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Writing 5- Cultures of Place

Professor Nicholas Van Kley

Swamp Gravy: Cultural Heritage as a Tourist Mechanism

Abstract:

Localist groups have emerged throughout the nation, promoting support for local economic and social development. However, the groups are unsustainable long-term because they work to generate economic profit for specific groups rather than community bonding for all individuals. This project in particular analyzes the success of Swamp Gravy, a local arts initiative based in Colquitt, Georgia. The purpose of this study is to determine whether Swamp Gravy's growing cultural tourism industry, which promotes consumption from non-locals, is genuine enough to procure economic, social and environmental growth. The methods used in this project include gathering firsthand accounts of Colquitt's evolution from individuals in and out of the community. Despite marketing Colquitt's cultural heritage to non-local consumers, findings show that Swamp Gravy has succeeded in promoting community pride and generating economic, social and environmental growth. The broader implication presents a community narration framework that other localist groups should strive to follow if they wish to strength sense of community and promote economic and social development.

Introduction: The framework of localist movements, community narration and the Swamp Gravy movement

Since the spread of globalization, localist groups have emerged throughout the nation in all forms, advocating on issues such as local food consumption, environmental sustainability and

more local political ownership. These groups attempt to bring together a diverse group of citizens under the same “local first” initiative, hoping to garner support for locally owned businesses. Their success depends on the lasting impact they make within the community. However, when it comes to planning a successful future for everyone, neo-liberal economic policies only value the controlling interests of business leaders (Pate 2012). Community members are marginalized from economic profit and thus the localist organization framework is unsustainable because it favors only one select group.

Over the past decade, emerging theories suggest that the key to sustaining a local movement is through narrative storytelling, a process that listens to all the stories of the local people (Pate 2012). By listening to the community’s past and present voices, localist groups may better understand and respond to the needs of the town. This promotes a more socially just, economically viable and environmentally sustainable solution to local problems. One specific example of an organization that has learned to *listen* to its people is Swamp Gravy, a localist movement in the small rural town of Colquitt Georgia.

This project will analyze the success of Swamp Gravy, a folk-life theater group organization 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 (Pearce, “Dining Out on Swamp Gravy”). Unlike many other localist groups, Swamp Gravy’s first goal was to promote a sense of community and cultural connection within Colquitt. The town itself had transitioned along with the rest of the world from labor intensive agriculture to the global mechanical industry in the late 1900s (Pate “Narrative Processes in Urban Planning”). 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 was a researcher on performance as a community-building tool and he 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. As a true localist movement that used local resources, the organization would enlist residents to 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 on their big project ("Partners in Livable Communities"). Their persistence and dedication attracted visitors not only from Colquitt, but from all across the nation. In fact, at least 75% of the audiences now are made up of people from outside Colquitt (Pate, "Narrative Processes in Urban Planning").

While Swamp Gravy succeeds in celebrating its local community, its tourist-centered consumption patterns call into question its validity as a localist movement. Using definitions of localism offered by David Hess and Nancy Kurland, this project asks if it is problematic for Swamp Gravy to market its community heritage to non-local people. Is Swamp Gravy's cultural tourism industry a healthy product for the local community when tourism by its very nature is not locally consumed? By understanding the major benefits that arise when Swamp Gravy markets its cultural heritage to all consumers, other localist movements can adopt similar strategies of empowering about their own communities and generating greater change.

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

Procedure:

For this project, localism is defined 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. As agreed upon by critics David Hess and Nancy Kurland, a localist movement accomplishes four main rules. Each rule targets a community's ownership, outputs, consumption or distribution. First, it must be locally owned 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 local consumption. Third, the organization must source and buy goods locally to stimulate the surrounding environment. Finally, the business should partner and network with local vendors to create a sustainable microcosmic network (Kurland, "The Localism Movement: Shared and Emergent Values"). As a by-product of their community growth, both critics advance that localist movements should be socially and environmentally responsible.

While the definition of localism in this paper has been agreed upon by both critics, David Hess remains less optimistic of the lasting effects of localism upon a community. In his book "Localist Movements in a Global Economy", Hess introduces a clash between globalism and localism, citing the popular opinion of localism as a paradoxical reemerging resistance to globalization. He acknowledges that localism has become more prominent as multinational corporations dominate local communities. However, Hess questions whether localism 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" (Hess 7). Through his data, he concludes that at best, localism can redress environmental and social justice problems only partially, for localist organization 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 is not driven by the interests of global multinational corporations

In particular, tourism, which can be driven by national interests, falls in line with Hess's doubts of successful localist results. For a meaningful localist movement, Hess requires that all sourcing, distribution and consumption be local. This is problematic because tourism by its very nature is not locally consumed. The community may be producing local goods, but their product is being advertised to the nation. Thus, from Hess's perspective, this raises a question as to the whether tourism representing local heritage as a product is healthy or not for a community.

Materials:

In order to understand the presence and growth of Swamp Gravy, I looked at numerous archival documents that highlight Swamp Gravy's positive impact through multiple perspectives. I began with the Swamp Gravy article from Partners for Livable Communities and Wilson's article "How a Small Town in Georgia Survives on Swamp Gravy" because they championed the movement as one of the best examples of culture-building institutions of change. The first article provides general statistics that were useful in measuring Swamp Gravy's success quantitatively. The second article is written by a reporter from the St. Louis Fed, a major economic institution in the United States, thus solidifying credibility to Swamp Gravy's growth and success. Swamp Gravy's Lead Director Richard Geer released "Out of Control in Colquitt: Swamp Gravy Makes Stone Cold Soup", an account of his experiences in the Colquitt community. The document highlights a first person local perspective of Colquitt's transformation, along with several eyewitness interviews that collectively depict Colquitt's evolution from disbelief to belief. I found it interesting to review his personal account because it presents both the triumphs and the obstacles standing in the way of Swamp Gravy. Finally, I analyzed Michael Pearce's "Dining Out on Swamp Gravy", an article that provides a non-local account of Colquitt's power. It provides a contrast to the previous article because it focuses on an outside account of Colquitt's

growth, prompting further ideas and research for improving other communities in similar fashions.

In order to further understand the question posed in this project, I looked at the rich information available in Ronald David Pate's dissertation "Narrative Processes in Urban Planning: A Case Study of Swamp Gravy in Colquitt, Georgia". The dissertation highlights the regional significance of a community arts initiative, providing a key lens that analyzes localism as a cultural phenomenon. I am able to draw more accurate conclusions about the movement's social effect on a region by looking at the conversation generated from Colquitt's rapid growth. In particular, by analyzing the discourse surrounding Swamp Gravy's effects, I can further validate its impact on Colquitt's cultural pride and stability.

Results:

Results show that Swamp Gravy is not limited by its consumption patterns. Even though the organization has produced a cultural tourism industry, there is still positive individual, economic and social impact from encouraging a space for personal narration within a community.

Despite its recent tourist-centered implications, Swamp Gravy's local narrative process has continuously reaped numerous benefits for its community. Its smashing success serves as a special case in which cultural teamwork promotes economic, social and environmental development. Most importantly, however, Swamp Gravy's performances have led to a celebration of Colquitt's community and culture. In the beginning, the notion that a community cultural performance could revive the local economy and culture seemed implausible to residents and sponsors alike. Effectively integrating community heritage into performance is tough to master, primarily due to the fact that there are so many different historical perspectives to

consider. 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. Through founders Joy Jinks and Richard Geers' persistence, Swamp Gravy succeeds in celebrating its diverse racial and socio-economic backgrounds by teaching members to share responsibility of cultural heritage with each other. Geer recognized that the genius of community performance is its "ability to skirt explosive confrontations yet deal with divisive issues and bring people together" (Geer 105). As one cast member contends, "when race comes up, we decide how to deal with it" by making scene alterations or changing the scene entirely (Pate 182).

In creating a space for local narrative processes, Swamp Gravy's presence produces a common core identity that builds community pride and confidence in Colquitt. The simple fact that Swamp Gravy *listened* to its constituents and encouraged them to celebrate their culture are the main reasons the organization continues to gain momentum. During performances, there are no dominant or submissive cultures, no rich nor poor families. As leader Kimbrel puts it, "once common experience across race is discovered, the conclusion that "people are people" begins to be realized" (Pate 188). In moving Colquitt from disbelief to belief, Swamp Gravy allows members to create an altered community identity and portray themselves to peers in a more representative light. 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 204). 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 205). Indeed, Swamp Gravy produces a mechanism of empowering people and when people begin to celebrate and tell their stories, their lives are validated. For the retired black school teacher and many others who felt marginalized by Colquitt’s closed off community in the past, they have begun to see their town as one inclusive institution with no one person determined by their status.

Community narration not only promotes common local pride, but also facilitates bonds of friendship between participants. This is exactly what head director Richard Geer envisioned for this project: “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” (Pate 76). This bonding dynamic takes place within Colquitt’s community of volunteer actors, even immediately after the first Swamp Gravy 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” (Pate 77). 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, the strength of community lies in the nature of Swamp Gravy’s work, from mediating particular parts of the script to even changing the entire play to ensure authenticity (Pate, “Narrative Processes in Urban Planning”). The group has found a way to process the necessary and painful retellings of past events, promoting trust amongst its members. The Colquitt community is bound together love and commitment, enabling them to use local knowledge to produce Swamp Gravy plays.

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. With its growing power and reach, however, it could not stay as just a local arts initiative or social movement celebrating Colquitt's rich heritage. Through word of mouth and creative marketing, Swamp Gravy produced an entire cultural tourism industry that generates revenue, jobs and political opportunities for Colquitt's community (Shuman, "Making the Case for Localism"). Its performances attracted funding from high-profile individuals, foundations and government agencies. Many Colquitt leaders saw Swamp Gravy's growth and recognized the movement as a major contributor to the town's status. Consequentially, Swamp Gravy's volunteer members were invited to monthly meetings with Colquitt business and political leaders, giving them a say within the community (Pate, "Narrative Processes in Urban Planning"). As 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 215). Helping the cause of recognition, the Governor of Georgia proclaimed Swamp Gravy to be Georgia's Official Folk Life Play in 1994, thus propelling the group to renovate and innovate its downtown square for future visitors (Pate, "Narrative Processes in Urban Planning").

Swamp Gravy's constant renovations have produced revenue-generating businesses that are invaluable to the theater's sustainability. Swamp Gravy has completely remodeled an old cotton warehouse to serve as the new theater, offering state of the art lighting, creative sets and multilevel staging and its ticket sales have generated over four million dollars in revenue for the community (Wilson, "How a Small Town in Georgia Survives on Swamp Gravy"). After five family owned businesses closed in 1999, Swamp Gravy created Market on the Square, a market which allows local vendors to test their products and services with Colquitt's residents before

establishing their niche within the town (Shuman, “Making the Case for Localism”). Several full-time and part-time jobs for its residents, keeping their income in circulation within the economy (Wilson, “How a Small Town in Georgia Survives on Swamp Gravy”). The company became the inspiration for other kinds of economic development in Colquitt, including the Community Development Corporation which addresses affordable housing and economic development issues (Shuman, “Making the Case for Localism”). Swamp Gravy has also expanded new infrastructure all around Colquitt, creating new after school programs and summer theater programs for kids and hosting workshops on local storytelling in order to help other communities create similar productions (Shuman, “Making the Case for Localism”). For many members, Swamp Gravy highlights the importance of community pride and inclusivity by developing economic programs that celebrate the locals. In fact, director Joy Jinks “didn’t realize when we started that it would have the kind of economic impact that it has had for the community. We didn’t realize it would bleed over into so many other aspects of community life. As we saw it unfold, we saw other needs in the community” (Shuman, “Making the Case for Localism”). And indeed, it helped develop other needs of the community. Perhaps the most impactful product of Swamp Gravy is the creation of town murals. With over 15 to date, these tall paintings 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. The growth of Swamp Gravy transformed the need to celebrate the town’s heritage into a new implication- using the “arts as an economic engine” (Pate, 281) to encourage community and growth of all kinds.

Discussion:

Swamp Gravy represents an effective localist organization because it focuses on constructing a united, inspired community first before encouraging social, economic and environmental change. Its model example leads to broader implications for future organizations on how to effectively construct a localist organization.

The results of the project show that the non-local consumption pattern of Swamp Gravy does not limit its artistic capacity to improve its community. Evidently, Swamp Gravy has served not only as an innovator for its own community, but for the region of southwest Georgia in general. The broader implication of this finding is that future organizations should strive to go beyond advocating local initiatives. 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 (Kox, “Localism? I Don’t Buy It”). 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 (Kox, “Localism? I Don’t Buy It”). Simply encouraging others to “buy local” is not enough to unite a community of so many distinct socio-economic, social and racial classes. Thus, these localist organizations cannot generate the greater amount of change they wish to see within the region.

The broader implication, however, poses a hurdle for future organizations that wish to follow this community narration framework. It’s difficult to not only identify a cultural discontinuity, but also to find the means to mend it within a community. In addition, members of another community may not be as open and willing as Colquitt’s constituents to attempt to sort

out local issues and problems. Thus, a limitation of this project's broad implication is that actually implementing the community storytelling framework will take time and natural willingness from the people.

Another limitation of Swamp Gravy's broader significance is the idea of change and time. The performances should not be the same year after year; rather, narrative storytelling is a continuous process. As Kay Chandler, president of the Colquit Miller Arts Council puts it, "Since we're bringing to life the stories of our community, that itself is ongoing—so there's no reason to ever have to quit doing Swamp Gravy" (Pearce, "Dining Out on Swamp Gravy"). Richard Geer, director of Swamp Gravy, agrees with the fact that Swamp Gravy's performance material should always be fluctuating. He notes 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" (Pearce, "Dining Out on Swamp Gravy") 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 unbelievable partnerships between Colquitt's leaders and constituents. What once was a virtually deserted town soon invigorated itself into a "can do" community and 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" (Pate 198).

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200 word Reflection:

The writing process elements I found most useful during this project include my conference with Professor Van Kley and specifically, chapters 2 and 3 of “Style”. Discussing my essay was extremely helpful in organizing each component of my essay. I also gained value from peer discussion when we reviewed peer workshops in class. By using my peers’ essays as examples, I was able to better understand the revised IMRD format and how it pertained in a more literary study. I also had a clear goal in mind of how to present my findings in a logical, organized manner. After conferencing with Professor Van Kley, I found it useful to edit my Results section first in order to understand my end goal before moving on to the Introduction. I liked the concept of writing transitional topic sentences and providing evidence as a way to outline the paper before actually writing it. In addition, after organizing my body paragraphs, I went back and used the “Style” rules to simplify and clarify my sentences, making sure to note a subject and verb for each sentence and include a wide variety of simple and complex sentence structure.

USING ARTS AS AN ECONOMIC ENGINE

Build COMMUNITY

Encourages community members to settle their differences by being vulnerable with each other



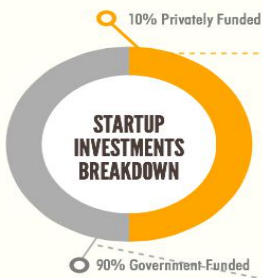
Common core identity that fosters community pride and self confidence

Gives community members a chance to reflect who they want to be on the stage;

Accept each other and our differences

Become empathetic to others when we are aware of their problems

Attract FUNDING



NOTABLE LOCAL INVESTORS

- High Profile Investors
- Local Businesses
- Community Members

NOTABLE GOVERNMENT INVESTORS

- Governors
- Local leaders

Promote ECONOMIC GROWTH



- Produce revenue-generating businesses
- Renovate Infrastructure
- Create new markets
- Inspire similar organization missions
- Create new community programs

But most importantly



Listen to all community voices



Validate all members of the community



Adopt a "can do" attitude



Celebrate Community Heritage

Infographic (1 day extension)