Theses and Dissertations

5-2018

The Myth of Southern Atonement: Constructed Forgiveness in Public Spaces

Elizabeth Ashley Clayborn
University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

The Myth of Southern Atonement:
Constructed Forgiveness in Public Spaces

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Communication

by

Elizabeth Ashley Clayborn
Hendrix College
Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, 2016

May 2018
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

_____

Ryan Neville-Shepard, Ph.D.
Thesis Director

_____   _____

Lisa Corrigan, Ph.D.   Thomas Rosteck, Ph.D.
Committee Member   Committee Member

Abstract

This thesis provides a rhetorical analysis of public space in Arkansas and examines the ways in which the myth of Southern Atonement is constructed within those spaces. Three formal elements characterize Southern Atonement: absolution from the past, distinctiveness in constructed authenticity, and hope for a post-racial future. The analysis develops over three case studies which I argue contribute to the construction, engagement, and actualization of this cultural myth. The first chapter looks at Fort Smith, Arkansas, and The Unexpected art project as a source of identity construction and place attachment. Then I examine The Billgrimage, or the monuments and museums attributed to Bill Clinton's Arkansas legacy. I argue that this journey functions as a source of engagement for the community and asks the visitors to use Southern Atonement as a political and cultural toolkit. Finally, I explore the town of Wilson, Arkansas, and examine the ways in which Southern Atonement has been actualized as a cohesive identity through community revitalization and public memory. Southern Atonement, as developed through the rhetoric of public space and place in Arkansas, posits the statewide community towards a future that both acknowledges the historical sins of the past while moving forward through political and cultural reimagining of what it means to be Arkansan and Southern. In doing so, some voices – particularly those of minority and low-income populations – are often omitted from the public memory narrative in order to alleviate hegemonic guilt without actual policy and social reform. In an effort to atone for the past, some efforts of displacement and disenfranchisement are occurring to support a political agenda.

Acknowledgements

First, I would like to thank Dr. Ryan Neville-Shepard for his guidance and support in my academic journey. It has been a pleasure and privilege to study political communication with him and to further explore the field of rhetoric. Dr. Neville-Shepard's passion and enthusiasm for communication research inspired my own aspirations towards a career in academia. This thesis, and my growing interest in rhetorical analysis, would not have been possible without his leadership and counsel.

I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Thomas Rosteck and Dr. Lisa Corrigan. It was through my prior research with Dr. Rosteck that I discovered my love for interpretive methods and spatial rhetoric. Additionally, Dr. Corrigan's expertise and advise was invaluable during my project development. I have been fortunate to have found such incredible mentors in my time here at the University of Arkansas, and I am grateful for their willingness to invest in me and their confidence in my ability to succeed.

Furthermore, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Asher Morgan, for their determination to push me to tackle new challenges and provide professional and friendly advice during my time here in Fayetteville.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Dennis Clayborn and Teresa Hall, for their unwavering support during my academic career and beyond. Thank you both for always believing in me and helping me through any times of doubt and hesitation.

Table of Contents

I have put on my mother's coat.
it is warm and familiar
as old fur
and I can hear hushed voices
through it. too many
animals have died
to make this. the sleeves
coil down toward my hands
like rope. I will wear it
because she loved it
but the blood from it pools
on my shoulders
heavy and dark and alive.
　　　Lucille Clifton – Entering the South

A Reckoning of Regional Identity

The allure of the American South: constructed authenticity perfumed with Magnolia blossoms, sweet iced-tea laced with bitter sin, and heavenly voices of the Blues jarred with the gnarls of rural poverty. As contemporary Southerners, we carry this burdensome history while looking for ways to relieve that weight of cultural guilt. We look simultaneously outward to see what comes next for us and inward to find who we are in a new and globalized world. Many have tried to identify and describe the unique, and often convoluted, identity of what it means to be a Southerner.

In 1886, Henry Grady, the "Spokesman of the New South," stood before a group of Democratic political leaders and promoted the myth of the New South as a program of Northern investment during reconstruction. This myth was characterized by industrial growth, diversified farming, and White supremacy but disconnected from the identity of the rebellious Confederacy (Smith, 1985). Grady proclaimed that "there was a South of slavery and secession — that South is dead. There is a South of union and freedom — that South, thank God, is living, breathing, growing every hour" (Bryan, 1994, p. 4). This rhetorical plea for a changing identity resurfaced again in the 1980s as dialogue became heated regarding the current, globalized worldview and

the dominant mind of the South (Smith, 1985). Smith (1985) observed that after enduring regional mythic continuity since the 1820s, Southerners sought a new myth of identity in order to interpret and explain new social and cultural realities. The collective imagination of the South, one ripe with potential for social and economic prosperity, has seen a cyclical nature of New South myth in the face of identity crises. When political and social tensions rise, some Southerners are faced with a challenge to what they know and understand about themselves as a culture, and thus seek to relieve that dissonance of the past with a potential future.

This evolution of Southern myth is not, however, the direct product of a seamlessly implemented political persuasion strategy from a thinktank of modern mythmakers. A contemporary Southern myth, if such exists, is instead the accidental product of the culture and the community within which it was constructed. The people, and their beliefs and values, are the formula for determining an identity, mythic or not. The intersections of myth are not exclusive to the speeches of politicians and prominent figures, and may be better understood by the public culture of Southern people. As such, this project turns to the realm of public space and public memory of the people to determine the nature of its contemporary myths.

Public space, from a rhetorical perspective, can be understood as the beliefs about the past that are shared among members of a group, which could be as small as a community or as large as entire nation (Dickinson, Blair, & Ott, 2010). Public memory can often be constructed within a public space, whether that be through memorials, monuments, museums, arts, or architecture. People turn to public spaces that have been attributed with historic or political value as a means of constructing a collective identity about a region, community, or nation (Davis, 2013). Geographic spaces and places can carry heavy cultural significance and thus the rhetoric of public memory and place-consciousness are deeply intertwined (Glassberg, 1996). This

2

reliance on public space and public memory as a source of cultural direction is a crucial point of access to understanding collective imagination.

In this thesis, I argue that the public spaces of one Southern state – the state of Arkansas – has been utilized to construct a new myth, one of Southern Atonement, in which the South as a regional community seeks reprieve for the sins within our regional history. I identify three overarching themes of Southern Atonement: regional distinctiveness in authenticity, hope for a "post-racial" future, and absolution from the past. These themes will expand Smith's (1985) analysis of contemporary New South myth from a postsouthern perspective. Postsouthern studies was first coined by Lewis Simpson (1980), where he described an "existentialist America" signaling an end to the past interpretations of the South. The concept of postsouthern studies is a product of literary criticism and a postmodern perception of the "sense of place." Romine (2014) acknowledges that within this construction, the location of 'place' is not so much in the South or in Southern literature as in the critical discourse about those things. Postsouthern studies acknowledges the notion of a void, an unsettling of Southern order, in a variety of differing ways (Romine, 2014). Despite its origins within Southern literature, I apply a postsouthern lens to the realm of rhetorical analysis and political engagement within public spaces. It is through this lens that the thematic elements of the New South myth can be extended to the myth of Southern Atonement. It is through Southern Atonement that we attempt to disconnect from the regional historicity by compensating for and white-washing the public memory of the South in order to fill that existential, postsouthern void.

Rhetoric of Public Memory and Space

This thesis uses rhetorical analysis of space and place to determine how public memory is constructed and how audiences are influenced to believe and act in particular cultural narratives.

3

This thesis builds off of Dickinson, Blair, and Ott (2010) in their examination of public space and commemorative sites as tools to construct a present reality. Furthermore, I extend this rhetorical analysis to understand the construction of myth in cultural spaces as a form of communal identity through Southern Atonement.

Public Memory

There is a distinction between public memory and history. History, while often told through the lens of power and culturally dominant ideologies, is the retelling of events as a narrative. Memory, however, serves not the function of preservation, but a means of recollection in order to manipulate and instruct the present (Dickinson, Blair, & Ott, 2010). Public memory serves as the intersecting point between institutions that can help a society understand its past, present, and future (Bodnar, 1992). It should be noted, however, that history and public memory are not entirely exclusive of one another as they are both modes of representing the past. Public memory is also distinct from private, individual memory. As noted by Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2000), private memory exists primarily in thoughts or in documents, whereas public memory is a component of political and social power. In fact, one singular and honest recollection of public memory cannot exist, as it is inherently privileged in hierarchical disparity of race, economic class, and gender.

Furthermore, Dickinson, Blair, and Ott (2010) contend that public memory exists in six assumptions: current concerns activate memory, memory narrates shared identities and constructs communal belonging, memory is animated by affect, memory is partisan and contested, memory relies on material or symbolic supports, and memory has a history. In the context of my own argument, I focus primarily on three of these six assumptions. First, public memory is understood as activated by current contexts and anxieties of the present. Groups,

4

communities, and institutional powers retell their pasts in a way to justify, subvert, or exemplify their present. Second, this manipulation of the present can be done through the animation of public memory by affect. That is to say that public memory privileges particular events, people, places, and objects deemed worthy and which have an emotional attachment. Particular aspects of public memory within a community may be hyper-focused on recollections that evoke some strong negative or positive connotations supporting the overarching narrative. Third, public memory is understood to rely on material and symbolic artifacts as support for engaging individuals to participate and attach to the group and its recollections. This type of "memory work" often uses performances, objects, and places as manifestations of public memory (Dickinson, Blair & Ott, 2010).

Rhetoric of Space and Place

Space and place, in particular, can illustrate powerful narratives of identity and belonging. Public spaces are inherent intersections of social relationships as well as key symbolic and material artifacts used for reflection and engagement (Davis, 2013). Dickinson, Blair, and Ott (2010) argue that public spaces become meaningful for public memory in two ways. The first being that they invite audiences to consider how particular places inflect and circulate our emotional investments. Secondly, they invite audiences to understand how those places are "rhetorically-rich" with symbolic dimensions of significance. Taken in conjunction with one another, these two aspects of meaningfulness regarding space and place demonstrate the critical role it can play in public memory, and subsequently the effects it may have on identity and cultural beliefs of the present. The rhetorical elements of space invite the audience to engage with the place as both being pieces of a larger, collective narrative of identity.

In his discussion of the public art of Diego Rivera, Scott (1977) furthered this demonstration of engagement with public space through what he coined the substantive, dynamic, and strategic perspectives. Although his argument was constructed for public art, specifically, my research on the public space and public memory of Southern Atonement in landmarks in Arkansas will be shaped by these three critical assumptions. In his analysis, Scott (1977) asserts that a rhetorical critic could understand the dynamic perspective as the social environment surrounding an artifact. Spaces and artifacts must be taken into context with the other discourse within the human milieu. In regard to public space, from a dynamic perspective, rhetorical analysis must consider those elements of other spaces as well as the historical debate regarding the space within the community. The open interpretation of a space through association with arguments and other artifacts surrounding it increase the dynamic quality.

The dynamic values of rhetorical experience can then shape and reveal the substantial values of the artifact. Scott (1977) argues that the substantial perspective is intermingled with the values of ownership and the honesty within an artifact. Thus, the demand for aesthetic purity contradicts what it means to be human in that it ignores the multiplicity of the aesthetic experience. From this perspective, a rhetorical approach to public space is taken not only in conjunction with relationships of other objects or spaces, but as a unique artifact in itself. Concerning public memory, one might understand both how public space fits into the larger narrative of identity for the community but also how it maintains substance on its individual interpretation as well.

Finally, Scott (1977) suggests, rhetorical critics should also understand the elements of public space from a strategic perspective. Scott explains that to be effective as a strategy, the messages should be conventional and relative to a culture. If a public space is manipulated in

such a way that it defies norms or privileged narratives, it will be discredited as representative to the communal identity. These elements should thus serve proper means to proper ends for the audience, in that they must serve both value-laden and strategic functions in the creation of identity and maintenance of public memory.

Political Myth and Southern Identity

To better understand the construction of an identity and public memory within a community, one must obtain access to the collective imagination and what visual, symbolic, and performative cues are critical to its formation. Myth, according to Barthes (1972), is a coded representation of a natural representation. Smith (1985) argues that there is an interdisciplinary agreement that mythological analysis provides an effective understanding of this collective imagination of a social group and political myths often function as a form of communicating overarching ideas, beliefs, and ideologies. The application of an interwoven rhetoric and myth-based perspective allows for a more fully developed interpretation of communication and culture within a community. Myths could be understood as a key vehicle for ideology (Flood, 2001). The literature surrounding the role of myth and society emerged from its prospects as a tool for transformation. Levi-Strauss (1955), for instance, understood myth as a tool for transmitting knowledge, and that the purpose of myth within a community was to transmit ideas between members and unify the collective identity. As a transformative tool, myth can be understood as situated in the larger context of political and civic engagement and the communication of political ideology.

A political myth, specifically, could be understood as an ideological narrative within a community that deals with past, present, and predicted political beliefs (Tudor, 1972). Malinowski (1926) argued that political myths can fulfill a crucial function of "expressing,

enhancing, and codifying beliefs" as well as setting a guideline for behavior and engagement within a culture (p. 101). In other words, myths are the playbook by which individuals can abide by in order to bolster the overarching beliefs of their community. Myth is not only influenced by current political events and discourse but is can also shape the current political climate. When faced with adversity or dissonance within their own collective identity, individuals may turn to a political myth for direction. Clarifying this point, Bottici (2014) argued for the understanding of myth as a process, one in which narrative work allows for people to orient themselves within a political environment.

To analyze a myth of the contemporary South, however, it is critical to understand the evolution of Southern myth from a historical perspective. Smith (1985) details this beginning with the Old South Myth which stemmed primarily from the social reality of an "abolitionist attack" on the region. In short, slavery and racist hierarchies were a pinnacle of Southern identity in the 1800s. Those with power sought to construct a myth that exemplified both a romanticized nature and nobility. Smith (1985) explains that this myth rationalized slavery as an institution because of hierarchal roots descending from the class disparity of European settlers. Within this myth, the White gentleman was portrayed as one of dedication to tradition, public servitude, and honor. The White woman, on the other hand, was symbolized as the Southern belle who acted as the submissive wife and the mystic symbol of nationality (Smith, 1985). It should be noted, of course, that this myth was the product of racial and economic inequity and actively used to exclude particular narratives of anyone not attributed to these idealized characters.

The rhetoric of the Confederacy then slightly altered this myth of the Old South, one that was defensive of chivalry and traditional values of slavery and nobility. This myth, however, struggled to sustain itself in the face of military dispute and loss. Thus, arose the myth of the

Lost Cause: the product of the psychological dissonance within the post-Civil War Southerner (Smith, 1985). In the face of defeat, the antebellum rhetoric was reconstructed to allow Southerners to continue to reaffirm their distinctiveness and superiority with a nostalgic and romanticized notion of the magnolia-scented "golden age" that once was. Despite these impressive feats of selective imagination in identity construction, one could argue that there has been no solid, collectively accepted myth of the South since the Lost Cause.

While Arkansas certainly falls under the umbrella of the regional Southern mythology, it should be noted that the state's population is composed of several unique regions ascribing to their own forms of mythic identity. For instance, in the northwest region the communities are characterized by the Ozark mountain men and the folklore surrounding those mythical actors. Unique to this region, though, is the theme of both independence and a strong community working in conjunction with one another ("Hillbillies and Frontier," 2016). There is a romanticized notion of isolated settlers in the mountains who were hardy and self-reliant, appreciated and tamed the natural world, and valued the strength of traditional family values and community ("Hillbillies and Frontier," 2016) Along the eastern border of the state, myths regarding the blues and culture of the Mississippi Delta have risen through the aid of heritage and racial tourism. In a region marked by historical condemnation for its treatment of African Americans, the Delta has grown in popularity as tourists flock to the lowlands in search an authentic blues experience (King, 2006). Unlike the predominantly-White imagery of the Ozark settlers of the northwest region, the Delta mythology is rooted in the experience of Black America. The Blues Musician characterizes this mythology which constructs a carefully selected public memory in artifacts of music, architecture, and food while sometimes omitting the more problematic histories of sharecropping and poverty. These are just two of the many culturally

distinct regions of the state of Arkansas, which exemplifies the puzzle-like nature of the myths of the New South.

In Arkansas and on the larger, regional scale, the discourse of public memory and Southern history continues to be contested. Smith (1985) explains the current climate for political myth in Southern regional rhetoric is one that posits both a past and a future that appeals to a broad audience, offers opportunity for participation, and stresses more egalitarian values than those of the past. Smith's analysis of Southern myths is admittedly dated, however, and several new, differing myths and cultural perspectives have developed in the last few decades. One such myth is that of the Rough South. The Rough South is characterized by "poor, White, rural, and unquestionably violent" participants, often depicted in the subset of Southern literature coined Grit Lit (Carpenter, 2012). Vernon (2016) notes how this performance of Southern identity is a leap from that mild-mannered, White, middle-class Southerner, but lacks any racial, gender, or economic diversity. This myth has become commodified in literature, film, and television and constructed a romanticized notion of poverty in rural communities (Vernon, 2016). This myth does, however, offer a source of regional distinctiveness in form of cultural heterogeneity on a national scale. This desire to resist globalization pushes those who identify with the Rough South to maintain the local, public memory and artifacts that construct it. This maintenance and commodification of a Southern myth, or identity, speaks directly to the notion of deconstructing and bolstering the notion of cultural authenticity from a postsouthern perspective. It is through this notion of postsouthern studies that one begins to understand the inauthenticity of a constructed, commodified South as a source of identity and unification.

Simpson (1980) would argue that postsouthern rhetoric is centered around the notion of no single, or "real," foundational social order, and instead is merely the proliferating series of

representations and commodification of culture. Other postsouthern scholars have asserted that "efforts to locate culture must defer to some imagined 'true' or 'authentic' existence to some nostalgic past or utopian future" (Romine, 2014, p. 3). Kreyling (2010) examined the ways in which Old South identity is commemorated in the New, virtual, and postsouthern "Souths" as a means to treat the wounds of American, and Southern, history. The biggest question for postsouthern scholars is whether a mechanically reproduced South is preferable to an authentic one, and whether detachment from tradition and commodified culture operate in an age of a simulated South (Romine, 2014).

Postsouthern studies understands the contemporary, regional South as both the tool and the product from a search for cultural identity in the battlegrounds of our past and future. Although previously applied to Southern literature, the focus on a "sense of place" and constructed authenticity makes postsouthernism naturally applicable to the rhetoric of physical space and place and the ways in which cultural identity and memory is erected there. It is through this perspective that I approach the thematic elements of New South myth and understand how they have been expanded yet again, morphing into what I call the myth of Southern Atonement.

The Myth of Southern Atonement

One of the most pressing challenges facing the regional American South today is that of evolving identity through increased immigration and diversity, as well as how to reconcile that identity with the past. Smith and Furuseth (2006) examined the historical perspective of how a New South myth of culture and class relations has been constructed along black-white divides and the degree of which limited absorption of culturally or linguistically foreign immigrants have affected the communal identity of the South. For instance, Arkansas alone saw an increase of the

11

Hispanic-origin population from .85% in 1990 to 4.4% in 2004 (Smith & Furuseth, 2006). As the region becomes more economically, racially, and socially diverse Southerners must also strive to reconcile a contemporary, transformative identity with the historical sins of the past.

The myth of Southern Atonement – which combines the themes of distinctiveness, equality, and forgiveness – functions as a tool for those with power in the South, typically White and upper-class citizens with financial influence. A combination of financial resources and progressive ideology leads Southerners, in particular, to reconstruct a record of public memory that functions to alleviate their own guilt and centers matters of race and culture within broader American cultural and historical memory. This phenomenon of mental gymnastics when it comes to reconciling the sins of the past and contemporary values and beliefs is not new, nor is it unique to the South. Kersch (2004) acknowledged that as Black, or other minority, populations become increasingly vocal about their own systematic oppression and the institutionalized racism pervasive in their community, their White neighbors will often throw these issues into high relief. With that in mind, the recent rise of recognition of police brutality and racial profiling in the region has required, once again, that those with power take a reflective moment to determine the ways in which they may socially perform and uphold these unequal institutions. The White, liberal, utopian ideal of civil solidarity sits uneasily in a climate of social inequality, stigma, and repression (Alexander, 2006). The myth of Southern Atonement serves as a vehicle of reconciliation for this discord of identity and has the potential, at least, to construct a more inclusive identity and subsequently affect policy change within the region.

The term *atonement* is a multifaceted depiction of both the intentions behind the myth as a form of political engagement, as well as the potential for the myth to be actualized in an inclusive and intersectional identity. Atonement was chosen because it places the matter of

absolution on the table, but acceptance of that guilt is required to complete the transaction (Brooks, 2004). It is up to the guilty to put forth an action of seeking forgiveness, but then it is ideally for the victims to decide whether those actions are adequate.

Smith (1985) identifies three themes of a contemporary Southern myth, including equality, distinctiveness, and place and community. Despite the fact that a primary component of the Old South myth was that it was for "Whites only," Smith (1985) argues that contemporary Southern myth seeks to redefine our past to be more accommodating in order to alter future opportunities for equality. The South, as a regional community, has also continued to rely on particular stereotypes that simplify the mythic drama of regional distinctiveness. The third theme is that a contemporary Southern myth envisions the region as sacred ground for special relationships between people and place (Smith, 1985). This mythic theme of place and community, in particular, is one shared beyond those at the top of a hierarchy of power. In my own analysis, I expand upon these three thematic elements in the development of a different political myth of the contemporary South, one of Southern Atonement.

The first characteristic of Southern Atonement is that of regional distinctiveness in constructed authenticity. Charlie Daniels exemplified this regional ideology of uniqueness perfectly when he said those who "grew up in the South have a kind of inferiority complex that we're just getting out of" (Smith, 1985, p. 88). When facing the previous romanticized notion of the past, one might begin to feel a need to separate and exemplify oneself as both important and exceptional as a community. Schroeder (2004) examined this exceptionality as the search for a sense of "wholeness or authenticity," and it is through this search that elements of the cultural South become a strategy for simulated, authentic experience. It is here that I extend Smith's (1985) work into a postsouthern concept. Smith (1985) understands Southern distinctiveness in

New South myth as "strategy of redefinition" with which to perpetuate positive stereotypes while negating others (p. 115). I demonstrate how this distinctiveness is taken a step further into constructed authenticity through reclamation of authority over which narratives are determined to be "lived experiences" of the South and which are omitted.

The perspective of postsouthern studies acknowledges the ways in which place is manipulated to construct a particular experience or public memory, while still disconnected from the reality of the past and present. Authenticity is understood as a rhetorical strategy of legitimizing public memory by recreating and curating how objects and people should be seen (King, 2006). Crew and Sims (1991) assert that authenticity is not about factuality or reality, but about authority. The regional South is seeking cultural distinctiveness by constructing a sense of authenticity in their lived experience. In doing so, the regional South commands the authority to determine the ways in which a distinct narrative is told and who is included in that story. I demonstrate later in this thesis how both Southerners and outsiders are constructing an authentic experience through regional distinctiveness which allows audiences to connect and engage with a nostalgic identity. Over the past few decades, Southerners and Southern publications have heavily relied on stereotypes to communicate distinctiveness by heavily relying on stereotypes of the region. There is a certain populist narrative attributed with these characters in which emphasis is placed on birthright to the region and overcoming adversity despite proletariat roots. Distinctiveness, in the context of the myth of Southern Atonement, is to be proud of an authentic, lived experience in the contemporary South.

The second formal feature of the myth of Southern Atonement is a hope for a prosperous future in a "post-racial" South. Brooks (2011) understands a post-racial America as a society defined by continuing and contrasting racial dynamics. A perspective that is both a reality and a

14

myth. Brooks (2011) explains that on an individual basis some may feel as though race does not matter, or does not matter as much, as it did in the past. One must recognize that those individuals' lived experiences are not true, however, across the board and Black communities still face systematic racism and oppression. I am not arguing that we have reached a pinnacle of post-racial society. I establish, instead, how this component of Southern Atonement dreams of striving towards that utopia of negotiated race relations in which everyone is both included and remembered in our memory and identity. I also acknowledge the ways in which the myth falls short of that goal. This longing for inclusivity is also extended beyond race, to elements of gender and economic equality. The myth of Southern Atonement envisions the future of the region to be one that is inclusive of diversity and prosperous economically. In an increasingly globalized and digitized world, the conceptualization of a communal future is one of the most effective ways of developing an accepted political myth. This rhetoric of a turn towards the future of the South is one that has been used repeatedly. For instance, in 1977 James Dickey believed that "the South is the future, and the future is right now" (Smith, 1985, p.119). It is through this theme that those with power within the social hierarchy of the South could enact policy and political pressure that actualizes a more inclusive and prosperous future. This theme of equality in a post-racial South is unique from Smith's work in that it is a form of selective remembering rather than rejection. Smith (1985) explained how myths of the New South simply adapted images of the Old South with new heroic figures. The myth of Southern Atonement strives to tell those stories of the past and rebranding them into a hope for a new, inclusive future.

The atonement process of the myth is best exemplified in the third and final component, which is seeking absolution from the past. The current Southern culture is one that attempts to

create a puzzle out of aesthetic components of the Old South myth and the "golden age" with centuries-long battles for civil rights and equal treatment. This theme of absolution is a direct extension of Smith's (1985) discussion of equality and symbolic redemption. Smith (1985) explains that in the 1970s there was an attempt to not only compartmentalize the historic treatment of minorities but also to explain how the South, as a region, has itself been mistreated in the hands of history. That is to say that the theme of absolution from the past is one that primarily apologizes for and recognizes the historical sins which one must atone for, while seeking reprieve from the guilt associated with the past. However, this is distinct from Smith's (1985) conception of New South myths in that he understood this theme of equality and forgiveness as enacted through "symbolic redemption." Smith proclaimed that, through political events such as President Carter's election, the South saw itself as having "surpassed the rest of the nation, and appeared to be exhibiting a certain smug satisfaction with the result" (p. 89). Southern Atonement, instead, understands the South as genuinely recognizing and processing the guilt of the regional community, and thus enacting a new identity that allows reprieve from those sins. This component is, of course, a problematic perspective when understood through the phenomenon of collective victimhood and who is allowed to be absolved within the existing social hierarchy of the South. True atonement would ask those who have been historically victimized and underrepresented to determine the path towards absolution. It is through an analysis of the cultural intersections within public spaces that we can determine whether this form of atonement follows suit.

Morris (2016) observed that "uncovering and acknowledging the root causes of personal or collective [memory] is the first step towards healing" (p. 142). It is my hope that in my examination of the spatial rhetoric of the South through the lens of Southern Atonement, I have

16

begun to uncover the tremendous, contorted roots of our own dissonance between contemporary identities and the history that fuels our carefully selective public memory. Southern Atonement, and cultural myths in general, can serve as a tool for removing the illusory curtain of constructed authenticity currently shielding the South from its own reality. Sprinkled within the national mythology of America and the American South is the value of self-improvement. The best way for both collective and personal inclusive growth is through a critical examination of the past through the lens of Southern Atonement.

It is my hope that this thesis will provide a platform for discussing a potential return to the examination of cultural myth as a means of constructing, engaging, and enacting a collective identity. This research contributes to the democratic discourse surrounding the current debates over public spaces and how they influence a culturally distinctive identity of the South. There is also the concern of gentrification and urban revitalization as the South tries to move forward and create separation from a problematic history. It is important to look at what messages are being constructed in these reclaimed and appropriated spaces, who is constructing them, and what or who is being left out of those narratives.

Cultural and political mythmaking function as being illuminative of the past and conveying particular hegemonic values and beliefs as a guidebook of sorts (Walsh & Currie, 2015). It is my hope that Southern Atonement, a myth constructed and displayed through the public spaces of the region, will provide the development and foundations for research within this realm of rhetorical analysis of placemaking and mythmaking in regard to social and cultural identity.

Chapter Overview

This thesis will develop over three chapters, analyzing three case studies of Southern Atonement in the spatial rhetoric of Arkansas. Using critical analysis as applied through the rhetoric of public space, this thesis will reveal how the construction of myth as a cultural identity is used as a means of seeking forgiveness and perpetuating a cycle of manipulating public memory to meet contemporary needs.

Chapter 1: Revitalization in the River Valley

The first chapter will demonstrate how the public art projects of the Arkansas River Valley region are painting a picture of the themes of Southern Atonement. I argue that the community of Fort Smith, Arkansas, is utilizing creative placemaking as a tool for developing place attachment, public memory construction, and community engagement. The National Endowment for the Arts (2010) proclaims that creative placemaking "animates public and private spaces, rejuvenates structures and streetscapes, improves local business viability and public safety, and brings diverse people together to celebrate, inspire, and be inspired" (p. 4). This chapter will demonstrate how the city-wide public art projects of Fort Smith both portray the rich history of the community while including and omitting particular narratives in order to assemble a public memory in absolution. I examine the ways in which the public art exemplifies the distinct qualities of the community and critically approach the question of how that process of creative placemaking may tactically affect how such distinctiveness is performed. I conclude with a look at the hopeful elements that point towards a more prosperous future for all within the community and to what degree that "all" is actually equal and inclusive. This analysis will be looking specifically at publicly-sanctioned art.

The chapter will examine one major art project, The Unexpected of Fort Smith, Arkansas. The Unexpected depicts itself as a movement to bring urban and contemporary art to Arkansas and is curated by Justkids, a "creative house" that produces and promotes art projects (UnexpectedFS, 2017). At the time of my research, this city-wide art project includes a total of thirty-three separate art pieces. The curators, Justkids, claim they offers services not just in art curation and production but also in "cultural development and placemaking" (Justkids, 2017). Each year, Justkids leads a collaborative, festival of murals to add new art to the walls of Fort Smith's historic downtown. I demonstrate how this recent growth of public art movements in Arkansas are aesthetically and strategically functioning to construct the myth of Southern Atonement. They are doing so by depicting the past and those who should be remembered, exemplifying an idea of what is authentic and distinctive to Arkansas, and curating a message of equality that blurs the lines of contemporary social divides.

Chapter 2: A Billgrimage Across Arkansas

The second chapter examines how the rhetorical elements of public space within Bill Clinton's homegrown tour, the Billgrimage, constructs a political myth that not only influences public memory of the past, but also inspires behavior and beliefs regarding the future. I argue that the Billgrimage functions as a political strategy in which visitors are asked to engage with a new Southern myth, Southern Atonement, and then ascribe to it as their own collective, political identity moving forward. More precisely, the Billgrimage is performative as a journey of reconciliation towards a more inclusive and equal future for all, while still depicting a sometimes white-washed and exclusive narrative.

I argue that the Billgrimage becomes a source of engagement through political placemaking. While public space can be utilized for narrative and identity construction, political

spaces can specifically be used to push an agenda. A subset of creative placemaking, as described in the first chapter, I argue that political placemaking specifically enacts identity through memories and culture using a political understanding of who or what is in and out as central to civic vitality. The regional South has historically used commemorative spaces to both remember the past and to influence the future (Davis, 2013). The contemporary regional community offers a fertile ground for new political placemaking through myth. Political and cultural myths offer an overarching narrative with which to identify as a source of increased community engagement and sense of inclusivity. Political placemaking, or the process of creating and recreating lived experiences through political and material spaces, is a method of strengthening these community networks and socio-spatial relationships (Pierce, Martin, & Murphy, 2010). In regard to Arkansas, the Billgrimage offers a prime strategy for political placemaking as source of engagement. The commemorative journey of the Billgrimage is a site for community members and outsiders to meet and collectively engage with the process of exploring our historical past and determining our role in a political future more specifically.

Chapter 3: Mythmaking in the Delta

This last chapter will examine how the rhetorical elements of public space within Wilson, Arkansas, construct a rhetorical narrative of heritage tourism in the South by actualizing the myth of Southern Atonement. I argue that the community of Wilson, in an effort of urban revitalization after economic downfall and population decreases following the decline of the cotton industry, has ascribed to the three major thematic elements of the myth as their own cultural identity. The community, through their sanctioned and validated public spaces, builds a narrative of disconnect from their problematic past through an effort of rebranding. By focusing

on other distinctive, authentic cultural elements such as art, music, education, and archeology, the town of Wilson, Arkansas, is the living version of Southern Atonement.

The chapter explores how the physical and digital spaces in Wilson tourism both uphold particular narratives of public memory while omitting and restructuring others. I argue that Wilson, Arkansas, has actualized the myth of Southern Atonement by presenting the past through an obscured lens, constructed a community that sees itself as the pinnacle of authenticity through heritage tourism, and one that envisions itself of an exemplar for the future of a "post-racial" South. I also examine the critical understandings of this community and the ways in which it proliferates non-inclusive and non-intersectional Southern identity. This chapter will demonstrate how a community can position itself as the product of atonement for a problematic history, while misconstruing the ways in which in seeks a "post-racial" future.

It is through the development of Southern Atonement in these three case studies that I hope to illuminate how the myth could be used as a tool for civic and community engagement. However, I also hope to turn a critical eye to the ways in which the enactment of Southern Atonement falls short on the promise of seeking forgiveness. In an increasingly politicized world, we should be looking at the value of political placemaking within communities and the ways in which it contributes to and hinders the intersectional growth of cultural identities. I argue that it is through the intersection of public space, both physically and digitally, that values, beliefs, and ideologies are constructed and changed. In a world in which political discourse is increasingly plagued with hostility, I believe there is value in understanding the malleability of cultural communication through myth, spatial rhetoric, and modern political discourse.

Chapter 1

Revitalization in the River Valley

Fort Smith, Arkansas, is a conundrum of a town with an equally perplexing history of outlaws, indigenous peoples, and military strongholds. Two hours west of Little Rock and nestled along the Oklahoma border, the city has been contemporarily described as where "the New South meets the Old West." ("Travel Fort Smith," 2017). The community is often seen as a crossroads of culture, history, and identity. That crossroads, however, was also the "end of the trail" during the infamous forced removal of southeastern American Indians in the 1830s ("Stories of the," 2015). It was where slaves and others came to seek Union refuge as an escape from the warfare raging in Arkansas and Missouri during the Civil War ("Six Days One," 2017). It is where Judge Isaac Parker became known as the "Hanging Judge" due to his reputation of death sentences for convicts of the American Old West ("Judge Isaac Parker," 2017). This convoluted history does not spin a tale of happy endings, a characterization which holds true to pigeon-holed stereotypes in the community of the present.

In the local media, *Arkansas Gazette* editorial writer Jim Powell branded Fort Smith as "so close to Tulsa, so far from God" (Brantley, 2017, para. 4). This is after the city was ranked one of the lowest scoring metro areas in a national "well-being" analysis ("Where to Find," 2017). Furthermore, the United States Census Bureau reported that although neighboring metro areas of Northwest Arkansas saw significant population growth of 8.3%, Fort Smith experienced a decrease of .31% during the same time period (Tilley, 2015). It could be easily argued that the city of Fort Smith faces an uphill battle of community and social reform, as well as image and cultural revitalization. In so doing, the community must navigate the intricacies of acknowledging their past, distinguish themselves as a hub of innovation, and shape their policy

and improvement efforts towards an inclusive, brighter future. This is not a challenge from which the city has backed down.

In the summer of 2017, Fort Smith's Board of Directors passed "Propelling Downtown Forward," a strategic development plan with the support of local business and community leaders (Golden, 2017). This initiative was spearheaded by 64.6 Downtown, a local non-profit committed to building vibrant spaces beginning with The Unexpected project ("64.6 Downtown," 2018). The Unexpected is an art plan curated by JustKids with the goal of re-activating some of the forgotten spaces in Fort Smith through public art and installations (Simon, 2017). This effort of creative placemaking as a source of community engagement and revitalization in Fort Smith is spurring public discourse regarding the function of public art on the local and global level. With publicly accessible canvases for vibrant reimagining, The Unexpected posits itself as a potential classroom-without-walls for visitors to construct a new identity from a jarring public memory and atone for the historical sins of the past.

This chapter will examine how the public art of Fort Smith, Arkansas, reappropriates space in order to construct a political and cultural myth of Southern Atonement as a source of creative community identity and public memory. I argue that the public art is the product of creative placemaking as a strategy of community revitalization. As a city-wide movement of aesthetic enhancement, The Unexpected paints a picture of both the complicated history of the community and envisions Fort Smith through a new lens for the future. The movement asks visitors to both contemplate the past and simultaneously appreciate contemporary, globalized culture while constructing their own understanding of identity and public memory. My argument develops over several sections. First, I will demonstrate the ways in which public and shared space functions as a performance of community values, beliefs, and character. Second, I will

explore the foundations of creative placemaking as a strategic mechanism for community engagement and the ways in which creative space can rhetorically enhance social capital, place attachment, and revitalization efforts. I will also examine the critical importance of spatial rhetoric in the intersections of public memory and public art. Third, I will detail the critical history of Fort Smith and follow with a description of The Unexpected project, the art pieces I have included in my analysis, and the described intentions of its creators. Finally, I will provide a contextual understanding of the myth of Southern Atonement as a potential political and cultural myth of the community through public art and creative placemaking. In examining art projects in the city of Fort Smith, I will focus on the ways in which the three formal characteristics of Southern Atonement are exemplified through identity construction, revisionist history, and public memory. In this section I will contend that the community of Fort Smith is in a balancing act of constructing an authentic narrative based on a problematic history while still seeking forgiveness for that same history. Charlotte Dutoit, curator and owner of JustKids, explains that The Unexpected seeks to "give the artists an opportunity to express themselves in an unlikely environment while building a beneficial cultural capital where it's needed - right in the heart of America" ("Justkids Curation, 2017, para. 2). Thus, in Southern Atonement and in the heart of America, we should be critical of whose heritage and blood was shed for that cultural capital and whether those narratives are being white-washed to relieve contemporary guilt. I will conclude with a critical analysis of the ways in which the public art of Fort Smith functions as a strategy for political and community engagement with Southern Atonement, and address the controversy of who is included in the identity that is ultimately constructed.

Public Space as a Performance

As Jacobs (1961) described, individuals interacting within a public space are performing a ballet, of sorts. It is in this performance, or social dance, that creative and social friction emerges through interactions, idea sharing, and even collision (Lehrer, 2012). Community members, or social actors, must carefully navigate the intricacies of the physical space of an environment as well as the memories, identities, and values attached to it. When those rhetorical components are manipulated, the dance between community members is altered as well. Thomas, Pate, and Ranson (2015) explain that "the best settings for this sidewalk dance are just a little uncomfortable, with an intimate feel that invites belonging as well" (p. 75). The performance should ideally be challenging but inclusive, both confronting problematic discrepancies and ideologies while inviting all community members to participate. Nonetheless, those dances, or interactions, are inherently plagued by confounding factors. This includes the intentions and power of those who construct public space and rhetoric, the personal investment of community members, the degree to which they feel attached to said space, and the public memory associated with the physical elements. These public spaces force us to interact with community members we may not otherwise address. It is in this notion that public space creates potential for community change and revitalization, by disrupting and expanding our communal imagination through interaction (Thomas, Pate, & Ranson, 2015). When those public spaces are utilized to promote creativity, they can push a community to further embrace the excitement, fear, and discomfort associated with change and engagement in these social ballets.

Some performances within public spaces are strategically constructed through methods such as creative placemaking. A community may actively curate or designate space specifically for creativity and dialogue for community members. Two major factors that contribute to the

efficiency of strategies like creative placemaking as a form of civic engagement are the building of social capital and strengthening of place attachment. By increasing an individual's role within and identity towards a space, one increases the willingness for collaborate efforts to civic health. One major concern of creative placemaking for increased civic health is gentrification. With a reinvigoration of the arts in culture scene of a community, there is a potential for the influx of non-native community members from a higher socioeconomic status, thus displacing the lower income residents. The intricacies of pubic space as a performance are interwoven in a complex web of creative placemaking, social capital, place attachment, and gentrification.

Creative Placemaking

Community well-being and civic health is highly dependent on the ability to access and engage with and in public spaces. Placemaking has grown as a cultural movement which intends to incite citizen participation in utilizing and transforming the public spaces of their community in order to strengthen the connection between people and shared spaces ("What is Placemaking?," 2018). The notion of "public spaces," in this context, refers to a shared space with elements of public ownership, intersubjectivity, and open accessibility for the community (Kohn, 2004). It is within these public spaces that identity is constructed, public memory is formed, and social bonding and social capital is enhanced (Dickinson, Blair, & Ott, 2010; Francis, Giles-Corti, & Knuiman, 2012). Critical placemaking is understood as a bottom-up, grassroot, person-centered process in which space is re-imagined through a "collective vision" in order to facilitate participation in public discourse (Toolis, 2017). This process has, however, been denounced for being apolitical and exclusive, particularly in terms of "revitalization" efforts attracting investment while ignoring wealth and racial disparately and displacement

(Bedoya, 2013). A particular subset of this movement that is often commented on for its focus on beautifying and cleaning public spaces is creative placemaking.

Creative placemaking relies on the "role of arts and culture in rejuvenating the physical, social, and economic dimensions of community life in the midst of post-deindustrialization and suburbanization" (Toolis, 2017, p. 186). These types of initiatives have received funding and support from both nonprofits such as The Project for Public Spaces and federal agencies such as The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The NEA understands creative placemaking as a source of imaginative innovation for structures and streetscapes which leads to increased business viability, public safety, and celebration of diversity (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). Similarly, The Project for Public Spaces understands "Arts-based Placemaking as an integrative approach to urban planning and community building that stimulates local economies and leads to increased innovation, cultural diversity, and civic engagement" ("Creative Communities," 2015). Examples of creative placemaking projects include the NEA-sponsored redevelopment of three Cleveland, Ohio, west-side theatres, new transit stations in Portland, Oregon, that incorporate neighborhood-distinctive artwork, and the transformation of a vacant auto plant in Buffalo, New York, into artist studio space and housing (Markusen & Gudwa, 2010).

While much of the creative placemaking initiatives cite a focus on cultural diversity and enhancement as a driving force of the artistic endeavors, this focus on art and culture often caters to the elites and the "creative class" and the focus on commonality rather than differences can lead to decreased recognition of the plurality and contested nature of communal identity (Doucet, van Kempen & van Weesep, 2011; Sharp, Pollock, & Paddison, 2005). It is critical that we expand on the questions asked by Mehta (2012): For whom are we trying to create benefit when implementing our creative placemaking strategies? Which people do we want to gather, live, and

visit these vibrant spaces? How does this improve the current community's quality of life and encourage activity? Mehta (2012) calls for an explicit pro-equity agenda for all creative placemaking efforts. If we are constructing space for artistic endeavors and community expression to flourish, it should be guaranteed that the space is big enough for everyone. Townley, Kloos, Green, and Franco (2011) note three classes of creative placemaking useful to examining the development, or hinderance, towards inclusive communities. First, there are the creative placemaking initiatives that promote a common in-group identity that do not reflect the ideals of the dominant group or do not respect the variance of identities within a community. Second, there is a class of placemaking projects which reinforce stereotypes rather than generate improved relationships among community members by limiting or only promoting superficial contact between members. Finally, there are those with strategies that name the differences within the groups, promote those disparate dynamics, and include all members within that creative dialogue of placemaking. Creative placemaking initiatives that fall within the third type will increase social capital among all members, utilize and enhance place attachment, and insure that any revitalization efforts benefit more than just the "creative elites" of a community.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to the complex network of relationships that develop between individuals who exist in a particular environment, community, or society and must be maintained and expanded in order to increase the overall functionality of the group. Putnam (2000) understands social capital as a feature of social life that enables participants to act together more effectively in pursuit of shared objectives. "By 'social capital,'" he states, "I mean features of social life—networks, norms, and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (Putnam, 1996, p. 56). One might argue that community members,

or social actors, are able to barter social capital to maintain or increase individual and group functionality. Creative placemaking functions to increase social capital for all community members equally through aesthetic experiences, revitalization, and dialogue.

Townley and colleagues (2011) argue that a sense of community directly draws on social capital, and placemaking as a strategy requires a distinction of bonding and bridging within those social strata of a community. While bonding creates and maintains strong ties in fairly homogenized groups in order to increase shared identity, bridging occurs in links across social groups or communities and facilitates dialogue and movement between social spheres (Townley, et al. 2011). Putnam (2000) argued that bonding social capital was critical for building solidarity, but bridging was essential for external linking and information diffusion. Social capital is both created, maintained, and reciprocated through these bonding and bridging interactions.

The primary benefit of bridging social capital is the allowance for sharing diverse resources (Hughey & Speer, 2002). The question for placemaking within a community is whether social actors are willing to share said capital and bridge those links across groups. Belk (2007) would argue that, as a society, we have begun to place more importance on economic capital than social capital and trust in money and material goods have supplanted trust in people. It is this notion of reimagining and rebuilding social trust within a community, and thus increasing social capital, that all revitalization efforts must ethically tackle in placemaking. Putnam (2000) argues that networks of civic engagement foster communal norms of reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust. Referring to the strategies of critical placemaking in constructing more inclusive communities, it is possible to promote increasing civic engagement through creative endeavors. Public art initiatives, for instance, that actively name the differences within the groups of a community and include representation from all social spheres can increase social

capital through bridging, and thus maintain or enhance social trust and civic health. Increased social capital will lead to increased identity construction for individuals, and thus higher investment in the wellness and functionality of a community.

Place Attachment

That identity and investment tied to space within a community can be considered place attachment. Thomas and colleagues (2015) define place attachment as the emotional connection with a familiar location, such as a home or a neighborhood. Tuan (1977) explained that "the more ties there are [to a place], the stronger is the emotional bond" (p. 158). These emotional bonds to space and place are accumulated through life experiences and meaningful interactions within and with that space (Lewicka, 2011). Social actors construct symbolic meaning of a space, and these meanings are often contested in a larger social context as well. Local community and larger cultural narratives can mold the rhetorical messages of a space, and thus the degree to wish individuals are willing to invest and develop place attachment.

In the social performance of public space, the physical setting tends to remain foundationally constant, but can be altered and manipulated to construct meaning by the everchanging roles of social actors. To extend this concept of a performance in place attachment, Milligan (1998) offers the analogy of set designers and actors as having control over the physical and socially-constructed setting, respectively. The architects construct the physical space; this includes city planners, property owners, and others who make decisions regarding the form of the space. The actors control the social aspects of place, at least those actors with the power and resources to do so. The two elements are not distinct, but inherently connected. Nonetheless, those social actors use the physical space to shape and constrain meanings, while influencing the interactions that occur there and with whom. These social actors can determine the messages

conveyed in developing place attachment for community members. This is done through a manipulation of what Milligan (1998) coined the interactional past and interactional potential. Interactional past refers to "experiences associated with a site and the degree of meaningfulness of these experiences translates into the degree of attachment to the site itself" (p. 2). The interactional potential refers to the future experiences imagined or anticipated to be possible in a site (Milligan, 1998). The anticipation for progress, growth, and interaction within a space increases place attachment for individuals. Creative placemaking can manipulate both this interactional past and potential through symbolic construction of narratives in aesthetic expression.

This concept of place includes the physical aspects of a specific location, but also the emotional and value-laden meanings individuals associate with that physical space. As Sopher (1979) clarified, "When [people's] experience of other places suggests that some familiar things at home may be distinctive, these become symbols of home" (p. 137). These "symbols of home," can be manifested spaces such as apartment buildings, parks, and other community living environment. They can be constructed in ordinary landscapes as well. It is the reappropriation efforts of creative placemaking that suggests place attachment could be cultivated for a community. In cultivating place attachment in creative placemaking, community members must determine the values, messages, and identity that will be constructed within the space – particularly those elements that will most fervently increase bridging social capital amongst groups.

Gentrification

There is a challenge in the development of inclusive social capital and place attachment through community revitalization and creative placemaking initiatives without a shift towards

gentrification. Many of the rhetorically examined creative placemaking projects have centered around public art programs, especially regarding efforts to revitalize urban and community spaces. The arts have been increasingly understood to provide a critical role in community and economic development, with the large aim of arts-centered revitalization focused on those economic benefits (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010). However, there is a growing concern that creativity as a modifier in placemaking constructs an exclusive narrative of revitalization efforts (Thomas, et al. 2015). Florida (2002) argues that this narrative invites a "creative class" to participate in cultivating social and economic capital through art-based reimagining of a community and space. By potentially inviting this group of outsiders through branding in order to cultivate a creative narrative for a community, there is concern of displacement of community members through processes of gentrification (Lloyd, 2011). Lloyd (2011) even argues that the discourse surrounding creativity in community and urban revitalization has recently come to define contemporary "progressive" urban policy. If the elements of social capital, social trust, and place attachment are not carefully considered, this policy-making and reform can often turn towards gentrification and lead to the displacement and exclusion of low-income or minority residents. When utilizing creative placemaking as a strategy for revitalization and development, communities must foster a diverse and inclusive approach to the narratives and identities being constructed. This includes considering both the potential for growth and interaction within that public space in the future, but also recognizing diverse, and problematic or disparate, histories within the community.

Public Memory and Public Art

As Malcolm Gladwell, well-known author and journalist, narrates his trip from Atlanta, Georgia, to Birmingham, Alabama, he explains his thought process and intentions for this

Southern journey in his podcast series, *Revisionist History*. He depicts how he has always loved

monuments and memorials, perhaps "because they are a representation of something we have

decided to take seriously" (Gladwell, 2017). He is in pursuit of "The Foot Soldier" by artist

Ronald S. McDowell, a bronze public art monument meant to memorialize the infamous image

of a police dog viciously attacking a young Black protester in 1963. The statue sits in Kelly

Ingram Park, a space which now functions as a shrine to the events of the Civil Rights movement

in Birmingham (Gladwell, 2017). The sculpture is a powerful, aggressive piece – with a police

officer looking overpowering and evil while the young boy small and fearful. However, as

Gladwell (2017) begins to unpack the cooccurring narratives behind that photographed moment

and the memorialization of it, he begins to determine that the statue is not an accurate

representation of the historical events that took place. Instead, it represents the public memory of

that photograph as a symbol. The young boy was not part of the march and the officer was

actually restraining the dog. McDowell, the artist, "made the police dog into a wolf and shrank

the boy until he was tiny and helpless because he was telling a story about Birmingham"

(Gladwell, 2017). The public memory of that moment represents the larger, systemically

oppressive forces that the foot soldiers of the Civil Rights movement had to fight against. The

public art commemorates that moment to make a subversive point about identity and race both in

the past and in contemporary Birmingham.

  "The Foot Solder" of Birmingham, and Gladwell's deeper analysis into the intricacies

surrounding it, perfectly depict this complex and interwoven interaction between public art and

public memory. Public memory refers to the circulation of recollections among members of a

given community (Houdek & Phillips, 2017). Quayle, Sonn, and Kasat (2016) understand

community art projects as a form of public pedagogy that seeks to intervene into the production

and reproduction of meaning in public spaces. Thus, art projects can be used to construct a rhetorical and symbolic narrative that informs community members towards a particular recollection of public memory. There are two themes to approaching public art as a form of identity construction in public memory: cultural continuity and recognition and acknowledgement (Quayle, et al. 2016). These art projects can be used to depict and maintain the cultural narratives already present within a community. Alternatively, public art can also be used to acknowledge counternarratives and identity within a community, and through recognition aid in the reconstruction of public memory. These community pedagogies through public art seek to challenge oppression, marginalization, and social exclusion (Sonn & Baker, 2015). Identity construction in public spaces through creative endeavors allows for potential expression of previously unheard voices within the community.

The movements of creative placemaking and community revitalization have led to a growth in contemporary monuments of history and public memory as functioning both educationally and aesthetically. Salvatori (2015) explains how the monument tradition began to lose self-reference in the 1960s, and now communities strive for artistic production with memorial aims that "challenge those traditional boundaries of stability, universality and rhetoric" (p. 931). Contemporary public art can both illustrate historical contingency while representing a direct criticism of traditional monumental practices. That is to say that monuments and memorials have conventionally demonstrated the public memory narratives of the hegemonic culture within a community and the dominant class or groups.

Public art can retell those same stories but with the inclusion of elements of the historically marginalized voices. This is particularly critical for those public art projects specifically constructed through community engagement and revitalization efforts. The artist of

"The Foot Solder," when confronted about his visual exaggerations within the monument, explained:

> That's what history is. Each side writes their own story and the winner's story is the one we call the truth. You don't think White people told their share of whoppers over the years in the south? You don't think that there's a statue in a southern town somewhere of a champion of the Confederacy that makes a hero of someone who was actually a villain? White people got to do that in the south for centuries. "Foot Soldier" is just what happens when the people on the bottom finally get the power to tell the story their way. (Gladwell, 2017)

It is through this vision of revising, and reimagining, communal "truths" in public memory that contemporary public art projects can repaint history.

History of Fort Smith

The city and community of Fort Smith, Arkansas, is fertile ground for that process of reimagining and reshaping public memory towards a more inclusive contemporary identity. The town was once considered a gritty, frontier community with a lawless reputation, even dubbed "Hell on the Border" as it was once the last developed township before unsettled native territory (Boulden, 2012). Located at the junction of the Arkansas and Poteau Rivers, the original military outpost of Fort Smith was chosen for strategic reasons: easy patrol of the neighboring territory of indigenous peoples and of any river traffic ("Balthazar Kramer," 2017). Named after General Thomas Smith, the original fort was abandoned after a short seven years in 1824. Nonetheless, the surrounding town had already been established, in large part from an influx of European settlers from the east. They were not, however, the only groups moving westward.

Between 1816 and 1840, a number of eastern indigenous tribes ceded their land to the United States government and headed west to what is now Oklahoma under forced removal in what is currently known as the Trail of Tears. There were several points of debarkation and several routes used, but the Trail of Tears ultimately passed directly through the gateway

community of Fort Smith, with the native settlements of Osage and Choctaw on the other side. This forced migration of Cherokee and other native tribes was riddled with death, as mortality rates for the entire removal and its aftermath totaled approximately 4,000 ("Stories of the Trail," 2017). A visitor to contemporary Fort Smith can walk a segment of the Trail of Tears, lined with informative panels on Indian removal, and now dotted with art installations – some even paying tribute to that gruesome history.

In 1838, the United States Congress authorized the reoccupation of Fort Smith as a military post and bought the surrounding acres of community from founder John Rogers ("Building the Second," 2017). A primary function of the fort was keeping liquor out of the neighboring native territory and to prevent its distribution. However, when Captain John Stuart arrived as the new commanding officer he wrote that "drunken Indians were seen in every direction" and observed that a number of his own troops were intoxicated and by the next day even more of his men were in the same condition ("Building the Second," 2017). One establishment near the barracks was notorious for its liquor distribution and was run by the Bigelow family. Stuart attempted to resolve the issue by disallowing soldiers to enter the establishment, but found that the soldiers just sent in Indians or civilians to buy their liquor and deliver it to them ("Building the Second," 2017). This contested match of spirits eventually escalated to the point where Captain Stuart had a cannon fire into the wall of the establishment, thus forcing the Bigelows to begrudgingly concede.

A few decades later, in 1861, confederate troops attacked Fort Smith, which was garrisoned by two companies of Union soldiers ("Six Days One," 2017). The post was evacuated and within hours overtaken by state militia. It would be two years before the Union army regained control of the fort, but faced attacks again in 1864 from Cherokee Confederate Colonel

Stand Watie. After a series of subsequent battles to maintain control over the area, the Federal army took the fort back and it acted as refuge for thousands of former slaves and those dispossessed by the fighting ("Six Days One," 2017).

Following the war, Fort Smith became immortalized once again – characterized as running rampant with outlaws and vicious law enforcement. One of the most notorious characters of this era is Judge Isaac C. Parker, or the "Hanging Judge," who sentenced 160 people to death without providing the condemned a right of appeal ("Judge Isaac Parker," 2017). His narrative of brutality in a personal vendetta against the outlaws of the West is the plot inspiration for many contemporary tales, including a fictional account of the Fort Smith federal court set in the late 1870's. *True Grit* was first serialized in the *Saturday Evening Post* and almost immediately developed into a film, released July 3, 1969 ("Judge Isaac Parker," 2017). The most famous character in the series is Deputy U.S. Marshal Reuben J. "Rooster" Cogburn, who does not represent an actual deputy, but is instead an amalgamation of the real men who served the federal court of Judge Parker in Fort Smith ("Judge Isaac Parker," 2017). The depiction of the executions in the film adaptations of *True Gri*t exacerbate the mythological misconceptions that vendors would be selling goods and wares to the crowd and that Judge Parker watched all his hangings from an upper window in the courthouse ("Judge Isaac Parker," 2015).

During the summer of 1885, a woman named Anna Dawes traveled to Fort Smith, later writing an article describing the conditions of the town's prison as a "veritable hell upon earth" ("Hell on the Border," 2017, para. 1). Some would argue that hellish reputation persists today. *Arkansas Times* writer Graham Gordy (2011) jokingly proclaimed that the hometown slogan for Fort Smith should be "Old brothels, abandoned buildings, and the gateway to an even more

boring-ass state" (para. 19). It is this perception that brought us to 2017, though, when The Unexpected art project sought to bring those forgotten spaces to life again and build character and creativity in the town (Simon, 2017). The Unexpected seeks to work from the canvases and tools already present within the downtown community: faded walls, decrepit buildings, and found materials.

The Unexpected

In an introductory video featured on the *Experience Fort Smith* YouTube channel, Johnny Cash's "God's Gonna Cut You Down" ominously plays over footage of an Arkansas state flag flying high and local residents resting on their motorbikes on the street. "Not so much happens here that is very different than what happened here for a long time," a narrator explains, "when something out-the-box happens here I think it's unexpected for most of the people" ("The Unexpected Project 2015," 2016). And thus, the Unexpected Project is born.

The Unexpected project began in 2015 and claims to serve a mission of bringing urban and contemporary art to Arkansas through immersive public art experiences (JustKids, 2018). Curated by JustKids, a global creative house that produces art projects on an international scale, the initiative in Fort Smith was to breath creative life back into a fading town with a colorful history. JustKids collaborates with 64.6 Downtown, a local non-profit "committed to building vibrant spaces…and to mobilize placemaking in Fort Smith and Arkansas" ("64.6 Downtown," 2018, para. 1). Although the public art pieces are permanent fixtures in the growing downtown scene of Fort Smith, The Unexpected centers around a week-long summer festival in which international artists are invited to create murals, sculptures, and indoor and outdoor installations ("Justkids Curation In," 2017). The program is now moving into its fourth year, with their 2017 festival proclaimed as the most successful yet. Charlotte Dutoit, owner and curator for Justkids,

stated that the goal of the latest festival was to "get viewers to revisit some of the historic landmarks in Fort Smith, discover hidden gems of the Downtown and participate in the creative process" ("Justkids Curation In," 2017, para. 2). The program specifically focuses on building Fort Smith into the globalized art sphere by bringing renowned public artists from across the world and challenging misconceptions about rural America lacking creativity and appreciation for art.

The colorful pieces do not just create an unexpected experience for local Arkansans, though. Artists invited by the JustKids group discuss examining their own biases about the area, town, and people that call it home. "Usually, when you go somewhere where there are not murals everywhere or this type of work you get a few really negative reactions, but I did not so that was also unexpected for me," one artist narrates ("The Unexpected Project 2015," 2016). ROA, a Belgium artist, is featured complimenting the community on being very welcoming and the beauty of the big, previously-undecorated buildings within the city ("The Unexpected Project 2015," 2016). The digital material surrounding the Unexpected project emphasizes this reciprocal relationship between the community and the artists, highlighting the ways they might both benefit.

For my analysis, I will focus on the more than twenty permanent fixtures featured year-round in Fort Smith. These were determined using a map found on the Justkids and Unexpected websites (The Unexpected, 2018). This focus was chosen due to the impact that these art pieces, primarily sculptures and murals, would have on the community in the long-term versus the short-term influence of the temporary festival events. In my analysis, I hope to determine how the myth of Southern Atonement is being constructed as a community identity and narrative, and thus I am looking beyond the scope of one art-filled week during the summer.

The Myth of Southern Atonement in Unexpected Fort Smith

As Lloyd (2012) examined, "the South is increasingly at the leading edge of crucial new developments in political economy, including neoliberalism and globalization" (p. 484). Fort Smith, Arkansas, and its growing art scene are exemplars of this cultural Southern shift. The city's artwork asks visitors and community members to both consider the public memory of the region and the role they play in the construction. From a critical perspective, though, one might wonder whose history and identity are being constructed in the social capital and social trust goals of the Unexpected Project. It is through this lens that we can understand whether the project aids in that sought forgiveness or is contingent on maintaining an exclusive narrative. In the fall of 2017, I visited Fort Smith, Arkansas, and walked the mapped route of art of The Unexpected project. This is an analysis of the project as it existed after three years of summer festivals celebrating creative placemaking. I will demonstrate the portrait of Southern Atonement constructed using narratives of forgiveness, authenticity, and historical disparity.

Constructed Authenticity and Distinctiveness

The Unexpected project contains art installations that perpetuate an account of distinctiveness in constructed authenticity by reclaiming authority over which narratives are determined to be "lived experiences" of Fort Smith and which are omitted. Fort Smith, as a community, is exemplifying components of their regional and historical identity in order to distinguish themselves as a culture and arts utopia of the South. This constructed experience of Fort Smith often acknowledges the realities of wealth, poverty, and social disparity within the community but continues to extenuate the narrative for the sake of maintaining a progressive characterization. In an effort of revitalization, Fort Smith seeks to distinguish themselves as a heritage destination with a constructed, authentic experience for those who visit or live there.

One artist who addresses the distinctive cultural qualities of Fort Smith in their art is D*Face, who has returned to the city multiple times and has a total of four included pieces at the time of this analysis. D*Face is from the United Kingdom and is well-known for his subversive images and challenges to orthodox thinking. In his "Arrows" installation, D*Face used repurposed telephone poles to depict massive arrows shot into the ground near the east entrance of Fort Smith. The massive arrows were a collaborative effort with Oklahoma's Choctaw Nation tribe, thus "ensuring the authenticity of their oversized aesthetic" (Lovett, 2016). By collaborating with the indigenous people in constructing art commemorating their heritage, D*Face maintained a sense of authenticity while still highlighting the distinctiveness of the region's past. The installation is a thematic continuation of D*Face's other Fort Smith exhibits, which function to memorialize the Trail of Tears. Nonetheless, the arrows are placed right at the entrance to the downtown brimming with ventures capitalizing on the native roots, outlaw crimes, and "Hell on the Border" anecdotes of Fort Smith. The artistic arrows portray a sense of danger for visitors in this battleground of identity narratives.

Other aspects of The Unexpected function to highlight characteristics of the region that are unique to "The Natural State" of Arkansas. For instance, Pastel also created a massive mural entitled "Empty," in which he appropriated the empty space of modern architecture to portray a natural element of plant life on this urban landscape. ROA also utilizes this method of reusing existing spaces as canvases for a new story. In "The Otter" and "The Mole," ROA forms these rodents to fit into the crevices of decrepit buildings and walls. By twisting these creatures to fit the mold of the buildings, he highlights not only forgotten animals of Arkansas but also forgotten spaces. Otters and moles are both native to the state, although rarely if ever highlighted as a unique draw. By placing them boldly around Fort Smith, a viewer is also asked to look beyond

the art installation and consider the surrounding canvases as well – the city itself. Bordalo II also created nature-themed art for The Unexpected, notably "Opossum" and "Fox." Both recreate images of animals native to the area, constructed out of repurposed scrap metal and what some might consider trash. Bordalo II is known for promoting sustainability and increasing social awareness through using primarily end-of-life materials. Once again, by focusing on natural elements of Arkansas that are often forgotten and constructing them out of forgotten materials, these art pieces ask viewers to consider all of the distinctive qualities of the region, not just the culturally highlighted ones. These art projects highlight the idiosyncrasies of natural elements within the state and region, and thus function to remind viewers of the hidden treasures that are unique and authentic to the Fort Smith experience.

Other projects within The Unexpected create new distinctive characteristics for Fort Smith through the use of oddities and shock in their aesthetic components. For instance, Ana Maria's "Unnamed" features two otherworldly characters in a tender moment – with mixed phenotypes of animal, human, and insect features. A viewer's attention is immediately drawn to the odd features of this art, partly due to the prominent display of this art piece along the main street of Garrison Avenue. In conjunction with the discomforting qualities and sadness in the expression, the piece almost demands the viewers' attention and creates a moment of unease. When paired with the array of culturally and historically significant artwork featured elsewhere in the city, "Unnamed" reminds the viewer of the intentions of the art project to imaginatively distinguish the community in the face of globalization and beyond the limits of regional history. Finally, Crystal Wagner took Charlotte Dutoit's goals of bringing attention to the often-overlooked landmarks of the city to heart with the installation of "Façade." A 3-dimensional piece of black, white, pink, and green materials that could only best be described as a nebula,

"Façade" decorates what remains of the historic Reynolds-Davis building. Wagner, an artist from Philadelphia, is well-known for these amorphous-growth sculptures plastered on historic buildings. The immediate juxtaposition of the abstract, contemporary art draped, and seemingly consuming, the historic structure provokes an immediate, shocked reaction for the viewer. The lithotrophic sculpture wraps round the Reynolds-Davis façade, which was once a five-story structure before destroyed by a tornado in1996. "Façade" creates a dialogue between historical and contemporary architecture, natural forms, and the birth of a pseudo-organism at the intersection of the two. "Façade" has unique qualities which make it odd and unique in the Southern landscape, while still drawing attention to the distinct, and authentic, history of Fort Smith.

The Unexpected project paints a picture of distinctiveness in constructed authenticity by acknowledging history, highlighting peculiar regional qualities, and then pushing the boundaries on artistic expression in the South. Through an effort of community revitalization, The Unexpected project provides a visual and aesthetic experience of Southern heritage, and its uniqueness, which allows visitors and community members to appreciate that heritage from a distance. The project uses elements of nature to emphasize the Arkansas character and draw those viewers back into the constructed authenticity of the community. This process allows the community to profit from the commodification of their culture, but potentially allows for economic capital to dominate social capital. While there is heavy emphasis on the historical roots of minority voices in the area, there is little inclusion or artistic expression of contemporary efforts towards a more inclusive community regarding race, culture, and class.

Hope for Post-Racial Future

Many of the art pieces of The Unexpected illustrate the dream of Southern Atonement in moving towards a utopia beyond the tense race, class, and other social relations of the past and present. This quality of Southern Atonement visualizes an inclusive future, but in doing so often constructs an exclusive public memory in order to dissociate from the sins of the past. Guido Van Helten's "American Heroes" most formatively demonstrates this element in regard to class relations and representation. The massive mural decorates the side of the towering grain elevators of the O.K. Feed Mills. This piece includes three colossal portraits that represent three very different individuals and personalities. The three characters are mean to be: "Ed, a Native American man from the Apache tribe; Kristina, a young African American woman who runs her own business; and Gene Beckham, a former employee who worked at this grain elevator for 70 years, immediately after returning from the second world war, before retiring last year" (Azzarello, 2016b, para. 2). These portraits and characters are meant to represent the contemporary heroes and heroines of Fort Smith and the larger regional community of the South. It is a poignant extension of the mythical "heroes" from the Wild West genre in popular culture, of which Fort Smith is intrinsically interwoven. By portraying these working-class people as the heroes of today, and of the New South, the art looks towards a utopian future of negotiated cultural and class relations.

Some of the other components of The Unexpected take a much more aggressive stance on addressing the past and moving forward to an idealized future. Irish artist Maser's "Darby's Rangers" exemplifies this narrative of a battle between the past and future. This colorful mural is featured on the wall of an army surplus store and portrays soldiers in battle during WWII. The clashing colors and shapes illustrate the chaos of war and the resiliency of those who fight. This

art is inspired by the story of Darby's Rangers in Fort Smith, where a group of solders, led by a Fort Smith native, were critical in surrounding the German forces in Italy. A similar portrayal of infamous battles is D*Face's "The Badlands" which is directly inspired by the stories of the Deputy U.S. Marshals and the infamous outlaws they pursued inside the native territory. This piece features aesthetically Western characters battling an unseen enemy amidst a sunset array of colors. Both of these installations feature infamous battles tied to the history of Fort Smith, but both portray only the heroes of the public memory and not the enemy. The present community of Fort Smith is in a similar struggle in negotiating their past and potential future, but it draws to question who is being highlighted as the heroes in this new narrative.

The most prominent display of this aggressive approach to addressing the future and past is D*Face's "War Paint." This mural is one of the immediate features seen on the wall of the Park at West End as visitors drive over the Arkansas River and into downtown Fort Smith. Featured is a Native American woman with a bow-and-arrow drawn, but instead of an arrow it is a paintbrush. A single tear falls down her cheek as her eyebrows furrow and she takes aim. "War Paint" takes a hostile approach towards fighting for a post-racial society and suggests that we use tools such as creativity and art to fight the demons of our past.

Other aspects of The Unexpected take a more hopeful lens towards the future. Askew One consulted with a modern Cherokee chief in Oklahoma to curate "Cherokee Women." This mural features the faces of four women close to said chief: his sister, daughter, wife, and mother. With strong, yet hopeful, expressions and starry details – the mural constructs the imagery of longing for a future beyond race and gender disparity. Similarly, Saner & AEC collaborated to create "Crossover," a mural that depicts the present and the past – while visualizing a future. The left half of the image has the "machine" of industrialization and urbanization, while the right has

the natural and spiritual aesthetics of native civilizations. All of the characters in this image are facing a native symbol of hope and prosperity. Despite the discrepancy between past and present Fort Smith, this art suggests that a collaborative future is possible.

In looking towards a more inclusive future for the South, in which the lines of racial and economic disparity are blurred, The Unexpected project paints a convoluted picture of class, industrialization, militarization, and globalization. The aesthetic elements of battle demonstrate the ongoing struggle towards this future of a new "American hero," the average, working-class citizen of contemporary Fort Smith. The art portrays a current and past fight leading towards potentially prosperous future for all, through the process of moving beyond our own problematic histories. The question remains whether all members of the community are being painted in that utopian future, or if they are being displaced for the sake of incoming creative elites.

Absolution from the Past

The final element of Southern Atonement apparent in the art of The Unexpected is the theme of absolution for the past, in which we, as a regional community of the South, seek symbolic redemption for our cultural sins. Those sins must be simultaneously acknowledged and redressed through contemporary constructions and values.

The first installation on The Unexpected map is Okuda San Miguel's "Universal Chapel," an abandoned house transformed into an explosion of color and geometric patterns. Miguel's signature art style is one that blends these organic shapes with human figures to "relay multifaceted themes of the universe and the creatures that inhabit it" (Azzarello, 2016a, para. 1). The visual performance of this installation at the east entrance of town asks visitors to consider the history of space and how it might be appropriated for storytelling. The once abandoned structure has been reimagined as a "chapel," or place of reprieve and worship, for artistic and

creative communication. The technicolor intricacies function as a public museum for demonstrating the complexities of the interwoven culture of Fort Smith and how they can coexist within the same space. As a form of creative-placemaking, the "Universal Chapel" invites visitors to acknowledge the abandoned or forgotten past and imagine the ways in which it might be renewed and revitalized.

Many of the other art installations depict a similar narrative with much less vibrancy and celebration. Portugal artist Vhils created "Portrait of a Cherokee Man," a solemn and overpowering display on the building wall of a small pocket park. Vhils is known for "destroying to create" and thus used jackhammers and chisels to break into the existing structure and paint to conceptualize this exhibition. This portrait was based on some of the very first photographs taken of Cherokee natives, the same tribe that would be driven through this same area during the forced migration. This art forces viewers to face the past directly, putting a face to the tragedy of public memory. By destroying existing structures to create this work, Vhils demonstrates the ways in which the past can be molded towards a more inclusive future while still acknowledging the sins of our past. In a way, Vhils is destroying the disguise of an inclusive community narrative to reveal what has been forgotten or removed, specifically the native inhabitants who were so violently driven from American soil.

One of D*Face's installations perfectly emulates this narrative of absolution. "Trail of Tears" features a large white heart, simple red target, and several arrows missing with one right on target. A tribute to the tragedy that was the historical Trail of Tears, these installations visualize the struggle of the indigenous people of this land and the tragic disenfranchisement and displacement they faced at the hands of historical oppressors. By forcing viewers to acknowledge

47

the past, these art pieces require an awareness of the historical landscape buried beneath contemporary establishments of the city.

Two Argentinian artists, Jaz and Patel, transformed another wall of the downtown area and entitled it "Rapto Divino en Fort Smith" translated to "divine rapture in Fort Smith." This mural depicts a motorbike rider being pulled and trapped from his vehicle by a colorful array of vines and weeds. Consumerist goods like watches, rings, and hats are flying away from the individual. In conjunction with absolution from our historical sins, perhaps "Rapto Divino" depicts an inevitable entrapment with our past, despite efforts to move forward. Even at a time of rapture, when we could potentially ascend to a new narrative or identity, the roots of our past run too deep for us to ever truly escape.

The community of Fort Smith, as portrayed in the rhetorical elements of The Unexpected, is both seeking forgiveness for a troubling memory of forced removal of indigenous people, criminality, and race relations while also exemplifying and remembering particular connections to their past for the sake of revitalization. Much the way Vhils chipped away at the decrepit wall to convey a portrait of a native man, The Unexpected is chipping away at the regional history in order to both acknowledge and seek forgiveness. The art initiatives are providing space for those historically disenfranchised and minority voices to be heard through the process of creative placemaking. In doing so, the community simultaneously seeks forgiveness, and to be absolved, from that past. Critically speaking, however, the contemporary commodification of that history for the sake of revitalization does not demonstrate a true atonement for that cultural guilt. Instead, it creates a source of social capital for the hegemonic, perhaps affluent, community members to feel a sense of place attachment for a physical space that conveys a cultural narrative they could not previously identify with. They may see themselves as disconnected from those

historical sins, but yet remain so far from the practice and implementation of inclusivity in the present.

Ultimately, the entire, city-wide journey of The Unexpected functions as a performance of Southern Atonement in and of itself. It should be noted that the majority of the art follows Garrison Avenue, which is marked as a part of the national Trail of Tears. A visitor walking through these exhibits is also walking along the historic pathway, currently dotted with plaques commemorating that history.

Also, if a visitor were to begin with the "end" of listed projects on the featured map, they would begin with D*Face's "War Paint." Again, this mural features an indigenous woman facing from the highway and pointing down the Trail of Tears with a dripping paint brush cocked in her bow. D*Face has explained that three of his art pieces are actually connected. "War Paint" is taking aim down Garrison Avenue, with colossal, heavy arrows buried in his installation "Arrows." Perhaps, these are the shots that missed their aim. Some of the other missed arrows are a part of "Trail of Tears," but there is that one single arrow that hit the target in the heart. This interwoven story of murals takes aim and hits the history of the Bad Lands in the heart with creative placemaking and art. The art revives a sordid past of displacement and criminal activity, highlighting it as distinct to the region. However, the art also aims the town's identity towards a new direction, a more hopeful future. The visitor is asked to walk this Trail of Tears, following the arrows, and atoning for that past. When journeying The Unexpected Project backwards, a visitor will end with the colorful and celebratory "Universal Chapel." This conglomerate of colors, human qualities, and festivity functions as a place to conclude the atonement process by placing the matter of absolution from the past – and the previous art – on the table. It is up to

Fort Smith to put forth an action of seeking forgiveness, and to ensure the chapel is big enough

to house all of the identities, public memories, and cultural histories of the community.

Conclusion

The Unexpected Project of Fort Smith, Arkansas, creatively and aesthetically depicts the

process and components of Southern Atonement as a process of community revitalization.

Southern Atonement requires a reconciliation with contemporary values with a sinful past and

asks for active construction of new identities and narratives as a source of seeking forgiveness.

Unfortunately, this process is often white-washed in order to alleviate contemporary guilt

without functionally addressing issues of disparity in public memory, social trust, and social

capital.

It should be noted that the murals of The Unexpected project are the product of freedom

in creation, in that the artists were able to depict their art without approval or organizers'

intervention. This leap of faith, the subsequent heavy nod to the culture and history of the region,

is truly an invention of creative placemaking. Fort Smith envisions itself as space, and

intersection of culture and community where the New South meets the Old West. The intentions

of including the sins of the past such as displacement, criminal activity, and poverty are apparent.

This collaborative effort with local Native tribes when depicting their cultural imagery created

social capital through bridging and thus demonstrated a move towards inclusivity between social

and cultural spheres.

Nonetheless, the concerns regarding neoliberalism, globalization, and gentrification

remain at the forefront of The Unexpected. A critical implication of this analysis is the potential

for the framework of The Unexpected as unchecked gentrification masquerading as art

appreciation. Neoliberalism as an ideology defines citizens as consumers whose democratic

choices are best exercised by buying and selling in late capitalism. By drawing primarily international, well-known artists to curate this art in Fort Smith, they are participating in a globalized system of commodification of culture. They are capitalizing on the heritage of the city to promote tourism on a global scale in hopes of economic revitalization. But who would truly prosper? If increased art and creative placemaking draws a class of creative elites to the area, Fort Smith may face an increase in cost of living and displacement of the current low-income or minority residents. Perhaps, this phenomenon would even require a whole new set of cultural sins to be atoned for.

A visitor to Fort Smith, Arkansas, is invited to relive over 200 years of history and experience the modern product of those turbulent centuries. The town has inspired films and literature alike and now envisions itself as a muse for public art. The Unexpected project takes visitors on a visual journey of the region's past and offers space for atonement and absolution from those sins. On the website advertising all the ways one might "Experience Fort Smith," they advertise that you will do more than make memories, "you will make history" (Experience Fort Smith, 2018). Southern Atonement asks those, as community members of the regional South, to consider which history, whose history, and in what way.

Chapter 2

A Billgrimage Across Arkansas

Hanging on the wall above the mantel of 117 South Hervey Street in the town of Hope, Arkansas, is a sepia-toned photo of Miss Mary's kindergarten class. There are two rows of eager young children holding pinwheel toys while glancing around, some at the camera and others into the distance. To the far left is a young William Jefferson Clinton, then known as "Billy Blythe," giving the photographer a mischievous side-eye. Decades later that boy in the striped shirt would find himself in the public eye and one-day serve as the President of the United States. Next to him is a young Joe Purvis, one of Clinton's lifelong friends and a prominent Arkansan lawyer. Also in the photo is Vince Foster, who would serve as Clinton's partner at Rose Law Firm and then in his administration. A few of the other kids include a young Mack McClarty, who served as Clinton's first White House Chief of Staff and then as Counselor to the President and Special Envoy for the Americas. This is not your typical kindergarten class. "President Clinton took Arkansas to the White House," says the tour guide as he points out the different boys, "And he didn't forget his friends. He knew where his roots were and he made us proud to be Arkansan again."

To be a proud contemporary Southerner, and Arkansan, is a conundrum in social, economic, and political regards. In an age of increased political polarization and heightened social tensions, the South offers a fertile ground for new political myth-making. A political myth is understood as an ideological narrative within a community that deals with past, present, and predicted political beliefs (Tudor, 1975). Political and cultural myths offer an overarching narrative with which to identify as a source of increased community engagement and sense of inclusivity. Placemaking, or the process of creating and recreating lived experiences through

political and material spaces, is a method of strengthening these community networks and socio-spatial relationships (Pierce, Martin, & Murphy, 2010). In regard to Arkansas, the Billgrimage – Bill Clinton's legacy of space – offers a prime strategy for political placemaking as source of engagement. The commemorative journey of the Billgrimage is a site for community leaders, members, and outsiders to meet and collectively engage with the process of exploring our historical past and determining our role in a political future.

This birth home of Bill Clinton is only the first site in the statewide Billgrimage, a journey which features stops in Hope, Hot Springs, Fayetteville, and Little Rock. Described as "an exciting opportunity not only to see sites related to President Clinton's time in Arkansas, but also experience the beauty and charm of his home state," this tour both constructs and exemplifies a particular narrative for Clinton and the state as a whole ("A Passport To," 2017). Tourism of the Billgrimage peaked when the Clinton Presidential Library opened in 2004, with curators creating a passport for visitors to get stamped at all four locations. This love for Bill Clinton, even decades after he left Arkansas in pursuit of bigger dreams of public service, is evident as community members and childhood friends still flock to see him at every political or historical event he is asked to attend in the state. He is still engaged in local politics, particularly during midterm elections, and Clinton's legacy is remembered fondly among many Democrats of Arkansas. It could be his folksy relatability and delivery when he speaks, or his unrivaled, proverbial ability to remember names. Either way, when Clinton returns home, he is often greeted with the same adoration and support that he garnered as governor and as a candidate for president. In the same way, the Billgrimage offers a journey of engagement, optimism, and big dreams of a cultural and political future all stemming from a place called Hope.

In this chapter, I examine how the rhetorical elements of public space within the Billgrimage constructs a political mythology that not only influences public memory of the past, but also inspires behavior and beliefs regarding the future. I argue that the Billgrimage functions as a political strategy in which visitors are asked to engage with and adopt a new Southern mythology, the myth of Southern Atonement. As a tour with a beginning and end, the Billgrimage is performative as a journey of reconciliation towards a more inclusive and equal future for all, while simultaneously depicting a white-washed narrative that deflects inconvenient realities about persistent inequality in the region. This chapter develops over several sections. First, I will explore the ways in which political space and place can be rhetorically analyzed and conclude with a demonstration of the importance of such spaces as a rhetorical strategy for engagement. I will provide a brief contextual description of the Billgrimage through its conception and the history of the sites I have included in my analysis. I will also foreground my critical reading of the Billgrimage through the lenses of race and atonement for the past. Finally, I will examine the Billgrimage, focusing on the ways in which the three formal characteristics of Southern Atonement are exemplified and performed in each site. I will conclude with a critical analysis of the ways in which the Billgrimage functions as a strategy for engagement with Southern Atonement and who is included in that call-to-action.

Politics of Space

Public space is inherently tied to the American democratic process as a source of participatory rhetoric, collective memory, and identity. Parkinson (2009) discussed the importance of public space in politics in that "democratic life gains its energy and vitality from millions of small-scale participatory moments in many different locations at many different times, all contributing to a diffuse public conversation" (p. 76). That is to say that physical space

provides a platform in which to widen the public sphere and engage the average citizen in discourse. Furthermore, space and place can illustrate powerful narratives of identity and belonging. Public spaces are inherent intersections of social relationships as well as key symbolic and material artifacts used for reflection and engagement (Davis, 2011). Through symbolic rituals and performative rhetoric, public space can function as an action-oriented tool that asks what citizens or visitors should be expected to do in a democratic society (Parkinson, 2009). Additionally, as Dickinson, Blair, and Ott (2010) argue, public spaces are meaningful for public memory in two ways, first by inviting audiences to consider how particular places inflect and circulate our emotional investments. Secondly, they ask audiences to understand how those places are "rhetorically-rich" with symbolic dimensions of significance. Taken in conjunction with one another, these two aspects of meaningfulness regarding space and place demonstrate the critical role it can play in the political sphere. Public spaces with inherent political associations help anchor a visitor's identity, role, and public memory in the democratic process.

This concept of public space being appropriated, or reappropriated, as a political strategy towards identity is not profound or unique to the Billgrimage or the South. Previous literature has understood public space to "enact identity and activities that allow personal memories, cultural histories, imagination, and feelings to enliven the sense of 'belonging' through human and spatial relationships" (Catherwood-Ginn & Leonard, 2015, p. 28). Public space functions as a tool for increasing community belonging, and in doing so engaging community members with particular beliefs and ideologies. This construction of group and communal identity is a crucial aspect to enacting civic engagement. Linenthal (2006) explains how distinctive and commemorative public spaces are essential as "America's greatest university without walls" (p. 123). Space and place can be a prime source of civic education when curators take on the

responsibility of inclusive preservation and integrating regional narratives with problematic histories. It is when those efforts are not taken, however, that coarse triumphalism and preened ethnocentrism flourish (Linenthal, 2006). In this chapter, I seek to understand whether the Billgrimage upholds that responsibility of shaping a progressive narrative of experience through Southern Atonement, or falls short for the sake of relieving dissonance.

Political museums and monuments, specifically, invite visitor engagement, and in that sense, the analysis in this chapter follows Kanter's (2016) approach to presidential libraries as a method to describe the performative elements of the Billgrimage. I will examine the ways in which curated exhibits, movement throughout the sites, audience engagement, and omitted narratives function to persuade a visitor to engage and perform Southern Atonement. I will also determine the strategic methods behind the Billgrimage and the potential for social and policy reform within those messages.

The Billgrimage: Four Stops and a Statewide Journey

The Billgrimage is a journey following the footsteps of Bill Clinton, the most well-known politician out of Arkansas, and the tracing of his lasting legacy. The sites of the Billgrimage are tasked not only with telling the history of Clinton's own life, but also in constructing a public memory of Arkansas from a political perspective. This research will use the official Billgrimage sites listed in "A Passport to the Clinton Places in Arkansas: A Billgrimage," an official handout from the Clinton House Museum in Fayetteville, Arkansas. This includes The Clinton Birthplace Museum, the plaque of his boyhood home in Hot Springs, the old Hot Springs High School, the Clinton House Museum, and The Clinton Presidential Library ("A Passport To," 2017). While there are other public spaces attributed to the Clinton legacy in all four towns, these are the sites that are more formally recognized as part of the official tour. Notably, the "Passport" not only

lists the traveling distance between each of the cities, but a brief historical summary of Clinton's time at each location as well. Thus, the pamphlet immediately constructs a timeline for the Billgrimage and when followed chronologically allows the visitors to directly engage with Clinton's own journey across Arkansas and into the political sphere.

The Billgrimage begins with President William Jefferson Clinton's Birthplace Home in the southwest region of Hope, Arkansas. The site is the actual home, built in 1917, in which Clinton spent the first four years of his life ("President William Jefferson," 2017). The home was first preserved by the non-profit Clinton Birthplace Foundation, Inc., as President Bill Clinton's 1st Home, and the group continued to restore and preserve the house from 1992 to 2011 ("President Bill Clinton's 1st," 2011). When the Foundation first began their ownership and restoration project in 1992, shortly after Clinton took office, they largely relied on local, private donations and fundraisers to finance their goals of preservation. For instance, one project was creating a brick structure in the yard set around a podium that honors President Clinton. Before laying these bricks, the Foundation requested donations from the community for a chance to have a name placed on one of the bricks. Thus, those names are forever a part of the history of the birthplace. In 2009, President Obama signed the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 and the Secretary of the Interior accepted the property on December 14, 2010, establishing it as a national historic site and a unit of the National Park System ("President Bill Clinton's 1st," 2011). In 2011, the Foundation officially bestowed the site to the "community and nation," and it has since been an official property of the National Park System ("President William Jefferson," 2017).

Clinton spent his formative years in Hot Springs, Arkansas, a community nestled in the Ouachita Mountains. It is his experiences in this city that Clinton credits his passion for

education reform and public service ("A Passport To," 2017). Despite this claim, there is very little here in regard to the Clinton legacy. Unlike any of the other three cities, there is no site or museum for specifically regaling the tales of Bill Clinton, limited mostly to a plaque set outside his boyhood home on Park Avenue, which is currently a private residence. Additionally, the old Hot Springs High School, which has currently been converted into studio apartments and is also a private residence, is a recommended stop for the Clinton tour, but it offers little in the form of exhibits.

The Billgrimage then takes visitors to Fayetteville, Arkansas, where Clinton moved in 1973 to teach at the University of Arkansas Law School. The Clinton House, on Clinton Drive (formerly California Boulevard), was acquired by the University of Arkansas in 2005 and the non-profit Clinton House Museum was formed (Bartholomew, 2016). The non-profit that runs the house operates in partnership with the Fayetteville Advertising and Promotion Commission (Bartholomew, 2016). The museum centers around the Clintons' marriage and subsequent early family life as well as Bill Clinton's early political career in Arkansas. The house has been listed on the National Register of Historic Homes since 2010. Bartholomew (2016) reports that when the Clinton family visited in 2008, Hillary remarked on the shabby tilework and wallpapering that Bill had done that still remains in the home.

The final stop on the Billgrimage journey is Little Rock, Arkansas, the state's capitol. The Clinton family spent a total of sixteen years in Little Rock, twelve of which were spent in the Governor's Mansion. While the mansion and the Arkansas State Capitol could be included in this analysis as sites of the Billgrimage, they are not spaces dedicated purely to the Clintons. This study will focus on the Clinton Presidential Library and Park, located on the banks of the Arkansas River in the downtown market district. The Clinton Presidential Center is maintained

by the Clinton Foundation, an operating foundation that raises money for their public service and charitable programs ("Clinton Presidential Center," 2017). The architects James Polshek and Richard Olcott designed the center to echo the nearby Rock Island Railroad, as a "tangible link between yesterday and tomorrow" (Kanter, 2016, p. 43). Clinton left office in 2001 and his Presidential Library was dedicated in 2004. This is the only site included in this analysis that requires payment for entry, and also the only site with ever-changing exhibits of art and history.

Given that all of these stops were unified as a single trail of museums and historic sites dedicated to Clinton and his legacy, it is important to note that the myth of Southern Atonement that functions at each of these stops is a tool for those with power in the South, typically White and upper-class citizens with financial influence, to articulate their vision for a region with a controversial history. A combination of financial resources and progressive ideology leads Southerners, in particular, to reconstruct a record of public memory that functions to alleviate their own guilt and centers matters of race and culture within broader American cultural and historical memory. The Billgrimage presents a prime example of this power structure of revisionist history and public memory as a strategy for influencing the future. Many, if not most, of the sites along the Billgrimage were historically curated through the funds and dedication of Clinton's most loyal supporters, particularly those with the financial and social power to do so. While still a product of community efforts to use space as a performative strategy of engagement, the Billgrimage is simultaneously a product of identity construction within the social hierarchy of Arkansas. It is then crucial to turn a critical eye towards presentation, and inclusion, of race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic disparity within this journey.

<center>**The Billgrimage and the Myth of Southern Atonement**</center>

Southern Atonement understands the regional community of South to be processing the guilt of the past through selective remembering and identity construction. We must navigate the dissonance of what it means to be a contemporary Southerner that hopes for a more inclusive future despite harmful wealth, race, and gender disparities of the past, particularly in the political and civil sphere. The entire Billgrimage journey serves as a strategy for engaging the audience within this process of atonement. This is done through presentation of Bill Clinton as an authentic and engaged Arkansas politician unique to the state, and thus a credible source for determining our future. By framing the nostalgic past and acknowledgment of historical sins around Clinton's legacy of authenticity, the Billgrimage uses political power and authority to dictate how and why the audience should engage with these messages. It is through this influence that the journey provides an opportunity for the audience to potentially move beyond the past and take on their own role of public service as a form of communal atonement.

I will structure my analysis around the ways in which the three characteristics of Southern Atonement are represented and exemplified throughout the sites. I will include the ways in which visitors are asked to both consume the strategic messages and engage with the myth as a political strategy. I will then assert that the Billgrimage performs the interactionist component of atoning and defining who is invited to participate in that process.

Absolution from the Past

The first notion of Southern Atonement evident in the Billgrimage is seeking to be absolved from the historical sins of the past. It is important to distinguish the two key elements of both nostalgia for what once was combined with forgiveness and, on occasion, revision of the past to relieve guilt. The Birthplace Museum in Hope provides the most comprehensive air of

<center>60</center>

nostalgia for a "simpler time." Strewn throughout the recreated living room and dining room are toys from the era of Clinton's childhood. At one point the National Parks tour guide says, "When Clinton came to visit he told us the only big difference was that it looks better than he even remembers it." This phrase gives visitors the direct notion of a romanticized reconstruction of Clinton's first four years of his life. This phenomenon directly exemplifies the postsouthern understanding of reconstructed culture as a form of commodified public memory and identity. As you continue to his childhood bedroom, there is a worn bed spread of the popular character Hop Along Cassidy, along with photos of Clinton dressed in a cowboy costume. In the kitchen, along with the era-appropriate oven and fridge, is a calendar on the wall from 1947, the year after Clinton was born.

In the Clinton House Museum in Fayetteville this narrative continues with a focus on Clinton's early political years as a spritely young law professor at the University of Arkansas. As you first enter the home from the front door, you are immediately faced with Bill and Hillary Clinton as young and romantic, with a replica of Hillary's $53 Dillard's wedding dress on display in the corner. Throughout every room are cases of official and homemade voting and campaign memorabilia from both his state and national runs for office. There are quotations with him depicted as the "comeback kid," as they acknowledge his failures and losses but depict the stereotypical "pick yourself up by your bootstraps and persevere" rhetoric ever-present in Southern culture. This curated exhibit performs the function of acknowledging misgivings of the past while still romanticizing the journey. The furnishings and kitchen are once again kept with appliances from the era in which they lived here, with photographs to prove the similarities in recreation. There is a nostalgic notion for a youthful glee and passion for public service constructed through each room of the small home.

The Presidential Library in Little Rock, however, moves beyond the aesthetics of nostalgia and addresses the forgiveness aspects of this theme of Southern Atonement. One key component of Bill's life story, as depicted here, is the impact Martin Luther King's speech and The Little Rock Nine had on Clinton as a child and young adult. There is a direct relationship drawn between Clinton and recognizing the problematic past of Arkansas's race relations. He is described as having watched the Little Rock Nine incident on television only a few towns away, after having grown up around his grandfather's integrated grocery store in Hope. Plastered across the display of the Little Rock Nine is a quotation attributed to Clinton directly that says, "Seeing the Little Rock Nine face down the angry mob fascinated me, and inspired an emotional bond that has lasted a lifetime." This is a direct acknowledgement of the region's problematic past but the ways in which Bill Clinton sought to atone for those sins through public service. It also exemplifies how he later presented the Congressional Gold Medal to each of the Little Rock Nine on behalf of the U.S. Congress in a special ceremony at the White House. This story is included as means of showing the ways in which he has sought forgiveness, and also invites the audience to perform atonement through commemoration.

From a dynamic perspective, the rhetoric surrounding these exhibits of forgiveness for a nostalgic past should be taken in conjunction with the discourse and community surrounding each site. For instance, the Birthplace Home was originally restored and maintained entirely through a community led non-profit, suggesting an internal validation for the public memory it constructs. Interestingly, it is through this perspective that the site of Hot Springs stands out. There are no distinct museums or exhibits to recognize Clinton's history in Hot Springs beyond a few plaques. The fact that his boyhood home remains a private residence in which signs are posted reminding visitors that no tours or close photographs are allowed demonstrates a potential

disconnect from contemporary Hot Springs culture and Clinton's legacy. In moving forward

from a problematic past, Hot Springs is potentially trying to distinguish its current beliefs and

cultural identity as separate to that of the political myth constructed by the Billgrimage. Thus, for

any visitor on the Clinton trail, Hot Springs represents a stark reality that the past is not far

behind, that nostalgia for simpler times is an exercise that deflects experiences of racial strife.

Yet, the sites of the Billgrimage collectively demonstrate how the myth of Southern

Atonement functions to create a romanticized notion of Arkansas from the 40s to the 70s in order

to suggest a path out of fractured communities, racism and inequality, and rampant poverty. The

attention to the period between the 1940s and 1970s encourages visitors to traverse through

nostalgia and embrace the political work of bettering the world. Strategically, these sites engage

the visitors with the past and ask them to recognize both the good and bad that comes with it.

This is demonstrated well at the Clinton House Museum, when visitors are asked to sit and watch

a montage of Clinton's campaign footage when he ran for congress and governor. The small,

intimate viewing room invites the audience to be comfortable while potentially reminiscing over

the old footage of a progressive Bill Clinton uniting everyday people across the state. The

experience constructs narratives of moving beyond problematic education and healthcare reform

in the state, rectifying problems of the past. The Billgrimage asks the audience to reflect on their

own nostalgic political and social past and determine what needs to be forgiven and how they

should move forward in the present day.

Distinctiveness in Constructed Authenticity

Regional distinctiveness is a pervasive element of both Southern and Arkansan culture.

Within the context of Southern Atonement, distinctiveness refers to pride and appreciation for

constructed authenticity from a postsouthern lens. This is to say that we are seeking a source of

pride from constructed lived experience based on stereotypes and myths of the South in order to alleviate the dissonance from the void of a stable and unchallenged identity in a contemporary world. From a statewide interpretation of this theme, the Birthplace, a National Park site, displays an entire map of other Arkansas National and State Parks and depicts the unique beauty of the Natural State. In the Clinton House Museum, this display of being distinctly Arkansan is constructed through the multiple photographs of Clinton during his time as a political leader of Arkansas. They demonstrate how he was truly proud to be an Arkansan as he visited all communities big and small and actively engaged in what they had to offer. There are photographs of Clinton at the Tontitown Grape Festival, the Hempstead County Fair, and the Ozark Folk Festival. There are several images of Clinton working in agricultural environments whether with animals or out on farms, a major component to southern Arkansas identity. These photographs present a visual notion of authenticity of Clinton as both an Arkansan and as a Southerner. They play up particular culture types of agriculture, music, and food in such a way that increases Clinton's credibility as a spokesperson for the South. Furthermore, there are multiple photographs of Clinton enjoying the local cuisine and even a direct plug to McClard's BBQ in Hot Springs. These images depict a man who is proud of his roots and who enjoys the authentic experience of local events, jobs, and cuisine of Arkansas.

Another crucial element of distinctiveness portrayed in the Billgrimage is that of music. Each of the three museums have photographs or artifacts of Bill Clinton and his saxophone. In the Birthplace, there are small blurbs of his growing love of music surrounding the record player, along with his favorite records. In the Clinton Museum, there are photographs with Clinton performing with local high school marching bands as well at the University of Arkansas Razorbacks, tying him and his affection for music back to the local communities. In the

Presidential Library, they have one of his own musical instruments as well as photographs of him either performing or being close with famous musicians, particularly Black Blues performers. This functions as part of the authentic distinctiveness narrative in that the Mississippi Delta of Arkansas is considered the Birthplace of Blues. By subtle recognition of this unique quality of Arkansas and an Arkansas man, the Billgrimage entices the audience to begin attributing music to part of unique, lived experience in cultural identity.

These elements of regional and communal distinctiveness construct a public memory of pride and loyalty to Arkansas. The aesthetic, substantive elements of these displays are rhetorically built on concepts of community, engagement, and small-town life. These messages of distinctiveness in Southern Atonement are meant to strategically motivate the audience to be engaged within their local community and to be proud of their cultural roots. The Birthplace quotes Clinton as remembering the unique network of creative storytellers he grew up hearing and how in strengthened his ties to home and Hope. The Billgrimage hopes to reconstruct this narrative of engaged, interactive community members who work collaboratively to maintain their regional pride and to uphold contemporary political beliefs and values of today. This component of Southern Atonement asks the audiences to identify and examine the ways in which Southern culture is distinct, unique, and inclusive for all Southerners. In doing so it positions the audience to directly engage with their own authenticity as a Southerner and the intersectional identities constructed there.

Hope for a "Post-Racial" Future

The most prevalent theme of Southern Atonement found within the rhetoric of the Billgrimage is that of hope for a more inclusive future in a "post-racial" South. It is this notion of Southern Atonement that seeks to blur the lines of disparity between Southerners, whether that

be through race, class, or gender. The myth asks all Southerners to engage and atone for the historical sins in the hope for an inclusive future.

This narrative begins at the Birthplace, in Clinton's own boyhood bedroom. Pointing at the train tracks just outside the second-floor windows of the home, the tour guide says, "Bill used to watch the trains from his window as a boy and wonder where they were going and if he himself would ever get to go." This construction of big dreams from humble beginnings is a key component of Clinton's own biographical history. Beyond that, however, the theme is recurring throughout the Billgrimage. For instance, in the Clinton House Museum, there are photos in the entry way, back room, and above the fire place of Bill and Hillary with their daughter Chelsea and then their granddaughter. These photos rhetorically present their own family as growing and them bringing new members into this world for a hopeful and optimistic future. The Billgrimage presents the Clintons as confident in the political prospects for their own family, and thus reassuring and engaging visitors with this narrative as it relates to their own lives.

In the Presidential Library, there are clips of videos from Clinton's campaign, some of which exclaim messages such as "Clinton sought to find a new direction for all people to change." This inclusive perception of new directions of equality are especially prevalent throughout this particular site. Clinton is the only former president to have an entire exhibit of their library dedicated to the professional history and successes of his wife, Hillary Clinton. It demonstrates an evolving push to a more gender-inclusive narrative within this hopeful future. Furthermore, at the time of analysis the Presidential Library had an extensive exhibit on the life of Nelson Mandela and touched on his relationship with President Clinton. This, in conjunction with the displays of Clinton's work with the Little Rock Nine, demonstrate the possibility of a more racially diverse and less problematic future.

Even the sites of exclusion on the Billgrimage present some hope for the future. The old Hot Springs High School is listed as part of the Billgrimage due to Clinton spending most of his school years in the city. This old high school, though, has been converted into art studios and apartments specifically for those in the community living with disability. While not directly tied to Clinton, the ways in which this facility has been repurposed presents an inclusive nature for disabled community members as well. The Billgrimage posits itself as a political tour of the state that is accessible to contemporary values across gender, race, and ability.

This post-racial conception of the future, however, requires an acceptance of forgiveness from those who have been victimized in the past. Unfortunately, the Billgrimage does not invite all audiences to fairly engage with this forgiveness. Instead, any audience member is asked to conceptualize the ways in which they might atone and subsequently forgive themselves, even if they are a part of the hegemonic, oppressive culture. This openly interactive component of the Billgrimage serves as a postsouthern conception of disconnect from the sins of the past by not openly acknowledging the problematic realities of our present. One example of this common, interactive element found across all three museum-based sites of the Billgrimage is *The Man from Hope* video from Clinton's 1992 Acceptance Speech. This video has been recognized by previous scholars as the beginning of a new era of convention and campaign rhetoric, one that chose to go through a biographical story that showed the audience why Clinton was not only a competent candidate but also why he was "worthy" of being president. Rosteck (1994), for instance, demonstrated how the video details the story of Clinton's broken childhood home, of pulling himself up by the sweat of his brow, and of his deep religious faith. I argue an extension of this point, that the Billgrimage purposefully includes this video through interactive exhibits to engage the audience directly with Bill's own narrative. In the Birthplace, this is the only aspect

of the site in which the audience is asked to directly participate. There is a touchscreen video pad on a podium that allows you select particular clips from the video that exhibit various aspects of Clinton's life: family, history, politics, and of course the community of Hope. In this interactive display, the guest can also view the introduction of the video from the Democratic National Convention, in which the speaker claims that Clinton's story is "truly an American story about a man that started life in difficult circumstances" and "who chose to go home and go to work for the people that gave him his start." The rhetoric of these video clips centers strongly around the idea of hope for the future through public service and serving one's own community.

The Presidential Library shows a clip of the end of the video, in which Clinton himself declares that "we've got to be one country again" and that he "hoped that from this day forward, we could be one nation of coming together in instead of coming apart." This speaks directly to the post-racial future Clinton and the Billgrimage envisions for southern states like Arkansas. In including an interactive element, however, the sites ask the visitors to engage with this narrative and to atone by determining their own narratives of politics and engagement as well.

Some artifacts demonstrate this theme of hope and inclusivity by creating an intimacy between the audience and Clinton as though he is directly addressing every individual visitor. One key example of this is in the Presidential Library, where guests can use an audio tour to hear Clinton himself speaking about policy, community revitalization, and his own biographical background. Furthermore, these themes of a post-racial future through Southern Atonement are strategically meant to inspire the audience to pursue public service dreams of their own. The most obvious example of this in the exact replica of the Oval Office in which guests can sit behind the overwhelming wooden desk, pick up the phone, and take a photo. It calls on the visitor to examine their own role as leaders in this hope for a future of equality.

It should be addressed, however, that the general spatial rhetoric of the Billgrimage ultimately asks for a post-racial future without delivering on the forgiveness it seeks. As previously mentioned, Brooks (2011) explains that on an individual basis some may feel as though race does not matter, or does not matter as much, as it did in the past. It is this problematic "colorblind" narrative that the Billgrimage puts forth. The exhibits throughout the journey demonstrate the trials of the past and posit Clinton as a civil rights icon for acknowledging and recognizing Arkansas' history with racial disparity. Absent from the walls of the Clinton Library, or even among the posters of the Clinton House and Birth Home, is any acknowledgement of continuing racial, economic, and gender difference. This is juxtaposed to Central High School right down the street from the Clinton Library, which supposedly inspired Clinton to his career as a public servant. Central High and the Little Rock school district has been undergoing years of re-segregation through social isolation across class and race and initiatives towards charter schools within the district. Corrigan (2018) rhetorically examined the sixtieth celebration of the Black trauma event of the Little Rock Nine and determined and unwillingness to address contemporary race relations within the district or the that the privatizing of public education is a critical factor in the contemporary re-segregation of the city. At this celebration, Bill Clinton himself was invited back to speak – perhaps largely due to his political narrative of influence from the Little Rock Nine and his ongoing ties to contemporary politics in Arkansas. Nonetheless, his speech at the celebration was at once bizarrely self-congratulatory and peppered with race-talk (Corrigan, 2018). In his speech, he highlights the role that he played in the public-eye for race policy and memory-work in the state, but does little to push for a contemporary engagement agenda beyond that heroic frame (Corrigan, 2018). Much in the same way Clinton spoke at that celebration, the Billgrimage constructs a performance that

acknowledges the sins of the past, glorifies the work Clinton has done, and then asks the visitor to begin their own path of civic engagement. The sites do not, however, convey a message of what ongoing battles should still be fought and who should be fighting them.

One must recognize that to be forgiven for the sins of the past, the community as a whole must acknowledge across the board that Black communities in Arkansas and across the South still face systematic racism and oppression. This component of a "post racial" future in Southern Atonement dreams of striving towards that utopia of negotiated race relations in which everyone is both included and remembered in our memory and identity. The Billgrimage fails to provide that inclusivity of race, gender, and ethnicity. Instead, this rhetorical journey requires that the distribution of historical sins within our public memory be carried equally among all groups, visitors, and community members, and despite an unequal heritage built from those burdens.

Conclusion

The Billgrimage of Arkansas acts as a political strategy for engaging the community with the political myth of Southern Atonement. This contemporary mythology expands the themes of the myth of the New South. Southern Atonement functions as a tactic of social reconciliation and political action towards a more inclusive future. The Billgrimage asks audience members to perform the act of atonement through acknowledging the problematic and nostalgic past while then engaging with a more inclusive future. It should be noted, however, that some narratives and identities are not directly included within the accounts of this mythology. The Billgrimage asks both the sinners and the victims to equally carry the heavy burden of Southern political heritage while working together towards a future of equality.

A major implication of this study is the examination of common public spaces as a source for developing cultural mythology and identities, particularly in regions tense with political and

social polarization. Recent research has examined the ways in which engagement in identity recovery and memory work in the face of trauma is a method of community healing and liberation (King, 2016). This concept of political mythmaking in public spaces, particularly political commemorative sites, could also be a strategy for social reunification and reconciliation in light of social and historical differences.

Additionally, this research suggests that public memory and cultural identity is malleable, and future research should be done to examine the ways in which narratives and the curated exhibits of public spaces change over time to adapt to contemporary values and beliefs. This analysis implies that collectively accepted and validated spaces of rhetorical identity construction should be examined for their depiction of public memory. This implication could be extended, however, to examine the ways in which placemaking and identity construction could also disrupt hegemonic public memory. For instance, Quayle, Sonn, and Kasat (2016) determined that expanded space and narratives of underrepresented groups within a community can inform public memory and offer a source of cultural continuity and recognition previously unfounded. That is to say that by including commemorative sites of engagement that oppose the culturally dominant public memory, space can be source of challenging non-inclusive identity and mythmaking.

Finally, this research examines the ways in which postsouthern studies could be reconstructed to apply to communication studies and political mythmaking. I argue that this "sense of place" in postsouthern studies can manifest in reality much in the same way southern literature mimics contemporary and historical notions of Southern reality. By expanding this subset of southern studies to the realm of political engagement, one can understand how to

contemporarily examine physical public spaces for constructed authenticity, public memory, and cultural identity.

Previous research has claimed that a visitor emerging from the Clinton Library experience may feel mentally exhausted but also pressed with a sense of urgency about the important work of public service and civic engagement (Kanter, 2016). This analysis demonstrates how that sense is expanded as a direct call for the visitor to engage with and ascribe to the constructed mythology of Southern Atonement. This entire Billgrimage journey serves as a strategy for engaging the audience within the process of atonement. This is done through a performance of the past as both nostalgic while acknowledging the sins that were committed, presenting Bill Clinton as an authentic and engaged Arkansas politician with pride for his roots, and providing an opportunity for the audience to move beyond the past and take on their own role of public service.

At the last stop on the Billgrimage, the Clinton Library posits itself as a conclusory component of Bill's story. The visitors begin with his achievements, followed by a timeline of how he got there, and then are introduced to those who supported him along the way. Finally, the visitor is told it is "your turn" to serve your public. As the visitor stands at the end of the Clinton Library, they can look ahead to the Rock Island Railroad Bridge across the Arkansas River, a link to the nostalgic past. To the right, they are faced with scenery considered authentic to The Natural State, with well-manicured grassy hills rolling into the wilderness. Finally, to their left they can see the skyline and capitol building in downtown Little Rock, symbolizing growth, the future, and equal opportunities for prosperity. Standing in this crossroads at the heart of Southern Atonement, a visitor may find themselves in a place of hope for the future, too. This space begs

the question, however, of who has the privilege of envisioning that hopeful future, and whose

history is being revised or selectively forgotten to alleviate a hegemonic guilt.

Chapter 3

Mythmaking in the Delta

The mighty Mississippi River and its tributaries have molded the lands of the Arkansas Delta for centuries. In a map produced by Harold Fisk in 1944, you can see the colorful snakes of Ol' Man River changing courses that cut through the flatlands, each time reshaping and reimagining the entire region. Driving along Interstate 40 from the capitol of Little Rock towards Memphis, the roads become straighter and the landscape flatter, with crops of soy beans, rice, and cotton as far as the eye can see. The seemingly smooth Delta, however, is deceptively rugged and uneven thanks to a history of flooding and sedimentation. A deception not unlike the culture of the region itself: riddled with obscurities, sins, and surprises.

The history of the Delta is as rich as its soil, but also pierced with whispers of racism and poverty. In 1935, Rupert Vance proclaimed that the region was "Cotton obsessed, Negro obsessed . . . Nowhere but in the Mississippi Delta are antebellum conditions so nearly preserved" (Cobb, 1992, p. 153, 183). Even today a passerby will find meticulously restored antebellum-style mansions alongside shambles of sharecropper shacks dotting the horizon. It is this juxtaposition of these two public memories of the South that fuel the modern tourism industry within the region.

Contemporarily, aspects of the proverbial history of the South have been selectively extended or omitted in the travel and tourism industry. Southerners, particularly those within the Delta region, have sought to remember their past through heritage tourism while, in the same breath, disconnecting from the problematic identity of their predecessors. That being said, the tourism industry is a vital economic source for much of the region and for the United States as a whole. In 2016, the U.S. Travel Association reported over 2.2 billion individual trips with over

$990.3 billion spent by these domestic travelers ("US Travel and Tourism," 2016). In Arkansas alone, more than 28 million visitors who spent a combined $7.2 billion visited the state in 2015, a 7.7% growth in revenue from the previous year (Souza, 2016). Not only is the travel and tourism industry generally profitable for the state and region, but popular tourism spaces can act as a vehicle for communicating beliefs and values within a community and to visitors. Smith (1982) observed that the character and function of Southern tourism, and the rhetorical and promotional aspects of such, provide a critical assessment of an interpretation of the regional identity and heritage. The significance of utilizing this profitable industry as a rhetorical tool for identity construction has not been lost on the region.

In the rural Delta community of Wilson, Arkansas, tourism and community revitalization are being used to both reconstruct the past and look towards the future. This small town of only 900 people was built under the legacy of the Wilson Company, once one of the largest cotton plantations in the South ("History," 2017). Founded in 1886 by Robert E. Lee Wilson, the company boasted 57,000 acres and more than 11,000 employees, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers in its heyday ("History," 2017). Nonetheless, the town saw a massive decline in economic activity over the last few decades, but pictures itself in the uphill climb of a cultural revival (Severson, 2014). The town's website proclaims itself as a "small town with great ambitions where the world meets the Delta" ("Where the World," 2017). The community of Wilson, in the face of economic disparity and population decline, has attempted to revitalize itself through a mediated experience and the reappropriation of space. The primary goal of these efforts is to connect to the past in order to make way for an exceptional present ("About Us," 2017). As their past is interwoven with the systemic problems of race and class in the cotton

industry, however, they must be selective in how they depict their own collective memory through their public spaces.

In this chapter, I examine how the rhetorical elements of space in Wilson, Arkansas, are utilized to reconstruct a sense of authenticity through public memory of the past and revitalization efforts towards the future. I argue that the space of Wilson has been appropriated and reimagined as the actualization of the myth of Southern Atonement as a community identity. The troubled history of Wilson, paired with the active efforts of revitalization and reappropriation of space, make the community an exemplar case study of the ways one might actively engage in the atonement process and the potential consequences of constructing a selective narrative as an identity. This argument develops in several sections. First, I will examine the ways in which authenticity can be rhetorically constructed, and the role it plays in heritage tourism in the South. Then, I will examine the intersections of physical and digital placemaking as a source of identity construction and public memory. I will also look at the literature regarding urban and community revitalization efforts and the benefits and consequences of those movements. Next, I will briefly explore the history of Wilson, particularly focusing on the Wilson Company, The Delta School, and the arts and culture. Finally, I will examine the spaces of Wilson, including the reappropriated places, the constructed tourism experiences, and the community's presentation of identity online. Specifically, I will focus on the ways in which Wilson has used the three formal characteristics of Southern Atonement as their identity. I will conclude with a critical review of the implications and consequences of these revitalization efforts and the actualization of Southern Atonement within the community.

Constructed Authenticity in Regional Identity

The history of the South is one riddled with sectionalism across racial, economic, and regional divides. The communal identity through Southern sectionalism renders "symbolic places of which narratives, myths, and collective fantasies have found its expression" (Davis, 2013, p. 111). Specifically, regional identities - unlike states, cities, and counties - are not constructed from stable, unwavering boundaries (Tell, 2012). Instead, regional identities are defined by broader configurations of politics, history, and culture (Powell, 2007). Smith (1985) observed the many ways in which the South, as a region, has often found pride in the distinct rhetorical and poetic constructions of its cultural history. The regional South is the product of mythmaking, public memory, and a maintenance of hegemonic beliefs and values.

In the midst of global homogenization, the desire for narratives of genuine cultural distinctiveness has grown. Scholars of Postsouthern Studies have examined the ways in which working-class, racially disenfranchised, and rural identities have been codified in the name of constructed Southern authenticity (Vernon, 2016). Authenticity in that structured representation, however, is often abstracted and notoriously difficult to grasp. MacCannell (1973) addressed the ways in which reproduction and reconstruction of lived experiences in the tourism industry are ubiquitous, and thus authenticity in modernity is merely the "experience of authenticity." As the rhetorical authorities of the tourism industry craft and package the past, they must often appeal to an authenticity that privileges particular narratives or public memory. As King (2006) notes, these constructions of cultural authenticity often "mirror a larger struggle between powerful institutionalized voices and marginalized communities" (p. 235). Reconstructions of history and culture often function as a means of legitimizing systemic and hegemonic values (Hobsbawm &

Ranger, 1984). This constructed authenticity is inherently inauthentic, and instead a product meant to represent a hegemonic narrative and cultural experience for the visitors.

One of the most prevalent constructed authentic experiences in the South is that of blues tourism, based on a predominantly Black music tradition that has roots in sharecropping and poverty (King, 2006). Southern states, particularly those along the Mississippi River, are now capitalizing on the growing popularity of blues tourism and are attempting to create a "mediated" experience for tourists ironically seeking authenticity and a "genuine" cultural understanding (Titon, 1998, p. 5). While offering the opportunity to see something different, cities that are remade to attract tourists seem more and more alike and are increasingly inauthentic, or at best a mediated experience of constructed authenticity (Fainstein & Judd, 1999, pp. 12-13). The rhetorical dimensions of constructed authenticity in regional identity and lived experiences, particularly in the South, play a critical role in the public memory and cultural narratives of the communities they represent.

Idealizations of Southern and rural utopia may be encouraged and endorsed by spaces of cultural discourse (Wallis, 2017). Oftentimes, the social imaginaries of this constructed authenticity include unrealistic, over optimistic representations that conceal the reality of the regional experience. Heritage tourism is an example of this often utopian and commodified industry, but it has been noted to have some potential benefits for community members being essential to the redevelopment and reclamation of public space (Boyd, 2000). While there is a focus on minority communities as racial heritage tourism destinations, there are potential benefits to this growing industry (Doggett, 1993). Dickinson (1996) acknowledged that heritage tourism has become an important feature of tourism development strategies as a cultivation effort of local business. While heritage tourism draws visitors to historic sites for educational

experiences in "cultural roots," the target communities must also capitalize on those heritage sites. They may do so by developing a critical mass of activities like restaurants and shops and strategic messaging about what is unique to this site as compared to other heritage tourism destinations (Dickinson, 1996). Thus, the industry has potential for creating economic growth within a community, despite a commodified cultural experience for the tourists.

Unfortunately, as Boyd (2000) examines, heritage tourism is also a tool to construct idealized visions of space and distract from less appealing qualities, which both "disrupts and repeats historical patterns of racial (and wealth) displacement" (p. 108). Desired authenticity in heritage tourism is often characterized by "facilitating or staging a glance at the back stage for the tourists" (MacCannell, 1999, p. 99). In doing so, this often results in the "cultural exploitation of the local population and its artifacts" (van den Berghe & Keyes, 1984, p. 344). When utilizing constructed authenticity through heritage tourism a community should be aware of the racial and wealth disparity that is present and the ways in which the narratives may perpetuate these communal issues. It is critical that the economic value of increased tourism within a region not overshadow the nature of public memory and the reimagining of, or perhaps atoning for, history.

The Importance of Place and Community

To examine the myth of Southern Atonement as it is rhetorically constructed in space and place, in this section I will first analyze the tools of placemaking as a source for engagement and identity. Next, I will examine the ways in which placemaking can lead to community revitalization and the potential implications of that movement. Then, I will expand that analysis towards myth construction and public memory.

Placemaking

In both the cultural and political spheres, the process of critical placemaking has grown as a tool for engaging a community in dialogue, inclusion, and democratic participation within public spaces. Toolis (2017) understands placemaking within a community as the ability to access and transform spaces they inhabit with the goal of strengthening the connection between people and the places they share. These shared places, or public spaces, are characterized by communal ownership, open accessibility, and intersubjectivity (Kohn, 2004). Public spaces are also sites of engagement where community members can exercise their rights of expression and assembly (Parkinson, 2012). Placemaking is intrinsically linked with place identity, which involves the emotional bond between individuals and shared spaces which can facilitate a sense of belonging, attachment, and purpose (Toolis, 2017). However, because placemaking understands identities as tied to landscapes, they can be both inclusive and exclusive (Davis, 2013). Often the identities constructed within public spaces are the product of hegemonic values and beliefs, and are thus perpetuating a cycle of disenfranchisement and exclusion for minority or oppositional community members.

Davis (2013) explained that as rhetorically powerful museums, monuments, and memorials are constructed through critical placemaking, some have been instrumental in impressing White, middle class hegemony upon the target communities. Blokland (2009) argues that a community's public memory narratives are products of placemaking that, once dominant in a public discourse, affect what defines "the community" and thus define community needs. Such narratives in placemaking can create symbolic representations that help to define who is and who is not part of the community, and thus perpetuate and reinforce disparity. Critical placemaking within a community can both exclude and include members and their personal

histories or experiences depending on the selected, constructed narratives or messages that are represented in public space.

Community Revitalization

Often, in these efforts of constructing identity and public memory a community will undergo a sort of revitalization and experience a reappropriation of public spaces. Urban and community revitalization refers to a strategic reorganization of community space and eccentricity aimed at reconstructing identity, particularly in neighborhoods or regions in decline due to economic or race-related reasons ("Urban Revitalization," 2018). A revitalized space has the potential for increased efficiency, innovation, quality of life, and economic development. Community leaders, searching for answers to decades of neglect and an eroding tax base, have generally embraced this migration of people and resources (Howell, 2008). However, Boyd (2000) argues that residents in the process of reinventing their community must also reinvent themselves through collective identities used to control that process of redevelopment. Thus, these revitalization efforts, in conjunction with critical placemaking, may further exclude and displace minority voices within a community. Although often with the promising intentions of economic growth, revitalization efforts may construct a hegemonic, and seemingly "authentic" lived experiences which juxtapose the reality of race, class, and social disparity within the region.

Southern Atonement in Community Space

The politics of memory, race, and place in the South have inspired new inquiries regarding identity and cultural myth construction. The legacy of slavery, racism, and other historical sins in the South has provided the wedge that marks a distinct identity as separate from both the cultural North and from non-White Southerners (Davis, 2013). Calculated amnesia and

strategic forgetting in postsouthern constructions of history in revitalization require selective

omission and the construction of new myth and identity from public memory (Ford, 2004).

Glassberg (1996) argues that "historical consciousness and place consciousness are inextricably

intertwined; we attach histories to places, and the environmental value we add to a place comes

through in public memory and historical associations" (p. 17). Thus, the landscape of race and

memory are at the center of the South's struggle for identity, positioning the contemporary

representational battle of "Old South" and "New South" (Hoelscher, 2006). As a community in

the contemporary South, the town of Wilson, Arkansas, may have turned to elements of regional

mythology as they searched for a new identity.

In my analysis, I will explore how the physical spaces in the community of Wilson have

been reimagined, reappropriated, and revitalized to promote tourism and uphold particular

narratives of public memory while omitting and restructuring others. I argue that Wilson has

actualized the myth of Southern Atonement by presenting the past through a white-washed lens,

constructing a community that sees itself as the pinnacle of authenticity through heritage tourism,

and envisioning itself as an exemplar for the future of a "post-racial" South. I will examine the

ways in which the community leaders of Wilson, Arkansas, have turned to Southern Atonement

as a means of absolving the dissonance they faced as the economic and population stability of

their community began to decline.

History of Wilson, Arkansas

Positioned halfway between the towns of Bassett and Osceola along US Highway 61,

Wilson, Arkansas, is the cultural and communal center of acres of cotton fields and those who

tend to them. The historical roots of this community run much deeper, though, and stretch all the

way back to 1880, when Robert E. Lee Wilson crossed the Mississippi from Memphis,

Tennessee, after the death of his parents (Whayne, 2011). Contemporarily memorialized as a determined Delta man, the fierce, teenaged Wilson convinced the courts to recognize his claim to the Arkansas cypress swamplands two years before he even reached adulthood (Whayne, 2011). Whayne (2011) claims that Wilson "pursued his own version of a New South in the post–Civil War era, one founded on lumber and cotton" and separate from the region's infamous inability to move beyond the social and economic legacies of slavery (p. 2). Lee Wilson & Company grew into a cotton dynasty, eventually boasted as the "world's largest cotton plantation," with over 57,000 acres and more than 11,000 employees, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers at its peak ("History," 2017). The Wilson family maintained ownership of the lands and company town for 164 years until 2010. Thus, the Wilson Company, family, and township are all critical pieces and products of the complex puzzle of Southern agriculture in the Mississippi Delta region.

This idealized, "bootstrap" narrative of Wilson's origin is not without its problems, though. Although the first member of the Wilson clan, Josiah, relied on slave labor, Lee Wilson used sharecropping and tenancy on his cotton plantations and accepted Henry Grady's "New South" messages of reconstruction (Whayne, 2011). There are claims that Wilson treated his African-American laborers better than most landowners in the South during his time, but that claim leaves much to be desired as far as race and labor relations are concerned (Grisham, 2016). Robert E. Lee Wilson apparently provided better housing and healthcare for his Black and White laborers (Whayne, 2016). However, he still used many of the labor practices of the era that maintained sharecropping as slavery by another name. After the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery, implementation of a wage system was problematic as "the South's quasi-feudal plantation system was not well-suited for a modern, free labor force" (McDermott, 2009, p. 68). In the time of economic turmoil that was Reconstruction, sharecropping rose as a façade of self-

sufficiency for freed laborers to develop autonomy and restore family units (Douglas-Bowers, 2013). This system of sharecropping was largely based on manipulation, though, as it allowed for the exploitation of small farmers by monopolistic structures dominated by local merchants, many of whom were prior plantation owners (Douglas-Bowers, 2013). Corrupt legislation and contract provisions only further hurt the sharecroppers by stipulating insurmountable debt through loans and property leasing. The provisions of sharecropping systems reflected the cultural assumption that Black and poor workers were unable to manage their own enterprises, and was an "effort by White Southerners in general to hold freedmen in a subordinate status after emancipation" (Douglas-Bowers, 2013).

For Wilson, his laborers were paid in company scrip that could only be used on the plantation and they only owned property that could not be removed from the lands (Grisham, 2016). On multiple occasions, Wilson and his company were accused of peonage, also known as debt slavery or debt servitude, in which labor practices hold workers to a job against their will (Grisham, 2016). Despite these allegations, Wilson and his company never faced any actual legal consequences in these claims. Aware of the "larger-than-life" image he projected in the community, Robert E. Lee Wilson was rarely challenged in his authority. In fact, he was often referred to as "Boss Lee" (Severson, 2014). Those who chose to leave the Wilson company usually did so in secret, abandoning their home and material belongings in the pursuit of freedom (Grisham, 2016).

Robert E. Lee Wilson spent the last few years of his life aggressively chasing business and political connections, eventually negotiating a million-dollar Reconstruction loan in mid-1933 (Whayne, 2016). Lee Wilson passed away later that same year, leaving his legacy and the company to his son, Robert E. Lee Wilson, Jr. During this era of economic bloom, the Wilson

family and company operated most of the businesses in the town of Wilson and owned most of the land and houses (Grisham, 2016). For a time, the family even minted their own currency to pay the workers, bags of which remain in the company vaults today (Severson, 2014). The town and community of Wilson was essentially a subsidiary of the company and cotton was the reigning king.

The labor shortage in the 1950s following World War II, when thousands of rural residents sought jobs in urban areas, meant that the company and town began losing money. It was in the hands of a new generation of the Wilson clan, with Robert. E. Lee Wilson III at the helm, that the company began selling homes to the residents and incorporated the town (Grisham, 2016). Even still, Wilson family members continued to solely serve as mayors. The company also began recruiting Mexican nationals for labor and expanded to vegetable and fruit production until the Bracero program ended in 1964 (Grisham, 2016).

The following mechanization of the agricultural industry meant that the large amount of labor the Wilson Company employed was no longer necessary. As the labor needs of the company decreased, so did the potential employment in the region. Many moved from Wilson to seek other job opportunities. In the hands of the fourth generation of Wilson family owners, it was announced that the company would be sold. In 2010, the company was purchased by Gaylon Lawrence and Gaylon Lawrence, Jr., of Missouri and Tennessee respectively, for an estimated $150 million (Grisham, 2016). What remained of the Wilson cotton empire were miles of fields, faded stores, and rusting grain silos.

After his purchase, Gaylon Lawrence, Jr., recognized that the fading town continued to face severe population and economic decline. In the 2010 United States Census, the town consisted of 903 community members, a 12% decrease since 2000 ("Census of Population and

Housing", 2010). The demographics of the town are currently 74.6% White, higher than the 60% demographic makeup of Mississippi County within which it subsists ("State & County QuickFacts," 2011). Despite these challenges, Lawrence wanted to revitalize the community. He sought the aid of John Faulkner, whose background in architecture positioned him as Wilson's "de facto" manager, historian, and cultural expert (Severson, 2014). The two men have collaborated to reopen the Wilson Café, clean up and repaint the downtown buildings, and improve the local cell phone service. In a 2014 *New York Times* article, Lawrence stated that he envisioned the community as undergoing its renaissance, with big changes like the Delta School and the arts and culture scene to come (Severson, 2014).

Founded in 2014, the Delta School posits itself as a non-profit, independent, co-educational school for students aged 4-18 ("History," 2018). With funding from The Gaylon Lawrence, Jr., family, The Lawrence Group, The Wilson Education Foundation, and local cotton farmers, the school serves to enrich both the residents of Wilson and the larger Delta region. The leaders of the school seek to serve their rural community while structuring themselves as a "national model of educational excellence" ("History," 2018). The school is currently enrolled at maximum capacity with over 200 students, but with intentions to expand. The Delta School attracts families from a seventy-mile radius of Wilson, with students commuting from as far away as Jonesboro, Memphis, Marion, and Blytheville ("History," 2018). The Delta School, as an independent and privately funded institution, seeks to act as a pillar of innovative education in the Delta, working to improve the culture and economy of the region.

Positioned along the Blues Highway, Great River Road, and Americana Music Triangle, Wilson also deems itself unique in its musical and cultural flavor ("Music & Arts," 2018). Through 2012 to the present, Wilson has undergone many big arts and cultural changes. Some of

which include a music series, community garden, new shopping centers, and art installations ("Then and Now," 2018). Despite a history rooted deep in rural agriculture and cotton enterprises, the contemporary town of Wilson understands itself as ushering in a modern era of renewal. By both emphasizing and capitalizing on all aspects of its heritage and culture, Wilson opens its to doors to visitors and offers a self-proclaimed "destination with a difference."

The Atonement of Wilson, Arkansas

My analysis of the physical and digital spaces of Wilson, Arkansas, is structured around the ways in which the three formal elements of Southern Atonement are rhetorically constructed and actualized. The spaces used in my analysis include the town's website, The Delta School, the town square, the original Wilson Company warehouses and factories, and the Wilson Café. I include the messages of authenticity, space reappropriation, and focus on heritage tourism as a community identity. In particular, I demonstrate how Wilson both performs and embraces the myth of Southern Atonement as a community identity and examine who or what is included and omitted from this identity. I will argue that the wealthiest members of the small community are constructing new identity based on Southern stereotypes, selectively revised history, and a development of arts and culture that is ultimately still exclusive along lines of race and wealth.

Absolution from the Past

The first element of Southern Atonement present in the communal spaces of Wilson, Arkansas, is that of seeking absolution from the historical and regional sins of the past. The contemporary community, as designed by those seeking to revive it, is both seeking forgiveness for a troubling memory of sharecropping, race relations, and the snarls of rural poverty, while also exemplifying and remembering particular connections to their past. In the *Industrial Connection* art installation, the concrete structures surrounding the original Wilson Company

87

cotton gin have been reanimated in order to "continue an artistic dialogue in the town" ("Industrial Connection Art Installation," 2018). By juxtaposing the organic and industrial features of the landscape, the abstract art catches a viewer's attention by conveying explicit messages about the history or past surrounding it. The intertwining and overlapping wiring conceptualize a puzzle of carefully navigated structures. *Industrial Connection* creatively connects the contemporary community to the past while emphasizing the industrialization of cotton production, which ironically – or purposefully – was the company and community's downfall. With this artistic endeavor, Wilson seeks redemption for the problematic past of the cotton industry while still accentuating and acknowledging that history as an attraction point within their communal heritage.

These messages of absolution are also rhetorically constructed on the town's website. The site highlights the "unique" history of the town that is "vital to its appeal," thus selectively accenting the overarching, agricultural narratives while only briefly covering the more problematic accounts. The page regarding the history of the town is itself titled "The American South: Authentic Artisanal Traditions" ("History," 2017). Overlaid across a black-and-white photo of a rural, African-American male (presumably a photo from the town's archives), this messaging explicitly white-washes the narrative of tenant farming and sharecropping while acknowledging the rural history. The site addresses that Wilson has "one of the most unique and historically significant stories in the Mississippi River Delta region" but reimagines the public memory of the cotton plantations as an artisanal tradition ("History," 2017, para. 6).

In the featured ten-minute documentary on the history section of the website, Dr. Jeannie Whayne is prominently featured as the primary historian of the Wilson legacy, drawing from the historical research she has done in her own work such as *The Delta Empire*. The documentary

begins with Dr. Whayne proclaiming there to be no "comparable, contemporary family" to the Wilsons in the business of Southern agriculture or otherwise (Visit Wilson, AR, 2015). The documentary then goes on to detail the history of the founding and growth of the cotton plantations and the eventual formation of the Wilson Company. Dr. Whayne details how Josiah Wilson, Robert. E. Lee Wilson's father who initially bought and began farming the land in Arkansas, was not included in any of the plantation lore surrounding slavery or the cotton industry in the 1850s (Visit Wilson, AR, 2015). This permits the first acknowledgement of slavery on the page, thus addressing the past while still glossing over it and omitting the Wilson family from that history of slavery. The documentary also emphasizes that Lee Wilson did not "dwell on his origins" or the past, but in all of his writings and contributions focused on the "now" (Visit Wilson, AR, 2015). Perhaps, a visitor to this site and to the town of Wilson is supposed to do the same.

Dr. Whayne ends the video with a demonstration of the evolution from the original slave plantations to the 21st century and the "portfolio plantation" today (Visit Wilson, AR, 2015). The viewer is asked to explore what that history means in terms of the social, economic, and environmental implications. Finally, she concludes that historians and others are fascinated and intrigued not just with the concept of slavery but of the history and culture of the South, in general. We are captivated by this "tortured history that confounds and confuses us…and begs our consideration," says Dr. Whayne (Visit Wilson, AR, 2015). This narrative of the history of Wilson explicitly asks the viewer to consider the past, acknowledge the problems, and then contemplate forgiveness for those historical sins – thus absolving the community from that past.

The final component of constructing absolution from the past is the Delta School. Upon visiting the school and speaking with some of the faculty and staff, it was discovered that the

Delta School is a symptom of "school of choice" in the region. After the local small schools faced consolidation, which meant bussing their children to the public district of Riverside, the community of Wilson wanted a "rural education option" that kept their students within the community. Thus, the Delta School was born. The campus is the reappropriated space of the plantation mansion of the Wilson family: ornate chandeliers, mahogany dining halls, and stone spiral staircases upon entry. This space, of course, stands out in the largely rural and poverty-ridden Arkansas Delta. Koon (2016) described the school as "a restored mansion that might remind one of Harry Potter's alma mater inside and out." As you drive along the cottonwood tree lined entrance-way, you might think the school is part of an Antebellum-inspired movie set. The community of Wilson and The Delta School partake in the process of absolution from the past by offering this once-exclusive space up for educational purposes, but it begs the question who those academic opportunities are actually accessible for.

The current Founding Head of the Delta School, Jennifer Fox, proclaims that the space is "a place where how big your heart is more important than the size of your bank account or the color of your skin…a place that is eager to grow, to fill a void, to change lives; a place like no other; a place to call home" (The Delta School, 2018). This public mission statement accentuates the prospect of reclaiming this space, previously home to a wealthy, White family whose legacy includes debt slavery and peonage. Nonetheless, while touring the space of the Delta School, one might notice that the current demographic makeup of the student body is still exceptionally Caucasian. The tour-guide for the campus reiterated that they do offer financial aid for the $12,000 tuition through The Cotton Foundation, in which local cotton farmers fund a pool of money to aid underprivileged youth in the area. However, it should be argued that by reappropriating the space of the Wilson family home for educational purposes, the community of

Wilson seeks to reimagine the past and offer new opportunities from it. As the school continues to be exclusive and expensive, despite progressive lip service, it should be critically determined who is actually included in these new opportunities, who is forgiven for the communal past, and who is doing that forgiving.

Distinctiveness in Constructed Authenticity

Wilson relies heavily on regional distinctiveness and a constructed authentic "Southern" experience as a driving factor of community identity. In the context of Southern Atonement, this distinctiveness is recognized through a pride and appreciation for stereotypes, myths, and unique cultural heritage. This is particularly pertinent in an increasingly globalized, commodified tourism industry. From a postsouthern lens, communities are losing that sense of distinct identity and thus seeking and relying on constructed experiences within public spaces. Much of the distinctive identity in Wilson comes from the arts, culture, and shopping that has grown from a community revitalization effort.

One initiative is the Wilson, once a boarded-up tavern and now a cornerstone to the Wilson experience. After purchasing the Wilson company, Gaylon Lawrence, Jr., reached out to a young restaurant owner and chef in Memphis and promised a full farm to grow food if he moved to Wilson and reopened the café. Needless to say, the offer was accepted. Self-described as "good homestyle food in the heart of the Delta," the Wilson Café boasts a menu not common to the region, with substituted vegetarian and vegan options and artisanal burgers and sandwiches (Wilson Café, 2018). Granite countertops, striking white-and-black décor, sparkling subway tile, and subtle gray wainscoting fill the small restaurant, giving the air of a culturally eloquent downtown eatery and not the dusty flatlands of the Delta farms. Many of the restaurant's vegetables come from the carefully manicured acres of Wilson Gardens, the local community

farming initiative (Wilson Café, 2018). The chef himself, Joe Cartwright, emphasizes that there is nothing like getting your vegetables for the day from the land across the street (Wilson Café, 2018). The restaurant centers itself around this appeal to Southern cuisine and farm-to-table eating, a cultural movement that has been observed across much of the American South. For instance, in North Carolina farm-to-table restaurants have sprung up with an emphasis on local food that is driving demand and helping to create new markets in places that have historically been underserved by the farming economy (Hartman, 2016). By emphasizing this agricultural connection, the Wilson Café and other farm-to-table restaurants can appeal to regional distinctiveness and heritage tourism in the rural South.

Visitors to the Wilson Café have noted that the experience feels somehow foreign to small town living, but that the restaurant's value is in catering to tourists. One local resident, Talya Boerner (2014) reflected on her experience, saying, "really, for a moment, I forgot I was home in the Delta." Upon visiting, Severson (2014) acknowledged that "the food was a delicious anomaly to the region, but the prices have a few people grumbling. Who pays $14 for a hamburger around here?" The prices and culinary distinctiveness of the eatery are arguably lofty and hefty for a "country cafe." Yet, the Wilson Café has become a constructed experience in community revitalization efforts and offers a distinct culinary identity for the town. One Wilson Café patron even observed that "there's talk of it becoming an arts and cultural center — perhaps a mecca for writers and tech-savvy millennials or a center for agricultural researchers" (Debbie, 2017). After her visit, Boerner (2014) concluded that "for the first time in a long time, Wilson is attracting first-time visitors, but perhaps more importantly, Wilson is bringing people back home." One should wonder who exactly is being invited back home to Wilson and what culturally distinct identity is being curated in this small, rural town.

Admittedly, the café is not alone in said constructed experiences in Wilson's town square. The entire area, about a city block wide, is in an English Tudor architectural style. Visitors have noted the distinctive air of the area surrounding the town square, with "Carrara marble on the bank counter, a French provincial house with Impressionist paintings hanging on the walls, and air-conditioned doghouses in the yard" (Severson, 2014). All of which, of course, is then surrounded by rusting silos and forgotten cotton country. Robert E. Lee Wilson, Jr., was inspired by his honeymoon to England in 1925, and upon return required all buildings in the community be built in this specific Tudor style and any existing buildings be retrofitted. As Koon (2016) stated, "to come upon an English village sweltering a half-mile from the Mississippi River levee can be a little surreal." These buildings have been maintained, restored, and repainted to emphasize this unique draw to Wilson, an architectural phenomenon distinctly unusual to the region and the state. By highlighting and reinforcing this aspect of the town, Wilson sustains a sense of identity centered around authenticity in their town square and community hub. The emphasis and conservation of this surreal, Tudor experience functions as an invitation for visitors to envision Wilson as both a cosmopolitan destination while maintaining an air of authenticity in New South identity. It is the direct manifestation of the tagline spread across the welcoming page of the town's website, "Where the World Meets the Delta" ("Where the World," 2017). And yet this historic, and constructed, tourism experience is still the product of the town's original visionary and is, quite literally, still orbiting around the town's cotton legacy. Buried in the center of the carefully manicured lawn of the town square, in the shadow of a commemorative flagpole, is Robert. E. Lee Wilson himself. A subtle reminder that town's roots run deep and some historical sins were committed not so long ago, despite atonement in constructed authenticity.

The vision of distinctiveness in Wilson goes beyond the architecture, though, and is also largely centered on the budding culture and arts scene of the community. For instance, the Wilson Music series is a quarterly event held in spaces across town and explicitly meant to articulate the "rich musical heritage" of the region along Blues Highway 61. The website for the town specifically details the "thriving community of local artists and artisans" as a draw for visitors seeking a Southern cultural experience. One such artist is John Oates, of former Hall & Oates fame, who was invited to Wilson and reported to *Rolling Stone* that the town was his inspiration for his new song and album "Arkansas" (Rosenberg, 2018). The video for the song features grainy, sun-tinted film of Oates standing in a field of cotton as post-production train and riverboat footage is super-imposed on the rustic barn walls and silos ("John Oates With," 2018). The video serves as an exemplar for the visual aesthetics of "authentic" Americana and the Southern experience. When discussing his inspiration in Wilson, Oates said, "I stood at night out in the middle of the cotton fields all along the banks of the Mississippi River and it was one of the most beautiful moments that I've ever experienced" (Dauphin, 2018). It was that night, when Oates and his band arrived at the Delta School Great Hall, that inspired his lyrics of the "snow white cotton fields of Arkansas heaven" ("John Oates With," 2018). The town and its ambience "seemed to crystallize this rural American experience in a way… What it means to be American swept over [him]" (Inspired in Wilson, 2018). The town of Wilson has brought further attention to this recognition from Oates in their own description of the music series online, in which they describe the production and inspiration for the song as "an evocative experience for him, the imagery contained in his lyrics were accented by the landscape of the town" (Inspired in Wilson, 2018). The distinctiveness of Wilson is exemplified in the commodification and accentuation of these traditional Southern aesthetics: cotton, rural sunsets, and historical working-class imagery.

The song, and the town's appeals to music and art, are direct constructions of an identity founded in the American and Southern heritage of the community.

That authentic, Southern experience is also exemplified by White's Mercantile, a store on the town square owned by a country singer-songwriter Holly Williams, daughter of Hank Williams, Jr., from Nashville, Tennessee. Described as "a way for locals and visitors to discover unique treasures native to the region," the store is filled with aesthetically Southern home goods, books, and clothing (White's Mercantile, 2018). For instance, a visitor might find handcrafted Memphis caramels, custom Wilson t-shirts, rusted Coca-Cola signs, regional cookbooks, apothecary or home-medicine items, whiskey and cocktail mixes, and "Howdy" welcome mats. These carefully curated items are, however, generally priced out of the range of the average Delta dweller, yet White's is another distinct commodity for the community that couldn't be found anywhere closer than Memphis. The owner even personally constructs an authentic transaction with each shopper by adding handwritten notes affixed to the selected products in the store, each describing why she chose it and what it means to her as a family-oriented Southern creative.

A self-proclaimed modern general store, the aesthetic and visual elements of the space – wooden shelves, jarred goods, faded signs, and multitudes of Southern slang merchandise - are meant to appeal to the heritage roots of the region. "I would go one step further and describe it as an *experience*. In White's, Williams has curated a one-stop shop filled with Southern items as distinctive as the Delta itself," declared one visitor (Boerner, 2017). The charisma this store exuberates doesn't necessarily get past the threshold, however, as very few of the items could be considered practical or useful in rural Arkansas outside of some the cookware and clothing. It begs the question for whom this shopping *experience* with "an understated southern charm" is

being curated for and why (Boerner, 2017). Arguably, it is for the community members seeking to capitalize on the distinct Southern roots and heritage tourism unique to the Delta region, and in doing so they must contribute to the construction of an authentic shopping experience that draws visitors in.

Hope for a "Post-Racial" Future

A pertinent factor in actualizing the myth of Southern Atonement as a communal identity is looking to a post-racial future. This component seeks a more inclusive future for the South, in which the lines of racial and economic disparity are blurred and community and regional members are asked to engage and atone in order to move forward. This vision of the future is explicitly characterized on the town's website, in which Wilson is idealized as "a small town with a great ambition: to create a nurturing, inclusive and inspiring community" ("About Us," 2017, para. 1). The community imagines itself to be a beacon for change for the region, as a new model for innovation and renewal, and most importantly a community that embraces racial diversity. This characterization is, of course, ironically juxtaposed to a greyscale image of three young Black boys sitting on a pile of freshly picked cotton on the town's website.

Some of the media designed by the digital team of Wilson emphasizes inclusive and progressive messages in the development of community. In "Our Community," a narrator describes why he moved back to Wilson – "[he] didn't want to be anonymous anymore, [he] wanted to be a part of something" (Our Community, 2015). The narrator goes on to state that a sense of community is missing from today's world and to be part of Wilson is to be part of a community and a "movement to make this great again" (Our Community, 2015). In another video, town owner Gaylon Lawrence, Jr., describes the skeptics he initially faced, but says those same skeptics now say, "we really like what you've got going on here, how do we be a part of

it?" (Made in Wilson, 2015). There is emphasis on the vision and passion for community unique to Wilson that isn't being found elsewhere in the region. Cotton gin manager Jim Johns proclaims that after a time of depression in the Delta region, he is excited to see things finally going the other way and he is enthusiastic for the future (Made in Wilson, 2015). These mediated messages construct an idyllic, agriculture-based community that envisions itself inclusive and strong despite a problematic history and the previous economic turmoil. Much of the digital media surrounding Wilson emphasizes the future and "making the community great again." Of course, in its heyday the Wilson family and community relied on the racist and oppressive economic system of sharecropping for success. If the intentions are to make the community great again and still maintain a sense of inclusivity towards a more progressive future, the community of Wilson is selective in choosing which aspects and narratives to revitalize and which should be left in the past.

In regard to physical space, the innovative artist residency program also draws on this "post-racial" future in atonement. The community is currently seeking artists, specifically visual artists, to come and "respond to the landscape," creating public and interactive art as a space for engagement. The community will offer studio space in the reappropriated Wilson Company cotton gin so that the artist can live and create within the region. What type of artist, though, might this residency program attract? Despite these efforts of creative inclusion, perhaps community leaders should acknowledge the inherent disparities associated with the initiative. For a Black artist, particularly with lived experiences in the rural South, to come back and work in a cotton gin where White plantation owners once maintained sharecroppers and tenant farmers and to create art for the predominantly White community, Wilson is asking for a vast amount of

forgiveness and emotional labor from that artist. In this vision of a post-racial future for Wilson, the lines of atonement are clearly blurred.

Conclusion

The community of Wilson, Arkansas, is actualizing the myth of Southern Atonement as their collective identity. The three main themes of the myth offer reconciliation of dissonance between the past and the future while constructing a distinctiveness crucial for regional and heritage identity. However, this myth construction inherently omits particular narratives from the public memory in order to look towards a more progressive future without the guilt of the past. Wilson emphasizes its distinguishing landscapes, unique history, and cultural narratives as drawing points for a more inclusive community and lived experience in the Delta.

A major implication of this analysis is the function of heritage tourism and revitalization, particularly in the South, and constructed experiences as a means of offering authenticity for visitors. Public spaces in the region are being manipulated so that working-class, racially disenfranchised, and rural identities are commodified for visitor experiences (Vernon, 2016). This phenomenon often results in racial displacement and continued disenfranchisement through the perpetuation of systemic, hegemonic values and community revitalization efforts. Koon (2016) reported that Lawrence, Jr., in an interview, once said "the people who love Wilson and love the history, they support it, because it's very logical to see that more activity and more renewal in a little town means growth and prosperity" and "If you ask the landowners about their housing and the value of their housing, they're very thrilled." I believe what is clearly of note here is the enthusiasm the landowners have for these renewal efforts. Of course, those deeply invested in the distinctiveness of the region, and with the resources to do so, see this revitalization and atonement process as a source for potential growth for the small rural town.

But for those minority and low-income citizens without the resources to contribute, and subsequently profit, from these revitalization efforts, the increase in property value and general cost-of-living is anything but beneficial. In 2016, property values had reportedly doubled, with "houses that go on the market routinely selling in fewer than four days" and "residents out for a walk getting used to being stopped by drivers who ask if they know of property in town, any property, that's for sale" (Koon, 2016, para. 4). An influx of new, wealthier citizens and visitors in search of authenticity might mean increased profits for the community, but it begs the question whether those funds will be evenly distributed. Further research should examine whether the jobs these revitalization efforts create are also going towards the segments of the community that need them most, or if this town, shaped by the affluent Wilson family, is still only for the wealthy.

Nonetheless, I do believe the intentions of Southern Atonement as a community identity are well-meaning. As Davis (2007) proclaimed, "cultural identity demands that in a changing world we try and hold on to what is important from the past and adopt the best features of the new" (p. 70). As a community in the Arkansas Delta with a history in cotton plantations and sharecropping, Wilson is in a particularly precarious position for identity construction. Because of its sheer diversity, the Arkansas River Valley and the cities within it offer an ideal exemplar for studying the varied motives and themes in the exclusionary history of the South (Lancaster, 2013). The process of atonement in identity construction should not fall on the shoulders of those who have been systematically disenfranchised by the sins of history for the sake of alleviating the guilt of those with the privilege and power to ignore it. Instead, it should be a communal effort to uphold and strengthen all voices, but particularly those often not heard in the past, in

order to fully address issues of the present. In amplifying those voices, and listening to the ghosts

of the past, we can truly move towards a more inclusive future in the American South.

Conclusion

Making Amends with Southern Atonement

William Faulkner (1936) once wrote, *"Tell about the South. What's it like there. What do they do there? Why do they live there? Why do they live at all?"* (p. 142). At risk of falling into clichés, this notable line is one worth questioning even decades after its conception. The regional community of the South has seen dramatic cycles of identity construction under the veil of maintaining regional values and exceptionalism in the face of both internal and external changes. The analysis of cultural and political myths has a disconcerting way of removing that veil and illuminating the mangled and sparse links in the tightly wound knot of identity. I argue that those same myths have the potential to also mend and reconnect a community. In a review of contemporary approaches to Southern studies, Makowsky (2016) explains that scholars are faced with the burden of "being associated with an antiquated view of Southern exceptionalism" as well as "anxiety [from] monolithic approaches that may seem to invoke an authoritarian past" (p. 197). This feeling of academic guilt-by-association stems from both the last few decades of critical approaches to Southern literature and the centuries of racism, sexism, and willful ignorance associated with the region. The South today is arguably not the South of the past, despite deep roots in problematic histories. The landscape of race, religion, politics, and culture are shifting in the face of globalization and the approaches to studying the region should be modified as well. This thesis presents an interwoven analysis using an interdisciplinary approach built from Southern studies, spatial rhetoric, and cultural myths. I have presented an innovative approach to determining what it means to be a contemporary Southerner through storytelling and identity construction in public spaces.

Across the development of three case studies, I have demonstrated that the public spaces of Arkansas are being curated to visualize, engage, and actualize a myth of Southern Atonement. I also examined the shortcomings of that myth construction and the practical implications and consequences for each community. Moving forward, I will review the features of Southern Atonement and how it functioned in each of the studies. I will then suggest the importance for this type of cultural work in regard to neoliberal policies of revitalization as well as calculated amnesia in public memory-work.

The myth of Southern Atonement exhibits three formal characteristics, each posing their own challenges in reimagining history and identity in the American South. The first characteristic is distinctiveness in constructed authenticity. While not inherently problematic, this aspect builds solely off the drive for remarkability and romanticized notions of the Old South that have branded the region for decades. This constructed authenticity is a product of postsouthern conceptualization of distinctiveness, in which space and place is manipulated to construct a particular experience or memory while still disconnected from the reality of the past and present.

The second characteristic is a hope for a "post-racial" future within the South. In this context, "post-racial" refers to a society defined by continuing and contrasting racial dynamics in which race differences do not hold as much value in contemporary social relations (Brooks, 2011). This, of course, perpetuates a sense of "colorblindness" that contributes to the erasure of minority memory and identity for the sake of alleviating hegemonic guilt. Nonetheless, Southern Atonement presents a narrative of progression that moves beyond those disparate sociopolitical relations of the past regarding race, gender, and class.

The final characteristic is absolution from that problematic past. As Smith (1985) highlights in his analysis, any present reimagining of Southern identity is intrinsically entwined with complicated myths of the past, whether that be Old South, Lost Cause, or New South. Consequently, the myth of Southern Atonement seeks to compartmentalize the historic mistreatment of minority and poor community members when acknowledging the past through present-day rhetorical constructions. The South pursues recognition and processing of the guilt within its history and seeks to enact a new, inclusive identity through collective victimhood. Unfortunately, these well-meaning intentions become convoluted when disenfranchised citizens are forced to participate in the emotional and mental labor of absolution, whereas true absolution would seek their clemency. Thus, the past becomes a white-washed rendering of history that allows for neoliberal claims to progress without employing accountability in those narratives.

Southern Atonement is the modern manifestation of an ideology laden with nostalgic remnants of stereotypes and aesthetic elements of regional heritage. I have demonstrated how the communities of Arkansas are striving to atone for their own distinct historical sins and repaint the overarching narrative of identity for the social actors that call those communities home. The religious metaphor of *atonement* posits this cultural myth as the epiphany towards a sociopolitical reckoning, of sorts, in which the regional community of the South has the potential to be released from the burdens the past. However, this atonement process requires more than lip service of White, hegemonic guilt. Instead, atonement should function as a framework towards social and political reform that provides systemically disenfranchised community members with more than mere penitence. Otherwise, Southern Atonement continues the dangerous cycle of myth construction in the South that never fully addresses the issues, once again repaints the past, and then allows those with power to forgive themselves without any true reparations.

In regard to the case studies of this thesis, I highlighted the ways in which underrepresented voices are both acknowledged and omitted within the public spaces of Arkansas. In the first chapter, I determined the ways in which The Unexpected project in Fort Smith, Arkansas paints a picture of Southern Atonement through creative placemaking as a means of community engagement and the development of social capital. The installations of The Unexpected function as a performative journey along the historically recognized Trail of Tears, leading a visitor towards the visualization of Southern Atonement. The community of Fort Smith, or at least those community leaders curating the public art projects, envisions themselves at an intersection of culture and community where the New South meets the Old West. The intentions of acknowledging the sins of the past such as displacement, criminal activity, and poverty are apparent. Nonetheless, the constructed notions of authenticity in the contemporary identity of Fort Smith, as displayed in the rhetoric of public art, suggest a neoliberal definition of citizens and visitors as consumers of this culture rather than active participants. In this way, Fort Smith is aesthetically curating an image of Southern Atonement without efforts towards direct and dynamic engagement.

Subsequently, in the second case study I examined the Clinton legacy of the Billgrimage as a site for community leaders, members, and visitors to collectively engage with the process of exploring their regional history and determining a role in a political future. In this way, the statewide journey of monuments and memorials dedicated to Clinton's contributions within the social and political spheres of Arkansas functions as a strategy to invigorate community investment in Southern Atonement. The spaces of the Billgrimage focus primarily on the public memory of Clinton, curating an image of him as a champion of the poor, minority, and underrepresented South. The spaces also position Clinton as an authentic representation of

Arkansas by emphasizing his ties to rural communities and his roots in the small town of Hope. Nonetheless, the spaces of the Billgrimage fall short of engaging the visitor in such a way that challenges the nostalgia of the past while determining what issues should still be addressed in the contemporary South. In this way, the myth of Southern Atonement is not fully realized as an identity beyond a call-to-action for public service.

The exemplar for the actualization of Southern Atonement as an identity is within the community of Wilson, Arkansas, the subject of my closing chapter. This small Delta community has utilized the myth as strategic revitalization to combat economic and population decline. Wilson emphasizes its distinguishing landscapes, unique history, and cultural narratives as appeals for a more inclusive community and lived experience in the Delta. In doing so, the community also omits narratives of sharecropping and wealth disparity in a town birthed from one of the largest cotton plantations in the South. Through the appropriation of spaces such as the plantation owner's mansion and the old cotton gin, for education and art respectively, Wilson seeks to reimagine itself as progressive and distanced from its historical sins. Unfortunately, to participate in this new narrative of a "post-racial" and inclusive future, the community also asks for unfavorable emotional labor and identity construction from its most disenfranchised citizens and visitors. The process of atonement in identity construction should not fall on the shoulders of those who have faced systemic oppression for the sake of alleviating the guilt of the community as a whole. Furthermore, to capitalize on the growing trend of heritage tourism, Wilson simultaneously commodifies its historical and cultural narratives, both good and bad, for the sake of consumerism and promotion of a unique experience. In this way, the constructed authenticity of Wilson relies heavily on tropes of the Delta South, one of the poorest regions in the nation, without direct reparations for those still living in poverty. Wilson commemorates itself as a town

of "authentic, artisanal traditions" and "where the world meets the Delta," but their identity of Southern Atonement is one that is heavily filtered through the lens of affluence and white-washed lore.

Despite these shortcomings in the visualization, engagement, and actualization of Southern Atonement as seen in Arkansas, I argue that there is still potential for the myth in constructing more inclusive communities in the regional South. I also argue that process of reclaiming public space and creative placemaking are tactical strategies towards bridging social capital, developing place attachment, and accommodating zones of engagement for those from different social spheres within a community. However, Southern Atonement also has potential for serious harm if utilized in such a way that validates hegemonic power structures, contributes to toxic neoliberal narratives of progress, and functions towards minority and poverty erasure from the memory-work of the South.

If neoliberalism is understood as an "economic doctrine that prioritizes the mobility and expansion of capital at all costs," then it can be directly tied to the existentialist notion of sense of place in postsouthern studies and Southern Atonement (Dillon, 2012, p. 114). To fill the void of a lacking sense of identity as a regional Southerner, communities turn to myth construction. In doing so, the implementation of neoliberalism occurs through the commodification of culture, history, and lived experiences within contemporary heritage tourism. The South simultaneously exemplifies historical stereotypes, including those laced with problematic dynamics, while seeking penance for those same sins of the past. Furthermore, there is a sense of profit and capitalization within that identity to revitalize and reinvigorate the cultural appeal of the South, a phenomenon that is seen as progressive through the lens of neoliberalism. By way of public art projects and community revitalization initiatives, Southern Atonement may manifest in the form

106

of gentrification or strategic urban planning that ultimately displaces minority citizens. For instance, Corrigan (2018) addresses how in cities like Little Rock, the attitude towards Black communities as "unhealthy organs" in the public body are the bedrock of coercive city planning, public education, and public transport initiatives (p. 66). If a new identity is sought for the primary function of capitalization and consumerism, then economic capital will gain importance over social capital within a community. When public space is aesthetically curated to aid in that consumerist narrative, even under the guise of creative placemaking, the cycle of disenfranchisement and erasure of underrepresented community members is apparent. Southern Atonement, without practical implementation towards reparations from that hegemonic guilt of the past, is merely appeasement and validation of oppressive power structures of the South.

One of the ways that erasure in neoliberalism may occur is through calculated amnesia. This phenomena and strategic forgetting in postsouthern constructions of history require selective omission and the development of a new identity (Ford, 2004). In Southern Atonement, there is the potential for minority erasure from public memory, as previously mentioned. However, there is also dynamic possibility for Southern Atonement to challenge a different form of selective forgetting, which I characterize as Northern Amnesia. If Northern Amnesia is positioned in an oppositional binary to Southern Atonement, then I hope this analysis will turn a critical eye towards the scapegoating of the South as an isolated region of racism, poverty, and general despair. Scapegoating is required to balance Northern Amnesia regarding nation-wide social and racial divides, a dyadic relationship which functions to keep the ideal of American exceptionalism afloat. This is to say that the cultural and regional South is often portrayed as the sole source of the nation's social, racial, economic, and academic ills. The South has systematically faced intergenerational poverty and low rates of social mobility for a myriad of

107

reasons, but has been characterized in popular political media as "clearly skew[ing] the national statistics, creating an embarrassing and depressing version of American exceptionalism" (Lind, 2015, para. 1). This phenomenon of blame-shifting occurs despite other regions also being a bastion of impenetrable prejudice, racially segregated housing, unemployment, and poverty. Perhaps this narrative is best exemplified in Lind's (2015) proclamation that "a lot of the traits that make the United States exceptional these days are undesirable; many of these differences can be attributed largely to the South" (para. 2). This precludes any regard for confounding factors or the danger of that rhetoric towards political action. Through scapegoating and crude stereotypes, the burden has been placed on the regional community of the South to re-brand itself towards a more equal and prosperous future. This burden is placed squarely on the shoulders of those leaders within the South, particularly those within minority social spheres, to work towards a more inclusive community despite internal and external opposition. This narrative of the South as the burden of America gives neoliberal Democrats the moral standing to abandon the region as a lost cause for voting and civic participation. Instead of writing off an entire region for their historical sins, there could be national sociopolitical initiatives to support the grassroots efforts of minority communities, their allies, and those seeking to bridge social capital between previously uncoordinated groups. Through the revitalization and identity construction efforts of Southern Atonement in public spaces, the national hypocrisies will be illuminated regarding those same problematic social and racial structures beyond the Mason-Dixon line.

In a mediated, consumerist era of commodified culture, public space can act as an intermediary between the past and present, between social groups, and between the historically guilt-ridden and the victims. In the formation of a resilient and inclusive community, all members must see their lived experiences represented within those public spaces. One should

ask, then, what is the condition of the lived experiences of the historic victims of the South? When Claudia Rankine (2015) wrote to reflect on the Charleston church massacre, she determined that "the condition of Black life is one of mourning" (para. 2). What might the condition of a White life be? Biss (2015) stated that it might be "forgotten debt." What binds a White identity, or any identity rooted in power, affluence, and dominance, is that of shared social advantages that can be traced back to the historical sins of the past. By refusing to acknowledge those privileges, those with power can continue to perpetuate a narrative of contemporary progress without addressing or critically examining economic and resource disparity rooted in those historic disgraces.

I argue that there is potential for contemporary sociopolitical atonement for that debt, but it will not be done through lip-service, gentrification, and erasure. If that debt, and that guilt, is imagined not as willful ignorance but as a prod towards inclusive policy reform, then atonement through political action is possible. Perhaps, even, through critical placemaking Southern Atonement could be realized not as a white-washed, commodified identity of the region and instead could function towards civic engagement and community building. But more importantly, it could provide acknowledgement of both the past and present socioeconomic disparities in the South and then invite all Southerners, and our allies, to the table in the deliberative construction of better future.

References

64.6 Downtown. (2018). *64.6 downtown* [Website]. Retrieved from http://646downtown.com/.

About us (2017). *Wilson, Arkansas*. [website]. Retrieved from https://www.wilsonarkansas.com/about-wilson-arkansas/.

Alexander, J. C. (2006). *The civil sphere*. New York: Oxford University Press.

A passport to Clinton places in Arkansas: a Billgrimage. (2017). *Clinton house museum. [Brochure]*. Department of Arkansas Heritage.

Azzarello, N. (2016a, September 20). Okuda San Miguel turns an abandoned house in Arkansas into a 'universal chapel.' *Designboom*. Retrieved from https://www.designboom.com/art/okuda-san-miguel-universal-chapel-justkids-arkansas-09-20-2016/.

Azzarello, N. (2016b, September 30). Guido Van Helten paints larger-than-life 'heroes' on feed mill façades in Arkansas. *Designboom*. Retrieved from https://www.designboom.com/art/guido-van-helten-portraits-feed-mill-arkansas-09-30-2016/.

Balthazar Kramer - first fort soldier National Park Service. (2017, August 28). *National Park Service [Website]*. Retrieved from https://www.nps.gov/fosm/learn/historyculture/balthazar-kramer.htm.

Barthes, R. (1972). *Mythologies*. (A. Lavers, Trans.). New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Bartholomew, D. (2016, October 24). Fayetteville's Clinton house museum. *Fayetteville Flyer*. Retrieved from http://onlyinark.com/fayetteville-flyer/fayetteville-clinton-house-museum/.

Belk, R. (2007). Why not share rather than own? *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 611,* 126-140. doi: 10.1177/0002716206298483.

Biss, E. (2015, December 6). White debt: Reckoning with what is owed – and what can never be repaid – for racial privilege. *New York Times.* Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/magazine/white-debt.html.

Boerner, T.T. (2014, February 3). Wilson, Arkansas. *Grace, Garden, and Grits*. Retrieved from http://www.gracegritsgarden.com/2014/02/wilson-cafe-wilson-arkansas.html.

Boerner, T.T. (2017, May 15). Experience white's mercantile in Wilson, Arkansas. *Only in Arkansas*. Retrieved from http://onlyinark.com/homegrown/experience-whites-mercantile-wilson-arkansas/.

Boyd, M. (2000). Reconstructing bronzeville: Racial nostalgia and neighborhood redevelopment. *Journal of Urban Affairs, 22*(2), 107-122. doi: 10.1111/0735-2166.00045.

Brantley, M. (2017, October 29). Happy cities list: No Arkansas winners but a big loser in Fort Smith. *Arkansas Times.* Retrieved from https://www.arktimes.com/ArkansasBlog/archives/2017/10/29/happy-cities-list-no-arkansas-winners-but-a-big-loser-in-fort-smith.

Brooks, R. L. (2004). *Atonement and forgiveness: A new model for black reparations*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Bryan, F. J. (1994). *Henry Grady or Tom Watson? The rhetorical struggle for the New South, 1880-1890*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press.

Building the second Fort Smith. (2017, August 29). National Park Service [Website]. Retrieved from https://www.nps.gov/fosm/learn/historyculture/building-the-second-fort-smith.htm.

Catherwood-Ginn, J. & Leonard, R. (2015). Rivers and bridges: theater in regional planning. In M. Stephenson & S. Tate (Eds.) *Arts and community change: Exploring cultural development policies, practices, and dilemmas* (pp. 28-53). New York, NY: Routledge.

Census of Population and Housing. (2010). US Census Bureau [Data File]. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html.

Clinton Birthplace Foundation (2011). *President Bill Clinton's 1st home: Hope, Arkansas [website]*. Retrieved from http://www.clintonchildhoodhomemuseum.com/.

Clinton presidential center. (2017). *Clinton foundation [website]*. Retrieved from https://www.clintonfoundation.org/clinton-presidential-center/visit/visiting-center.

Cobb, J. (1992). *The most southern place on earth: Mississippi Delta and the roots of regional identity*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Corrigan, L. (2018). The (re)segregation crisis continues: Little Rock Central High at sixty. *Southern Communication Journal*, *83*(2), 65-74. doi: 10.1080/1041794X.2017.1423513.

Crew, S. R., & Sims, J. E. (1991). Locating authenticity: fragments of a dialogue. In I. Karp, S. Lavine, & Rockefeller Foundation (Eds.) *Exhibiting cultures: the poetics and politics of museum display* (pp. 159-175). Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Dauphin, C. (2018, February 2). John Oates pays tribute to American music's roots with solo album 'Arkansas'. *Billboard*. Retrieved from https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop/8097501/john-oates-arkansas-album-premiere.

Davis, D. E. (2013). Zero-tolerance policing, stealth real estate development, and the transformation of public space: Evidence from Mexico City. *Latin American Perspectives*, *40*(2), 53–76. doi: 10.1177/0094582X12467761.

Davis, P. (2007). Place exploration: Museums, identity, community. In S. Watson (Ed.) *Museums and their communities* (pp. 53-76). London, United Kingdom: Routledge.

Davis, P. (2013). Memoryscapes in transition: Black history museums, New south narratives, and urban regeneration. *Southern Communication Journal, 78*(2), 107-127. doi: 10.1080/1041794X.2012.729125.

Davis, T. M. (2011). *Southscapes: geographies of race, region, & literature*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Debbie. (2017). The Wilson café: A jewel in the Arkansas delta. *Dining with Debbie* [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://diningwithdebbie.net/2017/03/24/the-wilson-cafe-a-jewel-in-the-arkansas-delta/.

Dickinson, D. G., Blair, C., & Ott, B. L. (Eds.). (2010). *Places of public memory: The rhetoric of museums and memorials*. Tuscaloosa: University Alabama Press.

Dickinson, D., Ott, B. L., & Eric, A. (2005). Memory and myth at the Buffalo Bill Museum. *Western Journal of Communication*, *69*(2), 85–108. https://doi.org/10.1080/10570310500076684.

Dickinson, R. (1996). Heritage tourism is hot. *American Demographics, 18*(9), 13-14.

Dillon, S. (2012). Possessed by death: The neoliberal-carceral state, black feminism, and the afterlife of slavery. *Radical History Review, 112*, 113-125. doi: 10.1215/01636545-1416196.

Doggett, L. (1993). Multi-cultural tourism development offers new dimension of travel. *Business America, 114*(18), 8-10.

Doucet, B. van Kempen, R., & van Weesep, J. (2011). We are a rich city with poor people: Municipal strategies of new-build gentrification in Rotterdam and Glasgow. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space, 43,* 1438-1454. doi: 10.1068/a43470.

Douglas-Bowers, D. (2013, November 7). Debt slavery: The forgotten history of sharecropping. The Hampton Institute *[Blog post].* Retrieved from http://www.hamptoninstitute.org/sharecropping.html#_edn18.

Experience Fort Smith. (Producer). (2016, January 11). *The Unexpected project 2015* [Video]. Available from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dk10fD1vRM.

Fainstein, S. & Judd, D. (1999). Global forces, local strategies, and urban tourism. In D. Judd & S. Fainstein (Eds.), *The tourist city*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Faulkner, W. (1936). *Absalom, Absalom!* New York: Random House.

Flood, C. (2001). *Political myth: A theoretical introduction*. London: Psychology Press.

Florida, R. (2002). *The rise of the creative class.* New York: Basic Books.

Ford, S. (2004). Listening to the ghosts: The "new southern studies": A response to Michael Kreyling. *South Central Review, 22*(1), 19-25. doi:10.1353/scr.2005.0012.

Founding head's message. (2018). The Delta School [website]. Retrieved from http://www.thedeltaschool.org/founding-heads-message.

Gladwell, M. (Producer). (2017, July 5). Foot solder of Birmingham. *Revisionist History.* Retrieved from http://revisionisthistory.com/episodes/14-the-foot-soldier-of-birmingham.

Glassberg, D. (1996). Public history and the study of memory. *The Public Historian, 18(*2), 7-23. doi: 10.2307/3377910.

Golden, A. (2017, August 3). Fort Smith to move ahead with Propelling Downtown Forward Plan. Arkansas News. Retrieved from http://www.arkansasnews.com/news/20170803/fort-smith-to-move-ahead-with-propelling-downtown-forward-plan.

Gordy, G. (2011, August 10). Hometown pride. *Arkansas Times*. Retrieved from https://www.arktimes.com/arkansas/hometown-pride/Content?oid=1881380.

Grisham, C. (2016). Lee Wilson & Company. In *The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History & Culture*. Retrieved from http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=4437.

Hell on the border jail. (2017, September 25) *National Park Service* [website]. Retrieved from https://www.nps.gov/fosm/learn/historyculture/hell-on-the-border-jail.htm.

History (2017). *Wilson, Arkansas*. [website]. Retrieved from https://www.wilsonarkansas.com/explore/history/.

History. (2018). *The Delta School* [website. Retrieved from http://www.thedeltaschool.org/about-us/history.

Hobsbawm, E. & Ranger, T. (1984). *The invention of tradition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hoelscher, S. (2006). The white-pillared past: Landscapes of memory and race in the American South. In R. Schein (Ed.) *Landscape and race in the United States* (pp. 39-72). London, United Kingdom: Routledge.

Howell, R. (2008). Throw the "bums" out? A discussion of the effects of historic preservation statutes on low-income households through the process of urban gentrification in old neighborhoods. *The Journal of Gender, Race, and Justice, 11*(3), 541-571.

Houdek, M. & Phillips, K.R. (2017). Public memory. In *Oxford Encyclopedia of Communication.* doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.181.

Hughey, J, & Speer, P. W. (2002). Community, sense of community, and Networks. In A. T. Fisher, C. C. Sonn, & B. J. Bishop (Eds.), *Psychological sense of community: Research, applications, and implications* (pp. 319-334). New York: Kluwer/Plenum.

Industrial connection art installation. (2018). *Wilson, Arkansas* [website]. Retrieved from https://www.wilsonarkansas.com/explore/music-arts/.

ISSA – iSupportStreetArt (2017, August 26). Justkids curation in Fort Smith, Arkansas. *iSupportStreetArt.com.* Retrieved from http://www.isupportstreetart.com/justkids-curation-fort-smith-arkansas/.

Jacobs, J. (1961). *The death and life of great American cities*. New York: Random House.

John Oates music. (Producer). (2018). *John Oates with the good road band – "Arkansas" official video* [Video]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=49&v=eMX-AAy-rDg.

Judge Isaac. C. Parker. (2017, August 29). *National Park Service [website].* Retrieved from https://www.nps.gov/fosm/learn/historyculture/judge-parker.htm.

Kanter, J. (2016). *Presidential libraries as performance: Curating American character from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush*. Carbondale: IL: Southern Illinois Press.

Kersch, K. I. (2004). *Constructing civil liberties: Discontinuities in the development of American constitutional law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

King, A. (2016). *Reimagining Argentina: Identity, memory, and healing collective trauma (Unpublished master's thesis).* Regis University, Denver, CO.

King, S.A. (2006). Memory, mythmaking, and museums: Constructive authenticity and the primitive blues subject. *Southern Communication Journal, 71*(3), 235-250. doi: 10.1080/10417940600846029.

Kohn, M. (2004). *Brave new neighborhoods: The privatization of public space.* New York: Routledge.

Koon, D. (2016, May 5). The wizard of Wilson. *Arkansas Times.* Retrieved from
    https://www.arktimes.com/arkansas/the-wizard-of-wilson/.

Kreyling, M. (2010). *The south that wasn't there: Postsouthern memory and history*. Baton
    Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press.

Lancaster, G. (2013). Nightriding and racial cleansing in the Arkansas River Valley. *The
    Arkansas Historical Quarterly, 72*(3), 242-264.

Lehrer, J. (2012). *Imagine: How creativity works.* Boston: Houghton Mifflan Harcourt.

Levi-Strauss, C. (1955). The structural study of myth. *The Journal of American Folklore,
    68*(270), 428-444.

Lewicka, M. (2011). Place attachment: How far have we come in the last 40 years? *Journal of
    Environmental Psychology, 30*, 35-51. doi: 10.1016/j.jenvp.2010.10.0f01.

Lind, M. (2015, July 3). How the South skews America. *Politico.* Retrieved from
    https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/07/how-the-south-skews-america-
    119725.html.

Linenthal, E. T. (2006). The national park service and civic engagement. *The Public Historian*,
    28(1), 123–129. doi:10.1525/tph.2006.28.1.123.

Lloyd, R. (2011). East Nashville skyline. *Ethnography, 12*(1), 114-145.
    doi:10.1177/1466138110387219.

Lloyd, R. (2012). Urbanization and the Southern United States. *Annual Review of Sociology, 38,*
    483-506. doi: 10.1146/annurev-soc-071811-145540.

Lovett, J. (2016, November 4). D*Face hits bullseye with 'War Paint' companion piece in
    downtown Fort Smith. *Times Record.* Retrieved from
    http://www.swtimes.com/news/20161104/dface-hits-bullseye-with-war-paint-companion-
    piece-in-downtown-fort-smith.

MacCannell, D. (1973). Staged authenticity: Arrangements of social space in tourist settings.
    American Journal of Sociology, 79, 589-603. doi: 10.1086/225585.

MacCannell, D. (1999). *The tourist: A new theory of leisure class.* Berkley: University of
    California Press.

Mackowsky, V. (2016). Tell about southern studies: What do they do there? *American Literary
    History, 28*(1), 191-198. doi: 10.1093/alh/ajv037.

Malinowski, B. (1926). *Myth in Primitive Psychology*. New York: Norton and Co.

Markusen, A. & Gadwa, A. (2010). Creative placemaking. The National Endowment for the Arts [PDF]. Retrieved from: https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf.

McDermott, J.J. (2009). Reconstruction and post-civil war reconciliation. *Military Review,* 89(1).

Mehta, N. (2012, October 12). The question all creative placemakers should ask [Web log post]. Retrieved from https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/the-question-all-creative-placemakers-should-ask.

Milligan, M. (1998). Interactional past and potential: The social construction of place attachment. *Symbolic Interaction, 21*(1), 1-33. doi: 10.1525/si.1998.21.1.1.

Missouri State University. (2016). Hillbillies and frontier living: Dispelling myths of the Ozarks' past. Retrieved from https://news.missouristate.edu/2016/11/15/hillbillies/.

Morris, R. B. (2016). American cultural myth and the orphan archetype. *European Journal of American Culture*, *35*(2), 127–145. doi: 10.1386/ejac.35.2.127_1.

Music and arts (2018). Wilson, Arkansas [Website]. Retrieved from https://www.wilsonarkansas.com/explore/music-arts/.

Parkinson, J. (2009). Holistic democracy and physical public space. In M. Kingwell & P. Turmel (Eds.), *Rites of way: The politics and poetics of public space* (71-84). Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Parkinson, J. (2012). *Democracy and public space: The physical sites of democratic performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pierce, J., Martin, D. G., & Murphy, J. T. (2011). Relational place-making: the networked politics of place. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *36*(1), 54–70. doi: 10.1111/j.1475-5661.2010.00411. x.

Powell, D. R. (2007). *Critical regionalism: Connecting politics and culture in the American landscape.* Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

President William Jefferson Clinton birthplace home (2017). National Park Service *[website]*. Retrieved from https://www.nps.gov/wicl/index.htm.

Putnam, R. D. (1996). The strange disappearance of civic America. *The American Prospect, 7*, 56–62. Retrieved from http://prospect.org/article/strange-disappearance-civic-america.

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Quayle, A., Sonn, C., Kasat, P. (2016). Community arts as public pedagogy: disruptions into public memory through Aboriginal counter-storytelling. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *20*(3), 261-277. doi: 10.1080/13603116.2015.1047662.

Rankine, C. (2015, June 22). The condition of black life is mourning. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html.

Romine, S. (2014). *The real south: Southern narrative in the age of cultural reproduction* (Reprint edition). Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press.

Rosteck, T. (1994). The intertextuality of "the man from hope": Bill Clinton as person, as persona, as star? In S.A. Smith (Ed), *Bill Clinton on stump, state, and stage: A rhetorical road to the White House* (pp. 223-248). Fayetteville, AR: The University of Arkansas Press.

Rosenberg, J. (2018, January 1). John Oates came to Arkansas, wrote a song about it. *Arkansas Times*. Retrieved from https://www.arktimes.com/RockCandy/archives/2018/01/03/john-oates-came-to-arkansas-wrote-a-song-about-it.

Salvatori, G. (2015). Stone or sound: Memory and monuments in contemporary public art. *Il Capitale Culturale: Studies on the Value of Cultural Heritage, 12*, 931-954. doi: 10.13138/2039-2362/1200

Schroeder, P. R. (2004). *Robert Johnson, mythmaking, and contemporary American culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Scott, R. L. (1977). Diego Rivera at Rockefeller center: Fresco painting and rhetoric. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, *41*(2), 70–82. doi: 10.1080/10570317709389599.

Severson, K. (2014, January 19). Arkansas town's new owner has visions of its renaissance. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/20/us/arkansas-towns-new-owner-has-visions-of-its-renaissance.

Simpson, L. P. (1980). *The brazen face of history: Studies in the literary consciousness in America*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press.

Six days one summer. (2017, August 29). National Park Service [Website]. Retrieved from https://www.nps.gov/fosm/learn/historyculture/six-days-one-summer.htm.

Smith, H. A., & Furuseth, O. J. (2006). *Latinos in the New South: Transformations of place*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

Smith, S. A. (1982). The old south myth as a contemporary southern commodity. *The Journal of Popular Culture, 16*(3), 22-29. doi: 10.1111/j.0022-3840.1982.1603_22. x.

Smith, S. A. (1985). *Myth, media, Southern mind*. Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press.

Souza, K. (2016, March 14). Arkansas' tourism revenue grows 7.7% in 2015, trending higher in 2016. *Talk Business and Politics*. Retrieved from https://talkbusiness.net/2016/03/arkansas-tourism-revenue-grows-7-7-in-2015-trending-higher-in-2016/.

State & county quickfacts. (2011). United States Census Bureau. [Data file]. Archived from the original on July 14, 2011. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045217.

Stories of the Trail of Tears. (2015, April 10). National Park Service [Website]. Retrieved from https://www.nps.gov/fosm/learn/historyculture/storiestrailoftears.htm.

Tell, D. (2012). The meanings of Kansas: Rhetoric, regions, and counter-regions. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly, 42*:3, 214-232. doi: 10.1080/02773945.2012.682843.

Then and now. (2018). Wilson, Arkansas [website]. Retrieved from https://www.wilsonarkansas.com/about-wilson-arkansas/.

Titon, J. T. (1998). The new blues tourism. *Arkansas Review: A Journal of Delta Studies, 29*, 5-10.

Titon, J. T. (2014). *Early downhome blues: A musical and cultural analysis*. Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press.

Toolis, E.E. (2017). Theorizing critical placemaking as a tool for reclaiming public space. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 59,* 184-199. doi: 10.1002/ajcp.12118.

Tudor, H. (1975). *Political myth*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.

U.S. Travel Association. (2016). U.S. travel and tourism overview [Data file]. Retrieved from https://www.ustravel.org/system/files/media_root/document/Research_Fact-Sheet_US-Travel-and-Tourism-Overview.pdf.

van den Berghe, P. & Keyes, C. (1984). Tourism and recreated ethnicity. *Annals of Tourism Research, 11*, 343-352. doi: /10.1016/0160-7383(84)90026-4.

Vernon, Z. (2016). Romanticizing the rough south: Contemporary cultural nakedness and the rise of grit lit. *Southern Cultures,* 77-94. doi:10.1353/scu.2016.0035.

Visit Wilson, AR. (Producer). (2015). *Delta empire* [video]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHB-amZG0Jc.

Visit Wilson, AR. (Producer). (2015). *Made in Wilson* [video]. Retrieved from
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2gSAWpR5HA&t=50s.

Visit Wilson, AR. (Producer). (2015). *Our community*. [Video]. Retrieved from
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjTI2i_k9n4.

Wallis, R. (2017). Myths and imaginaries: Depictions of lifestyle migration in *Country Style*
magazine. *Rural Society, 26*(1), 18-29. doi: 10.1080/10371656.2017.1285471.

Walsh, K., & Currie, A. (2015). Caricatures, myths, and white lies. *Metaphilosophy*, *46*(3), 414–
435. doi: 10.1111/meta.12139.

Whayne, J. (2011). *Delta empire: Lee Wilson and the transformation of agriculture in the new
south.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Whayne, J. (2016). Robert E. Lee Wilson. In *The encyclopedia of Arkansas history & culture*.
Retrieved from http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-
detail.aspx?entryID=1800.

Where the world meets the delta (2017). Wilson, Arkansas [website]. Retrieved from
https://www.wilsonarkansas.com/.

Where to find the good life. (2017, October 18). *National Geographic.* Retrieved from
https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2017/11/where-to-find-the-good-life/.

White's mercantile. (2018). White's mercantile: A general store for the modern-day tastemaker.
[website]. https://whitesmercantile.com/.

Wilson, Arkansas (2018). Inspired in Wilson: John Oates and the snow-white cotton fields of
Arkansas. [Blog post]. Retrieved from
https://www.wilsonarkansas.com/blog/53/inspired-in-wilson-john-oates-and-the-snow-
white-cotton-fields-of-arkansas/.

Wilson café. (2018). Wilson café [website]. Retrieved from http://www.eatatwilson.com/.