

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT ENDOWMENT FUNDS

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Proposal Title: Local Historic Knowledge Production and ‘The Public’ in Jonesboro, AR: An Academic’s Encounter with Contemporary Community Theatre and A Historic Community Lynching

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ABSTRACT

This paper will present an exemplary practice of the informative reciprocity between public art and the public humanities in a college town in the American South. It is based on the fusing of the author’s academic expertise (Southern Social History and Memory) into the extemporaneous context of the author’s participation in the local artistic community. First, this paper will present the tragic history of Wade “Boll Weevil” Thomas who was arrested on December 25, 1920 for the murder of a Jonesboro, Arkansas policeman. The following day a mob of 400 whites lynched the young black man at the corner of Main and Monroe (Jonesboro’s principal intersection at the time). No charges were ever filed against Thomas’s murderers although his death provided some context for the failed 1921 Federal Anti-lynching Bill. Eventually the modern inhabitants of Jonesboro lost all public memory of this singular event. Secondly, the paper will briefly explore the author’s participation in local community theatre at the Jonesboro Foundation of Arts (FOA) which happens to be located at the corner of Main and Monroe. Fortuitously, in September of 2017, the FOA presented its first ever production from the genre of African American theatre with a majority black cast and black director (*A Raisin in the Sun*). Due to my professional and personal knowledge I was able to fuse together these seemingly disparate events and advocate that the play could be a “redemptive” public moment. And indeed that is essentially what happened. During the run of the show modern black citizen-actors reclaimed and redeemed a space that had signified their exclusion a century before while white citizen-patrons became more aware of their city’s difficult history via the theatrical production and through local professional/social media.

Ultimately, I argue that scholars’ participation in their local communities, particularly in events that overlap into the public arts and humanities such as community theatre, is integral to their ability to employ their expertise in a way that engenders public trust. It can be an effective antidote to the bias which poisons many Americans’ perceptions toward academe in general. Finally, such active commitment to one’s community can provide greater credibility and more authenticity when a private intellectual attempts to become a public intellectual.