood nook, with a few good restaurants. Porter Square is...I think of it as very functional - grocery store, coffee, book store - like getting your basic needs met but kind of a local mall of sort...and they have a lot of parking, and the T is there.

Perceptions like these are based partly on lived experience and partly on the stories that are told and heard about them. These preexisting narratives and realities affect how neighborhoods are, and can be, (re)branded at the community level.

In this paper, I focus most of my research on East Somerville and, to a lesser extent, Union Square. East Somerville has, in the past, had a reputation outside of the neighborhood for being dangerous, unsafe, the “wrong” side of town, and although people have been working to alter these (mis)representations, prejudices still affect the community both physically and symbolically. For one, this reputation detracts from business in the area. Restaurant owners who want to have a customer base that extends outside of the neighborhood have a harder time attracting people to their venues.

People simply take their business elsewhere. These negative perceptions also influence the community's sense of self-worth and pride in where they live, which affects people on a more personal, and potentially more harmful, level. Union Square, although farther along in the process of re-imaging, suffers too from some of the same stereotypes. Through (re)branding initiatives, organizations like East Somerville Main Streets are actively working against these views to try to promote a more positive image of the community. It is undeniable that this will produce some positive results for the neighborhood as a whole. Yet, it is still important how and for whom this work is done as well as who has access to these resources. Somerville is changing, but its neighborhoods (and the people that live in them) continue to have distinct needs.

## **Initiatives**

### *City of Somerville*

Although I noted earlier that most of the organizations involved in Somerville's branding efforts are neighborhood-specific, the City of Somerville takes a more holistic approach, implementing programs that have the potential to impact all of the neighborhoods. Branding activities of this kind are primarily initiated by the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, which is "committed to improving the quality of life for Somerville's residents by enhancing low and moderate income areas, improving transportation access, and stimulating economic development to increase job opportunities and commercial tax revenue" (Storefront Improvement). One example of such a program is the Storefront Improvement Plan through which the city offers financial assistance and design guidance to business and retail property owners looking to renovate their storefronts. Although I consider this a "community initiative" because the goal is to transform the entire business district, it closely connected with individual branding efforts.



Taqueria Montecristo is a smaller ‘mom-and-pop’ restaurant in East Somerville  
Photo: Jessica Kulig

According to the office’s website, the program exists to “keep our local business district vital, foster sustainability and to set a design standard for retail shops in Somerville” (Storefront Improvement). This “design standard” is, in other words, the ‘brand’ that the city is trying to promote for its neighborhoods. It is intended to “address aesthetic issues that business and property owners face in planning commercial and retail improvements” (Storefront Improvement). As David Guzman explains in his interview with Alexanne Neff, “the initial premise is that if you enhance the storefront façade, this is going to start a ripple effect, and your neighbor will like to look like you and start off the process of revitalization in a particular commercial square” (Guzman 5).

Over the past few years, since David Guzman has been at the Office of Strategic Planning and Community Development, between twenty-five and thirty businesses in Somerville have benefited from the program. One such business is Fasika, an Ethiopian restaurant located on East Broadway. Below is the plan for Fasika’s new storefront, which includes replacing the letters on the front of the building and improving the awning:

- REMOVE EXISTING BLADE
- MODERN SIGN LIGHTS
- 1" ALUMINUM DIMENSIONAL ICON
- 1" ALUMINUM CHANNEL LETTERS PINNED TO FACADE
- PAINTED METAL BLADE SIGN WITH RAISED LETTERS
- SUNBRELLA AWNING ON ALUMINUM TUBE STRUCTURE
- INFILL LEFT ENTRANCE WITH REUSED BRICK AND REPLACE EXISTING WINDOW WITH OPERABLE GLAZING BAND
- REMOVE GRILLE AND REPLACE WINDOW; ADD CUSTOM VINYL GRAPHIC
- REPLACE ENTRY DOOR BEYOND



Photo: East Somerville Main Streets Blog

Fasika is an example of an immigrant-owned restaurant that has been able to capitalize on the city’s resources to work towards its business goals. For a business that, according to the owner, tends to attract any “people who are adventurous, food adventurers who try to taste different kinds” (Defar 5), this new look is simple, sleek, and has wide appeal for its clientele. But, what happens when the goal of the restaurant is to attract a different group of people, perhaps members of a specific immigrant ethnic group? As I discuss later in the paper, restaurants have very different advertising and individual branding strategies depending on what type of restaurant they are and who they’re trying to attract. It’s possible that this also carries over to storefront design. What we need to be asking is whether these design standards that the city promotes through the Storefront Improvement Program universal or culturally relative. Some of the recommendations that the city has provided in its Sign and Façade Guidelines are to “use colors consistent with those dominant in the area or with the architectural style and period of the existing building” (Sign 25) and to avoid “using bright, non-traditional colors” (Sign 25) and “neon

lighting in a storefront” (Sign 23). While these suggestions might appeal to someone like me, would a traditional New England storefront signal to Brazilians, for example, that a restaurant caters to them? This program is an example of a branding initiative on the *community* level whose goals may at times conflict with the *individual* branding and imaging strategies of certain businesses. The question is whether there is a way to make physical and aesthetic improvements that will still be representative of the restaurant and its customer base. I will discuss this program in relation to a specific restaurant, Capital Brasil, later in the paper.

### *East Somerville Main Streets*

East Somerville Main Streets (ESMS) is a small non-profit organization that aims to transform East Somerville into a thriving business district. It bases its activities around the Main Streets Model, which, according to Executive Director Carrie Dancy, has four key components: working on improving the neighborhood based on its own unique assets; building a coalition of people in the community who are aware of the issues; improving the dynamics of the business district to meet the community’s needs; and improving the aesthetic appeal of the area. ESMS organizes a variety of events, such as the recent Foodie Crawl, which are meant to engage the community in promoting their own neighborhood. The organization is heavily involved in processes of (re)branding East Somerville, and along with the City of Somerville, it has worked to develop a new vision statement for the East Broadway Business District, which follows:

The East Broadway Business District is the heart of East Somerville. We are committed to building a safe, sustainable and prosperous multi-cultural community by focusing on the traditions, heritage and aspirations of our residents, or business-owners and our customers. By providing high quality, affordable products, services and customer experiences, we will create a vibrant, walkable, one-of-a-kind center for commerce and leisure activities for residents, and a much sought-after destination for visitors, investors and entrepreneurs.

*Think Outside the Square.*

**EAST BR>ADWAY**

Because of its position in the East Somerville neighborhood as a driver of community branding efforts, as well as its relationship with many of the immigrant-owned businesses on East Broadway, I thought that my research would greatly benefit from Carrie Dancy's perspective on how these initiatives impact the immigrant business community in Somerville. I was particularly interested in hearing about some of the organization's recent events, like the East Somerville Foodie Crawl. Wherry describes how similar activities provided a boost for the Philadelphia neighborhood that he studied, so I was curious to see how the same kind of initiatives affected East Somerville. ESMS is positioned slightly differently in the community than the people who organized events in the neighborhood Wherry described. As Dancy said in the interview, restaurant owners are so focused on their own businesses that they don't seem to have time to organize their own events. There is not really a collective voice from the community that is contributing to these discussions about branding, even though many people are excited for some of the changes that are going on. Again, there are many reasons why this could be the case. It is possible that the heterogeneity of East Somerville's immigrant community prevents the population from organizing around a common set of goals. It is also possible however that the community lacks both the resources and the networks to initiate any events of their own, even if they feel compelled to do so. Although the distinction is important for moving forward, the answer, unfortunately, is not clear.

#### Carrie Dancy, East Somerville Main Streets

In my interview with Carrie Dancy, I asked her to briefly describe some of the events that the organization had put together in the past. First Tuesdays was one of these initiatives. It was a neighborhood after-hours event that was held at six different restaurants over the course of six months. It drew between thirty and eighty people each time, with the purpose of having people interact with each other and find out more about the participating restaurants. SomerStreets was a partnership with the city, which drew about five thousand people into the business district and had about 20-25 businesses in East Somerville participating. Finally, the Foodie Crawl was a community event with local

restaurants, which had about 1200 people, many of whom would not have otherwise come to East Somerville.

The East Somerville Foodie Crawl, which took place on October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011, was an event that showcased the food from seventeen local East Somerville restaurants, many of which are immigrant-owned. It was the biggest event of its kind in the area, and it was sponsored by a number of businesses that include Mezzo Design Lofts and Yelp. Since I had the goal of learning more about the relationship between community branding and immigrant-owned restaurants, I asked Dancy to elaborate on the Foodie Crawl and specifically how it relates to these topics. Carrie explained that she believes the biggest inhibitor for a restaurant to grow beyond its own specific clientele is that East Somerville has already been branded (unintentionally) as a neighborhood that does not have much to offer for people outside the immediate area and even for some people living in East Somerville. She explained that when people see something – a business, a poster for an event, etc. – they can immediately identify whether or not an event is for them (which is a result of *individual* branding efforts). What they were attempting to do with the Foodie Crawl was to attract people who would not normally go to East Somerville for a night out – to brand East Somerville as a place for everyone. Although, as Dancy explained, the Foodie Crawl was not for everyone. For the most part, it attracted a very white “yuppie” crowd. Dancy said that this was completely expected due to the type of advertising they did (most of the tickets were sold on Groupon) but that some of the other community events, like the SomerStreets Carnival, attracted crowds that better reflected East Somerville’s demographics. However, the new East Broadway Business District slogan, “Think Outside the Square,” very clearly reflects the same goal of the Foodie Crawl: attracting people who usually stay in Davis Square, and perhaps Union Square, but not the residents who are already living and shopping in East Somerville.

In terms of community change, Dancy explained that East Somerville, and all of Somerville for that matter, is going to change no matter what. The goal of East Somerville Main Streets is to capitalize



on what is unique and special about East Somerville when it does change. She said that a lot of the people and businesses in East Somerville are excited for the things that are happening. "I've been shocked before," she said, "by people who you'd think they'd want to keep this neighborhood like very Latino and they're like 'Let's bring in a Starbucks!' They want to see new, nice things too, like that." She said that with more up-scale restaurants and businesses coming to East Somerville, eventually the smaller, more economically vulnerable ones could be pushed out due to rising prices, but ESMS tries to strike that careful balance between moving forward and continuing to fill the needs of the current population. She said that sometimes change can be negative but often times it can also be positive, and at each step along the way they are being careful to "include all of the elements of local culture and not create these high-end demands" and stay "true to what Somerville is and what East Broadway is."

Dancy says that immigrant business owners are fairly receptive to participating in events like the Foodie Crawl, although it wasn't always that way. It has taken time to build trust with the community, which is why they were able to do the Foodie Crawl in year five and not in year one or two. However, she says that they do not specifically target the immigrant community. When they approach businesses, they don't generally take into account whether it is an immigrant-owned business or not. Rather, they tend to approach and treat all of the businesses in the same way. "Business people are business people," she said, "like they all want to make money and they're all, if they think it's going to impact their bottom line [...], then they're on board with it." Likewise, they don't go out of their way to provide services to new businesses. "The longer you're here," she said, "the more businesses you've seen come and go, and you also know that you can't - usually with things that have people go out of business - that you can't do anything to help them." One of the biggest challenges Dancy sees in trying to promote business and organize events in East Somerville is getting people to work together. She said, "you have to have a strong enough relationship with each person that they say they're going do X and then they do

it.” At the same time, she says that she can’t tell a person how to run his or her business, so she has to rely on them to follow through. In this respect, it is a community-wide effort.

Finally, I wanted to know what Carrie Dancy thought about the relationship between culture, art, and economic development, which relates to Hall and Rath’s discussion of the “commodification of culture.” She said that she thinks culture and art are serious elements of economic development. If you look at the Foodie Crawl, for example, she said that people came out for the culture and the experience. They could have just eaten at home, but they came out and spent money to “see and feel” the neighborhood. East Somerville Main Streets has done a lot of art programming in the past, especially in the first three years. They did the Colors of the Americas East Somerville Art Walk, where they put up artwork in many of the storefronts, and they also did an installation in City Hall called Interpreting East Somerville. Although she says that economic development encompasses a lot of things, “if you think about what has you go somewhere and spend your money, it usually has something to do with like the experience you have, which is really closely tied to arts and culture.”

In this chapter, I have explored how community organizations and the city government contribute to neighborhood branding in Somerville through various cultural events and business improvement initiatives. I will revisit these branding activities in Chapter 4 in the context of specific restaurants, but I will first explore how the owners of the restaurants attempt to “individually” brand their establishments.

### Chapter 3

## Self-Representation and Individual Branding

The manner in which a restaurant chooses to (re)present and personally brand itself – through choice of location, name, signage, menu, advertising, and web presence, among other things – says a lot about the clientele it seeks to attract and the experience that customers can expect. Like branding on the community level, individual branding is a large determinant of a business’s success. Aside from the quality of the food, a restaurant’s reputation and image are the most important factors for gaining customers and, specifically, gaining the customers that it wants. In my three interviews with restaurant owners in Somerville, I have tried to gauge the extent to which they are consciously making efforts to “brand” their businesses. I am particularly concerned with how this matches up with community branding and whether the goals on these two levels converge or diverge.

*William Pamphile, Fiesta Bakery & Restaurant*



Fiesta Bakery is currently in the process of expanding the business next door to add a seating area  
Photo: Jessica Kulig

Fiesta Bakery & Restaurant is located on Somerville Avenue in Union Square, next to La Internacional Food Corp., a grocery store that caters to a large Haitian population, and across from

Machu Picchu, a Peruvian restaurant. The bakery, which is owned by Haitian immigrant William Pamphile, offers a variety of services, the primary of which is catering for events like weddings and anniversaries; they serve custom-made cakes and pastries, among other things. Fiesta also functions as a small take-out restaurant with full lunch and dinner menus, which can be found online, as well as pre-made specialties like Haitian patties and 'Akasan.'

The inside of the bakery is quite small – there is no seating and only enough room in front of the counter for a handful of people to be in there at a time (though Pamphile has plans to expand in the near future). There is a small selection of food items displayed at the counter – a case with three shelves of patties and another couple of cases with various drinks and other specialties. Other than the counter, the inside of the business is very simple, with white walls, few decorations except for a few photographs, and a small number of food items on display. The outside of the bakery is equally modest. There is an awning that hangs over the front window, which has the name "Fiesta Bakery" on it and lists some of its services. The front window has a display of home-made wedding cakes, all intricately decorated with white frosting.

From what Pamphile told me in our interview, he seems to have a clear vision of what he wants his bakery to be: a welcoming environment where anyone, no matter who he or she is, can find something they enjoy. Although he has a large Haitian clientele and serves mostly Haitian cuisine, William expressed his interest in appealing to the community at large. "I don't want to be a *Haitian* business," he said, "The business is not, it's not about just *Haitian*. It's to serve the community. Haitian, American, Spanish, Black, White – it's like, no matter where you come from I want to have something for you." One of the universal favorites is 'Akasan,' a thick creamy drink made of corn meal, sugar, milk, and cinnamon. Pamphile explained, "Everybody around calls for Askasan - American people, white people, Spanish people, Haitian people. They go, like, 'Akasan, Akasan,' which is good. They love the food. No question about it." Pamphile explained that this is one of the reasons he has decided to keep

the name “Fiesta.” Although many people have pressured him to change it to a Haitian name, he says he is sticking with the name because his customers extend beyond the Haitian community.

This idea of serving the Somerville community also relates to his focus on “quality.” While he acknowledged that, as a business owner, he is certainly in it to make a profit, he explained that he focuses on the customer and not on the customer’s money. He wants to make every single person that comes into his business happy – and he brings that to every aspect of his business. “I don’t see the money,” he said, “I see the customer. So, for example, if I’m baking - I mean, I can use regular milk, but I don’t do that - I put Carnation. Carnation is more money. It’s very expensive to buy a lot of Carnation to make cakes, but like I said, I believe in quality, and because of that, we have customers coming back and forth, back and forth.” He also said that one of his goals is to make every single person who comes into the bakery laugh, no matter who he or she is. He has “branded” his bakery as a welcoming environment with a focus on quality.

In the future, Pamphile is hoping to attract a new set of customers who want a dining experience as well. He is currently in the process of renovating his bakery to add a seating area. When this is finished he hopes to begin doing more advertising. Although he has had to cut back in recent years, in the past he has publicized the bakery in a Haitian magazine called the “Boston Haitian Reporter.” He also has a website that lists all of his services and includes full menus and strongly encourages people to “[order] in advance to get exactly what you want how you want it.” His most important form of advertising, however, is word-of-mouth. About this type of publicity, he said, “That’s all it’s about, you know. They eat it from some sort of friend and sometimes they say, ‘well I ate it at so-and-so’s wedding and I’m crazy for it.’ And that’s the whole idea.”

*Geraldo Magela Silveira, Capital Brasil*



Along with burgers and snacks, Capital Brasil sells Brazilian CDs, DVDs, and calling cards  
Photo: Jessica Kulig

Capital Brasil is a small fast food restaurant and bakery located in East Somerville with the cluster of immigrant-owned businesses and restaurants that includes Amigos Market, a Latin American grocery store; Gauchao, another Brazilian restaurant; and Tapatio, a Mexican restaurant, among others. The Brazilian restaurant and bakery opened only a few months ago, and Geraldo, the owner has been working hard to build a solid customer base. His menu consists of a wide variety of Brazilian Hamburgers, which come with toppings ranging from corn and potato sticks to egg and bacon. It also has an array of Brazilian “snacks” like Coxinhas and Enroladinhos with ham and cheese as well as fruit smoothies and juices. Additionally, they sell small items like candy, phone cards, and Brazilian CDs and DVDs. According to the owner, Silveira, the restaurant caters mostly to a Brazilian clientele.

The inside of the restaurant is small – it has a front counter and display case, a refrigerator filled with drinks, and about four small tables. It has few decorations, but the walls are neatly painted in different shades of yellow and green. Above the counter, there is an extensive menu that includes a variety of Brazilian burgers, smoothies, fruit juices, and smaller pastry items. The menu is written in both

Portuguese and English. Above the front counter, there is a flat screen TV that plays the Brazilian channel. There are also Brazilian magazines and newspapers in the front entrance, a rack with Brazilian CDs and DVDs, and a bulletin board with calling cards behind the register.

I began the interview by asking Silveira about his experience in East Somerville. He said that he chose to open Capital Brasil there, as opposed to Davis Square or Union Square, because there were lots of Brazilians in East Somerville. The majority of customers that come through the restaurant are Brazilian, although a small number of Americans also come through. Therefore, he does some things that specifically cater to the Brazilian community. For one, all of the dishes on his menu are Brazilian – from the Brazilian style burgers, to the warm Coxinhas, to the fruit smoothies in flavors like guava and pineapple. His mother, who cooks all of the food, specializes in Brazilian dishes. Besides the menu, Silveira offers Brazilian CDs and DVDs and calling cards so that Brazilians in Somerville can call home to Brazil. Silveira says that people like these things, and they have a hard time finding them at other stores in the area. He said he believes that his restaurant helps to build the Brazilian community in Somerville. Although he hasn't really participated in community events since his restaurant is so new, it is something he would consider in the future.

Besides his merchandise, Silveira caters to Somerville's Brazilian community in other ways. The sign on the storefront and the menu on the inside are both in Portuguese (with descriptions in English). This makes it easier for his Brazilian customers to read the menu and for them to know that he speaks Portuguese and offers Brazilian food even before they enter the restaurant. When Silveira was opening the restaurant, he specifically sought out a Brazilian design company for that reason – he wanted to be sure that the business could make a sign in Portuguese that would appeal to the Brazilian community. Aside from the language, the signs also have Brazilian flag backgrounds, which serve as additional signals that the restaurant caters to Brazilians.

In terms of his relationship to community (re)branding in East Somerville, Capital Brasil was not one of the restaurants that participated in the East Somerville Main Streets Foodie Crawl. Silveira said that since the restaurant is so small and they just started, he thought it would be very difficult. They would have had to serve about a thousand people, and since he and his mother are the only ones who work there, Silveira didn't think he had the necessary support. He thinks that events like this could help business in Somerville, but he hasn't really worked with East Somerville Main Streets since he opened the business.

As far as building his customer base goes, Silveira says that, for the most part, people hear about the restaurant from their friends – through word-of-mouth advertising. He doesn't really do any advertising in print, on the radio, or on the internet. He says his busiest times are during the week when Brazilians are working and want to order take-out – on the weekends they are at home, so they cook for themselves.

Silveira also works with other Brazilian business owners in Somerville. There are several Brazilian restaurants in the area - Gauchao, Rodizio Grill, and Modelo Bakery. Silveira says that there has been a little bit of competition with the other Brazilian restaurants on Broadway, but, overall, it hasn't been too bad. In fact, some of the restaurant owners have helped him out a bit in opening the business – telling him how and where to buy certain things. For instance, he learned that Restaurant Depot on Route 16 is a good resource for finding ingredients for the restaurant's food. The other Brazilian restaurants in the area seem to serve as resources to him, rather than competition.

In terms of the future of his restaurant, Silveira would like to make some small changes, but he doesn't know when he will do that. He would like to replace some of the machines, for example, so that they can work more efficiently. He doesn't think that he will be expanding the restaurant at its present location, but it is a possibility if they decide to move to a new location. So far, he hasn't had much trouble since he opened the restaurant – the process with the city of Somerville was relatively easy and



business has been good. However, he is worried for the winter. He says the snow will make it difficult to do deliveries and business may go down, so he is not looking forward to these things in the next few months.

*Gus Da Cunha, Ola Gifts Café*



Ola Café strikes a careful balance with its coffee: not as strong as Starbucks but not as weak as Dunkin Donuts  
Photo: Boston Globe

Ola Gifts Café is a small coffee shop located at 112 Broadway, next to East Somerville Main Streets. The restaurant's main specialty is its coffee, which Gus explained is local and organic, along with the milk, and is stronger than Dunkin Donuts coffee but not too strong. Besides the coffee, Da Cunha offers a variety of cakes and pastries, croissants and egg sandwiches, as well as cold drinks and a variety of snacks and gifts that line the walls of the coffee shop. Unlike the other restaurants where I interviewed, Ola Café does not offer dishes from the owner's native country of Portugal, although he

says that it is not out of the question for the future. Instead, Da Cunha offers more typical café food and treats – selections for quick, but cheap, breakfasts and lunches.

The outside of Ola Gifts Café is impossible to miss – it is painted a bright orange color and is lined with various neon signs that list menu items, like coffee and croissants, and display welcoming messages like “Come-on-in. We don’t bite!” The inside, similarly is painted from head to toe in bright orange and green paint, a scheme that is both unique and inviting. The café itself is very small – it consists of a front counter, a display with pastries and cakes, a drink refrigerator, and two small tables. The menu hangs in back of the front counter, listing items like coffee, iced tea, and breakfast croissants. Although the menu is in English, there are also some translations in Portuguese as well as a sign on the front door that says “Se Habla Espanol.” On the right side of the café, there are also a number of shelving units that have snacks and gifts for purchase. They include anything from chips and candy to small gift baskets.

The owner of Ola Café, Da Cunha, has been living in Somerville for many years now, but it was just in the last year that he decided to open his coffee shop. He believed that there was a need for one in the area, and especially one that served more than just a “regular” coffee like Dunkin Donuts.

So far, Da Cunha said that business has been good and that he learns something new every day. He is constantly trying to improve his menu and the look and feel of the café. He explained that he has started out by focusing on just being clean, on keeping everything off the floor and using stainless steel to make the place look nice and be easy to clean. As far as his menu goes, he is always taking suggestions from his customers and taking note of what they buy and don’t buy. He frequently asks his customers if there’s anything they would like to see him offer, and he takes their suggestions when they have an idea. Since his coffee shop is new, he has just been trying to get a feel for who his customers are, what they like, and how to reach out to new ones. He wants to add some outdoor seating in the future, especially if the city expands the sidewalk, which is something that has been discussed.

Since I was interested in the “individual branding” aspects of Da Cunha’s restaurant, I asked him about the name – Ola Gifts Café – as well as the decorations on the storefront and inside the café. “Ola” means hello, and Da Cunha thought that a lot of people would be able to relate to that. It’s short, sweet, and easy to remember, not to mention it is very inviting. In Da Cunha’s words, “Yeah, it’s welcoming, ‘Hi, Ola!’ you know, it’s Ola Café.” For the outside of the store, Da Cunha chose to paint it orange because he thinks that the color is very eye-catching and will make people stop and take a look. However, he says that the paint itself is not enough. That is why he is currently in the process of having an awning made for the outside, which will have two coffee cups with steam coming out of them. He thinks that this will attract people who are just walking by and would otherwise not even notice that he was here.

One of the challenges of running the café, however, has been dealing with the City of Somerville. Da Cunha says that the process of trying to get this awning has been very lengthy. He has had to fill out lots of paperwork just to have it approved, and the company told him that usually they can do it much quicker in other cities. “I can understand liquor licenses,” he said, “You have to be a little more strict and stringent depending on the type of establishment [...], but this, like a coffee shop?” Another issue, which many other restaurant owners in Somerville have echoed, is parking. Although there are usually plenty of spots early in the morning, by the afternoon they are all taken. Gus thinks that this prevents a lot of people from stopping by because they have to go through the trouble of finding a spot and then putting money in the meter, just to get their coffee.

Da Cunha’s customer base is varied. He says he has a mix of Americans and non-Americans coming in, although he is looking for more ways to attract the immigrant community. One reason he thinks they may be hesitant to come in is that they’re unfamiliar with the place and don’t know whether or not he speaks Spanish. He says that it can be intimidating if you go into a store and you don’t speak English and the other person doesn’t speak Spanish: “I find that sometimes they may be hesitant to come in, because I don’t want to go in and ask them questions because asking, that means I have to

speak. And if they don't speak Spanish and I don't speak English, then I'm going to have problems. That might stop me from coming in." Luckily, Da Cunha is fluent in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. The problem is letting people know this. He has put up signs on the door that say "Se Habla Espanol" and has some others in Portuguese. Sometimes, he goes out onto the sidewalk with free samples or just to hang out, and he says hello to people and talks to them as they walk by. He says that he sometimes tells people just to come in and take a look at the café, even if they don't buy anything. He always tries to act friendly and asks people if there's anything they would like him to carry in the store. Finally, to better reach the immigrant community, he is in the process of making signs for the front window and for next to the menu that have pictures of coffee and croissants with the prices on them. He says that this will let people come in and order something, even if they don't speak English or can't read.

I told Da Cunha that I had spoken with Carrie Dancy a few weeks ago, and I wanted to hear about his experience with the Foodie Crawl. He said that he thought the event was really great and that he had told Carrie that she should do it more often. In order to participate, he bought croissants, cheese, and ham, and made hundreds of them cut into three good-size pieces each. He said he thought there was a good turnout: "I think it was 700 hundred, I ended up giving out seven hundred and something little sandwiches [...]so I think it was a good turnout, it was an excellent idea." He said that although it cost him money, he thought it would be beneficial to his business in the end. However, he has not really seen too many of those customers coming back yet. "None specifically said 'Oh I was here,' but, you know, it's good coverage because you never know, people might travel by here and say 'Oh, I remember that place' and then come in for coffee."

Since Da Cunha has been in the Somerville area for a long time, I wanted to know what he thought about the changes going on in the area. He said everyone, including East Somerville's immigrant community, is excited for what is going on. "I think East Somerville has been neglected for years," he said, "so it's a good thing that they're now looking at it, and I'm glad that they're now looking at it, and I

hope that they make the changes they claim that they're going to." There are talks of a rotary being built by Sullivan Station in addition to the sidewalk renovations and new Assembly Square Mall. In the past few years, the new Stop & Shop and Home Depot have made life easier – he said people are happy that they can now walk to these places when they need to. Most importantly, however, he said that these changes will make the immigrant community in East Somerville proud of their neighborhood. He explained, "I think they're going to feel a little more proud of this area of Somerville because this has been so neglected, left out, so I think by having these major changes, they're going to feel like they live in [...] a nice neighborhood that has all the nutrients that a family needs." Da Cunha just hopes that they won't be putting in a Starbucks next door any time soon.

## Chapter 4 Bridging the Gaps

### Community (Re)branding and Immigrant Business

In Chapters 2 and 3 I explored two types of branding: community branding and individual branding. Through interviews with Carrie Dancy, William Pamphile, Geraldo Magela Silveira, and Gus Da Cunha, I was able to get a sense both of how organizations in Somerville are working to change the “image” of many of its neighborhoods and how individual business owners are choosing to (re)present themselves through their businesses. As a community organization, the goal of East Somerville Main Streets is to work on behalf of *all* the businesses in East Somerville in order to build the business district. But how do its actual activities correspond with the business goals of the restaurant owners, especially in the context of their dynamic and evolving relationship to the city as immigrants? In order to answer this question, I will revisit the individual branding efforts of the three previous narrators and examine their goals in the context of community branding initiatives like the East Somerville Foodie Crawl and the Storefront Improvement Program.



American and Brazilian flags hang side by side in the window of a Gauchao, a Brazilian restaurant on Broadway  
Photo: Jessica Kulig

First, although Fiesta is located in Union Square and therefore not directly affected by the activities of East Somerville Main Streets, there are many other organizations doing similar work in the area (Union Square Mains Streets, Somerville Arts Council, etc.). As a restaurant owner he therefore must balance the vision he has for his own restaurant with the vision these organizations have for all of Union Square. In my interview with William, I discovered some of the ways he was able to reconcile these “individual” and “community” brands.

Before going into my interview with William Pamphile I had some preconceptions. Because the restaurant is physically small, I thought that William would be mostly catering to a Haitian clientele. Although Haitians certainly make up a large portion of his customer base, his goal is to bring in all sorts of people and be able to offer something to each of them. This can be seen in his different advertising strategies. On the one hand, has placed advertisements both in the local Boston magazine, the “Boston Haitian Reporter,” as well as on Haitian radio stations. To attract Union Square’s Latino community, he has decided to keep the name of the restaurant, “Fiesta,” because he wants to restaurant to be for them too. Finally, his restaurant has a significant web presence: he has a website with the restaurant’s contact information, menus, and photographs of some of the dishes he offers. He has also taken time to update his Yelp page with some of the pictures as well as a link to his website.

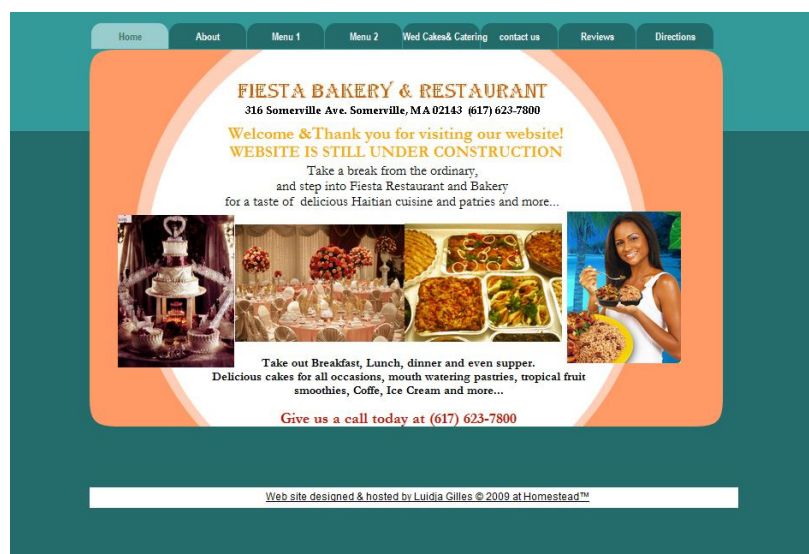


Photo: Fiesta Bakery & Restaurant Website

Aside from his advertising, Pamphile is anticipating the changes to come in Union Square in other ways. He is in the process of going through the all of the necessary steps to expand his restaurant next door to add a seating area. At the time of the interview, he had already drawn the plans and was working with various contractors to come up with proposals. The process, he said, was “difficult, very, very difficult because there’s a lot involved. You know, you have to get the electricians involved, the plumber involved, and on top of that we have to close for about 3-4 weeks, so that’s losing money. And you know we have to do that, and make the place much better.” In terms of the community brand, all of these individual activities are relevant in two ways. First, the branding efforts initiated by organizations like Union Square Main Streets and East Somerville Main Streets are not directed specifically at immigrant communities. As Carrie Dancy explained about ESMS’s efforts in East Somerville, “we’re really out to preserve [the multicultural] aspect of East Somerville, so [...] we’re an advocate for all, like not for those groups, but for everybody that lives in East Somerville.” As a restaurant owner who is directing his advertising strategies toward a diverse customer base, he is able to contribute to and benefit from these community branding efforts. Second, he is anticipating the future changes that will come to Union Square as a result of gentrification and the increased emphasis on the neighborhood as a thriving business area that will play a vital role in the city’s culture and economy. As Murdie and Teixeira explain in their article, two of the major changes that can happen as a result of gentrification are higher rent prices and a shift in the type of businesses in the area. With the expansion and addition of a seating area, William is trying to bring more business into his restaurant and accommodate a new demographic of people who have different tastes in how they dine. (Re)branding Union Square, as a result, will likely help William’s business by bringing in these new customers who will enjoy his unique dining experience.

By looking at Pamphile’s business, one can see the ways that branding activities contribute to the individual brands that restaurant owners try to create for themselves. However, there are also businesses whose individual brands do not match the community brands in the same way *or* who are



not able to benefit from the branding initiatives. Capital Brasil, in East Somerville, may be one of those businesses that is less likely to be accurately represented by the community branding efforts. It is clear that Silveira is intentionally catering to a specific demographic – Somerville’s Brazilian community – with Capital Brasil. He had his signs and menus made by a Brazilian sign-maker so that he could have the wording in Portuguese; he offers a strictly Brazilian menu, which he does not plan on changing in the future; and his restaurant is equipped with a TV that plays the Brazilian Global channel. All of these choices do two things: they help to attract Brazilians to his restaurant because it is easily identifiable as one that will cater to their needs, and it keeps them coming back because they feel comfortable in this space – it helps build community. While Silveira does have other customers, the majority of people that come through are Brazilian, and that is not by accident. How does this relate to the overall branding of East Somerville and especially the rebranding efforts by East Somerville Main Streets?

While it is clear that Silveira is specifically trying to serve the Brazilian community and brand his restaurant as a “Brazilian restaurant,” East Somerville Main Streets has slightly different goals. Though their main objective is also to promote business in East Somerville, they aim to attract a different clientele to the area. The slogan “Think Outside the Square” is evidence that East Somerville Main Streets is trying to brand East Somerville as a place that is friendly, welcoming, and offers something new to people who usually stay in Somerville’s more well-known neighborhoods of Davis Square and Union Square. The Foodie Crawl, for example, brought in over a thousand people, most of whom would not normally visit this area of Somerville – the “young urban professionals.” It is interesting to think about these branding efforts in relation to how Silveira is attempting to present his restaurant. The goals are the same – to promote business – but the strategies and target customers are completely different.

This also relates to projects that are being sponsored by the city of Somerville, like the Storefront Improvement Plan. As Silveira explained, his choice of a Brazilian designer for the signs was also intentional – he wanted someone who could speak Portuguese and could design a sign for a

*Brazilian* restaurant. This leads me to question how the storefront improvement project can effectively work *with* some of these ethnic restaurants to come up with a plan that helps the business accomplish *their* goals. As I explained before, the goal of the program is to “keep our local business district vital, foster sustainability and to set a design standard for retail shops in Somerville.” But what do they mean by a “design standard,” and who is that standard supposed to benefit? It is clear that Somerville, with the help of organizations like East Somerville Main Streets, is trying to push the future of East Somerville in a very specific direction. The question is whether they can do that while respecting the individual long-term goals of the neighborhood’s business owners on which they rely to support this new brand. Many immigrant-owned businesses, although their primary goal may be to make money, also serve other roles in the community. Silveira’s restaurant is a place where Brazilians feel comfortable with both the food and the language, something that may be difficult to find elsewhere. Although it is important to focus on the business district as a whole, in a neighborhood like East Somerville where business owners come from very different backgrounds, there must also be consideration of the fact that they have different goals and different needs.

Finally, Silveira’s explanation of why Capital Brasil did not participate in the Foodie Crawl raises more questions about these rebranding efforts. Silveira said that since his restaurant is so new and only has two employees, he didn’t really see a way to serve all of the people that would be coming through that night. So, his restaurant was left out of the event. In their article, Hall and Rath explain that this “commodification of culture,” whereby individuals and organizations use culture and ethnicity to promote economic growth, can be beneficial to immigrant communities. However, if organizations are using these strategies, they must be providing the necessary support to the restaurants on which they rely. Carrie Dancy said that “I’ve seen so many businesses go out of business, and the people who are here are here, but the newcomers - anything that someone comes in the office and they want my help with, they’ll get it, but I don’t invest a lot of time in new businesses.” On the one hand, there is only so

much the organization can do, especially given their small staff and limited resources. As Dancy said, businesses, in general, come and go regardless of whether they are immigrant-owned. However, it does become a problem if the majority of restaurants that do not survive are those that are owned by immigrants for the simple reason that they have fewer resources and less social capital. It seems that if East Somerville Main Streets, and other organizations involved in (re)branding, want to be able to promote business in East Somerville comprehensively, they need to try to do it in a way that does not exclude the smaller, more economically vulnerable places. Otherwise, as more people start to come to East Somerville from the “outside,” many of these existing restaurants and businesses could be pushed out. As a simple side note, Capital Brasil was one of only a couple of the immigrant-owned restaurants in the area that did not participate. For the most part, East Somerville Main Streets included as many businesses as possible in the Foodie Crawl. Yet, comparing the experience of Silveira at Capital Brasil with the experience of Da Cunha at Ola Café provides a good case study for *who* among the immigrant community is better able to benefit from such initiatives.

When I spoke with Da Cunha about his experience with the Foodie Crawl, he said that he thought it was great coverage for his café. He said people came up to him and told him that they didn’t even know he was there, so it definitely helped expand his potential customer base, although he did say he wasn’t sure if any of those people had come back since then. Like Capital Brasil, his restaurant was only a few months old at the time. However, Da Cunha participated in, and felt he benefited from, the Foodie Crawl while Silveira didn’t think he had the support to participate on such short notice. What is interesting about Da Cunha and Ola Café, compared to some of the other restaurants in East Somerville, is that he immigrated from a European country, has been in the United States for decades, and his restaurant serves food and pastries that would be thought of as typically American. His customer base, unlike Capital Brasil, is already majority-American. So, it seems like Da Cunha was able to participate in the event, after opening only a few months before, because he already had a good degree of social

capital, as compared perhaps to the owner of Capital Brasil. Furthermore, the crowd at the Foodie Crawl matched what customer base already looked like, even though he has been trying to reach out more to the immigrant community.

Through looking at the experiences of these different restaurants owners, there are several conclusions I can draw about the relationship between individual branding efforts of restaurant owners and the community-based initiatives of organizations like East Somerville Main Streets. First, in a community that consists of a diverse population of people, both immigrants and non-immigrants, it is very difficult to promote a comprehensive, all-inclusive “image” of a neighborhood. No matter what, any event under these circumstances is bound to “include” some and “exclude” others. However, there seems to be a pattern in Somerville of who is better able to participate and be represented by these activities. Those restaurant-owners with more social capital are more likely to have their individual branding efforts match up with the community branding efforts. Furthermore, when they don’t converge, business-owners with more social capital are better able to respond and to change their strategies. This is exhibited by the experiences of Gus Da Cunha, from Ola Café, and William Pamphile, from Fiesta Bakery & Restaurant. Both of these individuals are in a better position to respond to community change because of the length of time they have been in the United States and various skills they have, such as language or education level. On the other hand, restaurants whose owners have less social capital are often left behind, without the resources to accommodate the changes brought on by community branding.

## Conclusion

While it is easy to criticize branding initiatives like the ones going on in Somerville, it is much more difficult to find solutions to some of the problems that community change poses to certain populations. Furthermore, it is easy to forget the benefits that branding has to *all* members of the community. I spoke with Gus Da Cunha from Ola Café a little bit about the changes that are going on in East Somerville, since he has been here for so many years. He said that he is glad the city is finally focusing on East Somerville because it has been neglected for so long. He is excited about some of the changes that are happening – widened sidewalks, a rotary by Sullivan Station, etc. – and he said that most of the immigrant community is excited too. He thinks that they will feel a sense of pride in their neighborhood and in Somerville. In the end, changes like the ones going on in Somerville are not *inherently* bad; it is usually the side effects, like higher housing prices and demographic shifts, that are harmful to the community. In the end, people want to live in a community that they're proud of (which can mean different things for different people). The difficult part, in an area like East Somerville, is to make changes in a way that does not harm the existing community. So what can community organizations do?

The answers, as I said before, are never easy. One way for community organizations to take a more active role in promoting immigrant business, and catering to their individual needs, is to work with more closely with other organizations in Somerville that focus specifically on the immigrant community. One of these organizations is the Welcome Project, which works to build “the collective power of Somerville immigrants to participate in and shape community decisions [...] through programs that strengthen the capacity of immigrant youth, adults and families to advocate for themselves and influence schools, government, and other institutions” (Welcome Project). Some organizations have already partnered with The Welcome Project. This past summer, for example, The Welcome Project teamed up with the City of Somerville’s Shape Up Somerville campaign, which focuses on improving

daily physical activity and healthy eating, to bring a farmer's market to the Mystic Community Housing Development. Although there has been a farmer's market in Davis Square for the past few summers, they wanted to figure out a way for the immigrant community to access these healthy food options, especially those who were using a government supplemental nutrition program. As Rachael Plitch, the coordinator of this event explained, the solution was to bring the food directly to the Mystic through the Mystic Mobile Stand. Furthermore, they "sold subsidized produce with a match program for people using EBT, food stamps, WIC" (Plitch 3) so that some people were getting apples, for example, at a price of fifty cents per pound. Although the goals of Shape Up Somerville are different from those of organizations like East Somerville Main Streets and Union Square Main Streets, this is an example of how being explicitly inclusive and sensitive to the needs of different populations can really have positive results.

For the Storefront Improvement Program, a similar emphasis on considering the goals of immigrant businesses that cater to a specific ethnic clientele would be useful. Many immigrant-owned restaurants could benefit from this program if it addressed their particular needs. Perhaps the city could work with design firms like the one Silveira used to establish different sets of design standards depending on the type of business and the clientele that the business wants to attract. Similarly, it could devise a set of advertising guidelines that drew from the experiences of established restaurants in the area in order to assist new immigrant-run restaurants reach their customer base. Such strategies could help eliminate some of the barriers to starting up successful businesses in Somerville.

As I said before, there is no perfect solution to the issues that I have raised throughout this report. As I have only touched on the very surface of the topic of "immigrant business in a changing community," I cannot say for sure what the future of these restaurants will be in the Somerville. However, I can say that Somerville itself, and the neighborhoods within the city, seems to have a bright

future ahead of it. With careful consideration to the needs of different populations within the city, the changes that are going on have the potential to benefit the entire Somerville community.

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