

Karen Cao

Writing 5- Cultures of Place

Professor Nicholas Van Kley

Project 2 Workshop Draft: Swamp Gravy

### **Introduction:**

#### **What is Swamp Gravy and what makes it different from other localist movements?**

Swamp Gravy is a folk-life theater group organization based in the small rural town of Colquitt, Georgia. It was founded in 1992 by a group of women in the local arts committee who wanted to revive the community's sense of spirit and self esteem. The town itself had transitioned along with the rest of the world from labor intensive agriculture to the global mechanical industry. Many residents lost faith in Colquitt's community heritage and left the city in rapid stage of decline. Joy Jinks, a local social worker, was looking for a way to improve her community spiritually and economically when she met Richard Geer. Geer, a researcher on performance as a community-building tool, suggested the idea of a community theater based on the stories of local residents. Geer imagined a volunteer-based theater organization that interviewed town residents and turned their stories into the framework of the plays produced. Residents would not only be active in churning the substance of the plays, but would help out in every stage of production. Eager to preserve Colquitt's rich heritage and instill civic pride in its residents, Jinks and Geer got to work interviewing and prescribing townie stories. The two encouraged the Colquitt's residents to participate in all parts of the development process, from acting to writing to selling tickets and fundraising. The first show premiered at the local elementary school in October 1992 to a sold out crowd.

However, despite its initial success, Swamp Gravy's viability as a developmental project remained in question, primarily due to lack of funding. The notion that a community cultural performance could revive the local economy seemed implausible to residents and sponsors alike. Because the project used real life stories from residents ranging from economic instability to racial segregation, many residents feared that the community would be divided and ripped apart. However, it is precisely because Swamp Gravy used real stories from real people that it did not die out. The founders unwavering belief to keep the project going, along with the simple fact that Swamp Gravy *listened* to its constituents and encouraged them to celebrate their culture are the main reasons the organization continued gaining momentum.

Swamp Gravy's smashing success serves as a special case in which cultural teamwork promotes economic, social and environmental development. Attracting grants and donations, an entire cultural industry was born in the small town. Swamp Gravy has completely renovated an old cotton warehouse to serve as the new theater, offering state of the art lighting, creative sets and multilevel staging. The theater company opened a store, Market on the Square, which allows local vendor sources to test their products and services with Colquitt's residents before establishing themselves within the town. The company has expanded new infrastructure all around Colquitt, creating new after school programs and summer theater programs for kids and hosting workshops on storytelling and gathering oral histories in order to help other communities create similar productions. But perhaps the most impactful project is the creation of town murals set up within Swamp Gravy. These murals depict poignant images of Colquitt, ranging from environmental sustainability to racial inclusion, that constantly remind residents and visitors alike of the stunning social impact Swamp Gravy has made on its community. As Swamp Gravy grew in spirit and recognition, many businesses swarmed over in an attempt to capitalize on the

new fame and fortune. However, Swamp Gravy's increased influence within the community was recognized even by the governor and many businesses and their self serving interests were turned away. This shows the power Swamp Gravy has as an institute on the community, where "teamwork, volunteers for other projects, the Chamber and the city reaps a lot of benefit, city manager, the merchants, we all meet together now to work on projects together."

Evidently, Swamp Gravy has served not only as an innovator for its own community, but for the region of southwest Georgia in general. There are many organizations such as Farm to Fork or Georgia Organics that call for similar local economic growth like Swamp Gravy that are not nearly as successful as the theater organization. These localist organizations encourage community residents to "buy local", often for the purpose of generating changes in production, consumption, power relations and resource use. However, these values only pertain to those who can afford it, such as small businesspeople and middle-class shoppers, and are not applicable to those with less fortune. Thus, these localist organizations cannot generate the greater amount of change they wish to see within the region. This leads to the question that if these groups are preaching for the same final goals as Swamp Gravy, what is it about other local organizations that hinders them from actually improving a community? Or rather, phrased in another manner, is Swamp Gravy's success as a source of social, economic and environmental growth precisely because it began as a politics of scale community arts initiative that strived to bring together the spirit of the local people first rather than preach economically sustainable localist practices to residents?

**Method:**

## **The conceptual lens through which I will interpret Swamp Gravy's significance within the Colquitt community**

In order to effectively determine the scale of Swamp Gravy's success, it's essential to study the boundaries that define a localist movement. The critical lens through which I will analyze the validity of Swamp Gravy as a localist organization and its effects on the region include critics David Hess and Nancy Kurland. Together, these two distinct authors provide a similar standard guideline for defining a localist organization. Their analysis is reflected in Michael Shuman's "Making the Case for Localism", a piece of archive evidence that advances Swamp Gravy as a localist practice. In addition, I will cite Ronald David Pate's "Narrative Processes in Urban Planning: A Case Study of Swamp Gravy in Colquitt, Georgia" as a source that highlights the regional significance of a community arts initiative rather than simply a localist organization that educates residents on the benefits of going local. This is a key lens that analyzes localism as a cultural phenomenon, drawing more accurate conclusions about the movement's social effect on a region.

To begin, critic Hess provides a comprehensive, thorough discussion of the localism phenomenon in his book "Localist Movements in a Global Economy". He defines a localist movement as a locally owned independent business that builds and maintains not only a region's economic well-being, but also its environmental political and social well being. To put his definition into context, he introduces a clash between globalism and localism, citing the popular opinion of localism as a paradoxical reemerging resistance to globalization. Hess questions whether localism, which as been intensifying as communities are increasingly more dominated by multinational capital, can construct meaningful "government policies and economic practices oriented towards enhancing local democracy and local ownership of the economy in a historical

context of corporate-led globalization.” Through his data, he concludes that at best, localism can redress environmental and social justice problems only partially, for the movements face numerous limitations driven by forces out of their hands. He advances that localism must be rooted in a larger project to construct an alternative, locally based global economy, one that not driven by the interests of global multinational corporations.

Critic Nancy Kurland joins the understudied localism discussion in her article “The Localism Movement: Shared and Emergent Values” and identifies requirements for a localist movement similar to Hess’s definition. To identify these constraints, Kurland interviewed 38 localist leaders about their values as an organization. She defines a the structure of a localist movement by four main rules that the organizations all agreed upon. First, it must be locally owned and independent by a community and its residents should have full decision making authority. Second, the business should generate local economic growth and profit for its community by encouraging consumers to localize their preferences. Third, the organization must source and buy goods locally to stimulate the surrounding environment. Finally, Kurland says that the business should partner and network with local vendors to create a sustainable local network. As a side note from her findings, she advances that localist movements should also be socially and environmentally responsible, similar to Hess’s end vision for localism.

In order to accurately discuss and apply these critical lenses to an ongoing localist movement, it’s essential to have relevant sources that contribute to the archive of evidence. Critic Ronald Pate accomplishes this in his research dissertation “Narrative Processes in Urban Planning: A Case Study of “Swamp Gravy” in Colquitt, Georgia”. In addition to supporting Hess and Kurland’s localist movement requirements, Pate, expands on the definition of localism by identifying the ingredient missing from both Hess and Kurland’s outlines. Pate challenges a new

theory that proves community storytelling as the main ingredient to a localist movement's successful effect on its economy and environment. He criticizes that those who fail to recognize the potential value of community storytelling are more likely to often marginalize localist organizations, giving unfair benefits of globalism to the business elite. Thus, Kurland and Hess provide the framework for what a good localist movement should do to affect its community; Pate, however, proves community storytelling as the main ingredient to a localist movement's successful effect on its economy and environment.

Pate criticizes that localist practices often place their own interests as a business before the community, preaching economic and environmental engagement while avoiding a deeper story. Without meaningful communication between the business and the residents, the town becomes a battleground of different agendas and no progress is made to improve the town economically. Pate therefore suggests that rather than encouraging residents to buy local, businesses must listen to their constituent's interests and stories. This simple act itself will provide a better plan for the organization in terms of being socially just, economically viable and environmentally sustainable. This is an important distinction between the critics' analysis of what makes a localist organization. Hess and Kurland provide a set of guidelines defining localism but Pate goes one step further by clarifying that a community aspect is what allows it local organizations to affect a town's cultural and economic environment so significantly.

### **Results:**

**Results that will show a positive correlation between personal, economic and social growth and the encouragement of narrative storytelling within a community in order to heal.**

Results show that there is a positive correlation between personal, economic and social growth and a community arts movement. This positive correlation is driven by one man's

encouragement of narrative storytelling within a community in order to heal. In a magazine article written by the head director of Swamp Gravy, Richard Geer explains his reasoning behind encouraging community narration in Swamp Gravy: “What I feel in a story sharing..is love for other persons. I am drawn inside the speakers’ points of view and experience with them the world of their stories” (Geer 2011). This bonding dynamic takes place within Colquitt’s community of volunteer actors, even immediately after the first performance. One Black performer commented “I felt tonight that the group really began to fall in love with one another. I saw Blacks and Whites working together and... I could feel the love” (Geer 2011). This bond is compounded as volunteers of all various subgroups (race, socio-economic, age and gender) spend hundreds of hours gathering local stories and rehearsing together for the performance. But beyond the time spent together, critic Ronald Pate, in his dissertation “Narrative Processes in Urban Planning: A Case Study of “Swamp Gravy” in Colquitt, Georgia” researched the community performance process at a deeper level. He attributes their strength in friendship to the nature of their work, from mediating particular parts of the script to even changing the entire play to ensure authenticity. He advances Geer’s theory that a community of actors held together by love and commitment is what enables them to use local knowledge to produce Swamp Gravy plays.

While Swamp Gravy has not only generated personal relationships between neighbors, the community performances have also produced impacts on the town itself. As a form of social growth, Swamp Gravy united people from so many different corners of Colquitt’s community together. Fire Chief Tully attributes Swamp Gravy’s performance power to understanding his own role within the community as “small cog in a big gear” (Pate 2012). His new awareness of interdependency is further advanced by other members of the community, including one retired

Black School teacher, who cites her experience with Swamp Gravy in a similar way: “You make friends with others – become aware of other’s problems and you feel like you have another family when you join Swamp Gravy...I used to see myself as just a teacher, and now it has gone beyond that to a volunteer. I feel more like a member – part of a community.” (Pate 2012). For her and many others who felt marginalized by Colquitt’s closed off environment in the past, they have begun to see their town as one community institution, with no one person determined only by their status.

By bringing people together across church and business boundaries, Swamp Gravy’s local homegrown stories has given people a way to relate with each other and see a common identity across all borders. Many Colquitt leaders saw Swamp Gravy’s growth and recognized the movement as a contributor to the town. Consequentially, Swamp Gravy’s volunteer members were invited to monthly meetings with Colquitt business and political leaders. Helping the cause of political power, in 1994 the Governor of Georgia proclaimed Swamp Gravy to be Georgia’s Official Folk Life Play. This further increased Swamp Gravy’s economic gains from tourism and gave the members more say as to how Colquitt’s community should be organized. One Colquitt business owner admits that “the city, mayor have come to accept that this is a major part of the community. Swamp Gravy now has a lot of influence” (Pate 2012). In addition, new community serving institutions were created and the influx of tourists flooding in to see the plays helped encourage new business development. Interestingly, Joy Jinks, the founder of Swamp Gravy, acknowledges that the popularity of Swamp Gravy transformed the need to celebrate the town’s heritage into a new plan- using the “arts as an economic engine” (Pate 2012).

## **Discussion:**



**Swamp Gravy is more effective than most other localist organizations because it focuses on constructing a dynamic, inspired community first and then encouraging the united community to propagate social, economic and environmental change.**

In accordance with Hess and Kurland's definitions, Swamp Gravy is an accurate representation of a localist movement. To begin, it is a nonprofit organization locally owned by Colquitt's community. Although started as a cultural arts initiative with the goal of stimulating pride and sense of spirit within the community, it has since built and maintained Colquitt's economic, environmental and social well being. This can be seen quantitatively by Swamp Gravy's ticket sales, which has generated over four million dollars total in revenue for Colquitt, Georgia. The volunteer-based organization has created several full-time and part-time jobs for its residents, keeping their income in circulation within the economy. In addition, Swamp Gravy has succeeded in fulfilling Hess's main requirement for a localist movement. The organization has created an alternative, locally based microcosm of local vending, supporting surrounding businesses by buying local. Marketing and branding for Swamp Gravy is all done locally and their props and costumes are sourced from local clothing vendors. Swamp Gravy is considered an leading innovator in Colquitt's community due to its creative initiatives. After watching five family-owned businesses close in Colquitt, Swamp Gravy and its supporters decided to create Market on the Square. The market provides a place where new businesses can be incubated and tested to fill gaps in the local economy, giving many residents a chance to network within the community. In addition, its booming success led to the painting of several town murals, many of which preach environmental sustainability, racial economic fairness and a sense of community within Colquitt. Hess and Kurland's requirements are successfully met.

Critic Ronald Pate's dissertation "Narrative Processes in Urban Planning: A Case Study of Swamp Gravy in Colquitt, Georgia" advances that although Swamp Gravy improves its community as defined by the aforementioned rules, its true power to change Colquitt's community lies in its openness to listen to its residents, a theory otherwise known as narrative processes in urban planning. Through open interviews, field observations and additional documentation of Swamp Gravy residents, Pate associated the positive effect of a community arts movement on the town's economic, social and environmental growth. More so than just impacting the economy as most localist groups intend, Pate discovered that Swamp Gravy revived Colquitt's community back to good health through its focus on sense of community and diversity. By strengthening racial relations across the community, personal empowerment, and a new community identity, Swamp Gravy helped Colquitt and many others realize that the true value of a localist movement lies in its ability to bring a diverse group of people together, ready to fight for the same cause. Swamp Gravy does not just preach economic development, nor does it provide professional entertainment. Rather, what makes Swamp Gravy unique is its intentional mix of local stories in order to celebrate Colquitt's community and significance. Swamp Gravy is about the importance of place and the economic prosperity that will come from grounded programs that celebrate local culture first. For future organizations, it's important to note that simply encouraging others to "buy local" is not enough to unite a community of so many distinct socio-economic, social and racial classes. Another key feature that Swamp Gravy co-founder Richard Geer notes is that Swamp Gravy's purpose is not just to relay stories of the past community, but to relay and grow along with them. He states that the "idea is that the play stays in dialogue with the unspoken issues of the community" because local movements should always be in flux, shifting their concerns constantly in order to grow. What community storytelling

brought to Colquitt through Swamp Gravy was a process of self discovery, generating partnerships that are “hard to imagine having ever taken place otherwise”. What once was virtually deserted down soon was invigorated with a “can do” attitude. Residents of Colquitt not only wanted to revive their own pride for the town, but “want people to better understand who we are, a little better, and recognize that if we can do this, anybody can do it”.

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