Revitalization in the Alabama Black Belt: Cultivation of a New Civic Hegemony in Rural Main Street America

Martha Grace Lowry Mize

*University of Mississippi*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd)

Part of the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons

**Recommended Citation**

Mize, Martha Grace Lowry, "Revitalization in the Alabama Black Belt: Cultivation of a New Civic Hegemony in Rural Main Street America" (2021). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 2032.

[https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/2032](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/2032)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.
Revitalization in the Alabama Black Belt: Cultivation of a New Civic Hegemony in Rural Main Street America

Martha Grace Lowry Mize

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for:

Master of Arts
Anthropology

Master of Arts
Southern Studies

University of Mississippi

May 2021
© Copyright 2021 by Martha Grace Lowry Mize

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.
Abstract

One Alabama Black Belt community has sought to re-imagine itself as a future affluent space for new families, tourists, and diasporic communities—despite regional challenges—by supplanting traditional discourses and centering a new civic hegemony within local revitalization efforts. This research and thesis draws upon qualitative ethnographic methods: participant observation and interviews conducted in Marion, Alabama. Located in Perry County, Marion has approximately 3,000 inhabitants, the majority of whom are African-American. Marion was designated as a Main Street Community (June 2017) and began a series of revitalization initiatives to increase community pride and project confidence about future growth. The National Main Street Center's program known as "Main Street America" (MSA) is dedicated to cultivating economic and preservation-based movements that leverage public/private investment to catalyze grassroots development projects in town centers. Using Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist political theory, I argue that the MSA program in Marion exemplifies the building of a 'chain of equivalence' and the forging of a new civic hegemony to mitigate local crises related to depopulation, cyclical poverty, and differential access to resources. Marion's local revitalization efforts highlight the rise of a new hegemonic discourse and social imaginary spearheaded by grassroots nonprofits like Main Street Marion. The application of this research could open the door towards building collective agency in grassroots development across disciplines and communities. This thesis' purpose is to posit a new perspective on the levels and development of cultural hegemony by contributing to the interdisciplinary literature on the Black Belt region of the U.S. South.
This thesis is in memory of two women who helped change a town:
Dr. Billie Jean Young and Mrs. Inez Donovan Barnett
And for Ms. Lula, Paige, and James
**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CET Ministries</td>
<td>Communities Engaged &amp; Transformed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCF</td>
<td>Community Capitals Framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CED</td>
<td>Community Economic Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHOICE</td>
<td>Choosing to Help Others In our Community Excel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB</td>
<td>Institutional Review Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Main Street America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMSC</td>
<td>National Main Street Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTHP</td>
<td>National Trust for Historic Preservation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>non-governmental organization or non-profit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCLC</td>
<td>Southern Christian Leadership Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSOH</td>
<td>Sowing Seeds of Hope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWAFCA</td>
<td>South West Alabama Farmer's Cooperative Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UA</td>
<td>University of Alabama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UM</td>
<td>University of Mississippi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USDA</td>
<td>United States Department of Agriculture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

This thesis's research was only made possible through contributions from the community in and around Perry County, Alabama. Interviews and conversations with countless local organizations and individuals brought this research to fruition, even if not mentioned by name. The dedication of individuals and local organizations inspired this project from the start. I am incredibly thankful for the individuals who shared their thoughts and time with me over the past four years. Special thanks go to Main Street Marion, CHOICE, Project Horseshoe Farms, Breakthrough Charter School, Love Is What Love Does, Judson College, Marion Military Institute, City of Marion, Sowing Seeds of Hope, Perry County Alabama Extension Office, and numerous local church groups. Organizations outside of Perry County that were immensely helpful throughout this project include Main Street Alabama, The University of Alabama Honors College, First Presbyterian Church, and the David Mathews Center for Civic Life.

Dr. Marcos Mendoza was the key sounding board for my journey through this research and has been the voice of reason throughout this process. I am so grateful to Dr. Mendoza for providing the insightful and calming influence I needed to push through this project. Many thanks also to Dr. Darren Grem, Dr. Catarina Passidomo, and Dr. Jodi Skipper for their insights and feedback to make this thesis better.

The care and direction of the University of Mississippi’s Center for the Study of Southern Culture and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology also made this thesis possible through the cultivation of a new degree program in support of this project. I am further grateful for these two groups' faculty and staff who gave me the confidence and resources to
meaningfully say what needed to be said. A huge thank you to both Dr. Maureen Meyers and Dr. Jodi Skipper for their mentorship efforts which brought out the best in me. They gave me the confidence I needed to pursue these degrees from the beginning.

Last but not least, an enormous thanks goes to my family and friends who cheered for me, hugged me, and who have patiently listened to endless monologues on this topic over the past several years.

Additional thanks for the support of the University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board (I.R.B.). Research and interview approval was obtained on June 13, 2019, by Dr. Jourdan and was approved and titled under: "Branding Imaginaries in Alabama's Black Belt" (Protocol #19x-310), and listed as Exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b) (#2). Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, amended approval was then given to allow for recorded Zoom interviews on July 24, 2020, by Miranda Core. Additional approval was also provided for using NVivo Transcription software on September 10, 2020, also by Miranda Core.

Many thanks to The Center for the Study of Southern Culture provided funding for this research under the Charles Reagan Wilson Research Fellowship for 2019 summer fieldwork.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. ii

Abbreviations ......................................................................................................................... iv

List of Tables .......................................................................................................................... viii

List of Figures ......................................................................................................................... ix

Chapter 1  Introduction ............................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 2  Literature Review .................................................................................................. 12

Chapter 3  Contemporary Crisis in Perry County ................................................................. 31

Chapter 4  Formation of Counter Hegemonic Fronts .......................................................... 73

Chapter 5  A ‘Chain of Equivalence’ in Main Street ............................................................ 90

Chapter 6  “Yes, I Do See Progress” ..................................................................................... 123

Chapter 7  Conclusion ............................................................................................................. 146

List of References ..................................................................................................................... 149
List of Tables

Table 3.1  Webster and Bowman-Factors and Variables Used to Define the Black Belt...... 34
Table 3.2  Population Changes from 1960-2018 in Alabama and the Black Belt Region .... 42
Table 3.3  Race Population Changes from 1960-2018 in Alabama.................................. 44
Table 3.4  Race Population Changes from 1960-2018 in the Alabama Black Belt.......... 45
Table 4.1  Sample of Perry County Nonprofit Mission Statements ............................. 76
List of Figures

Figure 1.1  Author’s Relationship to Renaissance Marion Inc. Organizational Structure from August 2017-August 2018 ................................................................. 4

Figure 3.1  Mapping the Alabama Black Belt ................................................................................. 32

Figure 3.2  Alabama Black Belt Mapped Variables ................................................................. 35

Figure 3.3  Traditional Counties of the Alabama Black Belt ......................................................... 37

Figure 3.4  AL.com Map of Alabama Black Belt Counties ......................................................... 37

Figure 3.5  Map of Perry County, Alabama by Martha Grace Mize ............................................. 39

Figure 3.6  Cow Pasture in Perry County on a Foggy Morning in 2017 ........................................ 40

Figure 3.7  Photo of Rural Perry County Road Leading to Dallas County in 2017 ............... 40

Figure 3.8  First Congregational Church of Marion Historical Marker in 2017 ..................... 60

Figure 3.9  The Perry County Courthouse on the Marion Square in 2018 ......................... 65

Figure 5.1  National to Local Main Street America Program Organizational Structure ..... 96

Figure 5.2  Renaissance Marion and Main Street Marion Logo .............................................. 100

Figure 5.3  Renaissance Marion, Inc. and Main Street Alabama Relationship in 2017 by Martha Grace Mize .............................................................................. 104

Figure 5.4  Renaissance Marion, Inc. Internal Structure in 2017 by Martha Grace Mize . 105

Figure 5.5  Jazz on the Square: An Event held by the City of Marion and Main Street Marion in September 2017 on the Marion Public Square ......................... 110

Figure 5.6  Main Street Alabama Workshop by Alex Flachsbart on Tax Incentives for Local Businesses and Historic Buildings in November 2017 ..................... 110
Figure 5.7  Main Street Marion Board Members and Volunteers with Author at Christmas on the Square in December of 2017................................................................. 111

Figure 5.8  Main Street Marion Office Decorated for Christmas Light Competition for Downtown Businesses in December 2017....................................................... 111

Figure 5.9  Main Street Marion Delivery of Books from Black Belt Book Donation Drive in Fall of 2017 from Tuscaloosa Area to Perry County Schools ......................... 112

Figure 5.10 University of Alabama Black Belt Experience Students Completing A Mural in Downtown Marion Based on Community Feedback in May of 2018 .......... 112

Figure 5.11 Main Street Marion Community Market Analysis Results Presentation May 2018......................................................................................................................... 112

Figure 5.12 Economic Impact Data from Main Street Marion from June 2017 to March 2021 ..................................................................................................................... 118

Figure 5.13 Principles of Good Practice from the Community Development Society 2020.... ......................................................................................................................... 119

Figure 6.1  Old Perry County Jail to Become a Civil Rights Museum......................... 145
Chapter 1 Introduction

This study examines transformations in civic politics within Marion, Alabama, located within the U.S. South’s Black Belt region. In the past seventy years, Perry County’s 9,000 inhabitants, the majority of whom are Black, have experienced the rise of the civil rights movement and watched the deterioration of community resources and infrastructure. A place of extreme highs and lows, Marion has a past filled with oppressive politics and reactionary resource silos. The region, called the Alabama Black Belt, is often described as a ‘heavy’ place with various cyclical economic and community challenges that weigh on residents (Laymon 2018). However, as many locals would say, these crises do not solely define the home they know and love. They would recommend an extended stay in the region, getting to know the people, and judging the community by personal experience rather than statistics and stereotypes.

This research study provides an ethnographic analysis of Marion’s civic politics with a focus on the Main Street Marion organization. It draws upon qualitative ethnographic methods: participant observation and interviews conducted in Perry County with local organizations and individuals from June 2019 to January 2021. This formalized research builds upon one year of previous work with a local nonprofit group (Renaissance Marion, Inc.) in Marion from August of 2017 to August of 2018.
Since the late 1990s, Marion has sought to re-imagine itself as a future affluent space for new families, tourists, and diasporic communities despite regional challenges\(^1\). This thesis highlights efforts to supplant ‘traditional’ discourses that uphold the dominant power blocs and which created a new civic hegemony through local revitalization efforts.\(^2\) In a community like Marion, cyclical poverty, local political toxicity, and resource depletion combined with traditional hegemonic discourses have built a social imaginary of hopelessness. Applying Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist political theory framework, I argue that the rise of revitalization efforts in organizations, like Main Street Marion, exemplifies the building of a 'chain of equivalence' and the forging of a new civic hegemony.

Marion's designation as a Main Street Community in June of 2017 stimulated a series of revitalization initiatives to increase community pride and project confidence about future growth. The National Main Street Center's program known as "Main Street America" (MSA) is dedicated to cultivating economic and preservation-based movements that leverage public/private investment to catalyze grassroots development projects in town centers. Marion's local revitalization attempts expose the rise of a hegemonic discourse—articulating a new social imaginary—spearheaded by grassroots nonprofits like Main Street Marion. The illustration of Laclau and Mouffe’s work in Marion serves as a model that other development professionals

---

\(^1\) In this usage, diasporic communities refers to families that once lived in Marion and then moved to other parts of the country but remain connected through history and a sense of belonging. For a clearer understanding of the national level of the Black diaspora discussions consult Davies and M'Bow (2007). Davies and M'Bow discuss pan-African citizenship and belonging in the context of U.S. Black diasporic communities through the lens of Black geography literature.

\(^2\) Miriam Webster (2021) defines hegemony as "the social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group." The concept of hegemony is connected to dominant groups' power dynamics within a given entity (for example, a community) based on ideology and consent building rather than force and coercion. Laclau and Mouffe's theory is in the development of cultural hegemony and non-dominant groups' ability to dispute it or create a new hegemonic order.
could apply in the future towards positive civically-led efforts. This thesis advances a new perspective on political cultures of hegemony by contributing to the interdisciplinary literature on the Black Belt region of the U.S. South.

1.1 Methods

My formal research for this thesis did not begin until June of 2019. However, my broader knowledge of the community and the context of this research comes from an earlier period (August 2017 through August 2018) when I lived and worked in Marion, Alabama. From 2017-2018, I worked with a Birmingham-based nonprofit, which in partnership with a local Marion nonprofit, Renaissance Marion Inc., was able to create my position. The fellowship’s purpose was to help strengthen Alabama's civic life by working in Marion to help manage their new Main Street Marion designation from Main Street Alabama. My tasks primarily focused on tracking local economic data (mostly keeping track of volunteer hours), managing public relations (primarily those external to Marion) and social media for the organization, in addition to co-managing their new volunteer board, called Main Street Marion, with my local boss, the director of Renaissance Marion, Inc. The organizational structure looked something like Figure 1.1 when I was hired in 2017. The figures, including Figure 1.1 use dash lines to indicate a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or working relationship between entities and solid lines indicate employment or a sub-committee in organizational structures. The months quickly blurred and flew past after my arrival in Marion in August of 2017. I was put through the gambit of small-town introductions, helped the local board develop various local events and workshops, and managed the organization’s budding social media platforms, all while simultaneously absorbing the people, places, and experiences. Board members welcomed me into their homes, local 4-H
groups had me judge brownie-baking competitions, a local church group invited me to their monthly supper group, and I made many friends in the community during that time period.

![Organizational Structure: Figure 1.1](image)

**Figure 1.1 Author’s Relationship to Renaissance Marion Inc. Organizational Structure from August 2017-August 2018**

When I worked at Main Street Marion in 2017, I saw community members deciding, again and again, to make a difference despite the circumstances. I observed a shift in local discourse when they discussed new projects. I recognized a new hope in the way people talked about their community, volunteers, and community members' actions. That hope is what sparked this research, and upon my acceptance to the University of Mississippi’s M.A. programs, I began exploring it in earnest. I adapted my initial research hypothesis, which focused on community branding schemes, into a grounded theory approach guided by my initial year (2017-2018) spent in Marion.

I had no formal affiliation with any organization in Perry County other than the University of Mississippi (UM) after August 2018, when I entered the UM graduate school. This research's ethnographic methods were approved through the Institutional Review Board (I.R.B.)
certifications and committee at the University of Mississippi (I.R.B. Protocol #19x-310). Formal interviews were conducted from June of 2019 through January of 2021 with twenty-six community members from across different groups and organizations associated with Marion, Alabama. Informal conversations and additional participant observation primarily occurred in the summer of 2019 when I rented a room from a local family for two months. The local family was a retired Black couple who were very active in various community organizations. Their family had lived in Perry County for generations and welcomed me into their home for the summer of 2019. They often included me in community events they attended and I was very open with the community and the family I stayed with about my research. I tried to protect the individuals I interviewed by meeting with them privately during that summer. During my field research I also attended many community events, including a barbeque, a fundraiser, some local get-togethers, and several church services.

In addition to my previous year of participant observation within the Black Belt community of Marion, AL, I also consulted U.S. census data and local and state business records. These were accessed as virtual records due to the pandemic that began in March 2020. The groups that I interviewed within Marion included individuals from many different groups and organizations in the community. Local nonprofits and organizations that participated in interviews for this research included the City of Marion, Marion Military Institute, and Judson College, Renaissance Marion Inc. (the umbrella organization for Main Street Marion), Main Street Marion, Inc., Sowing Seed of Hope, Love Is What Love Does, Project Horseshoe Farms, Breakthrough Charter School, Perry County Historic Preservation Society, and Choosing to Help Others In our Community Excel (CHOICE). The individuals interviewed were also commonly associated with various local civic groups. A few interviews included local church leaders and
business owners. Other groups that have been active in the Marion community and provided further insight into external-local partnerships included individuals associated with Main Street Alabama, Alabama Cooperative Extension, The University of Alabama Honors College, First Presbyterian Church Tuscaloosa, and the David Mathews Center for Civic Life. The participants were interviewed based upon their willingness to participate. Referrals from initial interviews based on my rapport, established previously in 2017-2018, were used to gain access to less well-known and newly established community groups. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the bulk of the interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom and occurred between July 2020 and January 2021. The initial rapport I built with the community was crucial for making further connections and participants’ willingness to share community insights via a virtual platform. Common questions that I asked throughout the interviews included:

- What does the Black Belt mean to you?
- What needs do you see in the community?  
  - Do you see those needs being met? By whom?
- General questions specific if needed to their business, organization, or perspective on the community.
- What does economic development mean to you? What does that look like in Marion or the Black Belt?
- Has the community changed over time? What do you believe happened or caused that change?
- What do you hope Marion becomes in the future?  
  - What makes you think that?
  - Are there barriers, racial or otherwise, that you think are keeping people from that vision?
- Are there groups in the community that aren’t at the ‘table’? or Are their groups that you see being left out when people talk about the Black Belt?
- How have you seen Alabama Black Belt communities responding to the conditions of cyclical poverty, depopulation, and differential access to resources?

I recorded the majority of the formal interviews and kept extensive notes of each. Some participants did not wish to be recorded. In those cases, the notes were digitally scanned and coded with the rest of the data. Community members were also offered a copy of their interview
recording if they so wished, except in the cases where the interviews were not recorded. Each participant was made aware that all audio recordings would be destroyed upon completion of this thesis. Approximately ten of the twenty-six individuals did not know of my (2017-2018) work in Marion before the interview. Some responses to the above questions likely took account of the researcher’s positionality in the community based on my previous affiliation with Main Street Marion. This positionality was not only vital to building an interviewee pool but also to the eliciting of critical responses with respect to traditional power brokers in the community.

The interview recordings were transcribed using NVivo software and then coded in NVivo using Charmaz’s (2006) outline of a grounded theory approach. Charmaz (2006) informed aspects of working with the data; however, the questions and research design were guided based on prior participant observation and early hypotheses. All participants have been given pseudonyms to protect individuals who did not wish to be directly identified. As the interviews developed, key themes emerged from the data. New aspects external to my previous intentions, like the political and siloed nature of the community, and stereotypes of the region, were quickly brought to the forefront. Themes of hope also began to emerge as each challenge, crisis, and barrier that residents discussed was framed within local efforts that had failed or succeeded or missed a key aspect that would have aided in its success. These themes did develop out of my initial questions; however, there were connections and nuances that I did not discover until I finished coding the interviews.

1.2 Significance

This thesis uses Laclau and Mouffe's post-structuralist political theory to argue that the MSA program in Marion exemplifies the building of a 'chain of equivalence' and the forging of a new civic hegemony in opposition to local crises shaped by political, racial, and economic
factors. Laclau and Mouffe used post-structuralist political theory to show how new political frontiers and counter-hegemonic fronts are built within nation-states committed to liberal democracy (Mouffe 2018). Their work is associated with the rejection of classic Marxist analyses that only foreground class conflict within nation-states. Instead, Laclau and Mouffe’s (Laclau and Mouffe 2001) work is connected to the “new social movements” theoretical turn that recognized the need to account for the plurality of concrete movements emerging in the post-war context. These new social movements foregrounded racial, ethnic, gender, or environmental politics—among other subject positionalities—rather than class division based on ownership of the means of production and alienation. Laclau and Mouffe argued against class-reductive analyses and instead—drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci—theorized how radical democracy involved the stitching together of various social movements to create chains of equivalence that underpinned new hegemonic formations.

In this research, it became evident that contemporary discourses and power structures were being created to circumnavigate local political and economic barriers that had left the community in a state of cyclically segregated disparity. Marion's revitalization attempts expose the rise of a new hegemonic discourse and social imaginary spearheaded by local civic organizations like Main Street Marion. This shift has not occurred at the nation-state levels that Mouffe and Laclau described, but at the much smaller scale of micro-politics or civic politics that is primarily external to local government. Other studies have used these theories in application, like Bornstein and Sharma’s (2016) study of NGOs' political relations in India; however, these studies occupy a much larger scale of analysis. They are tied explicitly to political or governmental entities' relationships to grassroots movements. By contrast, this study demonstrates the utility of Laclau and Mouffe’s framework for community level analyses in
places—whether Marion or beyond—with such political toxicity that grassroots organizers have purposefully circumnavigated traditional political fields. Applying this post-structuralist political framework, this study dissects the levels of community participation within this process and discusses local conditions that led to the cultivation of a new civic hegemony in Marion.

The modern U.S. Black Belt region has largely been neglected by cultural anthropological scholarship, especially in relation to qualitative analyses of contemporary communities. Some studies have been done in geography and sociology; however, in this case, they have primarily focused on health or mapping the physical boundaries of the Black Belt region (Webster and Bowman 2008). African-American studies have also actively pursued the study of the Alabama Black Belt, particularly about specific communities in civil rights and newer studies under Black geographies. These studies in Black geography cover many of the same topics as this research, but often not in conjunction with broader political theories. Marion, Alabama, has only been referenced in historical works, and little outside of the field of journalism exists to this authors’ knowledge about the current place, local culture, or contemporary residents. This thesis’ purpose is to posit a new perspective on the levels and development of cultural hegemony by contributing to the interdisciplinary literature on the Black Belt region of the U.S. South.

---

3 This statement primarily concerns the cultural and political anthropology subfields, as archaeologists (Skipper 2016, Meyers et al. 2018) and others have studied the prehistory and history of the region in the context of modern communities. These works are the exceptions, and broader anthropology literature reviews have not focused on the region outside of prehistory and primarily archaeological or tourism-based investigations.
1.3 Outline

This thesis highlights the rise of a new civic hegemony in Marion, Alabama. To properly build this argument, a contextualization of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory and other relevant literature is presented in Chapter 2. The literature review for this research covers Gramsci’s notion of cultural hegemony, post-structuralist political theory, relevant community development literature, and racialization literature from Black geography. Chapter 3 examines the state of crises in Marion and the ‘interregnum’ this created. Local power gaps have been exacerbated by racial, political, and economic disparity coupled with severe population loss. These crises cultivated a discourse of disparity and hopelessness in the community. This chapter also examines the reaction of local power structures to these crises. It outlines some of the foundational silos created by the crisis environment. Chapters 4 examines the resulting evolution of what Mouffe described as ‘political frontiers,’ but in Marion were constituted in the rise of local nonprofits seeking to circumnavigate community challenges. This chapter also focuses on the networks that these new frontiers and counter-hegemonic fronts cultivated in order to survive. Chapter 5 looks at the formalization of a ‘chain of equivalence’ in Marion’s Main Street designation. The 'chain of equivalence' was the formalization and binding of the various political frontiers to a new civic hegemony built around the central goal of revitalization. This analysis is contextualized first by exploring how the Main Street America program operates in communities and investigates what adaptations were made in Marion. The chapter then follows the development of Main Street Marion, Inc. and the levels of support necessary to build the chain of equivalence. Chapter 6 looks at the subsequent shifts in discourse following the establishment of a chain of equivalence. These shifts in discourse cultivated and established a new civic
hegemony within the community. These shifts built a new social imaginary centered on the central goal of revitalization from the inside out.
Chapter 2 Literature Review

This thesis' purpose is to posit a new perspective on the levels and development of cultural hegemony by contributing to the interdisciplinary literature on the Black Belt region of the U.S. South. Section one discusses Laclau and Mouffe's post-structural theory on cultural hegemony and explores the impact of developing new hegemonic orders in conversation with modern social imaginaries. The pervasive impact of racism in the United States is covered in Section two and uses Black Geographies to frame the context of hegemony within racialized space and racial capitalism within this context. Section three explores the sociological literature on civic participation within community development efforts to contextualize local nonprofits’ efforts in Marion. Together these sections create a broader theoretical understanding of the relationships and conditions that this research observed in current grassroots efforts to improve places and spaces like the Alabama Black Belt.

2.1 Cultural Hegemony and Social Imaginaries

Establishment of a dominant group involves the growth of a common belief system that reinforces the status quo. Gramsci’s work, *Further Selections from The Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (Gramsci 1995), discusses how society functions and is controlled, via class-based hegemonic orders tied to economic conditions. Gramsci’s discussion focuses on breaking previously static models of cultural structures (example see Wolf’s (2010) modes of production) and establishing that culture is always in a state of constant struggle with various power factions or ‘fronts’ vying for control over status, resources, and power to regulate the economy and
society more broadly. According to Gramsci (1992), hegemonic ideologies are being constantly challenged by actors that create counter-hegemonic blocs or ‘fronts’. Challenges to the established hegemonic order occur at a breaking point or transition in a community and are set up in terms of ‘traditional’ verses ‘new’ perspectives (Gramsci 1995, 6-7). What ensues are hegemonic battles or struggles to replace one ideology with another by non-dominant groups in a community. These points of crisis, in which communities change, are usually caused when the ‘traditional’ or dominant groups’ belief systems no longer work in the face of a new community problem.

Laclau and Mouffe: Post-Structural Hegemony

Laclau and Mouffe (2001), in Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics, expanded on Gramsci's theories of cultural hegemony by conceptualizing how non-dominant groups could promote alternate logics and discourses within society without the privileged people and timeline that Marx outlined. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) proposed that various groups are always contesting power. Therefore, to create social change given hegemony, no one class or group would overcome established norms in one privileged moment. Instead, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) developed a concept called the 'chain of equivalence' as a post-structuralist response to earlier theorists' class-based systems. In For A Left Populism (2018), Chantal Mouffe expands the applications of hegemonic blocs created via a 'chain of equivalence' into the development of new political fronts. The processes that Gramsci (1992; 1995) and later

______________________________

Laclau and Mouffe (2001) developed outlined applicable processes of cultural change that translate beyond the political fields these theorists discussed (Leurs 2009).

Gramsci, Laclau, and Mouffe (1992; 2001; 2018, 12) outlined a state of hegemonic crisis called an *interregnum*. An *interregnum* is a gap in which current power structures fail to compensate for the disillusion of dominant hegemonic logics caused by local crises, but when no solution can yet be identified. An interregnum is constituted particularly when "dominant hegemony is being destabilized by the multiplication of unsatisfied demands" (Mouffe 2018, 11). This gap in a hegemonic order catalyzes a setting in which non-dominant social groups can best articulate counter-hegemonic discourses and mobilize to deconstruct or disarticulate previous ‘traditional’ hegemonic logics. Chantal Mouffe (2018) also refers to this as a "crisis of hegemony" that opens up political space for new actors.

As Laclau and Mouffe (2001) theorized, the mobilization of these various social groups then compose multiple political frontiers, which attempt to push new hegemonic logics into power, particularly at points of hegemonic crisis. To be successful, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) note that these counter-hegemonic fronts must build 'equivalence' between and across social groups to bind together various heterogeneous identities under a common goal. Mouffe (2018, 61-63) defines a 'chain of equivalence' as building a collective 'people' around a central project or node that accepts internal diversity to more effectively pursue counter-hegemonic changes. The coalescence of these groups under one umbrella has a higher likelihood of successfully

---

5 *Interregnum* has three primary definitions or uses according to Merriam-Webster (2021) that further illustrate the situations that Gramsci, Laclau, and Mouffe use this word to describe. “1: the time during which a throne is vacant between two successive reigns or regimes; 2: a period during which the normal functions of government or control are suspended; 3: a lapse or pause in a continuous series.”
supplanting previous 'traditional' logics and establishing a set of cultural logics or hegemonic order.

The 'chain of equivalence' does not, however, create a homogenous group. Mouffe (2018, 61-63) states, "Instead, we find ourselves within a process of articulation in which an equivalence is established between a multiplicity of heterogeneous demands in a way which maintains the internal differentiation of the group." The construction of a common goal through a new hegemonic discourse is what binds these groups together. As Mouffe writes, "To resonate with the problems people encounter in their daily lives, it needs to start from where they are and how they feel, offering them a vision of the future that gives them hope, instead of remaining in the register of denunciation" (2018, 76). Affective politics, politics that involve emotions, are key to mobilizing a 'chain of equivalence' and the subsequent establishment of a new hegemonic order. As Mouffe (2018) argues, a new hegemonic discourse can only be successful by adapting to changing crises and perspectives, involving and respecting various groups' participation in the central goal, and being built upon actionable solutions. A large enough change in local discourses—which unites various constituencies—has the power to establish a new hegemonic order. In summation, what Laclau and Mouffe have suggested is that by rearticulating non-dominant groups' struggles under broader goal-based discourses that value heterogeneous compositions, hegemonic change can occur.

Mouffe, Laclau, and Gramsci are all political theorists, and the use of their theories has been primarily confined to the nation-state level and literature on political culture (Leurs 2009). However, the application of this theory does not need to be confined to discussions of governmental relationships. Gramsci's construction of “the state” as the sum total of political and civil society is vital to Laclau and Mouffe's analysis because it recognizes the presence of “the
political” outside of traditional governmental fields. Nevertheless, Laclau and Mouffe largely confine their discussions of processes of hegemonic change to national politics intersecting with formal electoral systems.

**Impacting a Social Imaginary**

The resulting discourse shifts from Laclau and Mouffe’s process of hegemonic change impact a community’s visions of place and future. Benedict Anderson (1983) famously conceptualized the nation as an imagined community: a group of people too large to all know one another, but linked together through a common imagining of the collective. In his 1983 book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Anderson (1983, 42-43), analyzed the rise of various nationalisms throughout the world in relation to the explosion of mass print communication. The growth of print capitalism allowed individuals to connect themselves collectively with people outside of local social networks based on the envisioning of shared beliefs.

Anderson’s concept of imagined communities was expanded by Charles Taylor in his 2004 book *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Social imaginaries, according to Taylor (2004, 23) are, “…the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.” Social imaginaries emerge through and are reworked by individual and collective action. Social imaginaries are sustained at an individualized level, but also involve creating a future community, based on collective visions. One of Taylor’s examples of social imaginaries is the practice of voting which requires and individual to determine which candidate, law, or ordinances best match their ‘imagined’ community while also taking into account that the results are determined by a collective body.
Therefore how an individual voted would be based on an individual’s positionality, the individual’s experience and standing in the community, the history that brought a specific item to the ballot, and the likelihood of success based on the individual’s knowledge of community networks. The practice of using an individual imaginary is determined by what is collectively possible in community visioning. This thesis explores how counter-hegemonic civic politics facilitates the rise of a new social imaginary in overcoming an interregnum. In the United States ‘traditional’ hegemonic logics have been perpetuated and further complicated by racialization.

2.2 Racialization of Belonging

Race and racism are the terrible cornerstone of United States history, development, and present realities. Dependence on the oppression of specific groups for gain continues to affect the regional social conditions and development opportunities in the Black Belt and the U.S. South. The legacies of slavery, Jim Crow, and the civil rights movement on Southern political economy, legal systems, social structure, and landscape have led to numerous academic works and disciplines devoted to understanding the relationship between race, place, and space (Bledsoe, Wright, & Eaves 2020). These topics and their consequences have been studied with increasing frequency in the past three or four decades.

Geography, sociology, and a range of interdisciplinary works have been crucial to the exploration of racism and specifically anti-Black racism in the United States. Academic research has turned a corner in the past twenty years towards explicit and intentional work on race. The long-term effects of racism, particularly anti-Black racism, on the landscape are the center of research in journals like the *Southeastern Geographer* and seminal works like McKittrick and Woods (2007) *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* and Clyde Woods’ *Development Arrested* (2017). The lived experiences of these histories are embodied in the people. In the U.S.
South, this is particularly evident in the differences researchers discovered between Black and White southerner's relationships to place. Bledsoe, Eaves, and Williams (2017, 10) state, "Black Geographies do not merely present a corrective to biased or incomplete scholarship, but can provide for richer and more vibrant geographies of and in the United States South, a region fundamentally shaped as much by Black spatialities as by anti-Black racism." The modern U.S. South can only be understood by first grasping the forces, people, and places that shaped the region and built the U.S. South we occupy today. These insights reveal the components of the "traditional' and normative divides within hegemonic formations of places like the Alabama Black Belt.

_A Racialized Landscape: Race, Place, and Space_

So life goes on in Selma- controversy, confrontation. I doubt it will be much different in my lifetime. Everyone in Selma is warped by race in some way.

- James L. Chestnut 1972 (Eskew 2012, 168)

Racism saturates the U.S., but breaking down the broader concept into the lived experiences by geographic location brings the consequences into stark reality. Research under the theme of 'Black Geographies' ties place and race together, disrupting White supremacy's normativity and revealing such an oppressive system's economic consequences over time. Woods (2017) uses the Delta as a microcosm of these consequences, which furthers the relevance of the modern Delta and Black Belt communities in national discourses on race and memory.

The lived experience of race brings out the conscious and unconscious practices that inform non-dominant groups in the landscape. For example, upon moving to Kentucky and starting to teach a college class on race, Schein (1999) discovered a fear of talking about race in
White students and an explicit, yet undiscussed, racist nature of state symbols like the state song. Schein (1999, 2006) examines the hidden nature of complex race relations in the cultural landscape. Schein (2006) discusses where cultivated and uncultivated markers of racism delineate space through a lens of Historic Preservation to illustrate these systems in practice. Schein (2006) uses Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham, Alabama, as an example of these delineations and markers revealing the othering built into an urban community.

In the 1980s, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, in their book *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, specifically examined how the importance of race in society is determined and what economic, social, and political forces conceptualize the concept. Omi and Winant's analysis formed a critical contribution that furthered the theoretical conceptualization of race as directly tied to political actions and led to later works like Crutcher and Zook. Crutcher and Zook used a geographic lens within racial formation and resistance to tease out the concept of racialization. Racialization is defined by Crutcher and Zook (2009, 525) as "the process by which racial categories are created and negotiated and by which "race" is employed to discriminate and segregate, or privilege." Crutcher and Zook's (2009, 525) work defines the racialized landscape in the following way:

Through the aforementioned concept of ‘racialization’, tenets of race work their way into the cultural landscape, either materially or symbolically, to produce the? ‘racialized landscape’ or cultural landscape as a ‘racial project’ (Schein, 1999). These racialized landscapes then become active agents in racial formations and racist practices, but also provide space for resistance. (Zook and Cutcher 2019, 525)

Crutcher and Zook (2009) discuss cyberspace's racialized landscape following Hurricane Katrina by examining the differential participation of White users and primarily White spaces compared to those of the Black community spaces in the Google Maps and Scipionus programs. The
relationship of these systems to the contexts of specific places has been studied historically and in modern communities, particularly where negotiations over these expressions have been actively resisted or segregated to specific groups of a community.

The power and politics of names in places and their associations within communities is one way geographers have sought to tease out the racial formations at the community level. In the U.S. South, Alderman (2000) discusses the naming of various streets after Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK). Alderman uses databases to compile and compare the proliferation of MLK streets, comparing the 1980s to the 1990s and examining the geographic and demographic association of streets named for MLK. Alderman notes a case in Brent, AL, where the proposed street to be named MLK was protested because the street led to a garbage dump. Alderman (2000) found that streets named after MLK occurred disproportionately in places where the African-American population was between 10%-50% and primarily in communities with less than 10,000 people. The growth in the number of streets named after MLK between the 1980s and the 1990s Alderman (2000) believed could be an indicator of reverse great migration. Alderman and Inwood (2013) continue Alderman's (2000) discussion examining the racial tensions surrounding Greenville, NC, and Statesboro, Georgia, choices to name specific streets after MLK. Alderman and Inwood (2013) specifically explore how belonging, particularly equal belonging, is challenged via the economically racialized status quo. In Greenville, NC, the White communities spatially segregated the Black community by limiting the naming of predominantly White streets to MLK before making up rules and naming a bypass instead. In Statesboro, NC, the Black community was blamed for the disparities resulting from racial inequality. The statement of blame based on inequality is a primary example of how the control and allocation of resources have been structurally racialized against Black populations.
The realities of racial formation in Alabama have especially poignant examples within state politics. Inwood (2011) uses the Alabama Constitution to show how the legacy of Jim Crow remains an active precipitant of structural and cultural racism in the state. The Alabama state constitution is the longest and most amended in the U.S. and second only to India’s national constitution in length. In 1901, the constitution was explicitly designed to uphold White supremacy in the state, especially economically and politically.

The specter of Jim Crow, the proverbial elephant in the room, that continues to cast a shadow across the Southern landscape isn’t important because of what it tells us about the past, it is important because of the paradox it holds for the future—how a nation that has legally outlawed segregation continues to tolerate a situation where entrenched economic interests profit from a history of White supremacy (Inwood 2011, 573).

The specificity and tax regulations mean that local governments have little control or ability to enact broader changes without seeking state changes. Additionally, much of the constitution is rendered irrelevant by Federal law. The racial formations present in the Alabama constitution are something that current residents voted to change on the November 2020 ballot. The 1901 constitution’s recompilation was approved for 2022 via amendment presented as “Act No. 2019-271 (House Bill 328, 2019 Regular Legislative Session)” (Alabama Fair Ballot Commission 2020). This vote by the citizens of Alabama signals that larger changes to the racial formations of the state are taking place. The current changes of laws and the recognition of biases in the wake of the murders and protests of 2020 will hopefully force subsequent changes in how inequality affects the agency of citizenship and belonging in American culture.

*Racialized Economics*

The power and politics of these racialized landscapes are inherently and historically economic. The racialized nature of the United States, especially in the U.S. South, is a part of the
racial capitalism structures well documented in history, theory, and contemporary realities by authors like Robinson (1983), Cobb (1992) de Jong (2016), Rankin (2018), Woods (2017), Foster (2020), and many others. Racial capitalism functioning under Marxist principles fails to bring about the 'chain of equivalence' necessary to enact change. Marx relied on one group or class of people to enact change which Mouffe and Laclau argue is a flawed assumption. Additionally, in application to a racialized systems official and unofficial division by race, compacted by histories of violence and oppression, only further hinder counter-hegemonic collaborations beyond base resistance efforts. The state and political systems perpetuate these logics, especially through economic systems, whether through colorblindness, ostracization, or blame, all of which are tactics designed to create homogeneity and uphold the racialized norms of 'traditional' hegemonic logics within the U.S. system. Trends at the local municipal level, recorded throughout various disciplines like geography, in handling geographic equity have sought to blame Black communities for lacking economic, political, and social conditions. The significance of these efforts to address and sometimes reinforce racialized hegemonic logics is that these efforts attempt to create a homogeneity that is counter to the formation of a 'chain of equivalence. This section's literature uses examples from Black Geographies to illustrate the inability of current hegemonic logics to accommodate racialized differences or build consensus.

The production of power and the racialized logics by which they operate is integral to racialized capitalist economies. Robinson's 1983 book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* details a critique of traditional European Marx that in a racialized capitalism fails to understand the base assumptions of such systems and illuminates the existence of often invisible, flexible, and adaptive resistances within Black radical traditions. The history of violence that has contextualized the realities of racial capitalism in the United States only
further demonstrates the inadequacies of Marx's theory in covering the racialized economy of places like the U.S. South (Robinson 1983; Cobb 1992; etc.). Gilmore (2002) expands on this inadequacy using the state of terror, the New Jim Crow, and the conception of a welfare state to show how rooted White hegemonic logics have blamed Black communities for structural inequalities. Gilmore (2002) details the economic implications that are only symptomatic of these kinds of larger power systems. Gilmore discusses how recognition of systemic racialization factors into social behavior. Gilmore concludes that it is not the place or cultural norms that are important but the things and differences that connect them, thereby stating that assumptions and logics of power, especially differential power, are the critical connectors of racial or racialized political choices. Inwood's 2013 article ties political activism (change) to economic development (capitalistic status quo) through U.S. race relations. Inwood (2013, 2122) states, "Most critical for engaging the SMP [state mode of production] with the U.S. racial project is the way state actors attempt to produce an appearance of homogeneity that masks deeper social contradictions." The previous U.S. economic strategy, the Keynesian state, focused on broader economic policies that brought about short-term economic prosperity during recessions by changing social and political factors. Neoliberalism focuses on reducing state influence on economic factors to increase privatization. Inwood (2013) argues that the transition from one system to the other, which happened just after the civil rights movement, resulted in pervasive colorblindness in the state to promote capital accumulation before attempting to minimize state control in economic marketplaces.

Bledsoe, McCreary, and Wright (2019) explore how racialized capitalism has forced marginalized communities, both Indigenous and Black, to form their economic means to survive. These primarily were shown via cooperative movements, which though heavily studied in rural
Black agrarian settings, were also used by these authors in examples of urban cooperatives in Minneapolis, Detroit, Winnipeg, and Jackson, MS. These authors argue that previous conceptions of racial capitalism failed to engage with the control and context of social norms upon which the system is predicated in a similar vein to Robinson (1983). As with Fosters' (2020) account of the blues, the normalization of these conditions brings the theme of belonging and responsible citizenship in all of these texts forward. Blaming African-American and Black Americans for the inequalities of a system and then claiming the struggle to function under unfair circumstances negates their agency in creating solutions to economic, social, and imagined issues at the center of these authors' work and this research's spatial context. Various disciplines, including African-American Studies, Blues Culture, Black Geography, and Black Feminist Anthropology all diligently prove through rigorous study and research that efforts in Black communities have, despite lacking support and resources, been attempting and willing to engage in building broader heterogeneous networks (aka chains of equivalence) from the beginning.

Inwood (2012) discusses the territoriality that both led to and reinforces Greensboro, NC's racialized landscape based on the events in 1979 when union organizers were murdered by KKK and Neo-Nazi members. Following these murders, the degradation of Black citizens continued with the denial of reconciliation movements until 2006. Inwood (2012) contextualizes Greensboro's events, using them to illustrate the broader normalization of territorialized control to maintain a White capitalist status quo. The term 'master narratives' is how Inwood (2012, 1453) characterizes the stories designed to keep communities divisively separate. The Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission (GTRC) in 2006 needed to build into a common understanding so that the communities in Greensboro could attempt reconciliation efforts some twenty-seven years later. In conversation with Mouffe, these kinds of 'master
narratives' unite and create chains of equivalence capable of establishing new hegemonic discourses.

Green's (2003) research illustrates the advantages of extra-governmental economic development efforts in civic engagement. Green (2003) surveyed almost 3,000 communities and primarily focused on non-metropolitan communities for local governments' network participation and their impact on economic development. Additionally, he asked local officials to describe how economic development activities were conducted and how involved the public was in these activities. Significantly, Green (2003) found that the presence of local development organizations (LDO) showed a significant increase in public participation in the economic development process. Like Green (2003), these kinds of articles illustrate correlations in a sense of renewal and the success of now racially mixed efforts. Though this success may not be directly visible in terms of economic growth, the growth of community network engagement, specifically civically, in the context of racialized capitalism thereby affects the economic development practices of these places at various levels.

2.3 Community, Economics, and Development

Community development, economic development, and community economic development (CED) are three concepts that are related and overlapping in meaning and theory (McFarlane 1999; Cavaye 2006; and Virgil 2010). Community development is the broader scholarly field into which both economic development and CED fit. Cavaye (2006, 3) noted eight separate definitions of community development in his article titled Understanding Community Development. The common elements between the definitions he reviewed can be summarized as a related peoples’ attempt to improve or overcome challenges faced by the larger group via action. Community development was also noted as an active and long process (Green
2007, Cavaye 2006). The literature on these processes discussed a multitude of approaches limited only by the ingenuity of a group’s application (Long 1973, Quimbo, Perez, and Tan 2018, Cavaye 2006). The critical differentiation to the various approaches was typically the level of involvement and control balanced between professionals, local government, and the beneficiaries or community members. The levels broken down in community development literature, especially those that are community-led, reveal a foundational understanding of heterogeneous efforts united under clear and actionable goals.

Economic development, as argued by Cavaye (2006, 3), “…specifically aims to improve the relative economic positions of the community” and usually targets employment, income, or the local economic base. From the Black Geographies literature these are things that are especially racialized in the U.S. South. Cavaye (2006) identifies economic development as a branch of community development, but in practice, many people use the terms interchangeably. Local economic development in communities can also be thought of as the methods used to attract industry and businesses to an area by ‘official’ regulations or improvements such as state government tax incentives or zoning ordinances (McFarlane 1999:304-309, Virgil 2010, Cobb 1982). A history of these kinds of regulations can be found in James Cobb’s (1982) book, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development 1936-1980*, which explores how the economic development strategies in the southern United States changed from the end of WWII to 1980.

Community economic development (CED) combines both community development and economic development while prioritizing community engagement. Cavaye (2006) delineates community economic development (CED) from both, community development and economic development, as a label given by practitioners who combine the economic focus and community
social problems into localized development strategies. CED involves the application of these broader theories and encompasses their use within geo-specific or identity-based spaces (Crowe 2006). Virgil (2010, 10-11) defines CED as an approach that, “…reflects five elements: (1) it is a strategy that pursues market-based approaches to development (2) with efforts that are led by nonprofit organizations (3) working in defined geographic places (4) to create housing or jobs (5) that are facilitated by professionals.” This definition is useful in that economic access (not just jobs and housing) is the specific target of the development and dynamically involves a variety of community stakeholders via partnerships. The purposeful community-led focus means that organization that holistically engage with this practice work to build ‘chains of equivalence’ in a way different from Marx’s revolution-based solutions.

A complementary way to understand CED is via analytic tools like the community capitals framework (CCF). Emery and Flora (2006) created CCF as a capital analysis tool for development efforts that illustrates local systems of capitals investment. In this kind of analysis, capital, as used by Bourdieu (2015), Marx (1990), and Putnam (2000), is categorized into seven categories that stack toward overall community improvement. CCF (Emery and Flora 2006:20-21) then allows for the examination of community investment via a discussion of seven capitals: built (infrastructure), financial (monetary resources), political (power of decisions), social (network connections and relationships), human (skills and abilities), cultural (traditions, heritage, etc.), and natural (environment). These capitals are used to measure and adjust community investment in local assets to what Emory and Flora (2006) refer to as 'spiraling up.' Emory and Flora (2006, 22) state, "'Spiraling-up' represents a process by which assets gained increases the likelihood that other assets will also be gained." However, CCF can also be used to measure spiraling down and community deterioration of capital. The analysis of different
capitals (aka assets) shows that capital is not just economic, but also social with interconnected networks built towards group success. The CCF process is an attempt to create a self-reinforcing and self-reflective cycle of community improvement, usually explicitly aimed at quantitative market-based measures. Development strategies that wish to be successful must, therefore, essentialize community input to achieve success on any level because the strategies must represent the communities they function within.

*Rural Community Development and Resiliency*

Sustainability and success of these strategies and the ability of communities to handle stressors falls under the sociological topic of resiliency. Rural communities are the primary groups of study under resiliency due to their limited population and challenges to access resources, which some authors considered a long-term resiliency condition (Cafer, Green, and Goreham 2019). These scaled analyses of resiliency provide an excellent tool through which they could be transposed into a hegemonic analysis. Common challenges of these stressed communities have led to a sub-discipline expressly focused on development in rural places. Resiliency against these challenges is a broader topic under which many of the articles on rural community development can be found. Norris et al. (2008, 127) stated that “Community resilience is a process linking a network of adaptive capacities (resources with dynamic attributes) to adaptation after a disturbance or adversity.” Norris, et. al. (2008, 136) were able to break down resiliency as community capacity measurements in four categories: Economic Development, Social Capital, Information and Communication, and Community Competence. According to Callaghan and Colton (2008), the sustainability of the community’s ability to handle changes and crises could be viewed through a CCF stacked analysis of capitals. Hart et al. (2016) conducted another literature review of resiliency, concluding that by combining social
justice and knowledge-coproduction resiliency research could be a part of a self-help based approach. In 2017, Vaneckhaute and others wanted to move away from the previous approaches which tended to create a check-list of resiliency factors. Vaneckhaute (2017) argued that factors like community agency and collective memory were less tangible but more significant to development efforts. Bec, Moyle, and Moyle (2019) examined long-term resiliency factors discussing how to measure resiliency in communities via an index. Cafer, Green, and Goreham (2019) gave a more comprehensive system of measurement using CCF within a context of hazards, assets, and vulnerabilities to understand how communities build adaptive capacity and equity to measure community resilience. Cafer, Green, and Goreham’s (2019) model termed the ‘Community Resiliency Framework (CRF) combines past literature approaches plus the ease of use of CCF with the applicative realities to form a new model for understanding community resilience. Resiliency is even more important as the topic within development because it examines the communities themselves rather than isolated development strategies. Resiliency literature is important because of the scale (examined at the community level) and qualitative measures that map local power networks showing the collective vision’s success or failure through established frameworks.

Conclusion

This literature review has sought to illustrate the history of academic thought behind post-structuralist cultural hegemony theories, black geographies, and community development. Hegemonic discourses are always in dispute within rural societies like Marion but shift at points of interregnum. Over time, dominant narratives shape communities’ social imaginaries, which can be changed by developing a new hegemonic order. Various counter-hegemonic or political fronts must coalesce into a 'chain of equivalence' to form a more successful hegemony and shift
local discourses. The racialized systems, particularly economic ones, complicate shifts in hegemony by creating normative divisions counter to building chains of equivalence within populations. The resistive efforts of Black communities in the U.S., such as the Black radical tradition, have been consistently present despite the oppression and violence within racial capitalism. Community Economic Development strategies provides a foundational outline to apply these broader theoretical perspectives. The scale and intentionally collaborative efforts of community development research lend themselves to more effectively mapping the networks of power and politics as a first step towards building successful counter-hegemonic movements. The role of community economic development and the history of racialization within this process significantly impacts the context and development of a new civic hegemony in Perry County. The next chapter will discuss the local context that bred discourses of disparity and a social imaginary of hopelessness by examining the contemporary crisis in Perry County.
Chapter 3 Contemporary Crisis in Perry County

This chapter illustrates the historical trends and current challenges that have led to a hegemonic crisis in the Alabama Black Belt—specifically in Perry County. This modern crisis is rooted in the conditions of cyclical poverty, depopulation, and differential access to resources that have built up over time. Additionally, deep racial divides and subsequent wealth divisions have further exacerbated local challenges overwhelming existing 'traditional' power structures. The ongoing crisis has created a gap that Gramsci and Mouffe (2018, 12) called an interregnum. An interregnum is a point at which current power structures fail to compensate for the disillusion of dominant hegemonic logics caused by local crises, but when no solution can yet be identified. The interregnum is rooted in the daily challenges of residents in Perry County. Local formalized power structures—grounded in a primarily White elite group of planter-descendants—failed to supersede prior hegemonic logics or adequately solve local disparities over the past thirty years (Eskew 2012). This disconnect and failures by ‘official’ and ‘traditional’ power structures to adequately address the community’s ongoing social and economic needs are only further compounded by racial divisions. This state of interregnum has affected community politics, cultivating a discourse of disparity and a social imaginary of hopelessness.

3.1 The Alabama Black Belt in Context

This study examines the Alabama Black Belt, and specifically Perry County. The Alabama Black Belt is a part of the larger American Black Belt region. There are multiple, conflicting definitions of the Black Belt (Webster and Samson 1992). Government agencies,
academics, and news media do not consistently consider the same counties in their analyses and discussions. The two defining features most often discussed are the fertile black soil and the history of racialized slavery. Webster and Samson (1992) have mapped various historical definitions of the Black Belt in Figure 3.1. Figure 3.1 shows the region's geological and geophysical definitions through the dotted, opaque, and grey areas which do not universally agree on a specific bounded Alabama Black Belt (Webster and Samson 1992).

![Figure 3.1 Mapping the Alabama Black Belt (Webster and Samson 1992)](image)

Other understandings of the Black Belt shed light on the history of slavery and the post-Civil War U.S. South. Bullock and Rozell (2012) underscores the uncertainty of Booker T. Washington’s definition of what the Black Belt referred to:
So far as I can learn, the term was first used to designate a part of the country which was distinguished by the colour of the soil. The part of the country possessing this thick, dark, and naturally rich soil was, of course, the part of the South where the slaves were most profitable, and consequently they were taken there in the largest numbers. Later, and especially since the war, the term seems to be used wholly in a political sense — that is, to designate the counties where the black people outnumber the White.

-Booker T. Washington in 1901 (as cited by Bullock and Rozell 2012)

The ambiguity of inclusion and exclusion with counties associated with the Black Belt was further explored in Webster and Bowman’s 2008 study. Webster and Bowman (2008) listed common identifiers found in the literature and then translated those ten commonalities to measurable economic and demographic factors (Table 3.1) (Figure 3.2). The elements that Webster and Bowman (2008) were able to identify, shown in Table 3.1, encapsulate many common challenges faced by Black Belt communities.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literature identified factors that denote counties that fit the Black Belt:</th>
<th>Variables used to map the Alabama Black Belt Region:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Substantial concentrations of African American population</td>
<td>1. Percent African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Agrarian landscapes</td>
<td>2. Percent of Adult Population Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Comparatively low levels of urbanization</td>
<td>3. Percent of Population Below the Poverty Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Comparatively high rates of poverty and unemployment</td>
<td>5. Infant Mortality Rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Comparatively low levels of educational attainment</td>
<td>6. Population Density</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Comparatively high dependency ratios</td>
<td>7. Unemployment Rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Comparatively slow rates of population growth or absolute population decline</td>
<td>8. Percent of Households with Social Security Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Comparatively low levels of community health including higher rates of infant mortality</td>
<td>9. Percent of Population Belonging to a Conservative Protestant Denomination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Comparatively high rates of support for the Democratic Party</td>
<td>10. Percent of Population 25 Years and Older with a Four Year College Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11. Percent of Occupied Housing without Phone Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12. Dollar Value of Farm Operations Per Acre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13. Dependency Ratio</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3.2 Alabama Black Belt Mapped Variables (Webster and Bowman 2008)

Figure 3.2 illustrates a gradation mapping of Table 3.1, with the darkest counties having a higher density of the factors. These factors assert pressure on local communities that often result in regional classifications similar to those of the Delta in terms of race and rural resiliency (Woods 2017; Cafer, Green, and Goreham 2019). Figure 3.3 is a map by the Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) at the University of Alabama titled 'Traditional Counties of the Alabama Black Belt.' These seventeen counties include: Barbour County, Bullock County, Butler County, Choctaw County, Crenshaw County, Dallas County, Greene County, Hale County, Lowndes County, Macon County, Marengo County, Montgomery County, Perry County, Pike County, Russell County, Sumter County, and Wilcox County. These seventeen counties are not all inclusive and the identity of the Alabama Black Belt has been flexible in nearly all previous reference found by this author. This study uses the definition that includes the seventeen Alabama counties labeled 'traditional' by the Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) at the University of Alabama to benchmark some quantitative data.
surrounding the region (See Figure 3.3). An example provided by journalists, rather than academics, of the Black Belt can be seen in Figure 3.4 from Harress at AL.com in 2017. Al.com's map illustrates a more flexible definition of the Black Belt, highlighting 'consistent' Black Belt counties in red and 'sometimes' Black Belt counties in pink. In the past three years, this article (Harress 2017) has changed at least twice to reflect different maps, and the current page now shows the CBER version (Figure 3.3); instead of the map shown in Figure 3.4. AL.com has been vocal in efforts to define the region partnering with the University of Alabama in September of 2020 to create, “Black Belt 2020 is an ongoing series by AL.com and the Education Policy Center at the University of Alabama examining demographic, economic, and education issues, challenges, concerns, and options facing the Black Belt in Alabama” (Archibald 2020). The result of AL.com’s series was far more flexible than previous discussions of the region but is still an outside facilitated operation. These consistently inconsistent definitions of the Black Belt mean that though quantitative statistics are often provided, that these measures are only a starting point for understanding the region.
Marion and Perry County, Alabama

The section of the Alabama Black Belt explored in this research is Perry County. This ethnography research for this project focused primarily on the county seat of Marion (Figure 3.5). Perry County has about 9,000 people and covers a little over 700 square miles. Marion has approximately 3,000 individuals (American Community Survey 2021). Located in the cradle of civil rights, Marion is where Jimmie Lee Jackson's death spurred the Selma-to-Montgomery March and where the march itself was planned (National Parks Service Selma Interpretive Center, 2017). The history of racial violence against the Black community in Perry County and the Black Belt has been well documented through literature on the civil rights and through the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. Jeffries’ (2009, 169-171) book *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt* discusses many of the violent, oppressive, and
political challenges that local groups like that of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)’s leaders like Albert Turner, Sr. in Perry County faced in the Alabama Black Belt.

Marion is also known as the ‘College City.’ It is the home of two higher education institutions: Judson College and Marion Military Institute. Marion is also the founding location of two other Alabama Universities: Samford University (now in Birmingham) and Alabama State University (now in Montgomery). Like Lincoln Normal School, Marion's primary and secondary schools educated many prominent African-American leaders from 1867 till its closure in the 1970s, including Coretta Scott King, and was home to several future leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) (Kaetz 2010). Like its neighbors of Greensboro or Selma, there are also a plethora of antebellum mansions and Civil War heritage sites found throughout the community.⁶

---

⁶ Further information on the history of Perry County and the region has been well documented by local residents and academic institutions. Perry County history has been recorded by Lincoln Normal School Alumni (Coretta Scott King and others), Judson College professors (Billie Jean Young & Eleanor Drake) as well as school histories through Howard College which is now Marion Military Institute and Samford University. Research on the Black Belt more generally has also been done by the University of West Alabama, Auburn University, and Tuskegee University.
The region was the edge of the continent in prehistory and collected all of the silt and nutrients as a great delta within the southeastern United States. This made the 'Deep South' profitable for cotton and enabled the rise of the slavery-based plantation economy (Schwimmer and Frazier 2013). The history of agriculture shifted to timber in Perry County and directly intertwined with local economies tied to sharecropping following the abolition of African-American enslavement. An agricultural economy previously defined Perry County, but now the rural county was primarily served by educational services, manufacturing, and health services. In Marion, most jobs are in education, but there is also a local factory, Tekpak, which focuses on food packaging. In addition to Marion, another small incorporated community in Perry County, Uniontown, has a landfill and cheese and fish factories. The county's primary goods are timber,
cattle, and catfish. Perry County is inhabited by the descendants of the enslaved and the descendants of the White plantation owners and workers. The environment is an emerging source of tourism. Marion is just south of the Talladega National Forest and the Cahaba River. The river is home to the Cahaba Lily, one of the five flowers unique to Alabama. Birding trails and a wildlife park are just outside of Marion. The community also has the Alabama Aquatic Biodiversity Center (AABC) (Johnson 2021), which is the “largest state non-game recovery program of its kind in the United States.” The county is a popular place for hunting clubs and camps servicing a wealthy clientele seasonally within the state. Figures 3.7 and 3.8 are photographs of the landscape in Perry County from 2017.

Definitions of the Alabama Black Belt region have often been inconsistent within academic, political, and media accounts. Moreover, localities like Marion continue to provide their own evolving notions of place and region that contribute to the ongoing reformulation of what the Black Belt means. This section has provided a general overview of Perry County as one node within a region that has endured the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow, and White elite domination in a system built on racialized capitalism.
3.2 Local Challenges

In Perry County, contemporary residents recognize and experienced significant social, economic, and demographical challenges in this rural racialized landscape. One local nonprofit coordinator, when asked what needs she saw in the Marion community, commented:

Right, a lot of our problems are cyclical, so we have a problem with education, and we have a problem with education because the tax base is very small. We have a small tax base because there's no industry and very few jobs. There's no industry because there's not a hospital. All of those things make the tax base lower and hurt the schools, but you can't draw industry, you can't draw jobs into the area without a skilled workforce. So there are a lot of things that you get down about how we're going to tackle any one of these things when they're all related.

-Interview with Sarah Jamison, 2021

The number of issues listed in her statement—education, a tax-base tied to population loss, a lack of industry a lack of job opportunities, and healthcare gaps—all came up repeatedly in the interviews conducted with various community members. For her, “get down about” refers to the weight of the problems and how their interrelation is cyclical and often reverses community progress. Population decline, infrastructure and education failures, an uncertain climate for small businesses, racial inequality, and poverty all become ‘heavy’ factors for the community (Laymon 2018). The precarious nature of this rural community is tied to the history of these factors. The cumulative effect of these challenges has built into an overwhelming crisis that no one community group has been able to tackle adequately.

The heaviness of the situation overtime has built a gap into the community’s ‘traditional’ hegemonic logics. This gap is an interregnum brought about by the constant and extreme challenges that places like Marion experience. An interregnum is a point at which current power structures fail to compensate for the disillusion of dominant hegemonic logics caused by local crises, but when no solution can yet be identified. This breeds an imaginary of hopelessness and local discourses of disparity within the population. In this case local discourses of disparity
center on the dissatisfaction with local resources, the weight of local challenges, and the hopelessness these conditions breed within the populous.

Population

One source of the crisis is tied to continual decreases in the region's population. According to U.S. Census Bureau's records from 1960 to 2010 and the American Community Survey 5-year estimates for 2018, the Alabama Black Belt has had a net loss of only 5,117 people across seventeen counties. As shown in Table 3.2, the concerning statistics relate the Black Belt population percentage relative to the state. In 1960, in the aftermath of the Great Migration, the Alabama Black Belt still held nearly 17% of the state’s population. While the state has grown by a little more than 1.5 million people since 1960, the 2018 estimates reveal that only 11.2% of Alabamians now live in the Alabama Black Belt. Despite a 48.9% expansion in the state population from 1960-2018, the Black Belt has experienced a -0.9% growth rate in the same period.

Table 3.2 Population Changes from 1960-2018 in Alabama and the Black Belt Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Alabama (AL)</th>
<th>Black Belt (BB)</th>
<th>BB/AL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>3,266,740</td>
<td>552,223</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>3,444,165</td>
<td>516,429</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>3,893,888</td>
<td>552,835</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>4,040,587</td>
<td>548,496</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>4,447,100</td>
<td>568,092</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>4,779,736</td>
<td>560,719</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018**</td>
<td>4,864,680</td>
<td>547,106</td>
<td>11.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**2018: ACS 5-Year estimates data

Some of the population loss has been directly tied to out-migration, which has had a massive impact on the area. The way this out-migration has occurred is demographically different for the Black Belt than for the rest of the state. Table 3.3 uses U.S. Census Bureau data
and the American Community Survey to show the trends in state demographic changes between 1960 and 2018. Table 3.3 notes that since 2000 the African-American population numbers have increased in the state in a process often referred to as reverse great-migration. The state's diversity has also increased, with nearly 5% of the state estimated in 2018 (American Community Survey) to identify other than Black or White. Table 3.4 shows that the Black Belt has experienced similar growth outside of the black-White binary; however, in the Black Belt, Reverse Great-Migration, and White-flight since the 1990s, has delineated a racial make-up different from the state numbers. These statistical trends are in keeping with what Webster and Bowman (2008) were able to determine in the mid-2000s and show that in the Black Belt, there have been times where population majorities have shifted from majority White to majority Black and back again.
## Table 3.3 Race Population Changes from 1960-2018 in Alabama

Demographic Population Changes in Alabama

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>African-American</th>
<th>Other*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>2,283,609</td>
<td>980,271</td>
<td>2,860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>2,535,823</td>
<td>903,000</td>
<td>5,342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>2,872,621</td>
<td>996,335</td>
<td>24,932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>2,975,797</td>
<td>1,020,705</td>
<td>44,085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>3,162,808</td>
<td>1,155,930</td>
<td>84,183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>3,275,394</td>
<td>1,251,311</td>
<td>181,780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>3,317,453</td>
<td>1,293,186</td>
<td>162,422</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Other includes: Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Other, Some Other Race, American Indian, Eskimo, and Aleut, Asian and Pacific Islander, Other race, American Indian and Alaska Native Alone, Asian Alone, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander Alone, Some other race Alone

**2018: American Community Survey 5-Year estimates data

---

7 Social Explorer Tables(SE), Census 1960 (US, County & State), Social Explorer & U.S. Census Bureau
8 Social Explorer Tables(SE), Census 1970, Social Explorer & U.S. Census Bureau
9 Social Explorer Tables(SE), Census 1980, U.S. Census Bureau and Social Explorer
10 Social Explorer Dataset(SE), Census 1990, Social Explorer; U.S. Census Bureau
11 Social Explorer Tables(SE), Census 2000, U.S. Census Bureau and Social Explorer
12 Social Explorer Tables(SE), Census 2010, Census Bureau; Social Explorer
13 Social Explorer Tables: ACS 2018 (5-Year Estimates)(SE),ACS 2018 (5-Year Estimates), Social Explorer; U.S. Census Bureau
Table 3.4 Race Population Changes from 1960-2018 in the Alabama Black Belt

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Alabama Black Belt</th>
<th>Other*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
<td>African-American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960(^{14})</td>
<td>256,274</td>
<td>295,513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970(^{15})</td>
<td>265,478</td>
<td>250,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980(^{16})</td>
<td>280,289</td>
<td>263,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990(^{17})</td>
<td>274,620</td>
<td>270,249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000(^{18})</td>
<td>258,455</td>
<td>298,735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010(^{19})</td>
<td>229,358</td>
<td>308,630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018**(^{20})</td>
<td>215,310</td>
<td>307,497</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Other includes: Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Other, Some Other Race, American Indian, Eskimo, and Aleut, Asian and Pacific Islander, Other race, American Indian and Alaska Native Alone, Asian Alone, Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander Alone, Some other race Alone

**2018: American Community Survey 5-Year estimates data

The population numbers are not expected to change with the release of the 2020 census results. Population loss also means a loss of allocated resources, something that Perry County already struggles to acquire. Marion residents recognize and often discuss the connection between this population loss and the community’s future. One Black resident was hopeful that some progress had been made; however, the severe population loss left a significant gap between that hope and what it would take to make people stay in Marion.

---

\(^{14}\) Social Explorer Tables(SE), Census 1960 (US, County & State), Social Explorer & U.S. Census Bureau

\(^{15}\) Social Explorer Tables(SE), Census 1970, Social Explorer & U.S. Census Bureau

\(^{16}\) Social Explorer Tables(SE), Census 1980, U.S. Census Bureau and Social Explorer

\(^{17}\) Social Explorer Dataset(SE), Census 1990, Social Explorer; U.S. Census Bureau

\(^{18}\) Social Explorer Tables(SE), Census 2000, U.S. Census Bureau and Social Explorer

\(^{19}\) Social Explorer Tables(SE), Census 2010, Census Bureau; Social Explorer

\(^{20}\) Social Explorer Tables: ACS 2018 (5-Year Estimates)(SE), ACS 2018 (5-Year Estimates), Social Explorer; U.S. Census Bureau
Sometimes it in itself is a catch-22. Glass half empty or glass half full. While some progress has been made, much more needs to be had, but I think we do have a generation of people who are coming along, who are willing to go against the traditional way of doing things. However, those individuals are also leaving our community. So, again, they’re going somewhere else to make their needs known. It’s enhancing someone else’s community and then sitting back pointing fingers back at this community that they abandoned. So until some infrastructural needs, some governmental changes happen, we make the best of what we have... and wish for better... one day.

-Interview with Kristin Evans, 2019

Evans’ quote illustrates the connection between the population loss and Marion’s future. The intersections of this skepticism with both local infrastructure and the “traditional” hegemonic logics show a gap between the futures Evans imagines for the community and challenging reality. The wistful mention of a “wish for better” by Evans is also a critical component of this quote because it shows the discourse of disparity through a recognition of a significant gap in local resources and opportunities within the community.

*Education*

Local educators and parents identified brain drain, another form of population loss, as a considerable factor tied to local education. Marion's population loss is punctuated by a lack of educational options at the primary school level, which has frustrated residents, teachers, and volunteers. Local public schools have been closed or consolidated, and parents often seek alternatives outside of the county for school. Even the local, primarily White, private academy suffers many of the same issues as the public school with low enrollment and test scores.

The state of education here isn't working. And I've seen that more and more over the past several years, where sometimes we see complacency in our public schools….So I got frustrated seeing my students graduating and going into colleges, taking remedial classes, which would cost them more money… Their financial aid was going to classes that had they received the proper education or have they received you know, the rigorous education they needed. They wouldn't be enrolled in those classes and they wouldn't be wasting that money.

-Interview with Daniel Rolland, 2020
The failing state of education attracted people like Rolland to the region who, after initially serving as a regionally-placed teacher through Teach for America (T.F.A.), then became a resident to improve local education opportunities. T.F.A. has played an active role in the Alabama Black Belt. The County school system, consolidated due to population loss, have greatly appreciated its efforts. Rolland's point of a failing school system is a source of great contention in the community. Local educators are elevated and praised for their hard work but punished by the state for failing test scores. The state of education that Rolland discusses is punctuated by a lack of consistency with high teacher turnover rates and the lack of resources, all tied to the growing population loss and consolidations.

These challenges have only further fostered a sense of hopelessness in many of the community's children. One volunteer spoke about the collective framework many high school and middle school kids echoed on how the disparity discourses associated with local crises affected them. Zack Carter, a young volunteer in the public school system, said, "And I want to make sure that at least they get off on a good start before, you know, they're in middle school and high school, and they just think there's no hope for them at all, which I saw often talking to some high school students." At the individual level, or micro-discourse level, young people's in Marion speak to the impact of these challenges, creating a discourse of hopelessness.

**Infrastructure**

Failing infrastructure is also a contributing weight to Marion’s state of crisis. The infrastructure mentioned by Evans above weighed heavily on all of the interviewed individuals and organizations, including local churches and government. New community members were some of the most vocal on infrastructure as the physical aspects of the community are set in stark
contrast to the individual’s previous communities. Newer community members that fall into this category typically include people who moved to the area to retire, work at the local colleges, serve in local nonprofits, or minister to congregations, and they often mentioned the infrastructural challenges. Having moved to Marion to retire from elsewhere in the state, Katherine Neal bought a home in Marion, and it came with a significant hole in the street that had yet to be fixed three years later.

…there is a hole in the street. I mean, you can jump down and stand in this hole, and be under the ground. I think it's the storm sewer that has collapsed. I guess it wasn't hooked up correctly to begin with... but there is literally a piece of plywood over the top of it. It's been there for two years now and it's not good. So we're hoping for big things. I know there’s that hole and the DeKalb Street water leaks are at the top of the city's list now. I've been going to some of the city council meetings, but it's not clear to me yet where the funding is going to come from. I know that a year ago the mayor purchased all the parts that he needs to fix the hole on my street. So whatever they have to fund is just the labor portion of it. So we'll see what happens with that. But the water, that's a city wide problem. And it's huge and it's not really going to go away until it gets fixed...

-Interview with Katherine Neal, 2021

The water was a constant and growing worry for residents and the town was without water for a few weeks in the wake of Hurricane Eta in 2020. The roads and roofs of the downtown buildings were a constant strain for local business owners, nonprofits, churches, city, and county organizations. Repairs to the buildings, just the roofs, were in the thousands of dollars, and that was before storms or previous damage had been taken into account. The quote is for similar buildings that Neal mentioned above that have holes in the streets and roofs that leak. Even the wealthier residents of the community could not possibly afford all the repairs. Sometimes, the solution for those that owned older buildings in town was to let the buildings fall from neglect rather than sell them.
Race

Racism has been a constant lens in the history of the Alabama Black Belt. It remains a residue as thick as the region's humidity that many residents are still working to overcome. The racial formations and the racialization of spaces within the Perry County (Omi and Winant 1986; Crutcher and Zook 2019) Tony Horwitz, in his book, Confederates in the Attic, describes an interview with Hill Tankersley, chair of the Montgomery Chamber of Commerce in the 1990s, that this problem significantly impacted economic development. Tankersley (Horwitz 1998:359) stated, "'This state is overflowing with resources,' he said. 'It's got a heck of a work ethic. I want to bring jobs here. But we've still got an image problem. When you're sitting in a boardroom in New York and hear about Fruit Loops waving rebel flags down here, it's bad for business.'" Horwitz's quotes are not the only evidence of a public perception problem both internally and externally to the region. James Cobb (1982:139-143) noted the extreme controversy surrounding the Hammermill Paper Company's 1964 decision to put a pulp mill in Selma amid segregationist and civil rights movement protests. Cobb (1982:145) stated, "Many companies declined to risk the kinds of criticism, boycotts, or demonstrations directed against Hammermill because of its willingness to locate in an area where racial prejudice was so blatant." The racial conflict of the state from the Civil War to civil rights and beyond has heavily impacted the economic development of the Black Belt region of Alabama and the state. The 'traditional' power networks of the region hold the state back in terms of racial reconciliation.

Multiple institutionalized sites of structural racism define the Black Belt. Local business owners, in particular, disproportionately those of color, have struggled against White domination and disproportionate grip on wealth and status. These efforts have been covered across disciplines and also include agricultural cooperatives like the South Western Alabama Farmers
Cooperative Association (SWAFCA), SCLC, and SNCC which all at one point or another had active leaders from Perry County (Robinson 1983; Jeffries 2009; Eskew 2012; de Jung 2016). Black resilience endures in the face of the many challenges discussed above. One past local business owner from a neighboring town to Marion had to close her business in the last decade due to the area's racism but still shared the experience in an interview.

You just persevere, you know, like you. You see you see the unfairness and you still you just try. Hey, well, is the unfairness worse than you getting to have that joy that you get every day? And when I look at it like that. No, I didn't think the, unfairness of things, didn't override how having the shop made me feel. Like on my shop... I paid double the rent for that building. That didn't make me feel good to know that somebody else was renting the same space at half the price, matter of fact it was less than half, I mean, it was less than half of what I was paying for the same space. And I mean, I went to people and I asked ‘can I rent your buildings again to put the shop?’ And they charged me double on top of what the persons prior to me were paying that didn't make me feel good, but I was willing to do it to open a shop.

-Interview with Barbara Collins, 2020

Collins' experience opening a shop as Black woman is indicative of the broader struggles with racism in the region. White business owners paid half the rent to the same landlord and yet Collins still saw the business as worth the effort. Collins’ resistance is not the active rebellion that Marx envisioned, but is an enduring message of the Black radical tradition that Robinson (1983) discussed. A discrimination at first glance based on skin color is really more symptomatic of the normative a divide that other residents saw at restaurant tables and community gatherings. New people in the community had never experienced a place so divided. Older residents often refused to discuss the racial history of the town preferring to avoid the topic all together. Many of the discussion about Marion’s racial issues had to be explicitly prompted and Collins’ example is one of many. Collins' quote is directly in line with the community's history and with other experiences that black individuals shared from across the community. Though improved
compared to the civil rights era, rural communities in Perry County still struggle with racism, racial segregation, and an unequal racialized economy as does the region and the state.

In everyday interactions in Marion, the racial divide was masked behind discussions of picking a side, a church, or a seat. Many residents, especially those who were older and experienced the civil rights movement in Marion, implied that racism was a problem of the past or, at the very least, rapidly fading. Middle-aged and younger community members more often recognized and commented on the blatant structures of racism in Perry County. Residents would not be surprised, but perhaps disappointed, to hear that young people were shocked that a local business downtown could be new and black-owned or that comments made to visitors used the N-word. One White visitor who worked at a state level nonprofit and had interacted with nearly every group in the community commented that "The blatant racism was shocking to me on a different level. It wasn't everybody, and it certainly wasn’t the majority of people we talked to, but I've never met a more hateful people in my life than those few individuals." This quote was primarily in reference to a few of the community’s White elites and shows the vast difference in even the White community’s perception of Marion’s racial issues.

*Jobs and Businesses*

Another challenge that Jamison pointed out in the first quote of this section is the lack of locally available jobs. Small businesses face enormous challenges as well. In Marion, the downtown has seen the turnover of many businesses in the past twenty years, with only a few staples like the local drugstore, a few lawyers’ offices, and one restaurant able to continue alongside government entities like the post office, courthouse, and city hall. Perry County also does not have a Chamber of Commerce, which closed its doors in 2015, though the business license is still active in state records. The constant turning over of businesses in many ways can
be tied to many other challenges already discussed in this section. When asked about what economic development looks like in Marion, many responses were similarly cautious and descriptions of the region’s economy were based on the hard physical reality.

I think originally, I guess, in the 90s to the 2000 period. We lost the industry, so therefore when a lot of people finish school. They had to move away for job purposes. Right now we were in Marion in general. We still have Judson College and Marion Military Institute. And that's pretty much. We've got two nursing homes and that’s pretty much the terms of our employment here. So right now we're in the process of trying to. I guess bring a little industry back. Maybe get a hospital back and that could probably bring more to the community.

-Interview with Brandon Tucker, 2020

The education services industry is the largest employer in Perry County, but like Tucker stated, "that's pretty much it for jobs." Small businesses often needed workers, but qualified labor was hard for them to find. The perception of job availability—the state of the economy—is another community weight. The already small population struggles to support the businesses that do exist. All discussions of new businesses during this research were filled with caution. Newer community members like Rolland, a local educator, stated that the economy was the side effect of all the other challenges. "And that's kind of always been an issue here where even in Marion, I would be careful not to get too attached to restaurants or things like that out of fear that they might not stay open simply because of just the state of the economy here. I mean, I've seen so many restaurants in Marion just come and go." Local businesses' survival connects to the broader challenges of racism, infrastructure, education, and population, but is viewed as just another challenge that the community has become accustomed to over the years.

Poverty, Wealth, and Resources

Public statistics draw attention to poverty in the county. Approximately 52.3% of the Perry County population earns less than $24,999 per year, according to the American
Community Survey 2019 5-year estimates (American Community Survey Table #S0601, 2019).
The money to replace or repair a roof falls far outside what the majority of residents could afford. As a past nonprofit employee who worked extensively to fund a local organization in the area commented:

There's so much rich culture there and people that it's just it's bursting at the seams. It's just, it's not balanced. It can't get to the outside world, or people can't access the Internet, or people can't access the resources they need, or there are people who don't have food to eat. There's people who can't read. I mean, there are so many different challenges. That the balance ... That the balance is just not there. And even the balance of money. So the balance of money is with a small group of people. But that small group of people also controls all the political power and most of the land. It's a very small group people. And it's mainly White people and the majority of people living in poverty are African-Americans, the vast majority according to the U.S. Census.

-Interview with Charles Johnson, 2020

The wealth gap that Johnson, a White resident, cites has impacted local efforts as much as the depopulation and educational factors. Johnson explicitly calls out the racial "imbalance" to local wealth gaps. Some individuals' everyday needs versus the surplus of others are a well-publicized challenge of the Black Belt region. An employee at a different nonprofit devoted to healthcare further shared that though race might be the ‘elephant in the room’, the wealth gap is almost if not a more immediate challenge to solving local needs. The connection between race and wealth is very blurred in community conversations. The majority of those in poverty in the county are understood to be Black, but not to the point that all White residents are assumed to be wealthy and vice versa. The worker stated, "I think it's almost those of the haves and the have nots, those that have resources and are comfortable and those that don't have resources and are struggling. And they [the wealthy] just say, 'well, I'm comfortable. I'm not worried about those that are struggling.' And they're not even trying to meet the needs and those that are struggling.” As many people were able to elaborate, some are struggling with immediate needs. The small group of
wealthier individuals had less incentive for social change because they felt secure in the current situation. This separation based on wealth and race is at the heart of the region's history and current struggles—and impacts the efforts and everyday actions of residents in Perry County.

Another issue of both local wealth and resources has been evident in the City of Marion. As revenues have shrunk with population statistics, past municipal governments failed to conduct basic financial audits necessary to apply for grants and neglected public infrastructure. In particular, the local government has faced massive fiscal shortfalls in updating infrastructure. The municipal government has also failed to apply for basic grants due to a lapse in annual audits from sometime around 2000 until 2017. One Black city employee summarized where previous municipal administrations had left the community.

In talking about Marion, when I took on this particular position, our community hadn't had an audit in seventeen years, and we all know that our audits are how we get grant funding...If you're trying to receive something from some other agency, people want to know 'what are your assets? What are your liabilities, and who do you owe? And how long you have on that?' And I think that as not knowing what direction that.... or how big of a role that played... I was baffled, you know, for not having something of that nature, that magnitude that could highly affect our government and our people and our community. If people were wondering why, what is happening to the swimming pools and water? What has happened to these things? We haven't had a review of the records for seventeen years and counting. You know, so that played a very, very big role in what is happening.

-Lucy Hammond, 2019

Hammond was shocked at the state of the municipality's funding, and coming in after previous administrations' blatant mismanagement only added to the local challenges. Grant funding and public investment, based on this testimony, have not been available for seventeen years. The political entities designed to uphold infrastructure, assist in the attraction of industry, and pull together the community from wealthy to poor could not be transparent with the people it was attempting to represent. Money was finally secured by the City of Marion for an audit in 2017
and recently completed. The lasting damage of past fiscal decisions only further contributes to the heaviness and discourses of disparity found in everyday conversations.

Perry County thus faces compounding and intersecting economic, political, and demographic challenges. The challenges facing people in Perry County have defined the region for decades, hindering growth and exacerbating deterioration. The catalyzing crisis (Mouffe 2018) of economic deterioration can be seen in the precarious situation in which even local political environments could not adequately respond. Population decline through outmigration that outstrips in-migration has set the region apart statistically from the rest of the state and significantly impacted local resources. The municipal government's steady decline in the past seventeen years includes failures to invest in education and infrastructure. A shrinking consumer base and a fragile market to support small businesses have only further compounded the discourses of disparity in local populations. All of these individual challenges are further exacerbated by racial inequality and cyclical poverty. Racialization in a deteriorated economy only exacerbates these challenges. The historic and systemic racial capitalism of the region inherently divides the community. The ‘traditional’ or old hegemonic logics built and normalized the divisions, which, when combined with staggering depopulation, could no longer continue to function as the dominant logic in the face of such circumstances. Marion is rural, racialized, and precarious subject to disinvestment, decline, and retraction. The growing challenges have fostered at each step discourses of disparity within local populations and disrupted even the wealthier resident’s concept of community in the process. The subsequent gaps in logic due to the enormity of local challenges are what cultivated an interregnum within Perry County.
3.3 Power Structures in Marion

The power structures of Marion are as convoluted as the community's challenges. The power networks of the Alabama Black Belt are a topic not often covered outside local living rooms, and the complexities are hard to tease out even in the most thorough academic studies. The more comprehensive analyses of power networks in the region usually occur in historical analyses (Cobb 1982; Cox 2003; de Jung 2016; Hobson 2017); however, they often lack the dimension of meeting local challenges and needs, focusing on the official and formal contexts of politicking. Local racial politics are grounded in histories of separation and internal conflicts that continue to this day. The racial divisions have further compounded an already complex system that frustrates both Black and White residents at all levels (Eskew 2012).

Formal and informal power structures in Marion have been suffused with the specifically unequal racial formation proving as one of the strongest normalized standards of the 'traditional' hegemonic logics and common sense throughout the community. Formal power structures in Marion primarily consist of 'official' and elected positions like those of the Perry County Commission, Marion Bank & Trust leadership, City Councilmen, etc. Formal power structures are associated primarily with the toxicity of local politics and though composed of both Black and White leaders, have in the past cultivated systems of violence, threats, and fodder for bickering at all levels of the community. Unofficial power structures are primarily based on historical resistance movements that birthed Black radical traditions (Robinson 1983). Informal power structures primarily reside outside of governmental associations. They are located within local nonprofits, women both Black and White, and elders of local churches and longtime community members. Though still majority segregated in affiliation, religious groups are one category that holds dual status as both formal and informal structures of power within the
community. Together these form a multi-dimensional racialized economy and landscape that suffuses religion, gender, government, and the business community.

There are formal spheres of power, primarily dominated by White men and elected officials, that often follow historical patterns of wealth and prestige in Marion. However, the unofficial and official networks of power are run by women, and Black women predominantly lead local established unofficial networks. These women do not necessarily possess the fiscal or economic power of official leadership but instead utilize long-term rapport and unofficial networks as interconnected prestige highways to push various fronts into action. Cultivated leadership outside of elected or governmental organizations also includes religious groups. Perhaps not as influential as in the past, local religious leaders actively serve in various community structures, both Black and White. Various power structures, both formal and, informal back different local efforts in the community, creating a web of power struggles over credit for success and blame for failures. These different groups' inability to work in the same space, especially historically, creates a level of toxicity that residents, despite interwoven levels of personal involvement, actively abhor. The toxicity of local politics, which continues to this day, has facilitated a shift in the community's hegemonic order due to past power structure's failure to adequately address the growing states of crises.

**Women in Perry County**

The role of women in the power networks of the region was particularly evident in Perry County. Examples of the importance of both Black and White women in the community include the presence of the Alabama Women's Hall of Fame, Judson College, a women's Baptist college, the first Black female county clerk in the state, the home of Coretta Scott King, a Black female city clerk, and many local nonprofits were started and run by women. These factors illustrate the
integral role women play in the power network the Marion community. One interview about leadership led to this observation by a local nonprofit employee.

And I'm also going to be very specific, it's women. Women lead the Black Belt. They are the ones in the positions of the county clerks. They are the ones doing the work on the ground. They are the ones leading the families because another great need is the family unit. I know that the population trends and also single parent households, especially single moms. There are many of those in Marion and... the women are leading in those different ways, women are leading in the churches... I saw more women leaders, frankly, than I did men, even though many times men are the ones in the political leadership roles. But that's just my personal opinion.

-Interview with Charles Johnson, 2020

As Johnson pointed out, though, women often do not have the title or elected position associated with said role. Currently, in 2021, all of the local county commissioners are male, as are all of the city council members, with the exception of the clerks. The women are the gatekeepers of local networks in Marion; however, they are often not as visible in elected positions. This does not mean that the women, especially Black women, are less involved in local politics. There have been female city council members, both black and White, in the past. In recent elections, several women actively ran for public office. The current County Clerk and past County Clerk have both been Black women serving as record keepers, moderators, and close advisors for city council and county commission meetings. This division between men and women is not often a point of contention, but are a reality in Perry County's elected and appointed powers. As Johnson briefly mentions, a good illustration of the gender roles of Marion can be seen in the local churches. The pastors who serve as official and visible representatives of the congregation are typically male, no matter the racial or denominational affiliation. Women, however, typically make up a majority of these groups’ active volunteers, parishioners, and elders, who guide and influence a given congregation's actions within the community. The social positionality of women in the Black Belt is certainly a topic for future study as the formal and informal roles of contemporary
women, both Black and White, would significantly add to the literature of multiple disciplines given the stressed power networks in which these women operate.

*Religion*

Churches have played a key role in Marion's history for both the Black and White communities and continue to be one of the community's dominant power structures. As shown in Figure 3.8, markers dot the Perry County landscape and appear outside of many local churches. Figure 3.8 shows a Marion historical marker for First Congregational Church, illustrating churches' value and history in Perry County. The first question new residents are typically asked upon moving to Marion is, 'where they intend to go to church?' followed by an invitation to Sunday service. This is true for both the traditionally Black and White churches. Interviews with religious and non-religious inhabitants resulted in similar answers about first encounters with other residents upon moving to Marion. According to the Pew Research Center, approximately 86% of Alabamians identify as Christian, with 31% of those people affiliated with the Evangelical Baptist tradition. This is true for Black and White Alabamians. Most of those affiliated with Historically Black Protestant sects in Alabama were still affiliated with the Baptist Family tradition. As a religious community, the Black Belt is often described as part of the 'Bible Belt' (Pew Research Center 2021; Hayes 2017). Even in a community like Marion, with a population of around 3,000, there are approximately twenty different churches within or just outside the city limits.
The importance of religion in both the traditionally Black and White communities is evident in local history. For the traditionally White religious community, the Black Belt is where the Alabama Baptist Convention formed in Greensboro and Marion, resulting in the founding of both Judson College and what would later become Marion Military Institute and Samford University (Flynt 2008). In the Black community, churches have played a key role in the people's resistance and resiliency—a role well documented across academic disciplines (Fallin 2007). During the civil rights movement throughout the Alabama Black Belt, churches were the primary gathering point for civil rights leaders in the 1960s and 1970s (Fallin 2007). One lifelong resident noted the pivotal role churches in Marion have played and how the political power local pastors once had is no longer as powerful as it once was. One Black parishioner discussed the changes she had seen in the local churches in her lifetime.
Pastors are now understanding [that] these are not the congregations of old; where pew members believe what the ministers says [or] took what he said like it was the gospel. Now you have individuals who are reading, who are educated, and can read and interpret the Bible for themselves. And I can agree to disagree even inside the sanctuary and not go by what you're saying... So the church, which once was a pivotal, pivotal, component no longer is as such, its important, is still important, but it does not have the power that it once had. And it’s because people are thinking for themselves.

This quote reflects the development the strong leadership role that pastors in Marion held in the past. The importance of the pastor's role is no longer unquestioned. Still, the position holds an important place in the community's power structure. Many pastors are called or assigned to churches by the larger denominational organization and come to the community as outsiders, though they rarely rotate once placed. Local pastors in Marion remain active community members, often serving on multiple nonprofit boards and playing a more reserved but still important role in local power networks and the community's spiritual guidance.

The religious power structures of Perry County have, in particular, been impacted by depopulation. Some local church pastors reside in other cities outside of the Black Belt, driving in to serve their congregations. This is especially true for the numerous churches in the county (outside the city limits) and even for a few of the in-town congregations of Marion. One local pastor of a traditionally White congregation, when asked about the challenges in the community, stated, "Challenges, how long you got, you know? I always tell folks if somebody could give me a half-million dollars, I could spend it tomorrow here just on this one building alone." Despite his initial response on infrastructural challenges, a sentiment that many community members shared, the pastor also noted, "But also, I think one of the other really more material, but I think more palpable challenges is how people overcome that sense of despair because they have seen it….And so you just imagine taking a community and removing two-thirds of its people and two thirds, therefore, two-thirds of its resources gets to be pretty overwhelming and depressing and
that sort of thing." The challenges of Marion are heavily affecting the local power structures, which often struggle to adequately support the needs of the community in such a state of crisis. Pastors in particular and the role of religion in Marion reflect the relationships between the challenges and local power structures’ effects on residents.

**Local Government**

Formal elected power is a source of anxiety for residents at both the municipal and county levels. Historical political spheres at the regional and state level only further exacerbated local tensions. The ‘traditional’ political logics of the Black Belt combined with the community’s racialized atmosphere and faced with ever-increasing community challenges cultivated toxicity and lack of trust in local government. The recent turn-over in November 2016 from predominately White to Black municipal administration (Hinton 2018) has not able to shift this anxiety due to internal bickering and overwhelming community needs. Silos of power and resources are particularly raw in the local politics of Marion’s government. The tensions are often expressed at least ‘officially’ in highly oppositional statements made on record and via social media. As the county seat, Marion is often caught between county resources versus city resources. The ensuing battle of scarcity inflates to extremes in both political and economic arenas. However, it ultimately often fails to meet the initial goals and needs of the community. One resident spoke plainly about the effect of local political toxicity on the community’s opportunities.
It boils back down to local government. That plays a huge factor in what happens. So sometimes I think we're left out in the Black Belt because of politics. This is a very hard political climate and it can have negative effects on our communities as a whole….But we need to elect individuals who have the wherewithal to make decisions based on sound judgment and not feelings and emotions, not on the idea or concept of suppression of a particular group, or to benefit a particular group. The Black Belt, traditionally, is kinda stuck in that political arena, and what we look to our politicians to do.

-Interview with Kristie Evans, 2019

Evans is clear about the negative association of local politics on the community. Evans conceptualizes local elected officials as serving particular groups more so than others in the community. The "suppression of a particular" and "traditionally" in the above quote refers to the history of racialization within politics that has hurt and disenfranchised various community groups. This sentiment, expressed repeatedly by different residents, illustrates a gap in official local power structures. Toxic local politics could not address the community's many challenges and instead cultivated siloed groups in the community. Mouffe's post-structural political theory is especially relevant here. It reveals a significant crisis in the 'traditional' hegemonic order.

Recent changes in municipal government have left similar discourses of disparity inside Marion's city hall. Silos of resources have become a normalized expectation, and local government employees have been left to deal with the repercussions of elected official's neglect. A local employee of the city discussed how her career's biggest challenges were centered on these established insular norms.
I think that is my biggest challenge is getting people to really understand what it is that we do, how we do it and why we do it, so that is the biggest thing. And it resorts back to this small town craziness. You're trying to work so hard, and you have people pulling at you, wanting you to be on their team. And I'm like, 'what team?' And I'm just looking at them, saying ‘this is not about you or your favorite thing. This is about people in the community as a whole.’ So when you get into that arena, that's been the crazy part for me… It is people forgetting what they're in position for, you know, forgetting why they were chosen or why they ran for public office... That has been my biggest challenge and getting people to understand that.

-Interview with Lucy Hammond, 2019

The toxicity of picking a “team,” as Hammond said, in a public office, is reflected in the experiences of community members like Evans. Hammond discusses people both internal and external to local government in this quote; however, both operate in silos that have been normalized within the power structure. Since the 2016 turnover, more recent government administrations have continued this ongoing battle with little success due to the ingrained political toxicity of ‘traditional’ local power structures.

The dysfunctions of governmental-based silos also heavily impact and complicate the unofficial power structures of the community. Though limited, City resources and County resources are still expected to provide specific services that are often understood both officially and unofficially to be run through local nonprofits or agencies outside of the government in Perry County. Figure 3.9 shows a picture of the Perry County Courthouse. Supplemental arrangements usually use local organizations to provide 911 coordinators, indigent care programs, and diabetes services run through local nonprofits. These arrangements are often at the pleasure of local elected officials, and small allocations of funding are approved by vote for some of these services. Even with these 'understood' arrangements, political tensions can often negatively impact local organizations. One such example involved a local healthcare nonprofit that served low-income residents in Perry County. The health center's agreed funding was cut to
only $10,000 during a 9 pm special county commission meeting that surprised and disgusted residents. According to the local newspaper article and local political leader's Facebook posts, the organization was left to operate with only about $10,000 dollars to serve a county of 9,000 people (Turner Jr., 2017). Only after several months of the political dispute did the County yield to the community's desperate needs and eventually, after nearly a month of hostilities, returned some funding to the organization. These kinds of confrontations further illuminate the disenfranchisement of residents with the political power networks in the community.

Figure 3.9 The Perry County Courthouse on the Marion Square in 2018 (photo by author)

Individuals and organizations prefer to circumnavigate the official political networks of government. The ‘teams,’ ‘groups, ’and‘ silos’ that local government cultivated compounds the already staggering challenges. This state of crisis in ‘traditional’ fields of hegemony has forced community members to organize external to local politics. In non-governmental entities, though still affected by the racial and religious power structures, a common ‘people’ emerges in response to the needs and challenges Marion faces. The continuation of efforts to meet community needs despite the local toxic political structures is a source of pride for the region. In a continuation of Evans’ earlier quote, she was very clear about the challenges and resiliencies that local people mobilize around due to local government’s inadequacies.
So we work at, maybe in silos sometimes, but we work at achieving personal goals as well as community goals, meeting the needs of people. So the resilience of the Black Belt is definitely a plus and that all comes from its people. People that are working together to meet the needs of one another. Government... government assistance or government aid programs and projects are nice to have, but oftentimes we find that it's the people within the Black Belt who actually come together to aid those individual needs that needs to be met, which ultimately leads to certain things being abandoned and neglected in our community.

-Interview with Kristie Evans, 2019

Evans is discussing the resident’s reaction to the historical inconsistency of governmental organization and support. The silos Evans references are a normalized part of Marion’s official and unofficial power structures. Decisions and goals of the community are therefore made within these siloed power structures. In interviews with other community organizations one group stated, “while everyone might be in the room, they were all sitting at different tables and therefore tend to pull in different directions.” In this illustration, the ‘table’ is the center of the community where decisions are made. In theory, for Mouffe and Marion, this would be a democracy where every group is represented and has a voice. In other communities, government entities typically provide the ‘table’ at which collective decisions and goals are pursued. In Marion, local challenges, silos, racism, and political toxicity build a state of crisis that has catalyzed an interregnum. In Marion, the above metaphor of the ‘table’ is apt. The location of the ‘table’—and the perceived existence of multiple tables—underscores the dispute and contest over resources taking place in the community. The seats at the ‘table’ are being constantly contested (Mouffe 2018, 43).

3.4 The Scarcity of Disparity in Discourses and Imaginaries

The overwhelming nature of regional challenges and the disenfranchisement of community groups from Marion's power structures have cultivated discourses of disparity and a regional social imaginary of hopelessness. The survival of this state of crisis has meant that
community groups are siloed and operate as if under siege due to limited resources. Additionally, current visions and descriptions of the region reflect the discourse of disparity in ways both internal and external to Perry County. This normalization of these discourses has been illustrated in the above sections through quotes of the realities local challenges and power networks have created.

Charles Taylor's (2004, 23) concept of social imaginary and the influence of local power networks is particularly relevant to the resulting discourses in Marion. Taylor defines the social imaginary as "...the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations." The disparity of resources and collaboration in education, public infrastructure, and the turnover of small business all bring and contribute to discourses that normalize these conditions through their continuation. Mendoza et al. (2017) also looked at the imaginary in their article on the Patagonian eco-region, but from the perspective of place-based understandings.

The ‘imaginary’ refers to the shared understandings and interpretive frame-works that naturalize practical engagements with the world (Taylor 2004). A territorial imaginary denotes the master images and diverse fields of collective representation that become associated with distinct places, regions, and environments. Implicit to this process is the delimitation of a ‘territory’ as meaningfully different from surrounding terrains. (Mendoza et al. 2017)

Their notion of the imaginary applies directly to how the Black Belt and Perry County are considered in light of the challenges that the community faces. Publicity of local disparity discourses reinforces the normalization of siloed resources. This has created a social imaginary of hopelessness that is grounded in histories of depopulation, educational inequities, [etc.].
Discourses of Disparity

The political-economic challenges faced by residents of Perry County have fostered and normalized a discourse of disparity. These discourses are a direct result of the challenges that the community has faces and the inability of current logics to adequately hand those issues. In order to handle the disillusion of the community, compounded through a history of economic and racial struggle, silos and states of survival have been used to prevent the complete disruption of ‘traditional’ hegemonic logics. The shared suffering across community groups has conditioned a discourse of disparity centered on a siege and survival approach that has been used to reinforce current systems. Several community members viewed the relationship between the challenges and power networks as operating in a state of survival. Two female co-workers in healthcare, one Black and one White, spelled out this relationship during an interview together about operations in a local nonprofit.

Sarah Jamison: Yeah, I mean, [it’s] survival mode, basically, we're all coming from a place of scarcity. And I think that when that is the case, you want to hold on pretty tightly to what you have. Like, ‘I can't control all these other things, but this is mine and I can control it. And so I'm not willing to give up any of that control or any of those resources, even if maybe it would work better if I put this in the pot and we all share it, but then I'm not going to have mine. And what if it goes badly?’ And I think that's across the board, I mean, from government officials, to nonprofits, to churches, to just people, families, individuals.

Florrie Foster: And now you see who works in the government and that [they] should be looking out for the community as a whole. I don't even see where they are looking out for the community as a whole. They all have a tunnel vision. Everybody's kinda in that way of we just have tunnel vision.

Sarah Jamison: Right, [it’s] ‘I can take care of me and these people who are closest to me and my circle.’
Jamison and Foster, in this conversation, reveal the discourses of disparity on local resources. The “survival mode” of individuals and local groups reveals the consistent awareness of scarcity in the community. There is a significant fear of losing or wasting resources on new efforts. As Jamison states, “then I’m not going to have mine” reveals this fear which Foster elaborates is considered to be directly tied to gaps in local government. The “tunnel vision” is built upon the community’s scarcity and focuses only on the “circles” or silos that individuals and groups feel they can adequately help given local conditions. These discourses are not the sole responsibility of the local government. The state of crisis and resulting discourses have been building throughout the community’s history; however, the compounding mistrust in local power structures has normalized this “survival mode” within Marion’s population.

**Regional Hopelessness**

This interpretive frame has not only been internally significant, but externally noted in publications, studies, and articles, particularly in the last ten years. Glenn T. Eskew’s chapter, ‘Selling the Civil Rights movement through Black Political Empowerment in Selma, AL’ in *Destination Dixie*, sums up the perceptions and racialized binaries that shape economic development in the Black Belt. Eskew’s (2012:175) interview with Rose Sanders in Selma (Dallas County), quotes her stating that, "… Sanders suggested, ‘We believe Selma is dying economically, and we were dying economically before we got a black mayor. We are concerned about this city and we want people to come forward to help make this a reality.’" Selma’s efforts to combat the growing disparity failed to build the necessary chain of equivalence because efforts (both Black and White) to meet local challenges continued to operate under the same logics of racial division yet homogenous expectations that rely on only one group to succeed. The state of hopelessness is socially pervasive due to the circumstances facing region. This is not
to say that resiliency is dying, but it can also be a heavy burden. The Delta Regional Authority's publication, *Alabama's Delta Region Development Plan* (State of Alabama 2016:18), released a Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threat (SWOT) analysis of the Alabama Delta Region in 2016, which stated that the primary threat and weakness of the region respectively were "public perception that things can't improve' and 'negative perceptions and attitudes about the region." This was even true of local business owners who managed to remain open during the COVID-19 pandemic but were tentative about predicting or envisioning the community's future.

I would say we still have a few people that are in Montgomery that are fighting for the Black Belt to be able to thrive or at least survive... So right now I think people have tried. But like a lot of it, as I've traveled through the Black Belt, you see a lot of the Black Belt downtown areas have started to fall aside. So it's a tough question. I guess it'll only take time to see how it can survive.

   -Interview with Brandon Tucker, 2020

Tucker’s assessment of the Black Belt’s survival was cautious and based on the images and experiences he has witnessed in surrounding communities. As Tucker states people have “tried” and failures have unfortunately helped to perpetuate the discourses and imaginaries now associated with the region. Surviving versus thriving is a key part of the discussion when it comes to the Black Belt and is in the area’s reputation. U.N. officials toured the region in 2017 and the resulting article was titled, “*UN poverty official touring Alabama's Black Belt: 'I haven't seen this' in the First World*” (Sheets 2017). This was not a surprising title to local residents who live in the region every day.

When discussing the Black Belt’s public perception, local despair haunts even the optimism of current efforts. When asked to define the Black Belt Evans answered:
Equity and inequality often comes up. We have access to [things], but the quality of those things that we have access to may not necessarily be of the best, but we are known for our tenacity, our fight to work around whatever barriers to achieve whatever goals that we can...We have it. But to what degree we have it or do we have access to it? It's here, but is it of quality? Is it here just to say that it's here or is it truly what the people really need?

-Interview with Kristie Evans, 2019

Local efforts have strict expectations within these discourses and imaginaries. Evans and others noted that Perry County has "things," but are those items working to solve the local resource issues effectively and as Evans noted, those efforts may not be enough. Another Black resident and nonprofit employee Florrie Foster noted too, "They say that the state is no stronger than the weakest link and Perry County is that weak link because of the lack of infrastructure, because of no hospital, the lack of health care, and because of the fact that we are without jobs and the education and because of those things is going to require that the government... that they look intentionally to say, we're here, we're going to lift Perry County, because until we lift Perry County, the state cannot be the best it can be." Foster was not alone in her hope for state support. Even Evans recognized the power of a regional approach to development. However, these hopes were all tinged with the realities of toxic power structures and compounding challenges of the past and present.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has illustrated the challenges that Perry County residents have faced and that have built to a hegemonic crisis. This crisis has developed over time through the challenges of depopulation, failing education and infrastructure, racism, job and industry loss, wealth gaps, and cyclical poverty. Each additional challenge further illuminated the levels at which hegemonic crisis occurred and how it fostered a disconnect between the hoped-for future and the present reality. This state of crisis cultivated discourses of hopelessness and disparity relying on siloed
resources and a siege-based approach. Toxicity in ‘traditional’ politics, especially at the local and regional levels, compounded the crisis state and brought about an interregnum. Shifts in local political leadership have only taken root since the development of counter-hegemonic fronts began to develop in response to the state of crisis described in this chapter.
Chapter 4 Formation of Counter Hegemonic Fronts

The state of crisis in Marion is not new. Over the last century, various social groups have sought to challenge local social, political, and economic conditions of rural decline and disinvestment. Civil rights era organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) worked to promote nonviolent protests against racial injustice (Kaetz 2010; Brooks 2009). There were also efforts by interracial cooperatives like the South West Alabama Farmers' Cooperative Association (SWAFCA) that worked to meet the needs of rural, primarily Black farmers in the Black Belt using funds awarded nationally from the War on Poverty (United States Rural Opportunities Report 1967; De Jung 2016). The political fronts that emerged to challenge social elites were most visible along racial lines and followed the Black radical tradition (Robinson 1983). In response to some of the local and national successes of the 1960s-1980s in overcoming Jim Crow laws, White flight and the remaining elite commitment to racialized hegemonic logics had significant implications for Perry County.

This chapter draws on political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2018) to conceptualize the current situation as a "crisis of hegemony" that opens up political space for new actors. On the creation of new hegemonic logics Mouffe writes, "To resonate with the problems people encounter in their daily lives, it needs to start from where they are and how they feel, offering them a vision of the future that gives them hope, instead of remaining in the register of denunciation" (2019, 76). These recent civic efforts have developed counter-fronts of resistance
to the established hegemonic order and an affective politics of hope that seeks to change the narrative of the Alabama Black Belt in the minds of the citizens themselves\(^\text{21}\). These grassroots entities develop counter-fronts of resistance to exploit the hegemonic crisis and dispute the dominant group's power. The advancement of an affective politics of hope creates new possibilities for progress, inclusive development, and more robust democracy that fosters new micro-discourses across these resistive counter-fronts.

This chapter examines the emergence of civic groups—primarily nonprofit organizations—that have begun to overcome the current crisis. I argue that these civic groups have begun to articulate a new series of counter-fronts to the political elite in Marion. Organizations like Sowing Seeds of Hope, which started in 2000, with biracial and religious support were created in response to the extreme health, education, and economic crises that the local government was either incapable of overcoming or purposefully ignoring. These civic groups have also partnered with external actors. The University of Alabama's Honors College and other higher education groups have developed outreach programs that work with nonprofits to expand social services and foment economic development.

### 4.1 The Emerging Civic Counter-Front in Perry County

Enormous challenges continue to plague Black Belt residents in Perry County, especially concerning depopulation, poverty, public disinvestment, healthcare, and education. As discussed in Chapter 3, the racialization in Perry County has been defined by a longstanding racialized

\(^{21}\)The notion of “affective politics” can be found in Masco’s book *The Theater of Operations*. Masco (2014, 17-19) theorizes the Cold War and transition to the War on Terror based on affective politics. Affective in this context refers to ways of thinking/being tied to emotion. Affective politics refers to how states, NGOs, or civic groups mobilize new ways of thinking/emotion to compel political change.
ruling class that controlled the municipal and county governments and the business community. Though asserting dominance over the county, White social elites have increasingly faced a situation of hegemonic crisis. Marion reflects a situation of "political" and "socioeconomic transformations" in which the "dominant hegemony is being destabilized by the multiplication of unsatisfied demands" (Mouffe 2018, 11). In Perry County the compounding challenges and continued fall of the community pushed a destabilization process in opposition to the local crises. Mouffe (2018, 63) notes that this process "…demands the designation of an adversary." Mouffe (2018, 63) continues to say, "The people and the political frontier that defines its adversary are constructed through political struggle, and they are always susceptible to reticulation through counter hegemonic interventions." The development of counter-fronts does not ensure the successful establishment of a new hegemony. The designation of the community's deterioration and prior hegemonic order was the adversary around which these grassroots movements grew. This designation opens up a sociopolitical space to realign the popular 'common sense' and a move to embrace alternatives.

Civil-society actors and organizations, especially local nonprofits, serve as important new political actors in Marion. These local nonprofits—some of which are connected to organizations outside of Perry County—have begun to create a civic counter-front that circumvents the established political powers. In the face of racial inequities and the urgent need for resources, new networks and organizations have emerged to combat these local and regional challenges. These various nonprofit organizations' missions reflect different political nodes, centered on revitalization, that have worked to deliver social services to residents and build a social safety net that responds to direct needs. Table 4.1 shows the mission statements of a handful of the nonprofits in Perry County.
### Table 4.1 Sample of Perry County Nonprofit Mission Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Founded</th>
<th>Mission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sowing Seeds of Hope (SSOH)</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>Sowing Seeds of Hope promotes positive, collaborative community development that improves life for the residents of the Alabama Black Belt. (Sowing Seeds of Hope 2020 About Us)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Horseshoe Farms</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Our mission is to work with and build on the strengths of local communities, improve the health and quality of life of our vulnerable neighbors, and prepare citizen service leaders for tomorrow’s communities. (Project Horseshoe Farm 2020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHOOSING to HELP OTHERS In our COMMUNITY EXCEL (CHOICE)</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>CHOICE strives to create collaborative partnerships to ensure youth have access to resources that provide quality programs, activities, and services in six (6) key focus areas: (1) Workforce Development (2) Mentoring (3) Education (4) Cultural Arts (5) Health &amp; Wellness (6) Athletics &amp; Recreation (CHOICE 2021)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main Street Marion</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Main Street Marion is focused on the revitalization of historic downtown Marion, AL by bringing jobs, dollars, and people together. (Main Street Marion 2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love Is What Love Does (Grew from C.E.T. Ministries)</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Displaying love through service by providing citizens in poverty-stricken communities access to quality resources. (AL State Business License and Lewis 2020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communities Engaged &amp; Transformed (CET) Ministries Eagle Grove Baptist Church</td>
<td>(2018-steps outside of church volunteer work)</td>
<td><em>no mission statement could be located</em> (Presbytery of Shepperds and Lappsley 2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakthrough Charter School</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>The mission of Breakthrough Charter School is to prepare students in Perry County for success as citizens and leaders by providing a rigorous, service-oriented, and project-based public school that supports the social-emotional development of each individual child. (Breakthrough Charter School 2021)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The success of these civic organizations is perceived as a threat to the entrenched political bloc. A former nonprofit employee in Marion was very clear about this relationship.

So in Marion, when any leader steps above the status quo, they become a target. Whether it's the mayor, whether it's a new guy, like me, coming into town to live in there, even though everybody knew me. So the response was very excited and the response was, I want something done very, very soon. And the response was what's going to happen with this new group? And it's also there's not a lot of political capital in Marion. There's not a lot of there's not a lot of financial capital in Marion.

-Interview with Charles Johnson, 2020

Johnson’s response to the relationship between the status quo and leaders reflects the discourses of disparity discussed in the previous chapter. The resource scarcity means that “there’s not a lot of financial capital in Marion.” Additionally, the toxic political environment, which has often held the community back, results in low political capital. These new grassroots civic groups challenge the status quo and were then designated at the individual and group level as adversaries of current power structures.

### 4.2 Sowing Seeds of Hope

Sowing Seeds of Hope (SSOH) is a nonprofit organization serving Perry County that has become well-known for its healthcare efforts and other social services to residents. The programs that Sowing Seeds of Hope provides to Perry County residents are numerous. SSOH's programs include free blood pressure clinics on Wednesdays, in partnership with the McWhorter School of Pharmacy at Samford University, monthly support groups for residents with diabetes providing free diabetic supplies, and assisting eighteen families in becoming homeowners. It also has built homes through the USDA Mutual Self-Help Housing Program and provided Thanksgiving food baskets packed by churches from across the state for the elderly networked for delivery through local churches. The organization's website states, "In 2000, Sowing Seeds of Hope was founded
by a group of visionary leaders who believed that Perry County's future could be as rich as its Black Belt soil. Ministers, educators, elected officials, and local citizens committed to working together to improve the quality of life and work in Perry County." The organization has strong connections to various churches in Marion and across the state while simultaneously utilizing local educators in workshops and receiving minimal funding from elected officials for healthcare. These efforts were specifically collaborative and intended to promote empowerment and mobilization (Sowing Seeds of Hope, Inc. About Us 2020). The organization started with a collaborative methodology that worked around or circumnavigated the problematic White ruling elite, which had long dominated the municipal government. SSOH demonstrates a different kind of political logic focused on building an alternative sociopolitical network and distribution system to provide social services directly to county residents. Nonprofits like SSOH constitute a flexible set of decentralized actors that address health, housing, and food needs—a minimalist social safety net delivered by civic associations and primarily supported through religious networks. Crucially, SSOH was an interracial organization that drew upon White and Black networks that cut across various Christian religious denominations.

SSOH's developed networks with external actors, organizations, and institutions. According to community members and SSOH staff, the nonprofit's biggest success was the opening of the DaVita Dialysis center in 2012. This required changing state laws regarding population minimums for dialysis treatment centers. The health center provided weekly free blood pressure clinics in partnership with Samford University (Sowing Seeds of Hope, Inc. Our Story 2020). The director of SSOH spoke passionately about the center and what it means for people living in the community.
One of our biggest successes ...the dialysis center has been open and it’s continued to function and not had any problems and has had enough patients to support it. So I think that’s one thing that we’ve done. The other thing I look at and think about is that when we came on the stroke death rate for African-Americans and in Perry County was around 244 per 100,000. And then when I looked at a thing like 2015-2016, it came down to like 83 per 100,000, and so I... we see that we have a blood pressure clinic, a free blood-pressure clinic there, that we do in partnership with Samford’s McWhorter School of Pharmacy, the pharmacy students here, and one of their faculty members in the community.

-Interview with Francis Ford, Director of SSOH

The shift in statistics from 244 to 83 people per 100,000 year is a significant improvement for the county’s healthcare. The ability of SSOH to tap into outside resources to bolster local efforts shows the effectiveness of the organization in spite the challenges and limited resources. The organization’s success has resulted in national recognition by the United States Congress, Baptist News Global, Human Rights Watch, and The New Yorker magazine (Sowing Seeds of Hope, Inc. Our Story 2020). These honors have been echoed on the regional and state level with the Director’s induction into the Alabama Healthcare Hall of Fame (Judson College 2016) and their regional partnerships with universities like Samford, the University of Alabama, and various churches throughout the state.

Civic organizations like SSOH face severe financial constraints. On the day-to-day level, the director stated that no two days were the same, and biggest challenges came from a lack of resources. SSOH funding often comes from grants or donations that are accompanied by red-tape.
The biggest challenge is having a steady stream of income or resources, because, you know, when you're always looking for resources and many times if you're getting some resources, they come with strings attached to them. And so you may get a grant. And the grant may not be a lot of money, but maybe a grant… just for instance we were granted maybe like $20,000 dollars well then. When you get it the $20,000 dollars can't be spent the way you want it to be spent, the way you need it to be spent, it has to be spent according to the rules and regulations of that grant. And so there's some time that take you out of your routine because you have to meet the goals and the goals and the means of the grant. So I think that when we look at and that's one of the things is just that financial. It’s trying to make sure that we're financially solid and because we do exist on grants and donations and that's how we're able to do the things that we do. So I think that that is one of the biggest things. As I've seen is that is because if we had the funding we could, we could find the staff that we do find people that we be willing to work and have the heart for doing the work. But even though they have the heart and spirit for doing the work, they still need a paycheck and the day to pay their bills.

-Interview with Francis Ford, Director of SSOH

The financial struggles are paramount in the minds of SSOH staff and board members. The resources required to run SSOH's many programs have to come through grants and donations. Many nonprofits share these financial problems in rural America, but what stands out, in this case, is the unwavering local support that local political leaders lack and which occurs from sources outside of governmental and ‘traditional’ political reach.

Nonprofit organizations like SSOH emerge within a rural Black Belt space subject to a chronic state disregard and cycles of ongoing decapitalization. The racialized caaptialism and regulation of the region have left much of the local power at the state level through the Alabama Constitution and in urban centers like Montgomery. Alabama state government funding has prioritized regions like Huntsville and Birmingham leaving Black Belt communities like Marion to rely on philanthropy for primary support. Facing inaction by the municipal government, civic groups have emerged to provide a patchwork social services systems. One goal of SSOH is the acquisition of a hospital. In 1995 the Perry County Hospital was dissolved, leaving a considerable gap in the local healthcare system and drastically reducing the population (State of
Since the closure, no urgent care or emergency care facilities exist in the county. The Perry county hospital was converted into a local nursing home and rehabilitation facility. The local hospital's closure left Perry county residents without adequate resources to deal with the area's significant health issues, including blood pressure, diabetes, and heart conditions (Esenwa 2018). The nearest hospital from Marion is Hale County hospital, located in Greensboro. While the Hale County Hospital has an emergency room, Perry County residents often still have to drive to Bibb County, or urban centers like Selma, Tuscaloosa, or Birmingham to receive treatment.

SSOH's efforts to reopen a hospital have been subject to budgetary and facility retaliation from the Perry County Commission, the political body in charge of county government. The Commission is known for its heated, even threatening environment and records of threats by one commissioner to another litter regional newspapers (DeWitt 2011). Arguments against the hospital generally follow two lines of reasoning. The first line is that were a hospital to fail, Marion and Perry County would further lose population, leading to further closures from which the community, particularly the City municipality, may not survive. The second argument is tied to the fear of hurting the existing clinic businesses by introducing competition. Both of these arguments have been circulated through the public sphere, and groups have formed for and against the addition (Turner 2017). Those community members supporting a hospital view it as a solid opportunity to provide jobs of every pay scale, attract industry and people to the area, and finally offer much-needed health care and access to emergency medical services (Interviews with Joe Nelson, Florrie Foster, and Samantha Jackson).

In partnership with First Presbyterian Church of Tuscaloosa, SSOH met with other hospitals and went before the Perry County Hospital Board, which still exists despite the
hospital's dissolution, to discuss Perry County's healthcare options. In opposition to the hospital SSOH pursued, the county government withheld $30,000 from SSOH's director for over a month in retaliation for the organization's efforts. County Commissioners argued back and forth that the funding had not been provided because it did not exist and that the money should not be moved despite coming to a vote. The details of the event itself are fuzzy, and records are sparse beyond a definitive recognition of withholding funds. The funding was eventually returned to the organization after public outcry and the discussion of lawsuits (Turner 2017). The debate for a new hospital in the community has yet to reach any conclusion. However, in 2019 the Cahaba Medical Care clinic arrived in Marion, providing some emergency care and obstetrics with the potential for nontraditional hours in the future (Interview with Kristie Evans, Florrie Foster, Zack Carter, and Lydia Smith, Cahaba Medical Care 2020). Residents welcome the new clinic despite the hotly debated hospital situation.

Though facing opposition at various points and from primarily political leader’s temper-tantrums, SSOH has worked to create a counter-front that knits together various social actors within the county—especially religious congregations—while tapping external resources and organizations. The Black director of SSOH, a lifelong resident of Marion and a registered nurse, grew up during the civil rights movement and saw first-hand how her home has endured significant challenges. During a joint interview, the director and another staff member remarked on the community’s response to SSOH:

Employee: I mean, I think the community reaction has been very positive. We see this this past year, it was our twentieth anniversary. And so at this point, Sowing Seeds of Hope is very much a part of the community locally. Most folks know that we're here, have some idea about what we do, and know that if they are in need of some help, that either we will be able to help or we'll be able to point them in a direction where maybe somebody else can provide the assistance that they need.
Director: …I see that response that we have seen others… that have begun to take on some of the community itself, especially our churches have begun to come outside of their four walls to meet the needs of the people. And so we have churches now, providing this, giving away food, and doing the beans and rice that they give away at one church. And we have two churches, a Baptist church and a little church that have joined together to provide this service that are doing food giveaways and even doing clothing banks. So I think that those are the things that I see where Sowing Seeds of Hope that people in the community have begun to look at doing… or not waiting for people coming in to do things for them, but seeing how the community itself can be an outreach and help, help each other.

This commentary from SSOH employees highlights the themes of being a part of the community and providing much-needed assistance to residents. SSOH also has seen action in response to their work in the community as the director highlights in the actions of local churches. These narratives reveal the subtle and quiet construction of a political counter-front that operates outside the government and draws upon civil-society resources to promote socioeconomic change. As the Director notes in her statement, SSOH has become a force not just for social service provision but for reconstituting the community itself around “outreach” and “help.” This counter-front based on reciprocity and mutual aid operates in the active voice. Again, as the Director remarks, the goal is to show the people how to do things for themselves rather than “waiting for people coming in to do things for them.” Simply put, the project is to develop collective agency.

Though there are various nonprofits that compose this quiet counter-front for social outreach, there are still significant limitations as each pursues its particular missions. There is a small group of nonprofits that residents, throughout interviews and conversations, regarded as making progress in the community: Main Street Marion, C.E.T. ministries, Sowing Seeds of Hope, CHOICE, and Project Horseshoe Farms. All of these organizations have come into
existence in the past twenty years with a significant rise in the past five years (Table 4.1). Local colleges such as Judson and Marion Military Institute were also mentioned as promoting collective advancement. Many local nonprofit directors echoed Florrie Fosters sentiment.

…But we have the Main Street Marion and they are doing some things. We have CHOICE is doing some things in Uniontown. So I think that we have other organizations, like C.E.T. ministries is doing some things, and Project Horseshoe Farms. So everybody's working, but everybody's kind of got or has their own little mission and little goal. And so sometime I think that if we came together and worked as a coordinated effort, then it would have more impact rather than just kind of working like a silo.

-Interview with Florrie Foster, 2021

Despite their efforts, SSOH and these organizations still remain somewhat limited or siloed in their efforts to deliver social services. Moreover, this reflects a lack of coordination between nonprofits that might enable them to more effectively distribute resources and build organizational power. A traditional source of organizational support in many Alabama communities, the Chamber of Commerce, does not exist in Perry County. The racial formations of the community cemented through the history and ‘traditional’ hegemonic logics only complicated the Chamber’s position as a primarily White organization prior to its closure in 2015.

4.3 Forging External Partnerships

The creation of a counter-front would not be as successful without external networks to bolster their resources. External groups and organizations like the University of Alabama Honors College Black Belt Experience program and Samford University's McWhorter School of Pharmacy, churches from more urban centers such as Mountain Brook Baptist and First Presbyterian Church of Tuscaloosa, and individuals, like Hunter Lewis founder of a global investment firm, have all contributed vast amounts of resources to local organizations in order to
combat social disparities. Local higher education institutions, Judson College and Marion Military Institute, and churches as noted previously have also joined in these efforts. These external collaborations, between entities outside of the county and local organizations, have built partnerships that begin the process of shifting the balance of power.

There has been strong involvement by universities in Marion. SSOH has established a partnership with the Samford pharmacy school. Samford University was founded in Marion initially as Howard College in 1841, which later split into Samford University and Marion Military Institute (Samford University 2020). Other state universities, The University of Auburn and The University of Alabama, both have active outreach programs in the county working with various organizations. Auburn has two strong connections in the area, running both the Alabama Extension services for every county in the state and the Auburn Rural Studios, a program focused on citizen-driven architecture. Auburn Rural Studio brings new cohorts of students to the Black Belt every year. It boasts that it has completed over 200 projects since 1993 (Rural Studio 2021). These groups of students and the program professionals work closely with various organizations in the Black Belt to execute these projects, which have gone on to win national awards.

The University of Alabama (UA) has played a very visible and active role in Perry County since the mid-2000s. In 2009, the UA Honors College created the Black Belt Experience Program, where students design projects based on community feedback and execute them in teams led by community members over their freshman year (The University of Alabama Honors College 2021, Interview with Jan Miller). This program also led to the creation of a student organization called 57 miles, which is “a campus-community partnership between The University of Alabama Honors College and Perry County” (Joiner 2015). The UA Honors
College has worked closely with civil groups and businesses over the past ten years. Students have participated in tutoring, donating school supplies to the public schools, setting up websites for local businesses, and putting up murals about local history downtown. They have also created a summer literacy camp with both teachers and kids, cleared trails at Perry Lakes Park, packed foodstuffs for the homebound, and regularly helped clean up downtown streets and sidewalks.

The UA Honors College outreach programs highlight the importance of local partnerships and the need to remain apolitical. They have partnered with the local school systems, the Marion Military Institute and Judson College, and have collaborated with SSOH on their healthcare efforts. UA Program staff highlights their apolitical partnership model and its application to Perry County.

So all the pieces began to align with [the community telling us] ‘yes, we are interested in your coming to work with us. Here are some possible partnerships for you and your students. We're willing to work with you.’ And what was very important to us, Martha Grace, to work with the grassroots efforts versus we did not want to be seen in any with any political connections. We really wanted to be apolitical. So that was very important to us. It remains very important to us.

-Interview with Jan Miller, 2020

This perspective was echoed by other church groups, nonprofits, and businesses external to Perry County that have contributed outside resources via local partnerships over the years. Marion residents recognize their community as shaped by a toxic political environment. Outreach groups have sought to avoid any political affiliations that might curtail their capacity to forge partnerships. By working with local nonprofits, the Honors College outreach groups work across social divisions and engage different silos of actors.

These external partnerships have established long-term social relationships building trust between the Honors College outreach programs and local constituents. Over the years, the outreach programs have received feedback on their partnerships that has revealed some of the
local power shifts taking place. Program members’ report that local individuals and organizations have commented not just on the physical work that is being accomplished but also on the affective change brought about through the students’ energy.

We never want the experience in Marion to be one sided. Our students gain so much from it, we want to make sure that we're coming in and there's some benefit. …I can't say exactly what that benefit is, but one of the things that I have heard them [the community] say frequently is that there is a sense of hope and care. I remember one prominent African-American leader speaking to our students at our annual community appreciation dinner. And he talked about what it was like to have a group of students come year after year after year and show commitment and concern and hope. He said, ‘you all care. And he became very, very emotional. And I don't know really all what all that means. I can't speak for them for the citizens, but we would not be going back every year if we didn't feel like they genuinely wanted us there.

-Interview with Jan Miller, 2020

Miller’s quote comments on residents' affective attitudes to the changes that UA has bolstered in partnership with local efforts. Terms like "care," "hope," "concern," and "commitment" are the positive image that residents have associated with these outreach efforts. This kind of trust has allowed for new waves of students—working through the Honors College—to enter the community and continue developing partnerships to facilitate projects in various community sectors, including healthcare, education, rural revitalization efforts, and civic education.

Marion residents have reflected on how important it has been to the community to have external actors not captured by entrenched political blocs. A city employee commented:

…It's been a battle, but it's been good because you have people that come along every now and then, fresh faces that have the same ideas that you have. And they're energized and excited. And they see this potential in Marion like, oh, we can do this and we can do that. And you find yourself like, Go ahead. Go for it. You know, and you hope that the people that the sharks out there in Marion don't wear them down with the small town politics. But you're excited that they're here and you hope that their visions could help you and help the community. Because I tell people it's not enough to just complain. You have to be the change that you want to see.

-Interview with Lucy Hammond, 2019
These “fresh faces” are “energized and excited” and see a new potential and a new future for Marion. And rather than criticizing the efforts of external actors, some Marion residents instead encourage them to continue with their work though recognizing that there are “sharks” within “small town politics.” This city employee did not specify what this new future would look like—just that it wasn’t enough to complain about the current state of affairs. Instead, this resident articulated an affective politics of hope, vision, and excitement encapsulated in the Obama-esque-Ghandi-attributed proverb, “You have to be the change you want to see.” What this reveals is that the UA Honors outreach program is hardly apolitical. Through attempting to work across social boundaries and multiple interest groups, the outreach partnerships have sought to revitalize citizen social engagement and construct a more robust set of civic actors that foster a democratic politics of working for the common good.

Conclusion

Mouffé's (2018) notion of the hegemonic crisis, as the opening up of a political space for new actors to advance alternative sociopolitical perspectives, provides a way to conceptualize the efforts of nonprofits in Perry County as creating a civic counter-front that exists in opposition to a common antagonist, crisis, or problem. Moreover, this civic counter-front has promoted an affective politics of hope based on cultivating partnerships with external organizations and with community members. Amidst government disregard and inaction, civic groups have sought to build a basic social safety net by delivering social services directly to constituents.

This counter-front has emerged by recognizing the host of problems facing Perry County related to failed businesses, lack of adequate healthcare, questionable drinking water, and the staggering poverty and education statistics. Local social elites have chosen to deny the validity of these local needs. This is the existing ‘common sense' that this civic counter-front has pushed to
change and which has spurred more collaborative efforts to deliver social services and promote an affective politics of hope. A history of these movements within the community can be seen in de Jong (2016) and from the history of Black resistance seen in Robinson’s (1983) descriptions of Black radical traditions. As Mouffe states, an effective counter-front needs to offer people "a vision of the future that gives them hope, instead of remaining in the register of denunciation" (2018, 76). Recent efforts have developed new modes of resistance through the realization of partnerships and efforts to change the narrative of the Alabama Black Belt in the minds of the citizens themselves.
Chapter 5 A ‘Chain of Equivalence’ in Main Street

In Perry County, the intertwined crises of cyclical poverty, depopulation, and resource access created an interregnum. The state of crisis catalyzed and reinforced discourses of hopelessness across class, race, and age groups in Marion's rural community. The fragmentation of the official power bloc enabled the creation and growth of counter-hegemonic fronts. These counter-fronts responded to a lack of effective countermeasures by dominant political and governmental groups. These various counter-fronts, developed over the past twenty years, are primarily composed of grassroots NGOs that have sought to rally against crises that official networks have failed to adequately combat. This chapter argues that over time these efforts created a new 'chain of equivalence' binding together various local counter-hegemonic fronts to create a new civic hegemony within the community of Marion and Perry County. The 'chain of equivalence' in Marion centered on the revitalization of the community. Main Street Marion's development was the catalyst that coalesced this chain of equivalence around the central goal of revitalization.

Mouffe (2018, 61-63) defines a 'chain of equivalence' as the building of a collective 'people' around a central project or node that accepts internal diversity to more effectively pursue counter-hegemonic changes. Mouffe (2018, 61-63) remarks about this internal diversity by saying, "…we find ourselves within a process of articulation in which an equivalence is established between a multiplicity of heterogeneous demands in a way which maintains the internal differentiation of the group." The many small nonprofits in Marion were able to form an actionable narrative that framed the community outside of the many challenges and began to do
so in a way that accepted the independent mission and values of various community groups. The formalization of a 'chain of equivalence,' primarily external to local government, bound together various counter-fronts to pursue a community identity that transcended the local state of crisis.

This chapter serves as a case study of Main Street Marion's initial ability to formalize a ‘chain of equivalence’ in Marion. First, I focus on the Main Street Approach and how Main Street operates from the national down to the local level. Second, I discuss the application of this approach in Marion's designation as a Main Street community. This illustrates Mouffe's (2018) theory of power shifts in a new and distinctive application to grassroots civic politics. Third, I look at how the concepts of success and failure commonly used within community development literature have to be adjusted for Mouffe’s theory based on the example of Main Street Marion.

5.1 National to Local

In the twentieth century, U.S. preservation efforts focused primarily on History with a capital 'H'. Efforts to preserve specific histories both real and imagined, like those of the Daughter of the Confederacy (Cox 2003) or Civilian Conservation Core projects of the 1930s-1940s, left the American landscape populated with places, buildings, and artifacts deemed significant, but with few local resources to support them. Yıldırım Esen's (2006, 43) thesis on revitalizations movements using Main Street programs in Boston noted that "In fact, the focus of attention of the historic preservation movement in the U.S. in this period [1945-1980] was on key landmarks and buildings, and not on vernacular buildings and downtowns." The enervated downtowns were often filled with buildings deemed locally important; however, national and state preservation strategies, such as grants and tax-breaks, did not include or often benefit smaller communities (Cobb 1982). The combination of growing suburban America, the rise of a retail revolution seen in stores like Walmart, and the big-picture preservation efforts left smaller
communities (populations of 50,000 or less) with a burden of failing infrastructure and little economic opportunity (Cobb 1982; Lichtenstein 2010; Esen 2006). Disappearing commercial districts with failing historic buildings caught the attention of the National Trust for Historic Preservation (N.T.H.P.) and eventually led to the creation of a new approach that attempted to combine economic development efforts with historic preservation under the name Main Street America.

National Trust for Historic Preservation

The National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) was established initially in 1949 via congressional charter as an independent nonprofit centered primarily on preserving historic buildings, structures, and places (Yıldırım Esen 2006). The purpose of the NTHP (2020) organization in the late 1940s was "To facilitate public participation in the preservation of sites, buildings, and objects of national significance or interest." The process for establishing significance, while not formalized until the 1960s, with formal recognition like the National Register for Historic Places, and started being conceptualized in these earlier determinations (King 2000, 16). In the beginning, this primarily concerned saving physical structures, such as plantations like Woodlawn Plantation in Virginia (NTHP 2020). The organization continued to evolve, and with the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act, it became a federally funded entity until separating in 1996 again to become privately funded (NTHP 2020). As the NTHP moved

into a focus on national significance in the 1960s, Americans experienced a changing local economic landscape (King 2000, 16).

In the mid-twentieth century, American communities saw a shift from centralized downtowns to suburban sprawl and commercial one-stop-shops like Walmart. These trends meant that downtown districts and squares were often economically abandoned by communities leaving town centers to fall into disrepair. The NTHP and other preservation-based groups focused on sites with national or unique relevance rather than vernacular localities like downtown buildings. Vernacular spaces' revitalization had little support from federal or private groups, especially for communities between 5,000 and 50,000 in population (Yıldırım Esen 2006, 42). The NTHP, recognizing the need for preservation and economic revitalization assistance in mid-size communities, organized a research program to investigate a more comprehensive solution in 1977 (Yıldırım Esen 2006; NTHP 2020). The test program, run over three years, in three communities, focused on local networks utilizing a new approach combining both economic development and preservation (Robertson 2003; Wagner 1996; Yıldırım Esen 2006). The test program's success resulted in what now is known as the National Main Street Center (NMSC).

National Main Street Center (N.M.S.C.) and Main Street America

The product of locally tailored economic development and historic preservation efforts, the Main Street Project grew into a booming network of communities utilizing the Main Street Project’s findings (Wagner 1996; Yıldırım Esen 2006). The National Main Street Center (NMSC), as of 2003, had over 1,000 communities in 42 states participating as ‘Main Street communities’ with demonstrated improvement in jobs, building use, and positive community perception (Robertson 2003, 16).
Main Street America has been helping revitalize older and historic commercial districts for 40 years. Today it is a network of more than 1,600 neighborhoods and communities, rural and urban, who share both a commitment to place and to building stronger communities through preservation-based economic development. Main Street America is a program of the nonprofit National Main Street Center, Inc., a subsidiary of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. (National Main Street Center- About Us 2020)

A community’s membership in the program involves a detailed application, site-visits, and dues payments, which are accompanied by training and resources provided by both coordinating Main Street organizations and the National Main Street Center. The communities known as 'Main Street communities' function as local economic development entities and are oftentimes located within a city government, a chamber of commerce, business association, and occasionally as a separate nonprofit. Groups applying for designation are assessed by coordinating programs and must provide letters of support from various stakeholder groups in the community. The boards of these local organizations once designated hire a director to run the Main Street program. This position is often combined with municipal economic development staff or chambers of commerce, but is designed to involve various levels of community support and input throughout the designation process. Local communities that are accredited are provided with training, strategies, assessments, and services by coordinating Main Street offices and the NMSC to apply materials to, by, and in local communities. The materials provided to Main Street communities come with a network of support that may not be available at the local or state level. Main Street communities' common elements usually include a population (less than 50,000), community-based leadership, and a demonstrated commitment to the Main Street Approach.
The Main Street Approach

The overall methodology is a preservation-based economic development approach that is locally driven. Main Street America (The Program 2020) says what distinguishes the program is “the unique combination of grassroots dedication to comprehensively improving quality of life at the local level, integral support and expertise provided by Coordinating Programs at the city, county, and state level, and leadership and direction from the National Main Street Center (NMSC).” The use of The Main Street Four-Point Approach™ focuses on four main concepts based on feedback from community directors of the 1977 Main Street Project test programs (Esen 2006). The foundations of the Approach are Economic revitalization, Organization, Promotion, and Design (Robertson 2003, 17; The National Main Street Center 2020).

**ECONOMIC VITALITY** focuses on capital, incentives, and other economic and financial tools to assist new and existing businesses, catalyze property development, and create a supportive environment for entrepreneurs and innovators that drive local economies.

**DESIGN** supports a community’s transformation by enhancing the physical and visual assets that set the commercial district apart.

**PROMOTION** positions the downtown or commercial district as the center of the community and hub of economic activity, while creating a positive image that showcases a community’s unique characteristics.

**ORGANIZATION** involves creating a strong foundation for a sustainable revitalization effort, including cultivating partnerships, community involvement, and resources for the district.

(The National Main Street Center - The Approach 2020)

These four points are the core of the Main Street program. Economic Vitality activities, for example, include things like organizing local business meetings, coordinating workshops for community members on new grants or loan programs, and helping coach small businesses. An example of a Design-based action would be to work with local stakeholders and government
officials to ensure that downtown lighting fits with an overall downtown aesthetic and improves safety, and walkability, and highlights places of local significance. Promotion often includes adding signs around the community to guide consumers into downtown spaces or using social media to promote local businesses and events. The organization activities are primarily concerned with building stronger resource networks such as introducing banks at local business meetings, or speaking with state tourism departments about local efforts, or facilitating partnerships between local nonprofits and local businesses. One example of the Main Street organizational structure using the Approach above is illustrated in Figure 5.1. Figure 5.1 shows four committees, one for each point, composed of local stakeholder volunteers that report to a local board and are assisted by a local Main Street Director but function in coordination with the other three approach-based committees.

![Figure 5.1 National to Local Main Street America Program Organizational Structure (Inspired by Esen 2006 Table 4 pg. 54)](image)

The Main Street Four-Point Approach™ is also accompanied by eight guiding principles that define the scope of local Main Street efforts. Main Street Alabama (2020-The Philosophy)
lists these as Comprehensive, Incremental, Self-help, Partnerships, Identifying and capitalizing on existing assets, Quality, Change, and Implementation. The way that local Main Street communities are connected to the National Main Street Center reveals the local benefits and networks at play in the application of the Main Street approach.

*National to Local Main Street Communities*

The National Main Street Center had 43 coordinating member programs as of 2020, mostly at the state-level, across the United States (National Main Street Center 2020- The Programs). These forty-three programs coordinate and certify local communities’ efforts to implement the 4-Point Approach throughout a designated geographic region. Figure 5.1 illustrates the relationship between the National Main Street Center and the local program volunteers. An example is Main Street Alabama's state office, which (as of 2020) coordinates twenty-eight designated Main Street communities throughout the state and twenty-one network communities (See Figure 5.2). Network communities are an additional membership level for communities that want to implement the approach or begin a revitalization process but may not qualify or have the ability to organize as a designated Main Street Community (Interview with Maria Henry 2019 and Main Street AL Network Communities 2020).

The idea behind a community's membership in the program is that after some time, due to the success of the local efforts using the Approach, a community would either (a) no longer need to continue as a Main Street certified community or (b) would need only minimal assistance from the larger coordinating program. Dues paid for memberships or accreditation are paid to

---

23 It is important to recognize that these eight principles mirror those qualities highlighted in community development assessments also found in academic literature like Flora and Flora (2008), and Green and Cafer (2019).
Main Street Coordinating programs (see Figure 5.1) and are reflective of the initial support with the hope of gradual self-sufficiency over a five to ten year period.

*Shifts in Approach and the National Main Street Center*

The program is far from perfect. The 2008 recession impacted the implementation of Main Street organizations. The reduced amounts of funding for experienced staff meant that communities were not able to fully implement the approach, as well as some communities that out-grew the need for formalized support (Copeland 2017). The reduced number of Main Street communities caused subsequent changes for the National Main Street Center (NMSC) and for the Approach itself. NMSC became a subsidiary of the NTHP in 2013 and rebranded the national program as Main Street America in 2015 (Copeland 2017; National Main Street Center 2020). In 2017, the approach itself was reviewed and updated into what the National Main Street Center termed a transformative strategy series (Copeland 2017). This was done to allow older communities the ability to reevaluate and re-implement the Four-Point Approach.

**Transformation Strategies**—generated through meaningful community engagement and informed by an analysis of the district’s market position — help to guide a revitalization program’s work. An effective Transformation Strategy serves a particular customer segment, responds to an underserved market demand, or creates a differentiated destination. (The National Main Street Center - The Approach 2020)

The update's primary benefit was the recognition that communities could and would change over time, allowing for adjustments in shifting populations, demographics, and markets. The revitalization of the program itself was an essential step towards the modernization of a forty-year-old strategy. New issues, like a global pandemic, further challenge the program, but given the benefits, like prioritized grants and supportive funding provided by Main Street
organizations, the resources of this kind of approach continue to be applicable for local communities looking for a change.

This section has covered the Main Street movement's history and illustrated how the program is designed to help grow local economic and preservation efforts. A key aspect of the program is the creation of positive community perception. In a community like Marion, where hegemonic discourses of hopelessness and political silos cultivate a social imagination of community degradation, the Main Street's Four-Point Approach becomes an appropriate tool for reframing a new civic hegemony by building a chain of equivalence between the various counter-fronts. The first step in a community’s access to the program’s resources is through the application process. The training and external support of local Main Street communities also fits within Marion's counter-fronts strategy of using primarily outside networks to bolster local counter-narratives. The Main Street approach and designation therefore is designed to provide a comprehensive strategy that in the Alabama Black Belt has been utilized almost entirely external to governmental and official political networks. This circumnavigation of traditional political avenues is entirely led and guided by respected local individuals from various counter-fronts building the necessary trust and energy that local stakeholders needed to pursue broader community change.

5.2 The Approach

The Main Street Approach is a methodology that allows communities to join together around a central goal, community revitalization, without sacrificing the various identities, fronts, and silos of participating groups. Main Street Marion's founding is the chain of equivalence moment that Mouffe (2018: 6, 24) discusses in her analysis of political change as crucial to forming a new hegemonic order. As Mouffe (2018, 46-47) distinguishes, in agreement with
Gramsci, communities have two parts: a political and a civil society. In the case of Marion, the political state has been rendered almost superfluous due to a) the lack of response to cyclical crises and b) the historical toxicity of both exclusion and power silos. Applying a Mouffean perspective, what has happened in Main Street Marion (Logo is shown in Figure 5.2) is the subsumption of the political state by the civil state via the creation of a new civic hegemony. This section explores how Main Street Marion's establishment, largely external to formal political society, has created a chain of equivalence around community revitalization.

Figure 5.2 Renaissance Marion and Main Street Marion Logo (2017)

Renaissance Marion and Main Street

Main Street Marion (MSM), designated in 2017, was the culmination of various counter-hegemonic fronts formed to circumnavigate the failures of formal political society (Thornton 2017).

24 Gramsci’s (1995) formula is the state = political society + civil society. This has been used primarily at the nation-state level. The point of Mouffe’s and Gramsci’s argument is that we shouldn’t think of the ‘state’ as something remote or removed from everyday life. Instead, the state includes what we call ‘civil society’. The struggle to win the state (and the levers of power) includes the battle between civil society groups and official political society (i.e. governmental) groups.
2017). MSM was applied for and started by an umbrella nonprofit called Renaissance Marion. The 2017 brochure (Main Street Marion 2017) states, "In addition to sharing its 501(c)3 status with Main Street Marion, Renaissance Marion provides direction and financial management for Main Street Marion and ensures accountability, best practices, and continued progress."

Renaissance Marion, Inc. was formed in 2013 (AL Secretary of State Business Records #291-611) and though biracial, was composed of a predominately upper-class group of citizens. The wealthy board members' pursuit of a solution to community deterioration illustrates that the crises of Marion affected not just the 'poor' or the marginalized of the community but was also a concern for the wealthy and those at the top of the social pyramid of Marion. This initial group suffered from a lack of urgency and diversity, missing representation in age, gender, race, and class. The board did utilize external entities like the University of Alabama to boost and validate the organization's efforts. The University individual who served on the Renaissance Marion Board spoke about the good intentions of the Renaissance Marion's initial goals.

Renaissance Marion… was put together to really look at the beautification of the town, to really think about how can we... Appear more attractive. Physically, I mean, in our space. And they were very concerned about just even driving up to Marion to the town center. It was a bit disturbing to the members, to the citizens, so as an entity that really that was their first focus. It met for a while … and it was all basically it was just a board with no executive director…So some of the local citizens decided that they wanted to hire an executive director to take them to the next level… Somebody that was not in the political office, but who could really help rally, if you will, the different groups within the community for a common purpose.

-Interview with Jan Miller, 2020

The community's visual aspects, which are illustrative of the more profound cyclical disparities, were a turning point for even the community's wealthy. The need to fix the town aesthetic, which may not have been the most pressing issue in the community's social needs, was a critical starting point for the larger movement that Renaissance Marion would grow to pursue. As listed
in state business records (#291-611), the stated purpose of the organization is, "to combat the underlying causes of community deterioration." This mission statement is illustrative of a new counter front and, though not intentional, was also one that could be used as a common banner for various factions of the community. The Renaissance Marion board, seeking aesthetic updates, then decided to pursue a course that would lead to the adoption of the Main Street Approach by hiring a young, charismatic leader.

*The Application Process*

The new executive director was young White an alum of the University of Alabama's outreach programs in Marion and was well known across the community (Main Street Marion 2017, Interview with Chris Joiner, Jan Miller). After collecting community input and researching possible solutions, the director decided that Main Street would be the appropriate tool for combating community deterioration.

So I began going around and meeting with everybody that I could beginning to just drum up and listen, listen, listen. So it became very clear that Marion did not need a specific project. Marion did not need a new specific business or for us to go recruit one industry. Marion needed a process. Marion needed a plan and a vision to move forward that could be carried on by a group of people, a mass of people, a consensus of people that could work together in different ways. People have to have a vocabulary to work together. They needed an agreed upon way they were going to do things, count things, report their progress, and that's still in development, but that's what became evident to me... So my role in Marion was not just to come in and lead for three years, but to get something started, to help develop a platform for leadership, to help gather resources for this group of leaders that we would hopefully develop over the next three years that could take this and move it forward to get a statewide support group. So we began looking at different models and we found Main Street Alabama, which is part of the Main Street America program.

-Interview with Chris Joiner, 2020

This vision was brought about only through comprehensively canvassing across various community groups to find solutions that could best bolster both Renaissance Marion's goals and
provide people, regardless of front or silo, a common 'vocabulary' to pursue the revitalization of the community. Once approved by the Renaissance Marion board, the application process began. Thanks to the preemptive leg work, it was completed much more quickly despite the application's many components.

The Main Street application process requires immense and varied community support, which formalized a 'chain of equivalence' between local businesses, other NGOs, churches, political leaders, educators, and everyday residents. To be designated, the Marion community had to show its commitment to the idea by completing the extensive application process, attending an interest meeting and visioning sessions, meeting with Main Street Alabama staff, and paying initial membership fees. This involved gaining donations from wealthy families and individuals in the community in addition to the local bank. Tracking down local records involved the support of both the county and city records, working with the City of Marion to begin an auditing process, and the additional support of the local government's elected officials. Furthermore, the community's religious leaders and pastors met with the Main Street Alabama Director to show their support for the development of Main Street Marion. All the downtown businesses, both black and White, provided letters of support for the application. Additional meetings open to the public were held to start the community visioning process, where anyone could sign up to serve on the Main Street Marion volunteer board. One older community member who had lived in the community his whole life confided to the 2017 Main Street Marion Executive Director (Holdnak and Mize 2017, Joiner), "This is the first time that I can remember that everyone from every walk of life and every corner of this community has come together around an idea." The 'idea' here is a revitalized community that allows for individual visions and various fronts but binds them in a formal commitment to pursue a community different from the
disparity and hopelessness of the past. The level of support gained by the executive director involved exercising local and external networks to build a body of proof with enough people willing to state their support. The realities of that support were tied to different visions of the community but bound around the central revitalization of Marion. In 2017, after the fastest application process in Main Street Alabama's history, Marion became the twenty-first Main Street Community in Alabama and the second in the Black Belt region (Thornton 2017). The resulting structure of the Main Street Program was set up under the umbrella of Renaissance Marion as shown in Figure 5.3 Renaissance Marion, Inc. and Main Street Alabama Relationship Figure 5.3 and Figure 5.4.
Local Government and Main Street Marion

Main Street organizations are typically located in the local government in many communities, especially in economic and community development sectors. In Marion, none of the base infrastructural entities exist and neither did the public funding opportunities. According to the Main Street Alabama Director, the initial barriers to designating Marion as a Main Street Community were “the local politics, an attitude of apathy, and that the City of Marion had no money and lacked the ability to get money at the time.” This is directly in line with Mouffé’s (2018) analysis of political conditions at the nation-state level that breed heterogeneous collectives in the form of new hegemonic fronts. Mouffé’s focus on the explicitly political aspects of society, however, can be applied in this scenario to how Main Street Marion, in both its establishment and continuation, has been able to overcome the sense of hopelessness by supplanting it with a new discourse of civic hegemony based on hope. This reached even into the processes of the ‘official’ political society. This is illustrated in the Main Street Alabama
Director’s comments above and how these realities had to be confronted in order for Main Street to be designated by both Main Street Marion Staff and City of Marion Employees, respectively.

Main Street Marion: Marion is not an organized place, so the biggest problem that we had was that Main Street programs work on public spaces alongside the city, with the city. Well, to get a grant of any size whatsoever and work on a public space, we needed the city to have an audit. The city of Marion had not had an audit for twelve years plus… so we had to get that funded, through private donations; we had to help find funds to get the audit.

City of Marion: You know, I've been here for it though. In personally in talking about Marion, when I took on this particular position, our community hadn’t had an audit in seventeen years and we all know that our audits are how we get grant funding. If you're trying to receive something from some other agency, people want to know what are your assets, what are your liabilities and who do you owe? …I was baffled, you know, for not having something of that nature, that magnitude that could highly affect our government and our people and our community. You know, so that played a very, very big role on what is happening, but we’ve done a whole lot… And like when we did do those things and we did do the audit. It made people feel better and it made them say that we were becoming more transparent. Transparency is key to let people know what's happening behind the scene. How are you spending the tax dollars and what are you doing to better our community? So that has been. I'm happy about those things and it hasn't been easy trying to achieve them.

Main Street's programs, which heavily focus on creating centralized public spaces, require governmental support. In a community with depleted resources, this kind of public support had to be created. In 2016, just six months before the Main Street designation, Marion experienced the election of the first black mayor (Hinton 2018). I would argue that this shift in Black political power in the community was a prominent effect of the new civic hegemony built along various counter-fronts. It was mirrored in Marion's designation as a Main Street community six months later. As seen from this angle, Main Street Marion was further able to
help the City of Marion and local elected officials secure private donations for a much-needed audit.

*Levels of Support in a New Chain of Equivalence*

Main Street Marion’s new chain of equivalence was built upon multiple and differing levels of participation. The official designation in June 2017 established the internal structure of Renaissance Marion according to the Four-point Approach. This involved the creation of a diverse volunteer board under the Renaissance Marion board (See Figure 5.4). This volunteer board in turn managed various committees: an economic vitality committee, a promotion committee, and a design committee each composed of different volunteer groups from across the community and chaired by a member of the MSM Volunteer board. This division of labor deriving from the national Main Street approach allows for the incorporation of community volunteers, groups, and other organizations at various levels of the Main Street structure. The initial volunteer board was cultivated very carefully to try and represent as many fronts and groups within the community as possible. Main Street Marion’s first director was extremely specific about making sure the distinctive diversity of Marion be represented in Main Street’s efforts.

We had, this was the Main Street Marion board, it was made up of Latinx people, people that were from not of the community, people of color, Black people, White people, moms, dads, young, old, business owners, retirees. It was really what I think is the strength of Main Street Marion that’s going to help it last through. And we also have a lot more diversity in Marion than most other communities in Alabama. That’s something else that we’re very proud of.

-Interview with Chris Joiner, 2020

Participation and the cultivation of civic engagement is then a better gauge of success particularly in places where cyclical disparities take decades not months to overcome. This logic then indicated that in order to achieve a new kind of democracy described by Mouffe and Laclau
you need participation. This participation has to be focused and centralized around one effort in a
chain of equivalence, but does not mean that the groups or individuals participating abandon
their original fronts and identities for the new chain of equivalence. Involvement in a chain of
equivalence is also uneven and does not require the same level of support or participation from
every member. In the case of Main Street Marion there were plenty of individuals that simply
sent a letter or came to a meeting, but had no further affiliation with the organization. Others
contributed money, time, and energy to push forward with the Main Street approach. Neither of
these would have been possible without the other, but show the unevenness and levels of support
that built a new politics outside of traditional government.

The levels of hegemonic support were built around the need to stop the community's
deterioration and formalized on paper a new informal political network very much external to
local government. Interactions between other cultivated counter-front organizations like Sowing
Seeds of Hope and local governments, though often contested, were primarily limited to the
occasional designation of funds for providing county or city services. This kind of relationship
means that the nonprofit-led fronts were primarily if not wholly external to local governments
due to the government's inability to handle both community needs and the toxic political
hegemony that previous, predominately White planter-class descendants had cultivated. To be
successful, Main Street needed to garner support for community revitalization in a way separated
from 'official' political sides but also for an approach that explicitly operates in politically
governed spaces. This complication was solved in much the same way that other locally-run
NGOs had been able to form political frontiers in the past, by both ensuring the commitment and
involvement of as many community entities as possible while at the same time delineating levels
of support and allowing those entities to remain heterogeneous under one goal.
Main Street Marion was a flag in the sand that served as proof of concept to others who also wanted to push change in the community. Organizations like Project Horseshoe Farms (PHSF) expanded into Perry County with fundraising assistance from Main Street Marion. The Marion Fellows of the PHSF program have been highlighted across the community for their work in healthcare, education, and service. The service or work days with the University of Alabama were able to be coordinated with Marion Military Institute’s Leadership Club and Judson College’s faith-based service initiatives. These groups in higher education may not always continue along the same schedules, but even sparking the conversation and bringing them out into the community to transparently communicate with everyday residents was a huge change that took place in the past ten to fifteen years. Main Street Marion board members have also partnered with Make Alabama Beautiful which provides supplies for community clean up days on Saturdays once a month regardless of student participation. Even those who have not formally shown up to participate in the community clean up events have made some efforts in their own yards and streets outside of the downtown square. These events and partnerships have accomplished many of the visual changes in the community that Renaissance Marion initially wanted, but also assisted with some of the social needs of the community. Additionally, these big and small, yet consistent efforts, have established the organization’s credibility and the social media of the organization has furthered this message. Figures 5.5-5.11 are a photographic sampling of the various projects and events that Main Street contributed to or organized in the first year after designation (2017-2018 All photos owned and taken by Martha Grace Mize).
Figure 5.5 Jazz on the Square: An Event held by the City of Marion and Main Street Marion in September 2017 on the Marion Public Square (photo by author)

Figure 5.6 Main Street Alabama Workshop by Alex Flachsbart on Tax Incentives for Local Businesses and Historic Buildings in November 2017 (photo by author)
Figure 5.7 Main Street Marion Board Members and Volunteers with Author at Christmas on the Square in December of 2017 (photo by author)

Figure 5.8 Main Street Marion Office Decorated for Christmas Light Competition for Downtown Businesses in December 2017 (photo by author)
Figure 5.9 Main Street Marion Delivery of Books from Black Belt Book Donation Drive in Fall of 2017 from Tuscaloosa Area to Perry County Schools (photo by author)

Figure 5.10 University of Alabama Black Belt Experience Students Completing A Mural in Downtown Marion Based on Community Feedback in May of 2018 (photo by author)

Figure 5.11 Main Street Marion Community Market Analysis Results Presentation May 2018 (photo by author)
Changes and Criticisms

This new chain of equivalence directly confronted the traditional hegemonic order. Main Street was by no means universally supported and there were definitive pockets of resistance to the designation. The Main Street Alabama Director commented on one of the initial interest visits to Marion that she had bumped into some community members on the street and in asking them about the proposed designation and the local efforts was met with a shockingly racist and very negative reaction about both the organizations and the director. In fact the meeting left such an impression she said she had, ‘never met more hateful people in her life…they weren’t the majority, but the lack of communication and blatant racism wasn’t just a problem in the Black Belt, but across the state. And that efforts like those in Marion had to continue despite the nay-sayers because the only people who were going to save Marion were the people of Marion themselves.’ Racism is not the only problem that Main Street Marion faced and internal problems soon arose for the organization.

The umbrella nonprofit of Main Street Marion, Renaissance Marion is a primary example of the kind of conflicts that arose in opposition to Main Street’s efforts. About two years after the Main Street designation the volunteer board merged with the Renaissance Marion board. This was a significant shift in the organization and also removed the majority of the old umbrella members (Alabama Business Records #291-611). As Main Street Marion gained strong community support tensions grew and the apathy of Renaissance Marion’s board, which often refused to meet in 2017-2018 year, hindered the volunteer board’s success. The shift that occurred through the merging of both boards, while not often publicly discussed, is shown in the Alabama State Business records of the organization (Alabama Business Records #291-611). The change in leadership and the official name change from Renaissance Marion to Main Street
Marion, Inc. was one of the more visible shifts from an older hegemonic order to a new civic hegemony power structure. The efforts of Main Street Marion and its diverse volunteers would have been impossible only years before due to the complex racial and political tensions of the town. The movement finally gained enough infrastructure, momentum, and necessary support to make an internal power change that was in many ways a consequence of the changes the community was experiencing. The new board—or more precisely many of the key individuals from the original volunteer board—have worked very hard to pursue solutions to Marion's revitalization more effectively, including hiring a new director. The time and efforts of these internal struggles with Main Street Marion in addition to the recent COVID-19 pandemic have greatly stalled the efforts of the organization. Chains of equivalence have to be maintained and the precious time that was spent on internal struggles somewhat weakened the organization’s initial levels of support. However, the internal organizational shift was not a stopping point for the momentum that the chain of equivalence was able to build within the community. New nonprofits have opened in Marion since Main Street’s designation. Love Is What Love Does grew from a local church’s ministry efforts and Breakthrough Charter School, the second rural charter school in the state is set to open in the fall of 2021.

Mouffé’s chain of equivalence and the subsequent creation of a new civic hegemonic movement involved various levels of participation. Places like Marion—with permeating and ingrained politics at every level of the community—are ideal sites where Mouffean political theory can be productively applied. This is because every citizen, from the high school students at the public school to the wealthiest descendants of plantation owners, is aware of the political implications of every effort that occurs in the community. As one resident stated, “everything is political in Marion and when things happen there is nowhere else for them to happen, but in
someone’s face.” This environment which compounded by local disparities and racism long upheld by a siloed approach, but it also meant that in supporting Main Street at least some aspect of every siloed front undertook some level of opposition to the previous hegemonic order. The level of support gained by the executive director involved exercising local and external networks to build a body of proof with enough people willing to state their support. Social media brought in new hashtags capturing this new direction under #movingmarionforward, for which various entities have claimed credit, but the sentiment remains the development of a community based on the reduction of the cyclical challenges discussed in Chapter 3. These efforts have primarily occurred through the nonprofits via a new, often biracial, civic hegemony where the actual power and politics of the community are found. These nonprofit counter hegemonic fronts are where the majority of funds, social services, economic development, and growth in the community have taken place in the past decade.

The consequences of this ‘chain of equivalence’ have normalized a new discourse in the way residents think about the community and changed the social imaginary of even local stakeholders and government. As these contemporary discourses and fronts have worked to combat the disparities, they have also pursued partnerships with external groups. These partnerships have created support and recognition outside local power networks, further building local counter-narratives. Organizations like Main Street Marion are forming a broader effort that contains multiple political frontiers to articulate a functional counter-hegemonic front into a ‘chain of equivalence’ that, while not consistently successful, is able to change the discourses of place in the pursuit of community development. New organizations formed after Marion became a Main Street community—such as Love Is What Love Does and Breakthrough Charter
School—have furthered these discourses by focusing on meeting the immediate needs of local marginalized peoples and pushing the inclusion of these peoples at 'the table.'

5.3 Success or Failure

This section looks at how the concepts of success and failure commonly used within the community development literature could be adjusted based on Mouffe’s discourse theory and the example of Main Street Marion. Success standards for community development projects attempt to be typically measured through statistical data. However, recent literature has pointed out that these statistics typically used as grant requirements are often not the best indicator of a project’s success. In sociological and community development literature, local participation and civic engagement are the cornerstones for successful development efforts. These individuals often state that whether or not the social or community goals were achieved is secondary to the levels of buy-in that the project or efforts generated in the local community. In conversation with Mouffe and Laclau, community development scholarship argues for applying critical politics and assessing local power structures to be successful.

Metrics of Success for Main Street Marion

Main Street America is an external network (in relation to Marion) with a history of enacting change through locally-driven community economic development strategies. In Marion, Main Street's externality and its focus on local agency in economic development bound internal and external networks together in opposition to regional crises. Main Street in Marion functions differently than other Main Street communities in Alabama due to the lack of resources and support structures typically available to other Main Street communities. The local community's adoption of Main Street America's methodology in Marion does not mean it will succeed in the
traditional sense of business growth or statistical data. However, Main Street Marion does illustrate the culmination of changes that have been occurring in local discourses. As illustrated in Figure 5.12, each Main Street community is required to submit economic data on a monthly basis. As of March 2021 there were $105,000 of public investment. This category is specifically counting grants and government funding which, as noted in Chapter 3 and the last section, was not possible during the organization’s formation. Private dollars are composed of donations, the value of time that has been contributed in volunteer hours, and monies raised through fundraising efforts. These numbers are illustrative of the power and support the organization has been able to harness outside of the traditional efforts. New jobs and businesses are also reflective of businesses that close and only reflect the net (opened businesses- closed businesses= net businesses). The tracking of this data is publicly available through the Main Street Marion website as well as the Main Street Alabama website. The partnerships that have produced this data have been key to the organization and community’s success in the past few years. The definition of what success looks like cannot however be measured solely through examples like those in Figure 5.12. Instead, these numbers are side-effects—or some of the measurable outcomes—of the broader hegemonic shifts that have taken place in the community in the past decade. In reviewing the community development literature it is clear that in practice the qualitative and participatory aspects are what local nonprofits value in comparison to purely quantitative models. This emphasizes the qualitative success that Main Street Marion experienced after formalizing the chain of equivalence through its revitalization efforts.
**Figure 5.12 Economic Impact Data from Main Street Marion from June 2017 to March 2021 (DiscoverMarion.org 2021)**

**Community Development and Critical Politics**

Community development strategies refer to the many methods that can be used to solve community problems. Community economic development (CED) embodies a shift within the economic development sub-discipline by mandating community members' and organizations' participation and involvement. The relationship between the two in pursuit of goals is part of what is known as “co-production.” Co-production is defined by Bovaird (2007, 847) as "…the provision of services through regular, long-term relationships between professionalized and service providers (in any sector) and service users or other members of the community, where all parties make substantial resource contributions." Co-production is not without limitations. Bovaird (2007, 856) notes the dilution of public accountability as one of the limitations of co-production strategies stating, "…that it may dilute public accountability, blurring the boundaries between, the public, private, and voluntary sectors." Bovaird notes a paradox where co-production inherently blurs the boundaries and redistributes the power amongst those involved.

Community development and civic engagement literature in articles like Green (2003) illustrate correlations to the sense of renewal and the success of now racially mixed efforts, if not in terms of economic growth, then in terms of community network engagement and tie together
the U.S. racial landscape to capitalism and thereby economic development practices on the national, state, and local levels. Further, Green’s (2003) research illustrates the advantages of extra-governmental economic development efforts in civic engagement. The other articles combined with Green (2003) illustrate correlations to the sense of renewal and the success of now racially mixed efforts that an organization like Main Street Marion has achieved, if not in terms of economic growth, then in terms of community network engagement. The involvement of diverse community members allows for the most collective say in the production of development; however, this also can lead to power stalemates and lengthy timeframes. The Community Development Society (2020) provides current best practices that account for some of these concerns. As shown in Figure 5.13, these principles illustrate a considerable shift in the expectations for development professionals and call for the field to be more inclusive.

**Principles of Good Practice**

As a part of the CDS beliefs, the organization follows the core Principles of Good Practice:

- Promote active and representative participation toward enabling all community members to meaningfully influence the decisions that affect their lives.
- Engage community members in learning about and understanding community issues, and the economic, social, environmental, political, psychological, and other impacts associated with alternative courses of action.
- Incorporate the diverse interests and cultures of the community in the community development process; and disengage from support of any effort that is likely to adversely affect the disadvantaged members of a community.
- Work actively to enhance the leadership capacity of community members, leaders, and groups within the community.
- Be open to using the full range of action strategies to work toward the long-term sustainability and well-being of the community.

**Figure 5.13 Principles of Good Practice from the Community Development Society 2020**

The attempt and growth of coproduction’s importance in the field of community development were noted by development anthropologist Robyn Eversole (2012) in her article
Remaking Participation: Challenges for Community Development Practice. Eversole understands that the difference between rhetoric and reality is often vast. The theory is useful but faces many challenges in application. The professionals' and communities' ability to perform coproduction relies on trust, humility, and open flexibility, which is difficult to achieve in the best community circles. The three main challenges Eversole (2012) addressed were the control of knowledge, the outsider and insider game of institutions, and finally, the remaking of participation. The problem of participation, according to Eversole (2012, 37), is that the professionals should recognize themselves as participants, "who are comfortable in circles of both the powerful and the powerless, and who are able to facilitate the journeys of both." This is a powerful position that requires humility, and like CBPR undertaken by Muhammad (2015), it comes with a mandate of self-reflective recognition.

Those development professionals who work with-and-in communities (at the ‘coalface’) may feel this chasm in their own voice: when they apologize yet again to their fellow community members (‘I’m sorry, we just have to do it this way’), and equally, when they try to explain to professional colleagues (‘But no one in the community will want to do it that way!’).

Eversole recognizes that the literature seems to write about the professionals primarily; however, if those in this situation are viewed as community leaders, then the problems are just as common between the professionals as they are in the communities. de Hann, Meier, Haartsen, and Strijker (2017) note the professionals' perception of community involvement their discussion of professional-participant focus groups on rural Dutch citizen initiatives in their article Defining 'Success' of local citizens' Initiatives in Maintaining Public Services in Rural Areas: A Professional's Perspective. de Hann, Meier, Haartsen, and Strijker (2017, 313) term citizen's initiatives as "projects in which citizens take the initiative to actively achieve a specific goal together…" and specifically delineated this form of projects from government participation. The
community professionals were less concerned with the project's success and more focused on the side-effects like "...constructing a sense of community and social learning" (2017, 326). It was also important to note that the professionals stressed that citizens and not governments should be in charge of initiatives throughout the process. This perspective speaks to the way that development professionals perceive community involvement on the local level. The importance of participation in these kinds of projects regardless of their success was valued above all.

The importance of collaborative participation within community economic development reflects applying the "critical politics" approach to community development based on Mouffe and other scholars. The interaction of these two fields is evident in Main Street Marion's efforts to bind various counter-hegemonic fronts together under a common community-led goal of revitalization. The community development scholarship advocates for understanding sociopolitical dynamics in communities, mapping power networks, and studying how they slowly or more rapidly change in response to external resources and actors (like Main Street America). The point here is not that scholars should not focus on metrics like poverty, income, and health care. Instead, these also require a more rigorous sociopolitical study of the existing social groups, power blocs, and dominant hegemonic fronts to be successful.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to illustrate the 'chain of equivalence' built via Main Street Marion's formation in Perry County. The National Main Street America program focuses on revitalization that organizes various community groups under a common banner. In Marion, the MSA program became the formalization of various counter-hegemonic efforts under the common goal of revitalization in opposition to local crises. The measures of success and subsequent shifts that occurred further reveal that the 'chain of equivalence' gained multiple
levels of participation and successfully established a new internal dominant group. These changes that occurred through Main Street Marion indicate the application of Laclau and Mouffe's critical politics within community economic development to combat a local state of crises. The establishment of a new civic hegemony through the revitalization efforts also brought a shift in individual (micro discourses), organizational groups (discourses), and the community's broader social imaginary.
Chapter 6 “Yes, I Do See Progress”

Throughout the community's living memory Perry County has had an incredibly strained and complicated political atmosphere. The silos of power that resulted from such an environment—and the local community's almost universal awareness of such toxicity—enabled the formation of grassroots entities. These entities attempted to circumnavigate the political barriers through sectors deemed locally to be apolitical. These grassroots NGOs generated various counter-fronts in Marion, developed primarily over the past twenty years, which have sought to rally residents against challenges that official political networks have failed to resolve. As discussed in Chapter 5, the formalization of a 'chain of equivalence' around Main Street Marion bound various counter-fronts together to pursue revitalization efforts. The centralization of these new civic goals via Main Street Marion's establishment subsequently resulted in new community-identity and hope-based discourses. This chapter examines this new civic hegemony's implications beyond Main Street Marion by focusing on the community's shifting discourse.

This chapter argues that these grassroots NGOs' success—inspired by Main Street Marion—derives from being flexible, collaborative, and creative in ways that local government and formal political groups could not. Local changes in discourse have occurred among individuals (micro-discourses), within various counter-front groups (community discourses), and is pressing across social boundaries to imagine a new community future (the social imaginary). The disarticulation of these ‘traditional’ discourses has allowed the community to be creative in new ways as seen in the recent uptick of local nonprofits. Charles Taylor's (2004, 23) concept of
modern social imaginaries will be critical to understanding these discourse shifts' important implications. Taylor defines the social imaginary as "...the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations." Social imaginaries encompass shared understanding of values, practices, and interpretive frameworks, which orient groups based on place-based projections about the future grounded in a historically situated context (Taylor 2004; Mendoza et al. 2017).

A vital portion of the social imaginary is a place-based future narrative embodied through local collective actions and efforts. Despite the pandemic of 2020-2021, various political fronts are still actively pursuing collaborative projects between local government, NGOs, churches, and schools. Additionally, groups external to Perry County have commented on the growth and achievements of local tourism efforts, grants, and partnerships, further validating these local changes. These changes have not erased local power silos or eliminated the cyclical challenges that the community faces. However, they demonstrate that the new civic hegemony exists—initially formalized through Main Street Marion's designation—and has extended itself to encompass broader revitalization efforts within the community. The rise of this new civic hegemony has begun to supplant some of the 'traditional' challenges covered in Chapter 3, and the evident discourse shifts have expounded upon the changes brought forth in the establishment of Main Street Marion.

6.1 Supplanting the ‘Traditional’

Mouffe's theoretical framework applied to the case of Main Street's designation was the envelopment of the political society and civil society into the creation of a new civic hegemony (2018, 47). Mouffe (2018, 44) states that "The objective of the hegemonic struggle consists in
disarticulating the sedimented practices of an existing formation and, through the transformation of these practices and the instauration of new ones, establishing the nodal points of a new hegemonic social formation." Mouffe discusses how right-wing and left-wing political movements are often broken down by apathy; this applies to how Marion residents circumnavigated toxic political fields. A new heterogeneous group, bonded over equivalences between struggles and actionable goals, can work to supplant the previous hegemonic order. Disarticulation occurs when multiple groups coalesce around a political goal supported and legitimized by existing social norms. The fading prevalence of racial division and the acceptance of biracial grassroots efforts is one of the primary examples of Marion's disarticulation of the 'traditional.' This new civic hegemony upholds and valorizes the history of leadership, education, and racial equality—associated with the civil rights era—with which much of the community identifies. The strong civil rights history of the Black Belt region further reinforces the rise of a new civic hegemony by embedding this progress in understandings of local heritage. Mouffe's theory is primarily developed to analyze formal political environments related to liberal democracy, focusing on populism (Laclau and Mouffe 2001; Mouffe 2018). This thesis applies the Mouffean political framework to local civic politics—in this Alabama Black Belt setting—to explain sociopolitical changes and the deconstruction of the 'traditional.'

Local politics and elected officials' toxicity forced a social change in Marion to occur outside the 'traditional.' The creation of a new hegemony arose through local nonprofits' substantial efforts that were recognized across different community groups. All people interviewed for this research were asked, "How have you seen Alabama Black Belt communities responding to the conditions of cyclical poverty, depopulation, and differential access to resources?" Some responses were framed from a ‘traditional’ point of view, saying, 'In some
ways, they have not responded.' Others were framed from a new hegemonic and social imaginary perspective that articulated the rising cultural change of the past decade in the community. One White local educator’s response best illustrates the relocation of these efforts outside governmental or elected entities and into grassroots community-based nonprofits.

I think you see community efforts that are coming out of local nonprofits that are really working to help make a difference and to connect people to resources and opportunities. I think that's what's powerful. And I think especially seeing local people head those up. …It's people that are local here, that are from here, that have a vested interest here or plan on living here for years to come that are saying, 'you know, we want to make sure our community is something we take pride in and continues to develop. So how do we do that?' And it's through, you know, nonprofits and through these kind of things coming together and finding ways to connect people to resources. And that's been I think for me, that's what's really powerful to see. And what I think will make a difference in the long run is seeing people again that are not even elected... leaders, that I mean leaders in all the traditional terms of a leader that might not have the title, but put in the work through their different organizations and the community efforts to, again, just connect people to opportunities and resources that can come into the area and make a difference.

-Interview with Daniel Rolland, 2020

This quote illustrates that not only have locals seen changes, but those changes are attributed to leaders outside of the government. This is not to say that changes have not been occurring in Marion’s political environment, but rather that these efforts are not organic to that aspect of the community. Nonprofits in the community are viewed as being primarily apolitical and work specifically to address many of the needs that, in less rural or impoverished communities, would typically be provided by local governments. These services actively work to displace the cyclical challenges and discourses of disparity the community has been experiencing. These efforts also contribute to a new discourse of social empowerment and potential despite Marion’s continued struggles.
Racial Reformation

A crucial part of Mouffe's theory to coordinating social change is centered on disarticulating old hegemonic fronts, which occurs through changes in the hegemonic discourses. One barrier to this change in Marion has stemmed from the community silos and the side-effects of continued cyclical disparity leading to discourses centered on hopelessness. Local pastors, in particular, spoke passionately about the effort necessary to both validate the struggles of the past but encourage discourses of a more hopeful future.

Also, I think one of the other really more material, but I think more palpable challenges is how people overcome that sense of despair because they have seen it. The demographics of the area from the 1970s to now, over two thirds of the population of Perry County is gone, no longer here. And so you just imagine taking a community and removing two thirds of its people, and therefore two thirds of its resources, gets to be pretty overwhelming and depressing and that sort of thing. And so helping people overcome that sense of, well, we're on a downhill slide and there's no other choice. That's just where we're going to be and that's where it's going to go. But helping them to see that no, there is a way to sustain and move and begin to move forward. No, it's not going to be what it was in the 1950s or 1960s. It's going to be different. But it can be good. It could be different in a wonderful way if we worked together at it. And so overcoming that, some of that internal despair and reinvigorating some sense of hope has really been a challenge. But again, it's something that is happening. And I do believe that we're seeing some of the effects of that.

-Interview with Joe Nelson, 2020

This speaks primarily to the aging population that has experienced the community's decline. Evidence of these discourse shifts in actual social situations is happening at multiple levels, especially in local churches. The religious community both inside and outside Marion, which has also had to deal with the problematic racial barriers, has worked to help initiate these discourse changes through mission work and collaboration.

The pastors of Marion served as a point of power outside the political environment, arguably inside it as well, long before the civil rights movement. The role of religion in the region further illustrates religious institutions' power in the community (Chapter 3).
past decade pastors from a handful of the larger churches across the community, both black and 
White, have formed a committee that keeps in touch at least once a month. This realm's 
collaboration element has led to increased exposure and discourse shifts for even the most 
segregated parishioners. The local historically White Baptist church, which has been a fixture in 
the town since before the establishment of Judson College, is one of the places where these 
changes in racial barriers are being experienced. This church pastor spoke mainly about the 
connections between changes that are happening racially and politically as signs of hope for the 
community.

There are signs of hope and that there are some really wonderful places where 
what have been seemingly intractable boundaries of division are beginning to be 
melted, begin to be moved, and the opportunities to work together towards 
common, good and common places. And just to take our church as a further 
microcosm of that. We've got a number of African-American members who've 
joined us in the last five years and not because we necessarily sought them out. 
They sought us out. And they have been tremendous assets and tremendous gifts, 
really to our church family. And I believe particularly a couple of ladies that have 
been on this and they understand their role as being bridge builders. They 
understand that they are playing a unique role. They get incredible pushback from 
the African-American community for having dared to come and be a part of the 
Anglo Church here. But so it's those kinds of things where there's renewed 
boldness and receptivity on either side. Certainly racially, but also politically. I 
think those political divides are going to continue. But I do sense a shift in the 
winds for them. So all that said, my hope for the future is... is that there'll be 
increasing unity and an increased sense of comm-unity that we're in this together. 
We may have different opinions about where things should go, but this is where 
we live. This is our place. And so we need to make it as good as we possibly can. 
-Interview with Joe Nelson, 2020

Nelson has not indicated that the community is unified—rather that these small shifts are an 
indicator of hope for the future. Marion residents still often self-segregate, sometimes quite 
noticeably at local restaurants and events; nonetheless, the power of both invitations and 
membership outside of previously strict racial segregation is a step outside of older hegemonic 
norms. One black community member also pointed out that now biracial attendance at worship
on Sundays, while rare, is no longer such a shocking experience that it stops the Sunday services. These changes in discourse within the church towards biracial efforts are crucial in disarticulating the 'traditional' and supplanting it with a new discourse of hope for the future. In a place like Marion, these statements represent the reduction of racial barriers and a new opening for collaboration in ways that historically would not have been possible prior to the present moment. The historical racial barriers often meant that support for local counter-hegemonic efforts divided along racial, political, and organizational lines. The progress made racially in the churches is only one example of this shift.

The disarticulation of these ‘traditional’ discourses has allowed the community to be creative in new ways and pursue revitalization under the adoption of a new civic hegemony. Mouffé’s political theory champions radical democracy as the central political goal. In Marion, revitalization has been the nodal point that various groups have rallied around in a ‘chain of equivalence’ due to the shifts in discourses that supplant the ‘traditional’ despite differences in organizations and group affiliations. It is a revitalization of the community due to discourse shifts at the racial, political, economic, and religious levels that have allowed the community to imagine an actionable future built on unity. This new social imaginary is based on the ongoing aggregation of these small shifts that community members have experienced. One Black local nonprofit director often speaks explicitly on this imagined future.

I use in my messages often when you look at two words that [are] often used, but sometimes are under defined, you look at *opportunity* and you look at *community*, both of them end in *unity* and if you don't put those two together? You don't get the unity within you... within the Black Belt, within where you serving, to really strengthening where you are. And if you not strengthening and where you are, then ultimately you miss the point of being where you are.

-Interview with Emma Brown, 2019
This message has formed much of the rationalization behind the revitalization movement in Perry County. The point of being in a place that has had such disparity and faced such barriers, according to this ethos, is the creation of a new unity by strengthening where you are. This mission statement for the revitalization movement in Perry County fits with the racialized past and pushes for a new rationalization of the future to be better. The revitalization has only been possible through supplanting the traditional with alternate discourses of unity, inclusion, and collaboration. This section has worked to illustrate not only that these efforts have occurred outside of traditional governmental avenues but have also made progress against the ingrained racial barriers found in Marion. These shifts in local hegemonic discourses have originated in the nonprofits that have best been able to connect people in the community and, in the process, revitalize place.

6.2 Valuing the Attempts via the Components

Revitalization is a central node through which a new civic hegemony and collective discourses have been built. As Mouffe (2018) argues, a new hegemonic discourse can only be successful by adapting to changing crises and perspectives, involving and respecting various groups' participation in the central goal, and being built upon solutions. These are the critical accomplishments started by various nonprofits in Marion, which came to fruition in Main Street Marion's designation. The organizations' successes originated from being flexible, collaborative, and creative in ways that local government and formal political groups could not. As part of the ethnographic study, two of the first questions asked were: 'What needs do you see in the community?'; and 'Are those needs being met and by whom?' The answers revealed the organizations or groups responsible for recent changes and the methods through which their success should be or had been accomplished.
Flexibility

Flexibility within hegemonic discourse is the ability for new or establishing logics to encompass and adapt to changing community visions through a central goal. One of the newer nonprofits that formed after Main Street Marion is Love Is What Love Does. Love Is What Love Does is an organization that focuses on meeting the immediate needs of community members so that more systemic issues can then be discussed with and by those who would most benefit from community improvements. The organization engages in food distribution, clean-up days, jail outreach work, and other efforts that fulfill local needs as they arise. Another local nonprofit director who serves Perry County and has worked closely with organizations in surrounding counties felt strongly that the flexibility and adaptation would be key for further growth in the region.

I really hope that it becomes more unified. I also hope that the older generation becomes a little bit more receptive of younger generations’ innovation, because I think that in order to continue to be of quality service to the community, you have to grow with the community. And I think that a lot of organizations have old standards or foundations. And I think that they need to be, you know, re-tweaked or revamped to meet the needs of today's community. And so I hope to see growth in that area in the future. And I am seeing it in some areas of the Black Belt.

-Interview with Louise Lackey, 2020

This quote speaks to older generations and those in the community that have continued to pursue solutions that may have been effective twenty to thirty years ago but no longer work in present conditions and current community needs. In the pursuit of revitalization, a new civic hegemony needs to ensure that the movement can adapt to new needs without losing sight of revitalization as a goal. A specific example shared from a neighboring county was that of another organization that wanted to start a homeless outreach but had failed to ask the local homeless population what would best suit their needs. Newer organizations, like Love is What Love Does, have specifically
tried to break down local assumptions of needs and collaboratively work to form networks of support that can more sustainably serve marginalized groups.

One long-time resident, when asked about what has success looked like in the community, responded with an illustration of this kind of flexibility. Through collaborative efforts with groups across the community, Main Street was able to help in the acquisition of three new garbage trucks for the City of Marion.

For the Community. I would have to say. The ability to get everybody... like at this point we have Main Street. It's come to Marion. Which is now trying to revitalize the community and make Marion one of the, like I said, make it grow like it was in the early in the 80s. From the 60s to the 80s. I couldn't believe they said that the weekend that the streets used to be packed... [laughter]... that they used to be wall to wall. And slowly, they've been trying to get everybody to come together and just revitalized community. A recent project in which everyone was complaining about the lack of garbage trucks. So the community got together and funded and they were able to provide ... I want to say those three new garbage trucks they ended up bringing back to the community. And talk about the Little League program. It had been gone for about. Five, six years. And I guess about five years ago, everybody started to get together and got it back. To make that fun. It’s get kids things for a kids to do. Jeffrey Tubbs has a football program for the kids that he's been trying to get together, so it's finding things for the kids to do… to utilize their time.

-Interview with Brandon Tucker, 2020

From Little League to the garbage trucks, these kinds of projects, while not necessarily specific to Main Street's typical programmatic focus on downtown or even specific to Main Street’s individual efforts, were able to adapt to the community's needs and uphold the broader goal of revitalization through collaborative efforts with other organizations. To be successfully flexible to the community's changing needs, other aspects of this new civic hegemony have to be maintained. In this case, collaboration also proved to be a key element in the project's success. Therefore, it further reinforced revitalization as a goal that binds not just the Main Street supporters but also various community groups.
Collaboration

Collaboration requires that multiple entities with differing views, missions, and values can pull together for a common goal. In order to be successful in developing a new hegemonic order, collaboration needs to occur at two levels. The first is on this broader multi-front level more horizontally across various groups and organizations. This has been one of the most challenging components of a new hegemonic discourse for local organizations in Marion to pull together. Local nonprofits have repeatedly stated that silos, especially in the Marion community, have been one of their primary barriers to success. The second kind of collaboration that has also caused some initial difficulty for local nonprofits has been internal levels of vertical collaboration across class, race, and age divides. Vertical collaborations internal to each of these organizations have required the foundational levels of diversity to begin the pursuit of these larger goals. This kind of collaboration can be difficult for many of the more privileged groups in Marion, where silos often mean that risking resources in new ways requires a proof-of-concept. This hesitation can be frustrating, if not insulting, for organizations and community members who experience basic needs for running water, electricity, and food that privileged groups, both internal and external, have never experienced. In pursuit of revitalization, the goal has involved many different levels of the community coming together to accomplish projects under the banner of revitalization. For example, Main Street’s establishment meant wealthier community members had to be convinced of the approach in order to provide initial funds, busy parents commuting out-of-town for work made time to volunteer, and even those residents that wandered downtown kept an eye out for tools accidentally left out after clean up days. This kind of distinct internal collaboration is made more difficult by local silos that lack adequate resources, requiring vast amounts of time to coordinate. New nonprofits, in particular, often struggle to navigate the
vertical and horizontal networks simultaneously, but once initial connections are established, it has sparked some of these organizations’ proudest moments.

An additional layer to this collaborative structure has been the presence of external entities. Local organizations and community members have expressed overwhelming gratitude to these external groups for boosting local resources, but it also comes with drawbacks. One of the residents who moved to Marion about ten years ago talked out the external groups that he had seen come into the community over the past decade.

It is so common for groups from outside to come in. At one point, they were missionary groups coming in almost every week, every month, sometimes overlapping constantly. And as that died down, I mean, it was very obvious. And a lot of people said, these groups are great. We love them coming in. They help our economy. But sometimes they come in and they do something that they might not finish or they come in and they don't... they don't do what was actually maybe needed by the community. But the community is not going to say, hey, stop or you didn't give us what we wanted. It's very fine line. So it's a complicated situation and they're not bad people or anything. It's just there needs to be an interpreter, right.

-Interview with Charles Johnson, 2020

External entities have certainly helped to fill the gaps in local collaboration struggles despite the drawbacks of their contributions. As this quote reveals, the scarce resources meant that local community members were positioned in such a context that such assistance could not be refused. On the other hand, overwhelming gratitude for the opportunity to have worked together was expressed equally by groups and organizations, both internal and external to Marion.

The drawbacks have developed specific visions of how these kinds of external collaborations should be approached in Marion. As new people have moved to the community, they have further added to the energy and hope that allowed some collaboration to occur and been guided by the interpreters that are often locally known as ‘truth-tellers’ (Interviews with Charles Johnson and Kristie Evans). One White resident working in Perry County for the past
few years was able to illuminate how crucial these external partnerships were and how he had seen them be most successful.

And I think in general, if people ever want to be successful in the Black Belt, in every county or anywhere, they need to be able to identify stakeholders that are making these differences that are usually local to the community and figure out how, you know, we can partner and work together. So, yeah, that's kind of it. I definitely think there are things that are being done. I definitely think Breakthrough [Charter School] is going to add to that. But I don't think that I'm the answer to these problems or you know... I'm just playing a part to help improve this community that I now consider to be my home.

- Interview with Daniel Rolland, 2020

Many times newcomers to the community are where these four-way collaborations become most visible. New residents are less embedded in local silos and have the vitality and energy that long-term residents can sometimes lack. Additionally, experiences outside of Perry County bring new perspectives and approaches into the mix of efforts pushing towards revitalization. These collaborations have formed a backbone for local nonprofits, primarily a blend of newer residents and long-term residents.

Even local political spheres have started responding to the strengthened influence of horizontal, vertical, internal, and external collaborations, all upholding a new hegemonic order. The way different groups now discuss each other, often with excitement, is evidence of a new civic hegemony beginning to integrate previously siloed resources. As one City of Marion employee discussed the need to work with all these various groups because all together, these entities make up the people local government serves.
And I say, what better way to do it than the people do with people who really have a passion for people who want to work with others, because you can't do it without working with other people, with other leadership, be it local, state or county government, federal government. You have to work with other people and you have to be able to also work with other agencies. There are going to be nonprofits that come into your area. You have to be able to work with these groups because that's what their voices are a positive aspect for the community. And they represent portions of your community, if not all of your community as well. So we have to be able to work with them. And I feel like once you work with those people, those leaders, those nonprofit, most importantly, citizens in the schools, that's your community.

-Interview with Lucy Hammond, 2019

The importance of local nonprofits stands out in Hammond's discussion of different groups in the community. Strained political relationships have continued, but there is hope for changes in the political sphere. These kinds of statements are beginning to be acted upon in collaboration with trusted local nonprofits. Despite a year of pandemic conditions, this growing interconnected network is still actively pursuing collaborative projects between local government, NGOs, churches, and schools. This new level of connection has sought to overcome the region's insufficient resources by utilizing new partnerships to uphold a more collaborative vision for the community's future.

Creativity

Building a durable hegemony requires creative alternatives to negative barriers. Efforts to circumnavigate silos towards constructive solutions have succeeded and failed at various levels of the community. A professor and local outreach coordinator for one of the local post-secondary schools spoke about how the changes in the past five years have highlighted that creativity.
I think I'm always amazed at how creative and innovative our community members are. And I think just the development of over four or five years...Main Street came into existence and other small local nonprofits are sprouting up in different areas. And so I think for me what I see, what I already knew about the community was that community members want to come together for the common good. And that's only been evident to me from like being here, is that seeing people want to form organizations or form platforms for people to come together as a community to initiate change.

-Interview with Amanda Benson, 2020

This quote illustrates that part of that creativity has been in the form of collaboration because, as demonstrated throughout this thesis, working together has been one of the most complex parts of building a new hegemonic discourse. Other community members have seen creativity in the adaptations of local businesses and entrepreneurs. Teens at the local high school are a constant inspiration as they continually develop new side jobs to make money. The resourcefulness and creativity of the people in Marion is something that has only been highlighted by the cyclical crises the community was already facing and by the recent pandemic. Local nonprofits have especially needed to creatively solve various issues during the pandemic and recent impacts of Hurricane Zeta.

A Tuscaloosa church's pastor, which partners with several local nonprofits in Perry County, spoke about the creativity of the Perry County school system and the supplemental support of local nonprofits for remote education in such a rural place.

What the school system did was to convert all of its school buses and put Wi-Fi into all of their school buses, and then they drove them out to different places and parents, this is assuming they had time during the day, but could then drive their child to park next to the school bus. The Wi-Fi was strong enough that the child, if they had a phone or a laptop or whatever, could then do work, could connect with the school in the car. Sowing Seeds of Hope, which also has computers, it expanded its Wi-Fi, and opened up trying to create safe spaces and had two of the workers, one is an employee, another is a volunteer to coordinate that too.

-Interview with Lydia Smith, 2021
Smith was impressed by the local creativity and has helped funnel resources towards local partnerships. The county's internet service, which has abysmal coverage outside Marion's main thoroughfares, was brought up repeatedly in interviews. The local school system was able to take advantage of the minimal existing resources, the school buses, and coordinate an effort to provide internet in a county with limited broad-band in many locations. Lack of technological assistance for the region meant that these new collaborative networks needed to adapt in new ways in the face of a socially-distanced school year. Significant in Smith's statement is the recognition of these efforts by groups external to Marion, and the communication of these kinds of adaptations as one of Marion's growing strengths.

Flexibility, collaboration, and creativity have been critical to the cultivation of a new hegemonic discourse in Marion. These efforts have not always been successful, but even when these efforts failed, connections and networks of new discourses were built across community groups. The examples in this section have attempted to illustrate how a new civic hegemony is becoming embedded in Marion’s community practices. Led primarily by local nonprofits, all of these projects and efforts have held a common revitalization thread. Circumnavigating silos and local power structures, incorporating multiple community input and support levels, and creatively utilizing community assets in new ways have been developed out of this new social imaginary.

6.3 Cautiously Hopeful Futures

The discourse changes become even more visible in the way community members discuss Marion's future. The focus of the micro-discourses that were collected shifted from failures and struggles to growth, assets, and attempts. The way residents conceptualize and imagine the future in interviews commonly used words like 'hope' and 'progress'. Mouffe
specifically covers how emotions are essential to the kinds of mobilizations necessary for new hegemonic movements. Mouffe (2018, 76) states, "To resonate with the problems people encounter in their daily lives, it needs to start from where they are and how they feel, offering them a vision of the future that gives them hope, instead of remaining in the register of denunciation." Mouffe's point is that the rallying discourses must emotionally resonate with people, using affective politics to articulate solutions that envision a future new community.

Individual micro-discourses articulated different hopeful descriptions of the future. In responding to, 'What do you hope Marion or the Black Belt becomes in the future?' and 'what makes you think that?' one local nonprofit director brought up the conscious difference between reality and hope. She did this by replying with her question, "Now, in that question, are you asking where I want it to go or where do I see it going?" The only individual out of twenty-five to question whether what she hoped for the future was realistic came from a person at the very heart of local grassroots efforts. The recognition of separating out reality from imagination points out a conscientious awareness and separation between the discourses that have shifted, and the reality of the community’s challenges. This recognition did not hinder the individual’s willingness to dream big in terms of hopes for the community's future.

And I think that let me just say my vision, the vision that I have or vision that I see for Perry County, I would love a Perry County to be is that I would like for us to have a thriving community where we have where there are jobs and people can work at home. It would be a safe environment that we would have, and there would be opportunities for our children to be well educated. They [the children] would have an opportunity to learn and to learn in an environment that it challenges them, not just the environment that they meet the goal or meeting the expectations, but they are able to exceed those expectations. They're able to be creative and to be exposed to things so that they will they will know that the sky is the limit that they can dream and that they can dream of doing good things and that. So I'd like for that to be the goal that we have.

- Interview with Florrie Foster, 2021
The qualifying question to this statement means that this individual is keenly aware of the effort behind achieving this vision. This individual's perspective was that all that hope was going to take a lot more collaboration and coordination than the community might possess, but that she hoped that the place could ultimately be a home for people. Foster’s imagined reality was one where unity created an environment where the challenges to educational achievement faded.

Collaboration has occurred in the community though it has been a big challenge even between local nonprofits and volunteers. One of the younger community members who moved to Marion for a year-long fellowship with a local nonprofit was able to see the changing discourse in action, which made him hopeful for Marion's future.

I do think it takes a town to get behind any idea. And if you can’t, you know, share your pain and your joys with these individuals who we know so well, then we can't really buy into a system together and push the city forward push the town for it... I am hopeful because I've seen. David [with Main Street Marion] really the market and reach out to individual on all platforms and bring them together, which is definitely needed, there should always be people in the room who all have something to gain or lose as far as pushing the city forward. So we'll see what happens. I'm actually. Pretty hopeful, I mean, I'm pretty hopeful that in five years, Marion will be in a better place than it is now or ten years down the road. I'm not sure how that's going to happen. I just know that the people are really hard working.

-Interview with Zack Carter, 2020

This quote illustrates how the combination of reality and hope has bred a newly imagined future through the efforts of local nonprofits. “David” Barnes is one of Main Street Marion's board members that has talked explicitly to other community members about Marion's potential. This has been a conversation that Barnes has carried out many times with various community groups. In one particular instance, a man looking to fix up a building to create a rental space was talking about the building's dismal conditions and of the town more generally. Barnes stopped him and asked him who would rent his building if he (the owner) did not believe it was worth renting? This conversation is how the broader discourse shift has changed in Marion. As one employee at
the University of Alabama stated, "…But there is a real there's... they are amazing people, first of all. And there is a desire to be more than perhaps they are that is often maybe not tapped into."

Groups like Main Street and the growing number of local nonprofits are the primary agents cultivating the belief that Marion could achieve or perhaps be more than what the community is currently.

The establishment of Main Street Marion, and the success of its application to be designated by Main Street Alabama, is due in large part to a stack of support letters from a variety of community representatives. The Main Street Marion board president at the time stated in the Main Street Marion Fall 2018 Newsletter, “We want to take collective ideas and first build up the residents we have who are interested in investing in their community, and then we’ll try to encourage other businesses, even outside ones, to invest in our community” (Main Street Marion Board 2018). The idea of creating a collective brand in order to engage in productive economic development connects directly to the notion of the social imaginary (Taylor 2004; Mendoza et al. 2017).

The strength of the community is the centerpiece of the revitalization and new civic hegemonic strategy. Local business owners are a group in the community that has much to lose or gain from the revitalization process. Main Street's focus downtown has left some businesses out and is not as comprehensive throughout all corners of the community. This was corrected in some ways at the end of the 2018 Marketing Survey when it became clear that in the imagination of some five hundred residents, downtown was not confined to the square but referenced the entire town because of its rural location. The ability—based on this feedback—for Main Street to work with even more people only furthered the revitalization discourses. Local business owners were a crucial part of this change by promoting various events and projects, as well as their
attendance at local business meetings. As the people who have needed to invest in their businesses and the community to succeed, their buy-in towards revitalization is the key. One local business owner captured the town's new social imaginary.

In the future, I think everything is going to blossom. Be honest with you, with the, with the proper resources I think it's gonna really grow and if we're able to capitalize on the assets that we have to use.

-Interview with Brandon Tucker, 2020

Marion’s new social imaginary is grown from the hope and revitalization efforts that Tucker expresses here. To “capitalize on the assets” of the community will require the collaboration, flexibility, and creativity that Marion has demonstrated through locally shifting discourses and revitalization efforts. The hope for the future has been accepted, cautiously, as the social imaginary because of these small shifts that have demonstrated that it can become a reality. It may not happen tomorrow, but there is recognition, as Tucker illustrates, that a future of hope is possible.

6.4 Place-Identity and Civic Hegemony

The validation of local efforts by outside groups only further reinforces the new civic hegemony's establishment in the community. A church leader from Tuscaloosa spoke about the success she had seen in Marion through working in partnership with local non-profits.

What I see in my experience with Sowing Seeds of Hope and CHOICE is that when there is a local person with a passion connection in the community and a drive to make things better, then it will work. I see that in the person of Francis Ford and Emefa Butler, they are collaborative people. They're able to engage and to encourage others. And when there is a person like that in a community of very few resources. Then things do happen.

-Interview with Lydia Smith, 2021

This pastor also spoke about that even though some people are not originally from the community that those individuals still had a positive impact on local efforts like in the case of the
director of Main Street Marion. It is important to note here that the collaborative efforts and success that external groups have seen has not erased local group affiliations, but rather moved them into less siloed discussions. These local leaders of non-profits are described with words like ‘collaborative,’ ‘engage,’ and ‘encourage.’ These words capture the collaborative, flexibility, and creativity necessary to have built a new hegemonic front. These perceptions are symptomatic of the changes that have occurred in the way community members, even political leaders, are now discussing Marion. Newer community members who have moved to Marion are also an excellent resource in illustrating the way that this hegemonic shift has been projected. One recent transplant from California spoke about how his perception of the region as a whole has changed since moving to the place.

I don't think I understood the resilience of community until I moved here. Like I said, I've always been very community minded. I was that way when I was growing up, even that way in Los Angeles. I found ways to do that when I was an undergrad. But I think there's something truly special about seeing community members that work so passionately and fervently to just improve and build upon successes to make Marion and Perry County and Uniontown and the surrounding counties just this incredible place to be celebrated and to be revitalized and uplifted.

-Interview with Daniel Rolland, 2020

Even those who have only lived in the community for a handful of years are talking about the ‘revitalization,’ the efforts to change the community through local non-profits, and the subsequent community wide impact that these changes have wrought.

Tourism in the region has also picked up in the past couple of years and further illustrated the establishment of a new community discourse caused by the larger hegemonic shift. The magazine, Garden and Gun, in the April/May 2019 article, ‘Back in the Kitchen’ by Kessler covers Scott Peacock’s new Biscuit Experience tourism venture in Marion. The article concludes
with two small paragraphs, quoting Scott Peacock, that illustrate the growth of a new civic
hegemony as seen from the outside.

He thinks there’s a hunger for it. Though he announced the Biscuit Experience barely a month before my visit, already he has received a steady stream of bookings. “I shouldn’t say this, but I know that part of it is people wanting to meet me,” he says. “But still. They’re curious about the Black Belt, and I’m just starting to think about all the events we can do one day. When Peacock talks about Alabama, about its conflicts and ugliness, but also about rediscovering its beauty - its food, farming and architecture- I can’t help but think he’s also writing his own story out loud. (Kressler 2019, 137)

The six-page spread, biscuit pun intended, is not the only example of the growth in tourism and the change in local discourses and imaginaries. Tourism in the region has grown since the 1960s and civil rights has been a large portion of that growth for the Alabama Black Belt. The ‘Old Jail’ on the Marion courthouse square was awarded a $500,000 grant through the National Park Service to create a new civil rights museum in the community through another small grassroots non-profit, Beyond 50 Years (Candler 2019, McDonald 2018). Figure 6.1 shows the Old Jail located on the Marion courthouse square in 2018. The group was led by the late Dr. Billie Jean Young who spearheaded the project in addition to her academic work at Judson creating plays on Fannie Lou Hamer and Jimmie Lee Jackson (Taylor 2021). Additionally, the Lincolnite Club, Inc. another non-profit group associated with alumni of Lincoln Normal School were awarded $500,000 dollars in 2019 for the Stabilization and Roof Replacement of the Historic Lincoln Normal School Gymnasium by the African American civil rights grant program through the National Park Service (2019). This civic hegemony is not contained to the local Main Street organization or to any one group, but is built around a goal of community revitalization that regional and national groups have recognized.
Conclusion

This chapter has argued that these grassroots NGOs’ success—inspired by Main Street Marion—derives from being flexible, collaborative, and creative in ways that local government and formal political groups could not. Local changes in discourse have occurred among individuals (micro-discourses), within various counter-front groups (community discourses), and are pressing across social boundaries to imagine a new community futures (the social imaginary). The disarticulation of these ‘traditional’ discourses has allowed the community to be creative in new ways, as seen in the recent uptick of local nonprofits. These changes have not erased local power silos or eliminated the cyclical challenges that the community faces. However, they demonstrate that the new civic hegemony exists—initially formalized through Main Street Marion’s designation—and has extended itself to encompass broader revitalization efforts within the community. The rise of this new civic hegemony has been further reinforced by external groups’ acknowledgement of the rise of the community’s collaboration, flexibility, and creativity.
Chapter 7 Conclusion

Despite regional and local challenges, Marion residents have shifted the prevailing community discourse by establishing a new civic hegemony. Marion faced depopulation, cyclical poverty, and a lack of adequate resources. Marion's power structures and resources became sequestered into silos further compounding community problems related to healthcare, education, and economic opportunity. The community's degradation led to the rise of grassroots movements creating counter-hegemonic fronts vested in the efforts of various local nonprofits. These political fronts were constructed to circumnavigate old hegemonic barriers and meet the needs of community members in ways primarily external to local government. Out of these innovative fronts rose the central theme of revitalization, formalized via Marion's designation as a Main Street Community in June 2017. These various groups coalesced in a chain of equivalence, allowing local groups to remain independent while working towards community revitalization. Marion's new chain of equivalence took up a series of revitalization initiatives to increase community pride and project confidence about future growth. The rise of this new civic hegemony brought about a new social imaginary based on hopefulness for the future. Groups and organizations external to Marion have noted corresponding shifts in how the community is perceived through recent successes in tourism and place-based identity discussions. This study illustrates that the changes in Marion are not due to one individual or organization, but have occurred as a result of generational attempts to envisage a better community.

This thesis drew upon and applied the post-structuralist political theory of Laclau and Mouffe to understand these changes in civic politics. Laclau and Mouffe’s theory carefully
points out that power is always in dispute. However, this theoretical framework was developed for application to the realm of national politics within liberal democracies. This thesis has sought, by Marion’s example, to open the door for new applications and scales of study concerning political fronts, chains of equivalence, and hegemonic blocs that pertain to the civic politics of rural communities—in the Alabama Black Belt, throughout the South, and beyond. Studies across various disciplines have looked at community development efforts in the face of extreme challenges that could be reframed through failed and successful 'chains of equivalence' in future research. Works on Post-Katrina tourism and development in New Orleans (Thomas 2014), Inter-organizational education and public history efforts (Skipper 2016; Skipper, Green, and Chapman 2017), political power and tourism in Selma (Eskew 2012), and especially in communities in the Delta facing racialization at the same scales that Marion has experienced (Foster 2020) are all examples of places where this research could be applied.

Marion's journey is specific to the contexts and history of the place. The civic hegemony that grassroots groups in Marion built today may shift in the future as it has in the past. Many rural southern communities have experienced or are experiencing similar challenges to Marion; other communities wanting to emulate the changes this research has recorded need to understand that places, cultures, and people are not stagnant. Laclau, Mouffe, and Gramsci's main point was that the assumptions of power are constantly being contested. The crisis in hegemony within Perry County directly results from the extreme lows that citizens reached due to inadequacies between the logics and realities of local 'common sense.' There also has to be a recognition that change, especially in hegemonic discourses, does not happen overnight. Key gatekeepers in the community must continue to work across divides and maintain the bridges to make this kind of civic hegemony possible. No matter how strained or combative local political fronts became in
Marion, the common thread was that each group had a passion for the place they called home, which became the community's broader 'master narrative.' The diversity of groups participating at the end of the day still worked towards the broader goal of raising Marion's quality of life via efforts in revitalization.

The impact of this hegemonic shift in Marion has not necessarily yet been reflected in the statistics of the region. There are still local silos that disapprove of these sociopolitical changes. The 2019 American Community survey estimates continue to reflect a steep population decline. This research has not attempted to suggest that Marion’s difficulties would evaporate. Rather, this study highlights how the shifting of the social imaginary, the creation of a discourse of hopefulness, and the building of a chain of equivalence has created a new civic hegemony and a new way of dealing with local crises and challenges. It is the logics and common sense of the community that has shifted even as the crises persist. But as the director of Main Street Alabama pointed out, “No one else is going to save Marion, other than the people of Marion.” This is a realization that is well developed within the new civic hegemony of Marion. It is also a statement that the old hegemonic perspective never understood as a call to popular democratic involvement. The community members of Marion invite you to look beyond the numbers (statistics) and examine the place it is striving to become. The sentiment that concluded every interview and conversation for this research is one that I will leave as the final point of this thesis.

I just think that with this as you look at this and as you write this and see… for them to see that Perry County out of all the needs that we have, all of the issues and concerns and problems that we have, Perry County is a great place to live. The people of Perry County are unique. I think that they’re our greatest assets our biggest resource. And when you look at the numbers, don't judge the people by the numbers. Come to Marion and see Marion for yourself and know that it is truly a wonderful place to live.

-Interview with Francis Ford, 2021
List of References


Foster, B. Brian. 2020. *I Don't Like the Blues: Race, Place, and the Backbeat of Black Life*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.


McKittrick, Katherine and Clyde Adrian Woods. 2007. *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*. Toronto, Ont; Cambridge, Mass: Between the Lines.


Skipper, Jodi. 2016. "Community Development through Reconciliation Tourism: The Behind the Big House Program in Holly Springs, Mississippi." Community Development (Columbus, Ohio) 47 (4): 514-529.


VITA

EDUCATION

The University of Mississippi
- 2017 Bachelors of Arts in Anthropology | Minors: Business Administration & Southern Studies

PUBLICATIONS

Undergraduate Honors Thesis

Articles and Multi-Media


WORK EXPERIENCE

- 2019 Summer Fellowship through Sullivan Foundation
- 2018 Graduate Assistant in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and Center for the Study of Southern Culture
- 2017 Civic Fellowship through David Mathews Center for Civic Life working with Main Street Marion

HONORS & AWARDS

- 2021 UM Liberal Arts Graduate Achievement Award in Sociology and Anthropology
- 2021 Jay Johnson Award for Outstanding Graduate Student in Anthropology
- Summer 2019 Charles Reagan Wilson Research Fellowship
- 2017 YourTown Alabama Community Development Workshop Graduate