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CELEBRATORY ACTIVISM: A MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF SOUTHERN IDENTITY

by

Elizabeth Myhr Lynch

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College

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ABSTRACT

Celebratory Activism: A Media Portrayal of Southern Identity

(Under the Direction of Dr. Mark Dolan)

The objective of this paper is to investigate the media's role in portraying southern identity and to determine the media's effect on the surrounding communities. It specifically addresses the three media institutions of Thacker Mountain Radio, *The Oxford American*, and The Southern Foodways Alliance and determines how they represent and celebrate southern culture. The methodology of the paper consists of the assessment of existing literature in the field of the media's depiction of the South followed by case studies on Thacker Mountain Radio, *The Oxford American*, and The Southern Foodways Alliance. Through interviews and personal testimonies regarding Thacker Mountain Radio, through personal correspondences concerning the editorial mission of *The Oxford American*, and through examining the specific documentary and new media practices of The Southern Foodways Alliance, this study shows the power that the media can have within a community. As represented by these case studies, the media has the potential to positively affect communities and to unite a diverse culture through celebratory activism. With this realization, this paper argues that Thacker Mountain Radio, *The Oxford American*, and The Southern Foodways Alliance are three media forces that are positively impacting the South by celebrating, empowering, and strengthening the diversity of the region. These three media institutions exemplify the power that the media has to bring communities together in order to learn from one another and to celebrate the rich connection of a shared southern identity.

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CHAPTER ONE
Introduction
The Importance of a Southerner's Story

At the beginning of my junior year at the University of Mississippi, I watched a four-minute multimedia piece produced by a journalism faculty member about how a homeless man in Nashville named Cowboy survives the winter in a tent beside the railroad tracks (*Cowboy*). I realized then that journalism is more than just words on paper about what happened yesterday, or a broadcast report from the latest sporting event. I realized that some media forms and genres have the responsibility to tell a deeper story - to dig into the emotion of a situation and explore the effects of different circumstances on people and their daily lives.

Renowned investigative journalist I.F. Stone, known for his independent *Weekly* pamphlet publication, argued that the key to being a successful journalist is to “comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comfortable.” If this is true, then journalists have a responsibility to embrace stories that resonate deeply and to consider the way such stories are perceived by the public. Journalists have a duty to get beyond facts, with content that either comforts or afflicts sources and institutions. In this view, journalists become active players as opposed to detached bystanders.

After Christmas of my junior year, I boarded a plane to live in Spain for six months in order to learn the language, be immersed in a new culture, and

experience daily life outside of the Bible Belt. In an American program of about five hundred students, I was one of a very few from the South. Daily I heard daily comments like, "You're the first person I've met from Mississippi," and "You sound like Paula Deen" and my favorite, "She's a southern belle, she's too classy for that." For the first couple of weeks I was a novelty to all my new Northern and Midwestern friends. Questions about southern stereotypes, food, and eccentricities never ceased as the word "y'all" tipped off more and more conversations about how idyllic the South really is thought to be.

It wasn't until I left the United States that I truly began to understand not only regional, but personal differences with regard to the geography of our country. I grasped what Pulitzer Prize winning journalist John Popham, one of the first *New York Times* correspondents to write about the South, traveling its back roads, meant when he said, "You have to leave the South to see it. If you stay here, you think it is this way everywhere," (Cooper 2). The South, as a region and as a personality, is unlike any other place. From its southern drawls to its buttery foods and family traditions, the South's reputation precedes it. Because of its stereotypes and cultural caricatures - I seek to reveal aspects of the South's identity through culturally attuned journalism and to show the media's role in this portrayal. As a Brookhaven native, I have an insider's perspective; as a journalism major, I am tasked with speaking the truth.

Because the South is often viewed by outsiders in exaggerated terms, it is important that southerners illuminate what really drives the region and what factors shape its people. This study explores how radio, magazines, and new media

documentary studies help southerners define themselves, considering an example from each genre as case studies. By conducting interviews and through archival research, I will describe how Thacker Mountain Radio impacts the Oxford, Mississippi community; by researching original correspondence, which were the foundation of *The Oxford American* magazine, I discuss the editorial mission of this culturally-rich regional publication; and by analyzing different kinds of documentary adopted by The Southern Foodways Alliance, I will assess this organization's significance to the region. As context, I will analyze early forms of radio, magazine, and documentary studies that have influenced Thacker Mountain Radio, *The Oxford American*, and The Southern Foodways Alliance. Finally, this paper explores how the ideas of journalists, historians, anthropologists, and philosophers have helped to shape the concept of southern identity.

Thacker Mountain Radio, recorded live in Oxford, regionally aired and broadcast globally online, will serve as a study of a present-day radio show influenced by the cultural and local impact of past radio shows like the Grand Ole Opry and the Louisiana Hayride. Thacker Mountain Radio uses music and literature to share regionally-inspired stories and to offer listeners new perspectives on time-honored southern traditions. Focusing on print journalism, *The Oxford American* magazine represents the power that the written word has to reveal the depth of a specific culture, exemplified earlier in John Popham's work in the South during the late 1940s and the 1950s. *The Oxford American* is published in Little Rock, Arkansas and celebrates southern literature. Finally, my look at The Southern Foodways

Alliance

documentary and oral

histories, and their role in humanizing and recording past and present day local communities. The Southern Foodways Alliance partners with the University of Mississippi to “set a common table where all who gather may consider our history and our future in a spirit of reconciliation,” (SFA Mission).

Thacker Mountain Radio, *The Oxford American*, and The Southern Foodways Alliance are three media forces that attempt to correct negative stereotypes and generalizations by celebrating, empowering, and strengthening the South’s diversity. They attempt to bring communities together, connecting them so that they might learn from one another through a shared, mediated southern identity.

The media is a powerful force in communicating with the public and affecting the way in which a story, experience, or situation is perceived by an audience. While perceptions of the South have been influenced by many factors, the media has played a large role in how the South has been portrayed over time.

With issues ranging from race, class, and gender, the media has the power to portray the South in ways that shape public opinion of the region. Because the media has the power to affect the perception of the South, ethics scholar Clifford Christians and journalist John Popham are important figures with regard to this thesis. These two authors reflect the power of the media and the responsibility that comes with it. In his book *Good News*, Clifford Christians described a communitarian philosophy that in turn contributes greatly to the idea of communitarian journalism. Christians writes about specific media institutions owning the responsibility of working to transform communities by using their media power to help give voice to the voiceless and to indict the powerful. Such a

mission has relevance to the ways in which the media I have chosen to write about attempt to correct misconceptions about the South by fostering strong audience communities. Similarly, *New York Times* correspondent John Popham's work on the South acknowledges media power and the responsibility to pursue progression. Popham crisscrossed the South in his automobile, and his work reveals a journalist who sought to fully understand the customs, attitudes and beliefs of a region.

As a journalist, I am constantly faced with having to decide what story to tell. Having been greatly influenced by the works of Christians, I have come to believe that a journalist has the power to tell stories that positively affect change in communities and set a blueprint for continued positive change. Additionally, after hearing the many skewed perceptions of the South by others, I am convinced that Popham's method of investigative reporting on a deeply personal level is the best way of finding the heart of a story and reporting it accurately.

According to sociologist John Shelton Reed, the South is not known for "creating mass culture through the popular media, but the region has used media to perpetuate and maintain regional and local cultural values," (Cox 1). It is through the media, the early reigning power of the newspaper, along with what were then increasingly popular radio and magazine publications that gained popularity in the early to mid 1900s, that historical experiences and culture spread throughout the region.

Though the idea of the radio emerged in the 1800s by Michael Faraday and Samuel Morse, it was actually in the South where a greater expansion of radio occurred. Farmer Nathan Stubblefield is credited as the "inventor of radio" with his

five-mile broadcast of speech and music around Murray, Kentucky (Sloan 349). Since then, the radio has served as a showcase for regional musicians and writers beginning as early as 1924 with the WLS National Barn Dance show in Chicago. Additionally, in the South, shows formed such as the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tennessee in 1925, the Mountain Dance and Folk Festival with Bascom Lamar Lunsford in Asheville, North Carolina in 1928, and eventually down to Shreveport, Louisiana with the beginning of the Louisiana Hayride in 1948. “The Grand Ole Opry celebrates country music’s diversity,” said Pete Fisher, general manager of the Opry. (History of the Opry).

The early radio shows focused on a diversity of music that brought people together and promoted the sharing of regional and cultural traditions through music. In the following years the Opry gained national popularity with a spot on the NBC Radio Network, while stars such as Johnny Cash, Elvis Presley, and Hank Williams performed at home and abroad.

The Opry was not the only one to showcase emerging national celebrities from the South and broadcast southern music. The Louisiana Hayride, known as “Cradle of the Stars,” offered its own stage of talent that supported stars such as Presley and Cash, while encouraging a diversity of programming and a risk-taking attitude. The program reflects the day-to-day activities of life in Shreveport, which encouraged the emergence of musical fluidity across racial and cultural borders (Douglas 704). The creators of the Louisiana Hayride acknowledged the existing diversity of life in Shreveport, and used the radio show as a means to celebrate and unite those cultural differences.

The significance of the Grand Ole Opry and the Louisiana Hayride resides in their power of southern, regional expression. Because these radio shows were nationally broadcast, they gave voice to the South and influenced outside views of southern culture. They revealed a culturally rich region, but these shows also encouraged community involvement and support of country, folk, and blues culture, thus expanding the media's role. Just two years into its existence, Opry crowds clogged hallways to see its performers. To meet the demand, the National Life Company was prompted to build an acoustically-engineered auditorium capable of holding five hundred fans (History of the Opry). As music traveled across the airwaves, the live show brought together people of all races, classes, and economic standings who enjoyed celebrating the musical representation of a southern heritage.

The growth of the radio in the early twentieth century was not the only transition for the United States. From WWI in the early 1900's to the poverty of the Great Depression followed by WWII, the United States faced social upheaval, increased industrialization, and a growing culture of consumerism (Sloan 285). During this time, newspaper circulation continued to increase, depending greatly on marketing, advertising, news, entertainment, and above all, the newfound consumerism mindset. This consumerism created a public susceptible to the media and who had a constant desire to be fed by the media. Ironically, it was shortly after this that for the first time the South began to be spotlighted by the national media; however, the new awareness only emerged in response to issues regarding segregation and Civil Rights (Sloan 285).

With the growing-circulation of such papers such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* the nation began to hear voices from separate regions and to develop a national perspective. During the early 1960's, when the nation searched for information regarding the Civil Rights Movement in the South, the media had the opportunity to greatly influence the perception and impression of the South. Known for his realistic writing about the South and Civil Rights, *New York Times* journalist John Popham began to explore the South with fresh eyes. Revealing stories not found elsewhere in national publications, and changing preconceived judgments through his highly personalized and humanized stories of life in the South, Popham went above and beyond the call of duty as the *Times'* southern correspondent. In an unpublished interview with Popham about his journalistic techniques, he explained how he tried to show the South to the rest of the nation:

If I had an assignment in New Orleans, lets say, instead of coming right back to Chattanooga (where he was the regional editor for *The New York Times*) I would take two or three days coming back, and stop off in small towns and visit people that I had met at different areas in political life, and that sort of thing (Chattanooga Oral History Project).

Popham went on to talk about the people of the South and how they responded to outsiders. One must first cultivate and respect southerners before understanding their tremendous body of knowledge and wisdom, he explained. Popham knew people as high as the governor and as low as a farmer in the smallest town in south Mississippi, but to him both were the same. People and relationships are what make good journalists and good stories, he reasoned, and Popham knew how to enter into other people's lives. In an article saluting Popham, LeRoy Collins described the essence of the South that Popham strived to discover and share with the rest of the

country. "Popham believed in a future for the South that would bring out the best in our people, of all races, religions, and callings," (Collins 1).

Because of Popham's coverage of the South a real national recognition of the region grew. Through the troubling times of the Civil Rights era, with harsh lines of segregation and white supremacy being pushed away, Popham uncovered truths in the South that offset its weaknesses and negative press portrayals. Popham used his power as a journalist to share with the rest of the nation deeper social and cultural distinctions of the South that continued to reveal the South in a new way. Popham's work gave rise to a new type of investigative journalism, underscoring the potential of the media to influence public perception and perspective.

Popham's impact on the public perception of the South helped to connect small communities, fostering a kind of communitarianism. This model of journalism is echoed in Clifford Christian's book *Good News*, which focuses on the human element of community life and considers each journalistic source on an individual level. Under this model different forms of media discover their own potential within a community to shape humanity. Christians argues that "structural changes are needed in the press's world view, a new occupational norm, and fundamental reforms in the way mass-media institutions hire, involve workers in management decisions, determine their audiences, and engender civic responsibility," (Christians 13). Christians goes on to explain that communitarian journalism pursues the ultimate goal of "civic transformation that aims to liberate the citizenry, inspire acts of conscience, pierce the political fog, and enable the consciousness raising that is

essential for constructing a social order through dialogue, mutually, in concert with our universal humanity," (Christians 14).

Christian's ideas on communitarian journalism and Stone's philosophy of journalistic responsibility speak volumes about the power of the media; however, media institutions do not have the responsibility to be the most powerful force. I.F. Stone writes about a journalist's role to *provoke* comfort and affliction within a society- meaning it is not the role of the journalist or media institution to execute such evolution, but rather instead to inspire and bring to question the possibility of community acts of social, economical, and relational transformation. Because of this, through the differing outlets of radio, writing, and documentary productions, the media has the power to positively impact, build, and strengthen communities.

What follows is a discussion of other important secondary sources that shed light on my examination of how outsiders see the South and how southerners view themselves through the media. The case studies focusing on Thacker Mountain Radio, *The Oxford American*, and The Southern Foodways Alliance explore the effects of the media on southern communities and the positive impact they have by celebrating, empowering, and strengthening the diversity of the region. Through a series of personal interviews, I will discuss why Thacker Mountain Radio is important to the Oxford community, and how it is achieving its potential as a music and literature radio show. By researching original correspondences regarding the editorial mission of *The Oxford American*, I will determine why the South needs this culturally rich general-interest magazine; and by examining the different forms of

documentary studies that The Southern Foodways Alliance is conducting, I will discuss its success in bringing people to a common table.

Thacker Mountain Radio, *Oxford American*, and the Southern Foodways Alliance are three examples of media institutions prompting a deeper examination of southern culture through music, literature, and documentary studies, and are leading to a new, and more fully understood South

CHAPTER TWO
Literature Review
The Identity of the South

The outsider's South is lined with cotton fields, shaded by magnolia leaves, infected with racism, cured by hospitality, and laced with tradition. Scholars from various fields have described the South's cultural traditions and geographic flavor. By exploring what others have said about the South, and comparing what they have said to how Thacker Mountain Radio, *The Oxford American*, and The Southern Foodways Alliance reflect the South, I will situate these media institutions within a more scholarly frame, thus illuminating how southern media has helped to shape southern communities and regional identity, celebrating the diversity and uniqueness of the region.

The following literature review discusses the South's geographical and cultural distinctiveness, its image in reference to a consumerism society, and the South's personality as the product of historic conditions. In addition, I will provide insight into Southern media as a vehicle for cultural identity, exploring the roots of radio before Thacker Mountain Radio, discussing magazines that inspired *The Oxford American*, and identifying the documentary studies that influenced The Southern Foodways Alliance.

A Culturally Distinctive South

According to sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset, "Every country has a South—a social South if not a geographical South," (Thompson v). South signifies a point of comparative reference. However, people are distinguished from each other by more than geography. Geographic regions produce distinct cultures. "Culture is a way of life, a body of beliefs, and an organization of conventional understandings in which all, or nearly all, questions are automatically and convincingly answered," writes Edgar Thompson in *Perspectives on the South*, a collection of a series of papers written for the beginning of Duke University's Center for Southern Studies.

All people want to know from where they originate - how they came to be the way they are, and what makes them different from neighboring states, regions, and countries. The South, characterized historically for political and economic segregation, has long searched for ways to invent and re-invent itself along more progressive lines. Weaknesses such as poverty, racism, and inadequacy in comparison to the rest of the nation have fostered southerners' hope for a "New South"; however, according to Thompson, "Since Henry W. Grady used the expression in 1886, every generation of Americans has been told that the South of its day was a 'New South'," (Thompson xi).

The South is plagued by the pressures of outside change, aware of the necessity *to* change, and continually leaning towards a New South. Thompson argues that the *real* New South, however, will not exist unless its inhabitants embrace the idea that "the unexamined society is not worth living in," (Thompson xii). The new South will only come about when southerners are able to truly

understand their differences and choose to celebrate their distinctiveness. Along these lines, the media has the opportunity to lead southerners into an examination of their culture, just as its novelists have done.

In her essay, *Place in Fiction*, Eudora Welty writes, "One place comprehended, can makes us understand other places better." Charles Joyner adds in his book *Shared Traditions* that a "sense of place gives equilibrium. It is by knowing where you stand that you grow able to judge where you are," (Joyner 110). In this way, the heritage and identity of the South must be first fully understood in order for one to completely grasp the truth of other places. Joyner goes on to explain in *Shared Traditions* how the distinct cultures of the South, made of "red, white, and black" people, are what give the South such diversity and uniqueness, and its real sense of identity. "I believe that the sharing of culture traditions in the South is more responsible than any other single factor for the extraordinary richness of southern culture," writes Joyner. These cultural traditions - from food and song to art and rituals - are a merging of influences from regions as diverse as France, Spain, Canada, and Africa. Joyner explains that the synthesis of these cultures has been a dynamic evolving tradition that though deeply affected by differing ideals, frustrations, and anxieties, is full of the hope of all southerners, from all backgrounds, who it created it. There is unity in diversity, and the diversity of the South contributes to its particular and unparalleled existence.

Selling the South to the American Consumer

During the beginning of the nineteenth century with the rise of consumerism and modernization, advertising capitalized on the need for Americans to connect with their pasts while still buying mass-produced items. The South represented a simple, uncomplicated, pastoral lifestyle where antebellum homes, loyal servants, and a culture of leisure still existed, at least for some. This lifestyle, one that seemingly maintained pre-industrial values to which many middle-class consumers aspired, served advertisers well as a means of promoting modernized, mass-produced goods (Cox 37).

Thus, advertisers confirmed the appeal of a distinct culture of the South, and by successfully selling this image, they celebrated distinct cultural values. According to Karen L. Cox in her book *Dreaming of Dixie*, "The mammy, the southern belle, the bearded and mustachioed southern colonel, the male house servant or "uncle" figure, the "pickaninny," the opulent southern plantation, and even the concept of "southern hospitality," were all present in advertising for products ranging from flour and coffee to cleaning supplies and liquor," (Cox 36). In 1937, Quaker Oats used the black mammy as the popular image of Aunt Jemima in order to advertise for pancake flour, for example. Additionally, Atlanta-based Delta airlines in 1940 claimed that their flight attendants, then called stewardesses, personified the spirit of the airline. According to Drew Whitelegg, a research fellow at Emory University's Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life, "At thirty-five thousand feet, they (stewardesses) embodied southern hospitality, with its stress on home, family, and womanhood," (Whitelegg 7). Along with Aunt Jemima and Delta Airlines, R.J.

Reynold Tobacco Company used a southern voice to promote their product. According to an article by Louis M. Kyriakoudes, Vanderbilt's Director of the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, R.J. Reynolds often sponsored the Grand Ole Opry in an effort "to persuade the nation that smoking was fun, relaxing, pleasurable, and, of course, harmless," (Kyriakoudes 76).

Advertisers, though capitalizing on a fanciful image of southern identity, were successful, in part, because other media spread similar perceptions. "Advertising agencies were in the business of conveying familiar images that provided cultural meaning to products that consumers often recognized in other elements of American culture like literature, art, and film," (Cox 37). Americans outside of the South during the rise of mass modernization and consumerism thirsted for a personal, simple lifestyle amid industrialization and urbanization. Though not always an accurate portrayal, advertisements sold the image of the South as an attractive, longed-for place with a lifestyle that embodied what Americans outside of the South lacked.

While advertisers from companies such as Quaker Oats and Delta Airlines profited by selling this pre-industrial image of the South, they were able to gain credibility due, as I have said, to other media depictions. The growing popularity of this southern image was greatly impacted by television dramas and film exploitations showing the South as an outsider region. For example, with television series such as the *Hay Loft Hoedown* and the *Andy Griffith Show*, as well as films like *They Live by Night* and *Alabamas' Ghost*, mediated portrayals of the South grew, and some of these filmic portrayals mired the South deeper in stereotype (Monteith 61).

Though some of these stereotypes of endless danger and drama are magnified in movies, according to Sharon Monteith, “Movies about the South have always exploited what W.J. Cash famously called the ‘romantics of the appalling,’” (Monteith 60). Even so, all producers did not attempt to exploit the South; some merely tried to portray its history in an enlightening, entertaining way. For example, movies such as *Gone with the Wind* and *Roots*, with record-breaking broadcast success, “Document the immense popularity of media depictions of Dixie, but also demonstrate the complications inherent in differentiating among media forms,” (Monteith 171).

Like the advertisers, Hollywood was able to sell the image of the South in a way that has influenced outsiders’ view of the region. “Television movies concerned with the South, like other media depictions of the region, used the symbols provided by its history to dramatize the contradictions of larger American myths,” (Monteith 171). By exploiting the South’s personality and history, advertisers and producers spread a stereotypical image of the South. From the first southern television series of *Hay Loft Hoedown* to the CW’s most recent weekly drama series, *Hart of Dixie*, the image of the South has continued to be sold to the vast consumerism society that buys into the imaginative, dramatized southern identity. In this way, media institutions, from advertisers to producers, are exercising their power to influence and profit from various portrayals of the South.

Before beginning his book *Shared Traditions*, one of Charles Joyner’s first questions was whether or not there is a distinct southern culture. Joyner concludes that the starting point to understanding anything about the South is to view it in

relation to its historical experiences. “The region’s historical experience has endowed the men and women of the South with a rich folk culture, a culture not confined to elite whites but shared by all southerners, a culture that finds its unity in the region’s racial, class, and ethnic diversity,” (Joyner ii). Even so, the root perception of southern identity varies widely, depending on the time, place, and person with whom one speaks.

Attempts to define the South are thus difficult. On one hand, Georgia-born historian Ulrich B. Phillips wrote “The determination to maintain white supremacy is the cardinal test of a southerner and the central theme of southern history,” (Joyner ii). On the other hand, according to historian Eugene D. Genovese, “The only southern tradition is conservatism,” (Joyner i). Contrasting the two statements by Phillips and Genovese, distinguished historians Woodward and David Potter point more closely towards the solution with claims that the South’s identity can only “be rooted in its historical experience,” (Joyner ii). For this reason, the South cannot be understood in one way, or through one cultural lens. Its present identity, and the perceptions of those existing within its region and outside of it, are based on the South’s historical and continual transformation.

Because the distinct personality of the South is ever evolving, southern communities have been positively impacted as a result of additional media attention. As depicted by Thacker Mountain Radio, *The Oxford American*, and The Southern Foodways Alliance, the media has the opportunity to embrace the region’s uniqueness and combine its differences to create a more diverse image of the South.

In an article discussing pejorative beliefs about the South, Ruth Landes writes about speaking with a man who said, "The South is the disease of the United States," (Landes 375). In response, Landes said, "To Northerners also, particularly to those whose thinking like my own is conditioned by the currents of life in large cities, the South is the problem of our commonwealth," (Landes 375). Even after admitting an outsider's dismissive attitude towards the South and its communities, Landes goes on to observe, "And yet there remains an ineradicable feeling of appreciation for the South. So vividly do we recall the tremendous contributions her great men made to the young Republic," (Landes 375). Despite past problems and failures, prejudices and defeats, Landes concludes that the South is still known for its overriding, distinct personality. With the help of the media, and teams of dutiful, committed journalists, the South has the potential to capitalize on its history of differences and transform these differences into a new South--an empowered, emboldened and strengthened community.

In considering specific writers who connect both the past and present-day South--both infinitely full of struggles and stereotypes that remain captured in this unique region--authors Rick Bragg and Curtis Wilkie explore the causes and effects of living in such a charismatic community. Two of their notable books, Bragg's *All Over But the Shoutin'* and Wilkie's *Dixie*, help us understand from a personal point of view an authentic representation of a true southern community.

In *Dixie*, Wilkie recounts stories of historical events shaping the South, and shows how his personal experiences caused him to question where he was raised and the people he was associated with:

The Southerner is an imperfect, conflicted character, not easily pigeonholed—though a stereotype invariably develops when the South attracts national attention. We have been stamped as curious people, with wits as slow as our speech and the odor of a segregationist heritage sticking to our clothes like stale tobacco smoke (Wilkie 17).

Though Wilkie speaks strongly about his homeland, throughout the book he delivers stories about people and times that shaped the present-day South. As a reporter and foreign correspondent, he spent years outside of the South, fleeing from the Southern identity and image that he could never escape. Wilkie joined a group of easterners described by Morris in his book *North Toward Home* as “a genuine set of exiles, almost in the European sense: alienated from home yet forever drawn back to it, seeking some form of personal liberty elsewhere, yet obsessed with the texture and the complexity of the place from which they had departed as few Americans from other states could ever be,” (Wilkie 19). He worked as close as Washington and Boston and as far as Jerusalem; even so, he eventually wound up back in the South, in New Orleans a few hours away from his dying mother.

One night, Wilkie recounted that while sitting around the dinner table with friends such as William Winter, Willie Morris, and Eudora Welty, Morris looked across the table and asked, “Curtis, can you tell us why you came home?” (Wilkie 25). Wilkie explained to the reader how he struggled with that question over and over again, never reaching a conclusion. He reflected for a moment then the thought occurred to him and he responded: “Because people are kinder here,” (Wilkie 25). Before he left the South Wilkie imagined everyone to be the same; he believed all the world to be southern. To him, nothing seemed unique about the South’s racial customs, religious beliefs, reliance on King Cotton, or politics or pride. But even after

realizing the struggles of the South and its unusual personality, Wilkie affirms aspects of southern identity, writing,

Pride may be one of the seven deadly sins, but I believe it is one of our finer characteristics. Sometimes we confuse pride with honor, but most Southerners are proud of the quirks that distinguish us from Middle America. We look upon the landmass below Richmond as a preserve for our customs and consider our difference our glory (Wilkie 19).

The pride Wilkie speaks of as being so evident in the South is one that contributes greatly to connecting the differences between individuals within the region. Though the region is made up of a diverse group of people, it is pride that helps unite the region and encourages southerners to celebrate their diversity. Through the media, specifically Thacker Mountain Radio, *The Oxford American*, and The Southern Foodways Alliance, southerners are allowed to celebrate their diversity, proud of individual distinctions, but furthermore proud of a shared culture, distinguished as such from the rest of the nation.

Like Wilkie, Rick Bragg wrote a book depicting his life growing up in the South and the people that so greatly influenced him. His work, *All Over but the Shoutin'* is a memoir of his mother that sheds light deep into the daily existence of a broken family in a broken, southern society.

Anyone could tell it, and that's the shame of it. A lot of women stood with babies on their hips in line for commodity cheese and peanut butter. A lot of men were damaged deep inside by the killing and dying of wars, then tried to heal themselves with a snake oil elixir of sour mash and self-loathing. A lot of families just came to pieces in that time and place and condition, like paper lace in a summer rain. You can walk to Main Street in any small town, in any big one, and you will hear this story being told behind cigarette-scarred bars, before altars, over fresh-dug ground in a thousand cemeteries. You hear it from the sixty-five-year-old woman with the blank eyes who wipes the tables at the Waffle House, and by the used-up men with Winstons dangling from their lips who absently, rhythmically swing their swing blades at the tall weeds out behind the city jail (Bragg xii).

Bragg's memoir portrays America in the South during his childhood. Growing up in Alabama to a single mother trying to make ends meet, while an alcoholic father gave in to the psychological aftermaths of the Korean War, Bragg's memories shed light into a picture of southern identity in the early 1960's. The only one of his mother's three sons to leave and then return to the South, Bragg defines his roots with the knowledge of a world perspective.

Though he gained journalism experience from several different newspapers, Bragg eventually became a staffer at *The New York Times* where he covered murders, court trials and unrest in Haiti. Bragg explained that he normally just nodded his head and politely moved on after speaking with victims' families, though he was always surprised at their graciousness and openness during such a painful time. When one woman thanked him after he scribbled notes about her murdered little boy, he couldn't help but ask why -- "Why thank me for scribbling down her hopeless story for the benefit of people who live so far and safely away from this place where gunfire twinkles like the lightening bugs after dark?" (Bragg xiv). Her answer sums up Bragg's inspiration for writing about the South, about his past and everything that continues to shape him. "People remembers it," she said, "People forgets if it ain't wrote down," (Bragg xiv).

Bragg's memories of the South are not all about Aunt Carol's apple pie up the street or Pop's hot coffee on the back porch. Bragg wrote, "I grew up in a time when a young man in a baggy suit and slicked-down hair stood spraddle-legged in the crossroads of history and talked hot and mean about the colored," (Bragg xvii). But

the stories that he knows, “stories that were passed down from one of us to another over cones of strawberry ice cream in the gravel parking lot of the tiny store owned by a one-legged man named Tillison,” are the individual stories that shape what the South was, and the cultural struggles it continues to fight through (Bragg xvii). Bragg’s recollection of growing up in the South, though daunting and colorful, shows the realities of middle-class southern identity in a proud region.

Not only has Bragg written a memoir to speak truth about the history of the American South, but he has also read from this work at Thacker Mountain Radio, making several appearances, supporting a media form that in turn celebrates the cultural diversity of the South while strengthening the local Oxford community and, across the airwaves, the region as a whole.

Southern Media as Cultural Identity

Nothing has influenced outsider perception of the South than the media’s depiction of it. “That the mass media contributed- and continue to contribute- thematic and iconographic contours to the South is obvious to even the most casual observers of the region’s culture,” (Monteith 2). Ruth Landes writes that “Films and bestsellers provide us [northerners] with a definite if special outlook. They offer beguiling picturizations of the antebellum South as some country of Cockaigne where men were chivalrous and ladies glamorous, and their former slaves were attached to them by silken bonds,” (Landes 375). While external profiteering media outlets, often dramatized and clichéd, have affected an outsider view of the South

over the years, the impact of internal media institutions has gained influence and even prestige.

While individual media institutions continue to affect the region as a whole, the specific roles of radio, magazine, and documentary publication have long been influential inside southern communities. The impact and potential of such southern media institutions have the power to unify and strengthen divergent communities in forming a common ground of reading, listening, and sharing in a heritage. Not only do such publications provide a sort of safety valve of expression within a community, these publications also contribute to outward perceptions of the region as a New South.

a) Roots of (southern) Radio Before Thacker

With the words of "What hath God wrought?" on May 24, 1844, Samuel Morse's invention of the radio changed the future of the media world and opened the door for limitless communication (Sloan 349). Through eventual transformation and development the radio began to not only relay messages from one person to the next, but to serve as a form of entertainment and news broadcast. The invention of the radio allowed the development of shows such as the Grand Ole Opry, Louisiana Hayride, and eventually Thacker Mountain Radio to form and flourish within their own communities and to affect not only listeners but the dynamic within such diverse audiences.

From the early to mid 1900's, live recorded radio shows began to form as a new method of advertising for various products; however, live radio shows

developed into a community event celebrated both on location and in their own homes, bringing brought people together with the promise of good music and grass roots entertainment. The show's director George D. Hays "shaped the Opry into a folksy but highly commercial production that appealed to a broad based national audience of rural and small town listeners," (Monteith 260). Hay, known by many as the Solemn Old Judge, commanded performers on the Opry's stage to "Keep'er down to Earth, boys!" a statement which reminded stars such as Hank Williams, Johnny Cash, and Elvis Presley, of their small town, rural audiences (History of the Opry). When Hank Williams first visited the Opry stage he was a small name; however, after his performance of "Lovesick Blues" the audience called him back on stage six more times. According to author Roger Williams, "Hank Williams broke once and for all the artificial barrier between country and popular music," (Williams i). In doing this, Hank Williams not only connected the two genres of music, but he opened the door to allow southern imagery to dominate on a national level. Williams, hailed as a folk poet and a hillbilly Shakespeare, brought to life images of the South through his country music recordings.

Similar to Williams, Elvis Presley was a southern musician known on a national level. "Of all the musicians that emerged from the South, it is Elvis Presley who has had the most epochal influence on the national culture and beyond," (Music, *The Greenwood*). Elvis, despite his personal decline, mirrored in his music an image of the South that the rest of the nation had yet to discover.

At his best Elvis not only embodies but personalizes so much of what is good about this place [the South]: a delight in sex that is sometimes simple, sometimes complex, but always open; a love of roots and a respect for the past; a rejection of the past and a demand for novelty; the kind of racial

harmony that for Elvis, a white man, means a profound affinity with the most subtle nuances of black culture combined with an equally profound understanding of his own whiteness (Music, *The Greenwood*).

Elvis' work gave a national audience an immediate curiosity about the South.

Though known as "The King of Rock-N-Roll," his musical style of rhythm-and blues, and country-and-western were influenced by the diverse culture found of his southern heritage. Elvis' work spread across stages and radio waves and offered outsiders a glimpse into the unique culture of the South.

Though the development of live radio shows has been extremely influential in communities, they were not the first to use music as a tool for spreading stories and portrayals of the South. From London to Chicago and New York to Hollywood, sheet music for folk and blues songs depicted life in the South. In particular, minstrel songs were known for their distinct representation of life in the South. "Minstrel songs featured a nostalgic romanticized vision of the South as a form of paradise," according to the University of Mississippi Archives and Special Collections.

One of the most famous minstrel songs is "Dixie", written by Dan Emmet in 1860 for *Bryant's Minstrel's*. According to the Encyclopedia of the Antebellum South, the Virginia Minstrels, led by "Old Dan Emmit," was the first successful minstrel band (Minstrel Shows). The article reads: "These shows fixed images of blacks key to the plantation tradition, and they also demonstrated the allure that black culture had for white." Also, "I wish I was in the land of cotton, Old times they are not forgotten," the first two lines of the song that would become a national lightning rod, depict the essence of the song, the looking back on the South and its past with a sort of whimsical desire. From such representations of the South its stereotypical

identity has evolved. "It's not the song or the text, so much as how it's used in a distorted way to present a particular people with an image that really doesn't represent them," said ethnomusicologist Thomasina Neely-Chandler regarding the lyrics of "Dixie" (Neely-Chandler). Along with "Dixie" and Emmitt, other songwriters contributed greatly to the minstrel genre and the longed for ideal of the South. Composer Stephen Foster's songs "Oh! Susanna" and "My Old Kentucky Home" speak of nineteenth century dreams and nostalgia. Songs such as "Old Dog Tray," and others "had special meaning for restless Americans, who were ever on the move, always tearing down the physical reminders of the past to make way for the future," (Foster). Consumed by the newly-industrialized society of the country, Americans related to minstrel lyrics because of the simplicity of life and romanticized legend they portrayed.

While Foster's songs remain popular to this day, his career was rivaled by James Bland, who is considered the most successful minstrel composer of the 1800's. According to the *Journal of Popular Culture*, "Foster and Bland were the sweet minstrels responsible for the romantic southern legend and the sentimental ballad which for two generations dominated American song," (Suthern 660). From New York City stages to southern plantation fields, minstrel songs echoed stories from both black and white performers of the South's mystified and romantic pre-industrial lifestyle.

Music such as that found within the minstrel genre, along with early radio shows such as the Grand Ole Opry, are just two forms of musical media that have greatly impacted an outsider view of the South. From minstrel shows in the

nineteenth century, to radio performances by Hank Williams and Elvis in the twentieth century, southern images represented through musical storytelling dominated the entertainment industry. Music has always played a large role in portraying the South, and it continues to be a form of strengthening the bonds that are present within southern culture.

b) Magazines Influences on *The Oxford American*

“Magazines have always echoed popular ideologies, presented personal but representative emotional responses, and interpreted the men and women of their own days,” wrote press historian Frank Luther Mott (Mott i). From religion, architecture, travel, and food, magazines ranging from an endless spectrum of themes have long since reigned prevalent in the reading scene of a consumer culture. As a coffee table decoration or a source of entertainment and education, magazines nationwide, as well as in the South, spark interest in audiences who desire a tangible product with a localized perspective. Building off this desire, editors have positioned publications to meet the specific needs of readers, allowing topical as well as regional issues to blossom and flourish within a weekly, monthly, or annual publication. Additionally, magazines serve as a platform for authors to express themselves as well as represent the region from which they originate. Whether regarding politics, culture, or opinion, magazines communicate personal perspectives that often mirror an individual’s region. For example, southern writers such as William Faulkner and Willie Morris are national heroes for their literary work, yet both did not stray far from their southern heritage.

Well-known magazines such as *The New Yorker*, along with *Atlantic Monthly*, and *American Mercury* prompted a growth in literary magazines, and these were highly inspirational to the future publication of *The Oxford American*, which focused on good writing, reportage, commentary, and criticism, and offered a credible alternative to other magazines focusing on the South. *The New Yorker*, founded in 1925 by Harold Ross, exemplifies a format that provided readers with modern fiction, short stories, literature reviews, and investigative topical issues. Regarding *The New Yorker's* emphasis on publishing literature, in an interview in 1974 with John Casey and Joe David Bellamy, Kurt Vonnegut said:

We are teaching an audience how to play this kind of music in their heads. It's a learning process, and *The New Yorker* has been a very good institution of the sort needed. They have a captive audience, and they come out every week, and people finally catch on to Barthelme, for instance, and are able to perform that sort of thing in their heads and enjoy it (Allen 164).

Influenced by the highly saturated literary center of New England, the South began developing its own publications that provided the region with popular reading and entertainment. "Despite continued predictions that the magazine medium would perish in the face of electronic competition, magazine publishing in the South has continued to be strong into the twenty-first century--stronger, in fact, than in other parts of the nation," (Monteith 130).

The largest publication with over 2.5 million subscribers is *Southern Living*, a Birmingham, Alabama based operation known as "the acknowledged Lifestyle Bible for the able-to-buy segment of the southern market." According to the New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, *Southern Living's* readers "naturally find the magazine's idealized portrayal of their lives agreeable and often flatter; others may

find it a valuable resource for understanding the South's new urban and suburban middle class," (Monteith 359). Though *Southern Living* began as a regional publication, its circulation is nationwide, offering outsiders a home-based view of the South. *Southern Living* hoped that its portrayal of the South would serve as a direct representation of the habits and customs of southerners not only for its southern audience, but also for a national audience attempting to delve deeper into the curiosities of southern lifestyles.

While literary and lifestyle magazines continue to be influential within southern communities, national magazine publications have also served as a platform for aspiring southern writers to give voice to the South and its heritage. The works of William Faulkner and Willie Morris have been published in *The Oxford American* as well as in the nationally recognized publications of *Time Magazine* and *Harper's Magazine*. Morris served as the editor-in-chief of *Harper's*, the oldest general-interest magazine in the United States, which in his own words, aimed to create "a magazine young and courageous enough to carry the language to its limits, to reflect the great tensions and complexities and even the madness of the day, to encourage the most daring and imaginative and inventive of our writers, scholars, and journalists- to help give the country some feel of itself and what it is becoming," (Hudson 63).

Because of the magazine's success, many *Harpers'* veterans recalled working with Morris and the impact of his goal to protect his writers from external profit-oriented pressures. In a series of interviews documenting their time under Morris's direction, many staffers mentioned the effect of the qualitative interview in addition

to the power of a journalistic community. Under Morris's direction, concepts of community were brought to a new level and "called forth the work of Max Weber, which laid the groundwork for Geertz's 'webs of significance' concept in its stance that a person's actions could have meaning at the individual level, but also in reference to a larger community," (Hudson 64). Through a love of words and passionate written discourse, Jackson, Mississippi native Willie Morris, represented southern heritage as the editor of a national publication. Though rarely giving voice to his roots in the form of published articles, Morris's direction represented the power of journalism within a community and the potential the media has to promote lasting cultural change. "The Morris tenure at *Harper's* offers evidence of how writers encourage and undermine each other, how individual writing processes meet in a common space, and how shared experience leads to cultural change," (Hudson 64).

c) Documentary Projects Leading to The Southern Foodways Alliance

"Before the 1980's the 'documentary south' existed primarily as a benighted setting for televised examinations of poverty and political disgrace," (Monteith 51). Southern documentary artists chronicled the effects of deforestation and soil erosion on the Mississippi River and offered insight into the progress of the massive drilling and pipe laying of Standard Oil Company in southern Louisiana. Emerging in the 1960's, as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, "Some of the most powerful television documentaries ever produced focused upon the devastating economic and political practices in the South," (Monteith 52). Such productions as *Harvest of*

Shame and *The Children Were Watching* laid the groundwork for national recognition into an era of controversy and trials within the South's history. While documentary film existed, multimedia documentaries about specific aspects of southern culture are relatively new, especially the archiving of specific cultures, people, and tradition within a larger historical context and in multimedia pieces consisting of raw, subject driven audio, video and text narratives. Such new media pieces, as they are sometimes called, are published on the Internet, though a few consisting of audio only have found a home on radio.

In 2003, Dave Isay created StoryCorps, a New York based non-profit, which functions to digitally archive thousands of voices in an effort to document and preserve individual stories in the Library of Congress. Their mission is "to provide Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of our lives," (About Us, *StoryCorps*). Isay's organization says

We do this to remind one another of our shared humanity, strengthen and build the connections between people, teach the value of listening, and weave into the fabric of our culture the understanding that every life matters. At the same time, we will create an invaluable archive of American voices and wisdom for future generations (About Us, *StoryCorps*).

StoryCorps is a nationally-recognized institution that travels around the country archiving narratives, and is just one of many projects acknowledging the lasting benefits of communities brought together through a shared voice. The growth of new media documentary, as exemplified in the audio and animation works of StoryCorps, is also evident in Foodways experiments documenting the lives of people and communities bonded by food.

According to sociologist John Shelton Reed, "The study of the acquisition, preparation, and consumption of food opens windows into many larger psychological and societal questions," (Stanonis 205). In this spirit, the Southern Foodways Alliance formed in 1999 to document, study, and celebrate the diverse food cultures of the changing American South. Begun in Birmingham, Alabama by author and activist John Egerton and a group of about fifty others, it was first inspired by earlier, similar institutions such as the Society for the Preservation and Revitalization of Southern Food and the American Southern Food Institute. These institutions, along with Southern Foodways, focus on "setting a common table where black and white, rich and poor -- all who gather -- may consider our history and our future in a spirit of reconciliation," (SFA Mission).

In addition to contributing greatly to the surrounding community by documenting the South's food traditions, Southern Foodways and similar institutions affect the nation's view of regional traditions and the role food has played in the making of the southern identity. Whether it be the Civil Rights Movement or the fast food explosion, food is just one tool through which many historical and cultural experiences have been documented. According to Reed, "There is no similar consensus on whether one can speak of black and white food, and I for one don't think we can," (Stanonis 206). In this manner, with the realization that food crosses all barriers--economic, racial, and cultural--its potential to unite communities, regions, and the country is resultantly strong.

While The Southern Foodways Alliance is just one example of a specialized, ongoing documentary project, it represents a genre of media that promotes regional

recognition and demonstrates the power that the media has in community collaboration. Documentary projects like this are a creative, new media form allowing historical and regional culture to be preserved and recorded for the benefit of future generations.

What follows are three cases studies depicting how the media can represent the existing culture of the South in a way that celebrates the region's diversity for the betterment of the southern community. Through radio, literary, and new media publications, Thacker Mountain, *The Oxford American*, and The Southern Foodways Alliance are contributing to southern identity by honoring the South's cultural heritage and promoting it for the future progression of the region.

CHAPTER THREE
Thacker Mountain Radio
A Case Study on Oxford, Mississippi's Original Music and Literature Radio Show

While sitting, staring at a blank computer screen, wondering how to begin explaining the significance of Thacker Mountain Radio, an older man who had spent the morning whistling at his table beside me in the coffee shop, begins to look at the brown, University-issued hardback book sitting on the table beside me. Questioning me about it's content, and learning that it's Mary Warner's master's thesis on Thacker Mountain Radio, he responded with a deep smile and an exclamation of happiness.

His white bearded face lit up, as if remembering someone, something, that was associated with this community event that takes place every Thursday night.

"You know, I heard it on the radio one time, that Snooky Williams goes to Thacker," he said, as an edge of mischievous questioning played across eyes that peered out beneath his a flat tweed cap. "Do you know him?" he asked.

I responded with a yes, of course, thinking to myself, everyone who frequents Thacker knows the infamous Snooky Williams, as well as his wife Mary Lou for that matter.

"Isn't he wonderful," he said, wistfully as if thinking back on his younger life, and age-old memories that these two dear men shared together of days gone by.

That's when it hit me. There is something about Thacker Mountain that is indescribable, yet one conversation can prompt what it is that keeps bringing people

back. While it's a show, filled with folksy blues music, eclectic author readings, and original one-of-a-kind skits, Thacker Mountain Radio is a community celebration of southern heritage and cultural diversity. In large part because of its not-for-profit status, Thacker is a show for the people by the people-- surviving solely on generous donors, audience support, talented producers, and authors and musicians who are knocked off their feet weekly by foot stomping affirmation that shakes the hardwood floors of Off Square Books. It's a show that blurs the distinction between the performer and audience.

"Thacker Mountain Radio is a live, unrehearsed radio broadcast that features author readings and a wide array of musical performances. The free show is taped and broadcast every Thursday at 6 p.m. during the fall and spring before an audience of 200," (The Show). While the older, generally retired-age crowd shows up usually an hour before show time to claim top-notch seats, college students and young families drift in just in time to hear host Jim Dees count down the hour to begin the live show.

Often, those floating around the Square --typically just students in no hurry-- hear the boom of the Yalobushwhackers and find themselves standing outside on the sidewalk watching through the garage style full storefront windows that have been rolled back. Whether you're on the square watching the show, or listening to the live broadcast on Rebel Radio 92.1, you're sure to hear the Yalobushwhackers, Thacker's ever-talented house band, kick off the show with weekly renditions similar to this:

Good evening ladies and gentleman from the historic square of beautiful down town Oxford, Ms. Under the ever watchful eye of the old rebel soldier,

broadcasting 6,000 watts of unadulterated power through the earth's protective ozone layer- its Thacker Mountain Radio on the air. Somebody's going to sing a song and somebody's going to read a story- so stay tuned for the kind of show that makes you want to get on your mule and go straight to town. I don't know where you are tonight- you might be sitting home in your easy chair, you might be out there driving around in the suburbs somewhere, but if you're anywhere within the sound of my voice- I want you to reach out and put your hand on the radio! (Yalobushwhackers).

While the words of house band leader Jerry "Duff" Dorrough echo each Thursday night through looming shelves of unusual books and endless rows of wooden chairs, the diverse audience of all ages, colors, and classes, lean in to hear the unique mix of musical performances and literary readings.

Background of Thacker Mountain

In my time at Ole Miss, Thacker has always been a fixation on Thursday nights, but the Oxford community has not always been blessed with such a performance venue that celebrates and documents southern musical and literary culture. It was only with the creative proposal of Bryan Ledford and Caroline Herring, two graduate students in the Southern Studies department at Ole Miss, did Thacker Mountain Radio really come to life. While the show has undergone many changes, from its small beginnings in the summer of 1996 as Blind Jim's Radio Hour at Blind Jim's, an upstairs blues-themed bar on the south side of the Square, to its eventual transition into The Words and Music Community Radio Hour at Off Square Books, Thacker grew steadily in popularity until it finally landed on Rebel Radio 92.1 as Thacker Mountain Radio.

Ledford and Herring, talented local musicians and graduate students, developed what would be the future radio program of Thacker Mountain Radio in

search of a venue to share musical expression in a comfortable listening environment. At that time, Ledford explained, “Venues were turning away from bluegrass and turning to ‘booty’ music. Going to a show meant crowding into a place where listening to music was secondary to socializing,” (Warner 9).

During the time when Ledford and Herring were occupying Blind Jim’s, Square Books owner Richard Howorth invited popular Mississippi band Blue Mountain to perform in his book-lined building to celebrate after a special literary reading by award-winning author and local literary hero, Larry Brown. Band members Cary Hudson, Laurie Stiratt and Frank Couch, “turned the literary space into a rocking music venue,” (Warner 9).

Whether it was Howorth, Herring, or Ledford’s original idea to continue this idea of mixing literature with music is unclear, but the fact remains that there was something special in the ambience of Square Books that day with Larry Brown that sparked the innovative, cultural, and community-changing concept that would soon become the still present program of Thacker Mountain Radio. With Howorth’s many ties to renowned authors, and Ledford and Herring’s ear for local musicians, the trio began working together to present the Oxford community and on-air listeners with a special sort of program- a program that ties culture, music, and literature with the undying sense of something southern- something so comfortable and easy that it makes you want to, as Duff says, “reach out and put your hand on the radio,” and feel a part of a group of people who join together to celebrate a unique diversity- a diversity found through differing perspectives and ideas, presented through music and literature, that somehow in sharing, makes everyone feel like they’re a part of

something bigger than just a Thursday afternoon radio show. In the words of Snooky Williams, one of the original twelve audience members, "Thacker is opening a door to the past and the future and blending it all together," (Williams).

The show's success would not have been possible without the help of those people who so greatly believed in its potential--believed that it would one day soar from those initial twelve present listeners, to the now faithful crowd of over two hundred and fifty people who fill the long open space of Off Square Books every Thursday. Its success has helped to illuminate aspects of southern culture and identity. Along with the initial creators, Ledford and Herring, Thacker has been home to a number of house bands, producers, and hosts, all of which have given a lot of time, and heart, in support of this community radio show that fulfills more than the simple desire for an hour long cultural fix.

With the help of house bands The Sincere Ramblers, The Circuit Riders, The Taylor Grocery Band, and the still present Yalobushwhackers, Thacker audiences have been privy to some of the South's finest bluegrass, folk, and rock and roll music. In addition, Thacker has opened its microphone, or known by many as the *okraphone*, to such renowned authors as Willie Morris, Barry Hannah, John Grisham, Tom Franklin, Curtis Wilkie, and countless others. Rotating between the authors' readings, talented musicians such as Blue Mountain, Drew Holcomb, Shannon McNally, and the Homemade Jamz rock out on the small stage at Off Square Books, or even larger venues such as the Lyric Theater or Nutt Auditorium for special shows. Thacker Mountain performers offer insight into what it means to be southern not only in today's time, but they shed light into a historical tradition that

has largely impacted their story telling methods. From blues legend LC Ulmer singing on stage in his overalls and trapper hat to New Orleans author Randy Fertel speaking about his family's Ruth's Chris Steakhouse franchise, Thacker Mountain audience members have the opportunity to witness a celebration of southern culture and connect to a shared southern heritage.

Cultural Significance

From racial differences to socio-economic statuses, Thacker serves as a stage where negative qualities of the South, qualities that have previously divided the region, are curiously resolved and celebrated, at least for duration of the radio show. "People realized something new was happening and different and kind of exciting," explained Howorth when speaking about the beginning of Thacker (Warner 17). Howorth recalled the show being a hit right from its start, and a lot of that had to do with the similar show qualities that Ledford loved in *The Grand Ole Opry*, and *The Louisiana Hayride*. Thacker Mountain, known as a cultural radio show, not only serves as an hour-long broadcast for music and literature but also as a venue for the sharing of new, cross generational perspectives, influenced by historical contexts and conflicts that are so uniquely southern.

During a Fall 2011 show Preston Lauterbach read about his experiences on "The Chitlin' Circuit" and was followed by blues legend Bobby Rush. Rush played his harmonica to a house full of students who laughed at the implausibility of his lyrics, while the white and blue-collar community chuckled at the truth in his words, and the retired audience smiled at the accurate depiction of a past reality. The stories

that are brought to life through the country, folk, and rock and roll music, followed by readings about regional foods, family dynamics, and racial relations, both fiction and non fiction, speak about a region that has been divided by endless prejudices and poverty, but rebuilt and strengthened by a desire to redeem itself.

Thacker Mountain Radio is a media institution greatly impacting the Oxford community, as well as listeners throughout the state who are privy to its distinct culture orientation. While Thacker serves as platform for the spreading of ideas and opinions, it's also a site that encourages community involvement, audience diversity, and the unconventional acceptance of all things uniquely southern. Thacker is a radio program run by producers and volunteers who believe in the concept of unity through diversity and who strive to bring together people with different strengths, educations, and perspectives, so that the loyal audience may benefit and grow from the entertaining reality of what the South has to offer. The South, thought of as the disease of the country by some, is being rebuilt in communities because of specific media institutions such as Thacker Mountain Radio. A radio broadcast, Thacker impacts and strengthens its community by allowing itself to be an instrument of exposure- exposure to what the South is; exposure to stories of hardship, racism, poverty, and unemployment; exposure to service, forgiveness, hospitality, and pride. Through music and literature Thacker Mountain Radio is a form of media celebrating where the South has been, and the hope of what it will one day become.

Testimonials

While Thacker Mountain Radio has been successful across Mississippi, it would not be possible without its loyal live audience who sit in the wooden chairs at Off Square Books, rain or shine, in order to support their local community radio show. It might be a student who comes every Thursday of their four-year college career, or it might be Snooky Williams, one of the original twelve members of the audience during Thacker's first show; regardless, each person in the audience takes home something new from every show. Be it life lessons or a newfound love for a small-town author, each week Thacker gives substance. According to Snooky Williams, it's all about eye-opening diversity:

I tell you, the most impressive thing was when they had the choir from the church over in the Delta, and they had the boy that has cerebral palsy and all and can't speak. He was with the choir, and was just going with it, and he talks through a machine. I can't remember the name of it- but anyways that was the most impressive program because here's a guy, and they accept him as being okay; and he's white and they're black- it was just a great program and very touching. I think it meant (to the audience) that everybody has something- that God put you here for something. And he put this guy, with all this trouble on Earth, and was doing some good. I don't know what all he was doing, but it was good (Williams).

Williams spoke of a time when the audience was not only entertained, but learned a valuable life lesson in just a few short songs:

And then another time we had a New York street band here- the last thing I want to hear is a New York Street band. They came, they had their street clothes on, their dreadlocks and everything, and they played for the ten minutes. And the good thing about Thacker is if you don't like it, wait ten minutes and it'll change. Well the show was over, and then at that time Bryan Ledford, who was the leader, he said 'y'all come up here and play with us, and we can play together maybe, and we're going to play an Elton John song'. And they started off and the country band started, and then the street band came in, and then this guy with dreadlocks and a clarinet blew a beautiful melody. The guy with the cowboy shirt and old dirty jeans answered him with his harmonica note for note and it was just spell bounding to the crowd because it made us realize that all the differences we have can be solved with a lot of things if we just try to understand each other (Williams).

While Williams' comments on the performer-audience relationship are important in the understanding and appreciation of southern culture and talent, the friendships formed within the audience consist of more than just a Thursday afternoon conversation. "I think part of getting old, is if you associate with young people and be around them, you get a new life in you. And then y'all maybe learn something from old fools like me," said Williams. The live element of Thacker Mountain Radio not only offers an entertaining weekly event, but it promotes cross-generational exchange and community engagement for the greater impact and future progression of the region.

Along with Williams, Thacker's host Jim Dees has noticed the cross-generational impact the show is having on the community as well.

I think the show brings together a somewhat diverse audience, overwhelmingly white of course, but a mix of elderly and college age with some in-betweeners. They come together for that hour (and happy hour after that) in close quarters in an intimate setting. Each generation is exposed to something new. I don't think good old Snooky Williams of Water Valley would ever be in the same room with Jon Langford of the Mekons, let alone sing along with him, "Get the money!" were it not for Thacker Mountain Radio. Punk rockers and bankers in harmony, literally (Dees).

By bringing into harmony the diversity of culture that exists within the region, Thacker is furthering the mission of celebrating what the South really is. With weekly entertainment that pushes the limits of story telling, Thacker Mountain Radio teaches its supporters about a transforming culture, influenced by its past and striving towards a more positive, united future. According to Dees, Thacker teaches how wide open creativity can be.

I've seen a guy play a guitar made out of a cigar box. I've heard someone get music out of a gourd. We had one author whose entire book was made up of nothing but questions. Every sentence in the book was a question. I've seen William Gay, who didn't publish a word until he was 55 years old, read a story

that literally had the audience laughing and crying at the same time. Think what the human body has to go through to laugh. Then think what it takes to make you cry. Then think of doing both because of words typed onto a piece of paper and someone reading them to you. It's powerful stuff. Entertainment is now bought, sold and "consumed" in a variety of cold, unfeeling ways: by way of a tiny screen or headphones or even, God forbid, over our phones. To have a living, breathing person stand before you and share their most intimate mode of expression, their deepest feelings – in person, live, no do-overs- and have it move you to tears of laughter, shows you the power of art. The fact that we capture that on radio waves and send it out to all of Planet Earth is miraculous and kinda cool (Dees).

This powerful form of art, that of musical and literary storytelling, is the way in which Thacker Mountain Radio is bringing people together and celebrating the existing culture of the South. Without creating something new, Thacker is bringing together representations of a diverse culture, honoring each individual's talent, and accepting the differences that each has to offer. "We provide the airwaves, almost like a blank piece of paper, and the authors and musicians fill that space with sincere expression from their souls. We represent the South just as it is. We don't have to editorialize, we just present the music or literature as it is, unvarnished and straight up, and the audience can decide," said Dees.

The goal of Bryan Ledford and Caroline Herring in starting Thacker Mountain Radio, as effort to create a comfortable musical listening environment with cultural and literary significance, has grown and transformed into a show of cultural celebration that is impacting and engaging the community in the creation of a new South. Thacker Mountain Radio is a media institution that weekly honors human achievement and talent in an effort to unite one another by celebrating the qualities that make us all different. According to Ledford, "What is so wonderful about it is all the people that are still dedicated to making the show come off, and to working hard on it and making it happen. It's great to see that it's grown and snowballed, and hopefully it will keep on going,"

(Ledford). With the continual support of the community, the hard work of the producers and house band, and the endless performances of talented authors and musicians, Thacker Mountain Radio will continue to serve the region and the nation as a media institution dedicated to the celebration of cultural diversity and committed to the honoring of a rich heritage.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Oxford American
A Case Study on the Southern Magazine of Good Writing

While working for Square Books, Marc Smirnoff was inspired by a time of a literary understanding from his childhood. Of course, it could have been his broken down BMW sedan, as well as the inspiration he gained from reading Sherlock Holmes when he was a child. In any case, these two seemingly unrelated biographical aspects of future magazine publisher Marc Smirnoff converged in Oxford, Mississippi, landing him behind the counter at Square Books. His immersion in the classics and his newfound sense of place would eventually produce a new journalistic venue for southern cultural identity.

In the foreword to *The Best of The Oxford American* Smirnoff explains that, “Different sublime forces conspired to start me reading outside the dull curriculum. And this reading- from Sherlock Holmes who led me to *The New Yorker* which in turn led me to the writers and books discussed in *The New Yorker* prompted me to see the whole world, and myself, differently,” (Smirnoff ix). Because of this new realization, gained from literature, specifically of the style exemplified by *The New Yorker*, Smirnoff began to understand the power of written word- the power that regional authors can have in opening doors and broadening horizons for their readers. Smirnoff wrote,

The short of it is that I am utterly convinced, even if nobody else is, that the power of literature can do something so outright corny and magical as saving people. It can straighten us up (just like military school does for some) and

lead us to put things in better perspective. It can make us understand what is truly consequential and what is dross and dead and unworthy of our attentions (Smirnoff ix).

Creating the Magazine

The Oxford American, known as “The Southern Magazine of Good Writing” was started by Marc Smirnoff in Oxford, Mississippi, and its first issue was published in 1992. Through an examination of personal correspondences found in the JD Williams Library Archives and Special Collections, it is clear that Smirnoff’s endeavor was to create a magazine of regional and cultural importance that would eventually grow into a national publication. In starting this general-interest magazine, Smirnoff relied heavily on the advice, support, and talent of seasoned authors. For example, in a November 1991 letter to Smirnoff regarding the plan for *The Oxford American*, editor, novelist, essayist, teacher and publisher Louis D. Rubin, Jr. shared his opinion about the venture:

Your plan sounds good, though ambitious in the extreme. I think much of your chance for success will come through not being self-consciously Southern. That’s what killed that grits-and-gravy magazine they tried to set up several years back. You have to go for good writing by Southern writers, and assume that by virtue of that identity itself you will have a “Southern” magazine. If you start straining for Sudisme with articles on good ol’ boys, Faulkner country, the folks back home, and the like, you become a tourist-trade item—when the people who will buy and read that kind of thing can find it far more available in non-literary places, (Rubin).

Realizing the susceptibility of magazines about the South to slip into the stereotypical image of the region of which Rubin wrote, rather than depicting the actual cultural reality and state of the South, Smirnoff made it a point to fight against such representations. In a letter to an author referred to as Ms. Williams, Smirnoff

wrote regarding her writing style and successful essay publications. After explaining his plan for the magazine and the void in the region he hoped to fill, he wrote: "Who needs more ill-written reports of gardens, or recipes, or family reunions, or family traditions? New York City might lack this wholesome approach but the South is suffering and hidden under it. *The Oxford American* will strive to give a more accurate picture of our region and will place unbearably high standards (that's how our competition will phrase it) on content," (Smirnoff).

In the first issue of *The Oxford American*, Smirnoff wrote to many well-acclaimed authors, such as Barry Hannah, Richard Ford, and Willie Morris, explaining his vision, and asking for their collaboration. With promises of future success and eventual financial security, Smirnoff hoped to convince initial contributors of his vision and inspire them to donate their work to his first publication.

In a letter to Barry Hannah dated December 17, 1991, Smirnoff wrote to offer his most sincere and grateful thanks for Hannah's contribution of "The Spy of Loog Root" to *The Oxford American*. Smirnoff wrote, "I understand the financial sacrifice you have made. I will not forget that sacrifice, nor your generosity and your trust," (Smirnoff). In a letter thanking Richard Ford for granting permission to rerun "Rules of the House", his essay originally written for *Esquire*, Smirnoff informs his personal hero of the state of *The Oxford American*. Smirnoff wrote, "So I just wanted to tell you that *The Oxford American* is moving, that it is alive, that it is not dead. And I think it is going to be a fine magazine. This region needs a good general-

interest literary magazine and this is the void that *The OA* will strive to fill,” (Smirnoff).

Shortly thereafter, in a December letter attempting to convince Willie Morris to contribute his work as well, Smirnoff stated that along with Hannah, the Charter Contributors already included Jack Butler, Joy Williams, Florence King, X.J. Kennedy, William Steig, Fred Chappell, Dr. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Bill James, Charles Bukowski, and more. After explaining his vision of the magazine to Morris, Smirnoff wrote in the margin asking: “Why must all our great writers send their writing eastward if they want to get published in a sound way?” (Smirnoff). This question was one that greatly motivated Smirnoff in his magazine endeavor and established his resolve to provide the South with this literary publication that it was missing.

Regional Importance

While Smirnoff wanted to develop a regional magazine that highlighted and celebrated the culture of diversity that is so prevalent in the South, he realized that this would not be the first magazine to portray the American South; however, his goal was to far outreach the visions of less innovative publications.

People here are bored and disgusted with the sentimental and clichéd depictions of the South that are reruns in the so-called southern magazines of record. Those periodicals rarely portray the real life that is around. They rarely show a regard for ambitious and excellent writing. *The Oxford American* demands more of itself (Ibid).

When writing letters to potential contributors of the magazine, Smirnoff often included a “Call to Submissions” which explained exactly what he was trying to accomplish with *The Oxford American*. He wrote,

While many fine literary journals abound in the South there are no good general-interest magazines in our region. The popular magazines of record (you know who) are full of glossy nonsense and slick spittle. They rarely show ambitious literary aims. This is where *The Oxford American* will strive to make a difference. It will snoop all over the place and it will place high standards on content. *The Oxford American* will not publish pieces about recipes, or beauty contests, or flags, or furniture, or family reunions, or family traditions, or lawns, or Southern soap opera starts, or picnic hot spots, or gardens (Call to Submissions).

After such an introduction about the magazine, Smirnoff ended his letter, saying, "It is high time that the South put forward a magazine of spirit, aim, and purpose," (Call to Submissions).

While modeling his magazine after successful cultural publications such as *The New Yorker*, Smirnoff had a lot to live up to. Because of this, Smirnoff knew that his magazine must take the existing richness of southern culture and share it in a way that would overwhelm readers with the desire to change. "It was fundamental to my vision of *The Oxford American* that we bring to it this belief that the best writing has the power to affect personal change in the reader," said Smirnoff (Smirnoff v).

"*The Oxford American* is a national magazine dedicated to featuring the very best in Southern writing while documenting the complexity and vitality of the American South," (About the Oxford American). By documenting this complexity and vitality of the South, *The Oxford American* is acknowledging the distinct culture of the South, spreading it through literary works, and celebrating it for the rectification of its readers. In addition to being known for its strong representation of Southern literature, it is also noted for its impressive art and photography, and it is continually receiving acclaim for its exposure of strong musical talent. According

to James D. Watts Jr. of the *Tulsa World*, *The Oxford American* has “brought to light previously unknown works by such writers as William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Walker Percy, James Agee, Zora Neale Hurston, James Dickey and Carson McCullers; showcased some of the best musicians who are keeping alive Southern traditions and expanding them in innovative ways; and celebrated the unique culinary delights of this part of the country,” (Watts, *Tulsa World*).

The Oxford American recasts the words of Faulkner, which on the cover of a 2009 issue read, “Southern Literature is never dead; it’s not even past.” Under Smirnoff’s leadership, *The Oxford American* is living according to Faulkner’s wisdom and celebrating the distinctness of Southern literature. With *The Oxford American* as an instrument of communication, contemporary authors such as Jack Pendarvis, John Grisham, and the late Barry Hannah, along with nationally acclaimed southern heroes such as Eudora Welty, Walker Percy, and William Faulkner, are all brought together within one publication to unify the historical, yet still-existing, diversity of regional culture as told through the agent of a literary magazine.

Though *The Oxford American* has stopped publication a number of times because of a lack of funds, with the continued support of regional authors and the University of Central Arkansas, the magazine continues today as a quarterly publication. After the first loss of funding in 1995, Oxford resident and author John Grisham became the publisher, securing financing that allowed it to continue publications; however, the new business model did not survive for long, and in 2001 the magazine began to fail again. In 2002 the headquarters of *The Oxford American* was moved to Little Rock, Arkansas where it began to be published in conjunction

with AtHome, Inc. Two years later, the University of Central Arkansas assumed the role of publisher and formed the nonprofit organization called The Oxford American Literary Project (About the Oxford American).

Reader Support

While *The Oxford American* has struggled with funding and continuing to publish, its standard of delivering exceptional content and its vision for providing the region with a general-interest literary magazine has never wavered. Because of this, its readers have benefited from its contributions--benefited from its remarkable literary content and celebration of the region's diverse heritage. Not only publishing the appealing stories about the South, *The Oxford American* shares the gritty, tough, and unconventional depictions of people and places that have added for so long to the real beauty of the region.

Since its first publication in 1992, readers of *The Oxford American* have supported this general-interest literary magazine about the South, perhaps because it speaks to them on a level that other journalistic presentations of the South have not. In 1992, John Shelton Reed wrote to Smirnoff thanking him for his contribution to what we know about the South, which in many cases confirms and expands our knowledge of the South through a discussion of its diverse culture. Reed wrote, "I look forward to seeing and maybe writing for your new venture. Please enter my subscription. I know it's not exactly what you had in mind, but I sure do miss the old Southern magazine. Good luck with the venture," (Reed).

Its readers voiced the degree to which the magazine filled a journalistic void. In 1995, reader Mary Hood wrote to Smirnoff, "I appreciate your sending me *The Oxford American*, and I have now read two of the three copies. Every number does a number, somehow," (Hood). Additionally, in 1995 another reader, Paul C. Keller wrote, "I am enclosing my renewal notice and my personal check in the amount of \$24 to pay for another year of your excellent publication. My only regret is that you don't publish more frequently but then quality often takes a bit more time," (Keller). The content of Smirnoff's publication continued to provide evidence of the type of magazine he wished to create. Another reader, Lance E. Wallace, wrote, "I know you already believe the magazine will work, I just wanted you to know that I believe in it as well. Having just completed Willie Morris's second memoir "New York Days" I am beginning to develop an understanding of the type of magazine you want to build," (Wallace).

While readers of *The Oxford American* continued to encourage Smirnoff in his venture, their correspondence suggests that they understood its significance in portraying the region. For example, in March of 1996 Barry Hannah wrote to Smirnoff; "Marc, Thanks for *The OA*, best issue yet. I read it cover to cover just about and felt a small regret for not being in amongst the good team," (Hannah). As Smirnoff hoped, nationally-acclaimed authors such as Hannah understood the role a southern literary magazine such as *The OA* could play and they were eager to become a part of it. In a letter to the editor of *GQ* written by Willie Morris defending his friend John Grisham, Morris wrote:

The literary quarterly which he [Grisham] bailed out of debt, *The Oxford American*, is a first-rate publication, and under the editorship of young Marc

Smirnoff will get better. I've contributed to it before, will continue to do so, and will encourage my writing friends to also. John Grisham will be a salutary presence for this fine quarterly magazine. I'll write for him (Morris).

Though established authors such as Hannah, Morris, and Grisham knew the potential of *The OA*, ordinary readers understood their presence. A reader from Athens, Georgia, John C. Frierson, wrote to Smirnoff and his letter states: "I have been a reader of your fine magazine since the very first issue and I have enjoyed seeing the magazines consistent improvement. As an alumnus of Ole Miss and a life-long resident of Athens, Ga., I feel your magazine accurately reflects the 'peaceful easy feeling' of the South and the genuine love of literature within it," (Frierson). Another reader, a Georgia-born southerner working in Pittsburgh, wrote a letter to Smirnoff that embodies the impact of *The Oxford American*. It stated:

I read it from cover to cover as soon as it comes. It reaches my soul- my Southern heritage of which I am so proud. It has an inexplicable appeal. Some features are painful and bothersome but they ring true. I can always identify with something or somebody.

Snow's words are a testament to the critical love that a southerner can have for ones own heritage; however, it's a love that that is necessary and beautiful and will continue to lead to the future progression of the region. She continues on,

Living in the North I am constantly aware that people who are not from the South don't understand the South—who we are, why we are who we are, where we've been and where we're going. They think they do but they don't. Your magazine keeps me in touch with the South- the beauty, the grace, the ugly, the mean. Thank you (Snow).

Snow's letter affirms that words have the power to connect people--to connect southerners to each other and connect outsiders to this unique region.

Smirnoff's goal to create a general-interest literary magazine from the South, though with its own struggles and trials, has been a successful venture. By realizing the power that literature has to invoke real change in people, Smirnoff created a literary magazine in a region that needs change- a region that needs enlightenment, needs to be shown the powerful unity that can be gained through its differences, and needs to celebrate its unique heritage.

The Oxford American is the southern magazine of good writing, but it's also a form of media that serves the region and the nation in an effort to honor the South for its cultural and literary diversity. Comprised of regional authors, led by Smirnoff's vision that the best writing has the power to *affect personal change in the reader*, *The Oxford American* is influencing the nation and changing the South. The magazine is a form of southern media that acknowledges existing cultural barriers within a southern heritage, and celebrates their power to unite, renew, and empower the South.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Southern Foodways Alliance

A Case Study on Documenting, Celebrating, and Studying the Diverse Food Cultures of the Changing American South

Mornings at Bottletree Bakery on Vanburen Avenue in Oxford are enough to explain the draw that food can have to diverse sets of people. Black and white, young and old, file past rows of humble pies and blueberry muffins to indulge in fresh-baked, saucer-sized cinnamon rolls. Asians and Native Americans along with students, professors, and families take their seats in the wooden chairs beneath frames of folk-art or spread themselves along the black leather topped bar stools. Nike shorts and oversized t-shirts mix with skinny jeans and mustaches, as a combination of sorority girls and trendy hipsters come together in a place where homemade granola and the house cup of Joe reign supreme.

But it's not just at Bottletree Bakery that a diverse crowd gathers to enjoy a meal together. Throughout the South, from the Cajun country of Louisiana to the catfish ponds of the Mississippi Delta, culinary traditions are a form of cultural expression. This form of expression speaks about the reality of the individual stories the make up the region while uniting diverse pasts to form what is truly southern. In the *Southern Food* primer, one of the original creators of The Southern Foodways Alliance John Egerton wrote, "Within the South itself, no other form of cultural

expression, not even music, is as distinctly characteristic of the region as the spreading of a feast of native food and drink before a gathering of kin and friends. For as long as there has been an American South, and people who think of themselves as southerners, food has been central to the region's image, its personality, and its character," (Egerton 12).

Background of SFA

Because of the importance of food in the South, a group of likeminded people came together in 1999 to form The Southern Foodways Alliance. In his letter of invitation, author and activist John Egerton wrote to friends encouraging their support and presence at the founders meeting in Birmingham. He wrote,

You will appreciate, I'm sure, the spirit of inclusiveness that is driving this effort. The time has come for all of us--traditional and nouvelle cooks and diners, up-scale and down-home devotees, meat-eaters and vegetarians, drinkers and abstainers, growers and processors, scholars and foodlorists, gourmands and the health-conscious, women and men, blacks and whites and other identity groups, one and all--to sit down and break bread together around one great Southern table (SFA About | History).

By acknowledging that the table, a place to gather and break bread, was a natural place to join all identity groups, Egerton set the tone for the initial group with what would eventually become the mission of the Alliance.

Nearly a month later, "A group of fifty people convened in a two-day meeting to lend their names to a non-profit organization dedicated to the documentation and celebration of the diverse food cultures of the American South," (SFA About | History). After a mission was set and a name adopted, The Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi agreed to act as the incubator of

the SFA and to provide start-up capital, earned from the sale of the Center-researched and written cookbook, *A Gracious Plenty: Recipes and Recollection from the American South*. While The Southern Foodways Alliance is original in its mission and members, two organizations with similar aims preceded it; however shortly following the establishment of the SFA, The Society for the Preservation and Revitalization of Southern Food and the American Southern Food Institute both folded their member rolls and cash reserves into the SFA. With the collaboration of the previous Foodways institutions, along with the fifty new founding members, the elected board of directors agreed to hire John T Edge as director in July of 1999, thus commencing The Southern Foodways Alliance.

Using Food to Unite the Region

While The Southern Foodways Alliance is dedicated to the documentation and celebration of the diverse food culture of the American South, it is by looking at food that the real quality and essence of the existing and distinct cultures of the South are revealed. In an interview by SFA Board Member Angie Mosier with John Egerton in 2005, Egerton said,

I think of [The SFA] as much more than just the food. The food is very important and--and it's essential. You--you couldn't do what--what we were trying to do without food being a part of it. And so this was an organization with food as its--really as its primary focus but we wanted these larger social cultural ingredients to be a part of the mix. You [SFA] will be learning and teaching people about the--the larger dimensions and the power of--of this food to--to achieve some really remarkable things (John Egerton).

Through the mission and values of The SFA, Egerton and other members established the Alliance in order to use food as a tool to unite the region and the nation. By

learning from the past and looking towards the future, SFA honors the South by giving voice to the power that food has to celebrate a common heritage. The mission of SFA reads, “We set a common table where black and white, rich and poor—all who gather—may consider our history and our future in a spirit of reconciliation,” (SFA Mission, *SFA*). In this way, The SFA is serving as a media institution focused on the strengthening of community and dedicated to the celebration of diversity.

Recognizing the need for reconciliation in a region largely known for its negative characteristics and destructive past, The SFA accepts complications caused by race, class, and gender in the region and fights to diminish the barriers. One of the values of the SFA claims *We Are Offbeat*. It says, “We celebrate the South, but we do so thoughtfully and often times critically. The South has a complicated and peculiar history. We acknowledge that. And we leverage that past for our future,” (SFA Mission, *SFA*). With the realization of the need for a critique of the region, The SFA uses such honest evaluations to further their mission of sincere reconciliation and progression. In an interview with author, food critic and Director of SFA, John T. Edge said,

It’s all based on the fact that you can look critically at your region, and you can be critical of the people within your region, but you can still love your region, and you can take pride in it. But if you don’t take a critical stance and you love your place and people unconditionally, then you’re not a part of the greater progressive tradition in trying to resolve some of the issues that vex our region (Edge).

By using food and the natural way that it brings people together, in the hope for continued reconciliation and unification, The SFA strives to understand the foundational culture of the region and to celebrate the diverse yet common heritage shared around a southern table.

Utilizing New Media Formats

In its endeavor to document and celebrate the diverse food culture of the American South, The SFA uses several different ways to accomplish its goals. By staging symposiums and other events to encourage continued support, involvement and awareness, by producing documentary films, by collecting oral histories, and by publishing compendiums of great writing, the SFA is a media organization embracing new media practices in order to connect a large, cross-cultural audience.

The Southern Foodways Alliance events range from member fieldtrips in a haunted jailhouse, to BBQ Block Parties in New York City. In addition to other symposiums, each year the Southern Foodways Symposium in Oxford, Mississippi, joins together renowned chefs, critics, and Foodways members from all over the country to celebrate the work of Southern Foodways and support the mission it is accomplishing throughout the South. The Southern Foodways Alliance aspires that its members have a hands on experience, and understands the impossibility it is to be untouched after witnessing the authenticity of culture, and the unique history of development, which embody the food cultures of the South. For this reason, in hopes of granting a greater understanding of the innately traditional divide between groups of people within the region, fieldtrips have taken SFA members to the oyster beds of the Apalachicola Bay in Eastpoint, Florida, to the epicenter of American barbeque in Greenville, North Carolina; however, it is by first understanding the foundational differences that exist within the southern region that one is then able

to realize the commonality shared across customs that can be celebrated and used to connect people with such differences.

Amy Evans Streeter, Director of SFA's Oral History Initiative, plays a large role in leading member fieldtrips; additionally, she has gathered and documented over six hundred oral histories for The Southern Foodways Alliance. Joining the SFA team in 2005, Streeter began fieldwork that has led to an immense library of interviews and audio stories that document the fundamentals of culinary traditions in the South. According to the *Oral History Primer*, a publication of The Southern Foodways Alliance, "Integral to an appreciation of our region's diverse food cultures is the collection and preservation of the stories behind the food," (Streeter 1).

"The Southern Foodways Alliance's Oral History Initiative documents the lifework of people who grow, cook, serve, and savor Southern food and drink," (Streeter 1). Because of the oral histories gathered all across the South, Streeter has developed the BBQ Trail, the Boudin Trail, the Gumbo Trail, the Tamale Trail, and several others.

Combined with an interactive map and a Smartphone app, Streeter and The SFA archive interviews that detail past and present food cultures of the South, while shedding light into the history, progression, and significance of specific culinary traditions.

In addition to the trails developed by Streeter, The Oral History Initiative reveals the diverse ethnic cultures that exist throughout the region. From the Lebanese community in the Delta and the Vietnamese shrimpers of the Gulf, to the Greek families of Birmingham and the Chinese grocers spread throughout, the South

is home to a variety of diverse immigrant roots that furthermore add to the diversity of culture existing in the region. However, it is through the preservation of oral histories that the mixing of cross-cultural differences is exposed and the unification of diversity is documented (Streeter).

Along with The Oral History Initiative, the production of documentary films is a large part of the work of The SFA. A graduate of the Southern Studies masters program at the University of Mississippi, documentary filmmaker Joe York collaborates with SFA in an effort to document, celebrate, and preserve the diverse food cultures of the American South; however, according to York, "We try not to just make films about food, but we try to use food as a way to talk about how diverse the South is, and to explode those stereotypes that people already have about the South." York explained that during his time in the Southern Studies masters program the growth of online media and the ease by which one could create a film was just beginning to emerge. Before this, he said, "There was never really a way for southerners to visually tell their stories on TV, the way that we can now. It was easy for folks to perpetuate stereotypes (of the South)." According to York, it is important that people from the South tell the stories of the South. Only in this way will a true understanding and representation of southern culture be exposed and celebrated.

Pride and Joy, a feature film York is in the process of creating, will debut in the fall of 2012 and seeks to document a great road trip through the South, determining what people are doing and what traditions are still alive. In doing this, York hopes to discover what unifies people of the South, and also what makes them unique and special and worthy of being celebrated. *Pride and Joy* is just one example

of the type of films York produces in an effort to expose the South and its existing culture. "What we are trying to do is to paint a really broad portrait of the South, or to document the South in a way that says what's really interesting about this place is that it is unified, but there is this giant area with regions that are all wildly different. In essence it's just to document that diversity, that breadth of culture and to say this is worth documenting and it's definitely interesting," York said.

While York's creation of films about the diverse food cultures of the American South accomplishes its goal of documenting and exposing the South in a tangible, accessible way, York's hope is that his films, in collaboration with the overall vision of SFA, will help to archive the South's history while preserving it for the progression of future generations. York said,

We all crave the stuff that our grandmother made, and that's our culture, that stuff is a big part of who we are, black or white, as southerners, and it's really important that we embrace that and that we celebrate it. **A**, because that's a good thing to do anyway, but **B**, I think because people in my generation have to pay attention to this stuff and carry it on, or in the end you will end up with this very sterile representation of a culture that *used* to be vibrant and interesting. To me, I look at it as documenting, and hopefully preserving through documenting.

Because of York's work throughout the region, from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Mississippi Bluffs and Bayous, he has witnessed the diversity of cultures existing within the region of the South. Because of this, though, York's understanding of different people and customs are mirrored in his documentaries and shared for the advancement of the region. By first discovering the root level by which cultures are connected, a powerful unity can be established, surpassing whatever differences may exist, and resulting in a shared pride and respect for the overall diversity of

cultures. According to York, his documentary films function to visually represent a common thread to which all cultures can relate. "I think folks don't necessarily know what each other do, or what that's really like. The fact of the matter is, I have been in every kind of home, around every kind of family, of every nationality, of every color, of every ethnicity that you can imagine in the South, and everyone is exactly the same," York said. By documenting and preserving individual traditions that exist within the South, York's films, as a part of The Southern Foodways Alliance, are depicting the uniqueness of southern culture while exposing the foundational ingredients through which the region is united.

The Southern Foodways Alliance, celebrating, documenting, and preserving the unique food cultures of the American South, serves the region and the nation as a form of new media. By highlighting culture through events and publications, oral histories, and documentary films, The SFA is critically celebrating the region in an effort to strengthen communities for a greater, more progressive future. John T. Edge explained the mission of SFA as that of *celebratory activism*. In an effort to build a better South, The Southern Foodways Alliance is a media institution that is actively unifying the region by honoring its diversity and celebrating its differences.

CHAPTER SIX
Conclusion
Why the Media Tells Stories

The ground is spotted--flowered with bright oranges and reds stuck to the ground by last night's rain. Students swarm the sidewalks, rushing from one class to the next at the University of Mississippi, not even looking up to cross the street. The chill of the new fall air dances its way around the undergraduates as they walk from building to building never noticing the old stone sign marking a fallen building, representing an age old struggle, that so greatly defines our region. The stone sign reads "Dead House: Used as Confederate morgue after Battle of Shiloh in April 1862," and serves as a daily reminder of the South's history and racial divide, and the endless consequences that continue to arise from decades past. Across the street, contrasting the stone marker, is the historic Barnard Observatory that now serves as the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, a place where the goal is to investigate, document, interpret, and teach about the American South. The irony of the two landmarks represents the connection between the past and present conditions of the South, and how the history of a region greatly affects the identity by which it is known in the future.

Regarding the importance of a region's history, in *Shared Traditions* by Charles Joyner, historians Vann Woodward and David Potter write that, "the South's identity can only be rooted in historical experiences" (Joyner, ii). The historical

events of the South are greatly impacted by the manner and the medium through which they are told. In this way, the media becomes a powerful structure in communicating with the public and affecting the way in which a story, experience, or situation is perceived. Students walking through the Overby Center for Southern Journalism and Politics, a part of the Meek School of Journalism and New Media at the University of Mississippi, can see the words of Charles L. Overby on the wall, offering inspiration for young journalists to live into the responsibility that comes with the power of the media. "Southern journalists and politicians have shaped our country's destiny from its beginning, for better and for worse. From the Old South to the New South, their passion and principles, their vigor and style have made our region formidable, tragic, mythic and historic," (Overby).

From the earliest days of our nation's history, to the extreme growth in newspaper distribution, through the age of the radio and continual technological developments, and finally to new media and modern, innovative journalistic practices, journalists have used their power to shape our country, our past and our future. From the South's Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's to endless struggles with race, class, and gender, the media has had, and continues to have, a vital role in telling stories that offer perspective, give hope, and encourage change in our region; however, only by choosing to accept such a responsibility will the media effectively promote the progression of the South.

In John C. Merrill's book *Existential Journalism*, Charles Kuralt suggests that journalists can do more than merely inform people; "We may help educate them occasionally. We may help broaden their vision and elevate their spirits. We may

accept the responsibility we have to be better than we are, broader than we are, calmer and more reflective," (Merrill 62). With this mindset, the media institutions of Thacker Mountain Radio, *The Oxford American* magazine, and The Southern Foodways Alliance are stepping outside of the traditional role of story telling. These three media institutions are pushing the limits by giving voice to the voiceless, by critically loving the region's weaknesses, and by pursuing a mindset of celebratory activism. In this way, by exercising the power of the media, Thacker Mountain Radio, *The Oxford American*, and The Southern Foodways Alliance are organically encouraging the benefits of unity through diversity and giving southerners a new perspective of themselves and outsiders a new perception of the South.

Alan Lomax, folklorist, ethnomusicologist, and founder of the Association for Cultural Equity, once said, "It still remains for us to learn how we can put our magnificent mass communications technology at the service of each and every branch of the human family," (Lomax). Realizing the endless potential that the media has, Lomax's words remind us of the perpetual aspiration that journalists, and non-journalists, should have. To put ourselves at the service of each and every branch of the human family, is to not only acknowledge the personal, cultural, and regional differences that we have, but to celebrate them in hopes of a greater understanding and respect for others. While Thacker Mountain Radio, *The Oxford American*, and The Southern Foodways Alliance are not always visibly successful, their missions to celebrate the South and all of its differences promote their continued success.

Through personal interviews and storytelling, I have witnessed first-hand the positive impact Thacker Mountain Radio is having on the Oxford community and abroad. From Water Valley, Mississippi native Snooky Williams to a lonely Internet listener in Paris, France, Thacker Mountain Radio airs songs of the South and sounds of a beloved region that *feels* like home to so many. After reading countless handwritten letters, from scribbles on scratch paper to the consistent lines of a typewriter, the heart of *The Oxford American* magazine and the dream of Marc Smirnoff is made evident in the small room of the Archives and Special Collections portion of the JD Williams Library. With the hope of filling a gap in the literary culture of the South, Smirnoff built a general-interest magazine, through struggles to stay in publication, that represents a broad readership and a gritty, unconventional view of southern identity. Finally, from the chicken foot eaters of South Carolina to the catfish farms of the Mississippi Delta, The Southern Foodways Alliance, by utilizing new media documentary studies, is bringing people to a common table. Through the sharing of oral histories, the production of documentary films, and the overriding desire to expose southern food cultures, I have been convinced by the SFA that it is possible to find a connection to which all people, of all backgrounds, can connect. By using food as a tool, The SFA is celebrating the South thoughtfully and critically.

As a journalist, we are constantly faced with the decision of what story to tell. I have decided, however, that by telling stories of cultures, by exposing them for what they genuinely are, the good and the bad, one is able to be critical of the past while continuing to look towards a positive future. Illustrating how to tell a story,

Thacker Mountain Radio, *The Oxford American* magazine, and The Southern Foodways Alliance exemplify three media institutions that grasp how to critically love a culture, documenting and sharing it for increased societal understanding, and learning from it how to progressively unite groups of people across cultural boundaries. Thacker Mountain Radio, *The Oxford American*, and The Southern Foodways Alliance are three media forces that are positively impacting the South by celebrating, empowering, and strengthening the diversity of the region. These three media institutions exemplify the power that the media has to bring communities together in order to learn from one another and to celebrate the rich connection of a shared southern identity.

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