ABSTRACT

MADISON AVA HELMAN. “Hang Your Head and Cry”: A Re-Examination of Western North Carolina Murder Ballads. (Under the direction of Professor Michael Grimwood.

Prior analyses of the murder ballads “Tom Dooley,” “Omie Wise,” and “Poor Ellen Smith” have either emphasized their musical-performance history or attempted to establish the details of the historical murders on which the songs are based. Researchers have paid little attention to the lyrics in and of themselves. I examine those lyrics as exemplifications of the ways in which rural Southern communities remember tragedies. All three ballads demonstrate a filtration process that revises the factual narratives, purifying the women and extolling the communities’ responses to the crimes while condemning the accused. In the case of “Omie Wise,” for example, the lyrics act as extra-judicial punishment when a conventional court system levied none. “Poor Ellen Smith” provoked so much unrest that town officials prohibited musicians from playing it in public settings, and “Tom Dooley” has sparked countless debates regarding the murder itself.

I argue that considering the lyrics as words to be heard and understood not only facilitates a more complex understanding of the songs as communal literature, but can also expand existing ideas regarding a community’s influence on artistic monuments (visual, cinematic, literary, musical or otherwise) to a tragic event. The persistence of the ballads into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries hinges largely upon their ability to express core elements of human nature, both good and ill, while revealing the malleability of memory.