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The Paradox of Cracker Barrel: A Case Study on Place and Placelessness

By

Meredith Gregory

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfillment of the Requirements for Honors in Geography

Department of Geography
University of Mary Washington
Fredericksburg, VA 22401

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Advisory Committee:

Caitlin Finlayson
Assistant Professor of Geography, Thesis Advisor

Stephen P. Hanna
Professor of Geography

Ian Finlayson
Assistant Professor of Computer Science
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Committee:
Dr. Caitlin Finlayson
Dr. Stephen Hanna
Dr. Ian Finlayson
Introduction:

The whole family is packed in the car; it is summer break; the destination is Grandma’s house, two states over. As lunch time approaches, everyone’s getting a little sick of being in the car. And then you pass it, the sign you have all been waiting for, it reads: “Cracker Barrel next exit.” This scene could play out in hundreds of locations across the United States. While this family may not have ever been to the Cracker Barrel location they are about to walk into, they have in fact been there. This family knows rocking chairs will be on the front porch and the wooden peg game will be on the tables. They know what is on the menu and how the staff will treat them and about how much it will cost. Cracker Barrels provide the interstate travelers and locals alike with a place so placeless it is in fact placefull.

Cracker Barrel works diligently to create a strong sense of place at each location. This sense of place, however, is contrasted with the inescapable placelessness, or lack of unique, distinguishing features (Relph 1976, Preface), that is a result of all 650 Cracker Barrels looking virtually the same. The focus of this research is on how Cracker Barrel intentionally works to create a sense of place, while at the same time, how its uniformity simultaneously positions it as a placeless place. Geographers define place, and thus placelessness, in many different ways and this case study will first analyze these definitions and then apply them to tease out how Cracker Barrel not only exists but thrives under this paradox of placelessness and placefullness. Cracker Barrels are designed and decorated the same no matter where they are geographically located leading them to be considered placeless. Even with minimal ties to the local area, there are few places, restaurant chains especially, that foster a greater sense of place for so many people. Through placemaking and theming – “the process by which an environment is given a distinct character” (Muñoz & Wood 2009, 270) - Cracker Barrel effectively reproduces the feeling of a small, rural town’s general store from the early 1900s for all the patrons to enjoy. The paradox of Cracker Barrel is that the locations are both placeless and placefull and it is the same elements that make it so.
This research leverages two visual methodologies, content and semiotic analyses, to tease out how Cracker Barrels can be both placeless and placefull at the same time. By analyzing a stratified random sample of user generated Yelp! photos, I was able to view Cracker Barrels across the country and piece together how they do this. Using content analysis – an examination of what signs are and are not present (DeBres & Sowers 2009, 220) -- I gained a clear understanding of what items Cracker Barrel uses to create their desired theme. Semiotic analysis focuses not solely on what signs are present but more on how those signs interact and what impact that combination has on the, in this case, Cracker Barrel visitor’s experience (Rose 2001, 69). Through this methodology, I determined that Cracker Barrel creates such a strong sense of place while simultaneously existing as a placeless place by incorporating huge numbers and a wide variety of artifacts that differ very little from store to store. Cracker Barrel uses these artifacts to theme their stores as a rural America 19th century “home-away-from-home” (“FAQs”). This theme makes Cracker Barrel placefull, but the lack of variation between stores makes it placeless.

**Literature Review:**

**Place**

Geography, while lacking a universal definition, plays a role in almost all facets of life (Nelson 2017, 5). Both the American Association of Geographers and the Joint Committee of Geographic Education of the National Council for Geographic Education use five themes to define geography: location, place, human-environment interactions, movement, and regions (Nelson 2017, 5). The focus of this paper is place. Tuan (1977) centralizes the concept of place within the discipline of geography by stating matter-of-factly “Geographers study place” (Tuan 1977, 3). Seamon and Sowers (2008) further this sentiment writing, “Astronomy has the
heavens, History has time, and Geography has place” (Seamon & Sowers 2008, 43). The question still remains, however, what is place?

Place, too, lacks one, agreed upon definition. Relph (1976) breaks the definition into two categories: people’s identity of place and people’s identity with place (Seamon & Sowers 2008, 45). Identity of a place refers primarily to the physical features of that place which differentiate it from other places (Relph 1976, 45). Identity with a place refers to a person’s personal attachment to a place (Seamon & Sowers 2008, 45). Places form from spaces when we experience them. The more interaction we have, the more attached to those defining physical features we become and the higher quality our social interactions also become (Relph 1976, 141; Korusiewicz 2015, 400; Tuan 1997, 6). It is clear then that spaces - areas defined by abstract qualities such as distance, direction, size, shape, and volume - become places when they gain significance to humans (Ujang & Zakariya 2015, 709; Zelinsky 2011, 2). Phillips et. al. (2011) further this stating, “Place is a space which has social and emotional meaning and is socially constructed” (Phillips et. al. 2011, 74). In the same way spaces gain significance to humans because of specific social interactions, they also gain significance in the physical sense, through the presence of distinct physical features (Phillips et. al. 2011, 75). An example of this is when a new middle school shifts from being a space in which a transfer student learns, to the place where they see their friends, go to their locker, and call their school. It is both the social interactions with their friends and teachers and the presence of certain physical features, such as their locker, that transform an unfamiliar space into a place. That raises the question: is anywhere intrinsically a place? Phillips et. al. (2011), Zelinsky (2011), and others would argue that no, no space can just be a place, but that in both the physical and social sense it takes human connection to become such a place. This does not mean, however, that Paris, France – arguably one of the most recognizable places – is not a place to someone that has never been there. To someone who has never been to France, the images, movies, and reputation surrounding Paris are what create the experience with the space and thus fosters the
transformation to place. While visiting Paris would increase the sense of place for someone, it is not impossible for a space to be a place to someone who has never personally experienced it. Places exist because of either physical or social connections with the space, but when social and physical connections combine, the placefullness is that much greater (Shao & Lui 2017, 152).

In order to understand a place, it is first necessary to understand what those places mean to those who interact or acknowledge them (Seamon & Sowers 2008, 44). Relph (1976) coins this concept “insideness” (Relph 1976, 71). The more inside a person feels, the stronger their place identity (Seamon & Sowers 2008, 45). In the same manner, the more outside a person feels, the weaker their place identity (Seamon & Sowers 2008, 45). Cuba and Hummon (1993) define place identity as “an interpretation of self that uses environmental meaning to symbolize or situate identity” (Cuba & Hummon 1993, 548). This does not mean, however, that every person who interacts with a specific place experiences it the same as different individuals or groups can experience the same place in very different ways based on the nature of their interactions with it (Seamon & Sowers 2008, 45). Place is thus an intrinsically individual experience (Cuba & Hummon 1993, 567). Even an armchair – a seemingly ordinary armchair – could be considered a place, but just because it means something to someone does not mean it will have the same significance to everyone else who sits in it (Tuan 1977, 149). Hough (1990) summarizes this writing, “Understanding places begins with feelings” (Hough 1990, 5). One person’s positive feelings of a place will make them feel very inside and have a strong place identity, while negative feelings will have the opposite effect.

Place attachment gets at the emotional side of place identity. Shao and Lui (2017) define place attachment as “an affective bond that people establish with specific areas where they prefer to remain and where they feel comfortable and safe” (Shao & Lui 2017, 152). A home or hometown is a good example of this. People often become attached to where they live and grew up due to memories, social connections, and the familiarity of the place. The key, therefore, to
fostering place attachment is the ability of a place to make someone feel a certain way. People become attached to familiar places whether that be from length of residency, bonds with neighbors, or other factors (Phillips et al. 2011, 78). As there are no requirements on a location’s size for it to be considered a place, people become attached to areas as small as the aforementioned armchair or a room and as large as a country or region as long as those places elicit the emotional response in people that connects them with the place (Tuan 1977, 149; Cuba & Hummon 1993, 549). Place attachment is a continual and never ceasing process (Cuba & Hummon 1993, 547), yet the time it takes to truly become attached to one place in particular is rarely immediate and takes a long time to fully develop (Phillips et al. 2011, 77). Tuan (1977) furthers this idea stating, “Attachment, whether to a person or to a locality, is seldom acquired in passing” (Tuan 1977, 184). Just as people form relationships with other people, so too can they connect with places, and just as this process takes varying amounts of time depending on the people, so too does this length of time it can take to have strong place attachments.

Place attachment is inherently linked to place identity (Phillips et al 2011, 76; Cuba & Hummon 1993, 549; Shao & Lui 2017, 153). Phillips et al. (2011) make this connection by extending Relph’s (1976) concept of insideness to place attachment. They state that place attachment has three components: physical insideness, social insideness, and autobiographical insideness (Phillips et al. 2011, 77). Physical insideness is the physical attachment and familiarity with a place based on time spent in the place. Social insideness refers to the sense of belonging someone gets from connecting with other people in a place. Finally, autobiographical insideness is based on a personal history with that place (Phillips et al. 2011, 77). Cuba and Hummon’s (1993) study on place attachment in Cape Cod, Massachusetts found almost one-third of their 432 participants felt most at home because of their social connections with the place, or their social insideness, twenty-eight percent attributed the sense of home to physical features of their homes, or physical insideness, and twenty-five percent named autobiographical insideness as the primary reason they felt at home (Cuba & Hummon 1993, 557). In an
opposing manner, physical, social, and autobiographical outsideness can lead to place detachments, a common occurrence when people first move to a new location (Cuba & Hummon 1993, 550).

How individuals become attached to places – be it social connections, physical features, or autobiographical reasons - often changes with age. Tuan (1977), Phillips et al. (2011), and Cuba and Hummon (1993) all comment of the shift from greater reliance on social connections to a greater reliance on the physical characteristics of a place as people age. Tuan (1977) states, “To the young child the parent is his primary ‘place’” (Tuan 1977, 138), meaning that the physical place a child is in has very little to do with their attachment and all to do with the presence of their parents, which is evident in many children’s reactions to their parents leaving them with a babysitter or at school. Older participants rely instead on the physical elements of their surroundings as well as on prior experiences with those places to become attached to places (Cuba & Hummon 1993, 557). While Phillips et al. (2011) and Cuba and Hummon (1993) both mention autobiographical insideness, neither provides a substantial discussion of this category.

The final kind of attachment Phillips et al. (2011) and Cuba and Hummon (1993) defined is physical insideness. Tuan (1977) focuses on this form of attachment when defining place as “whatever stable object catches our attention” (Tuan 1977, 161). He clarifies this stating, “As we look at a panoramic scene our eyes pause at points of interest. Each pause is time enough to create an image of place that looms large momentarily in our view” (Tuan 1977, 161). These points of interest in the built environment are just that, points of interest, because they relay meaning to the viewer based on social and cultural understanding (Goss 1992, 162). It is the combination of the built environment and social and cultural understanding that conveys a message to people to be quiet and respectful in churches but to be carefree and have fun at an amusement park. It is also the built structure and existing objects that tell society that a place is a church and not an amusement park. Houses are made into homes in large part by the use of
“identity symbols,” as Cuba and Hummon (1993) coin them, which serve as personal signs of self (Cuba & Hummon 1993, 550). Someone who visits the home immediately learns something about that family based solely on the physical features present. The family also has a stronger attachment to the home based on the presence of those cherished objects (Cuba & Hummon 1993, 550).

It is the unique and distinctive qualities of identity symbols which make them not only valuable to individuals but also to the larger community as a whole (Zimmerbauer 2009, 247; Nelson 2017, 15; Uysal 2013, 225). These symbols anchor the sense of place for the community (Phillips et al. 2011, 87). Csurgó and Megyesi (2016) highlight the importance of this stating, “Symbolization of place is one of the main dimensions of place making” (Csurgó & Megyesi 2016, 430). Zelinsky (2011) further highlights this when writing, “Neither state nor nation can prosper if it fails to exploit a stockpile of nationalistic or static symbols” (Zelinsky 2011, 28). These symbols, especially specific collections of symbols, are arguably mutually exclusive as long as they are examined on the same scale. The objects that represent “The South” are not the same objects that represent “New England” and the objects that represent the United States are not the same objects that represent Japan. While nothing more than social constructs, these associated symbols both create and reproduce a sense of place (Zimmerbauer 2009, 246).

Objects serve a dual purpose in that they both create places and “anchor time” (Tuan 1977, 187). Objects can exist for hundreds or thousands of years depending on how they are made; the presence of objects from a certain time period help anchor time and recreate the sense of place that existed when they were common. In Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, for example, the presence of staff in Revolutionary War period clothing, horse carriages, and dirt roads both anchor time and create a sense of place. While some object both anchor time and create a sense of place, others may solely create a sense of place. People often become very attached to objects just as they might places or other individuals. When a family or individual, for
example, moves to a new home, no matter how far, it naturally takes time to become attached to the new place. Bringing objects from the old house and placing them in similar locations rapidly decreases the time before the individual is attached to the new house (Phillips et al. 2011, 78). Because objects can hold so much meaning and are connected to time, the preservation of such objects is crucial for some individuals (Tuan 1977, 197). Tuan (1977) argues that reflecting on one’s past is universal as it provides a sense of self and identity (Tuan 1977, 186). Themed restaurants, historic sites, and some personal homes may therefore establish themselves as historic deliberately through the use of artifacts from a particular time period to evoke a certain sense of place (Tuan 1977, 198).

Every new combination and arrangement of symbols creates a different sense of place. Two broad categories are domestication, or the production of familiar landscape, and exoticisation, or the formation of unfamiliar landscapes (Korusiewicz 2015, 401). Much of the previous argument states that people get attached to familiar areas as people “find comfort in familiarity” (Phillips et al. 2011, 78). Korusiewicz (2015), however, comments on the “fascinating mystery” experienced in exotic places that draws people to the place allowing them to form attachments (Korusiewicz 2015, 401). These places, however, are best accepted when paired with familiar, domestic elements as to not venture too far from the security of familiarity (Phillips et al. 2011, 82). As mentioned earlier, place attachment is a continual process which allows for the purposefully unfamiliar elements of a city, in Korusiewicz’s (2015) case, to become familiar (Cuba & Hummon 1993, 547). With a focus on urbanization, Korusiewicz (2015) highlights the aesthetics, or the physical environment, that build this combination of domesticating elements and exoticking elements (Korusiewicz 2015, 405). No matter if the purpose of the object is to domesticate or exoticate a place, the objects purposefully included play a large role in creating both the aesthetics of and attachment to that place.

Whether strictly domestic, strictly exotic, or combination of the two, localities and regions feature landmarks which tell us where we are and create the objects that evoke place
attachment (Korusiewicz 2015, 405; Tuan 1977, 159). Tuan (1977) attributes this to “the symbol-making human species” (Tuan 1977, 18). These symbols, in conjunction with social insideness and autobiographical insideness, are what foster both place identity and place attachment. It leads people to say “I am a Virginian” or “I am a New Yorker.” Tuan (1977) writes, “Attachment to homeland is a common human emotion. [...] The more ties there are, the stronger the emotional bond” reflecting the importance not only of the objects but of the combination of objects, social interactions, and autobiographical reasons (Tuan 1977, 158). Together these three elements work together to form a collective memory of a place where a place is deeply understood thus people are highly attached (Phillips et al. 2011, 94). People are complex beings and the same can be said about the way we construct a sense of attachment to place (Cuba & Hummon 1993, 557).

Defining place is no simple task (Young 2001, 681). Place involves both the physical environment in which we live and the personal meanings we attribute to those spaces (Relph 1976, 145). It is a combination of these that produce the interactions people have with the world around them. Each specific place on a map is unique, no matter the size. If a person has a certain attachment to one place, their childhood home for example, they cannot have the exact same attachment to another because it cannot have the same physical objects, the same social relationships and memories, nor the same autobiographical reasons for attachment. This gets at the emotional side of Relph’s (1976) definition but it can also apply to the physical side of his definition. A person cannot be both in one room and another room without being instead in the divide between the rooms, which is itself another place. This concept comes into play when a business or individual decides to locate in a particular location. Hough (1990) writes on the matter, “Being tied to that location involves stability and a sense of investment in the land because one’s wellbeing and survival depends on it” (Hough 1990, 35). Because the business is ‘here’, it means it is not ‘there’ (Pierce et al. 2011, 55). In summary, place matters.
Rural Placemaking

Researchers have been attracted to rural communities when studying placemaking. Phillips et al. (2011) hypothesizes that this is because of the “easily attractable and attachable nature” of these communities (Phillips et al. 2011, 79). Studies on rural places are driven by examining the culture of the area just as rural community development is guided by the locality’s culture (Csurgó & Megyesi 2016, 429). As mentioned above, it is the symbolic and physical features of a place that guide placemaking efforts (Csurgó & Megyesi 2016, 429). Csurgó and Megyesi (2016) stress that these symbols must be based off local community knowledge and local cultural characteristics (Csurgó & Megyesi 2016, 430). Stating, “Local stakeholders and initiators collect and reconstruct image elements of the locality” (Csurgó & Megyesi 2016, 436), Csurgó and Megyesi (2016) highlights that it is not just place that matters, but the local place that matters.

In the United States, “The South” is, according to Zelinsky (2011), “the most universally acknowledged sociocultural subdivision of the United States” (Zelinsky 2011, 224). The South, like any region, is reliant on symbolization to reproduce and thus maintain its regional identity (Csurgó & Megyesi 2016, 437). The goods and services, accommodations, gastronomy, tourism sites, local food production and food products, and local events, among others, all build into their identity (Csurgó & Megyesi 2016, 437). Food, especially when examining southern restaurants, is a large part of this equation. Zelinsky (2011) lists off historically “southern” foods, noting that the cuisine “involves a heavy reliance on pork, cornbread along with hominy, grits and other corn products, molasses, hot wheaty biscuits, turnip greens, sweet potatoes, with the occasional chicken, rice, and where available, catfish, all washed down with distilled spirits or coffee and more recently iced tea or buttermilk” (Zelinsky 2011, 179). These foods still dominate menus across the South today (Zelinsky 2011, 179). Southern food, like any other region’s dominant foods, stem from the specific geographic qualities of a location and the “climate, soils, available flora and fauna, along with technology, economics, ethnic and cultural heritage, and
cultural diffusion” in that area (Zelinsky 2011, 177). Food is just one of the many characteristics that make up a place’s identity.

Whether studying small towns and local placemaking (Csurgó & Megyesi, 2016), midwestern main streets on postcards (DeBres & Sowers, 2009), or the regions across the United States (Zelinsky, 2011), what sets rural placemaking apart is the need to be closely linked with their neighboring areas (Csurgó & Megyesi, 2016, 430). While this is not untrue of typical placemaking, the authors listed all stress this fact more than those broadly studying placemaking. Csurgó and Megyesi (2016) found that the extent to which a place has a defined identity, formed through symbolization, can be explained by the relationship between neighboring localities (Csurgó & Megyesi, 2016, 441).

**Placelessness**

Placelessness strips away all of the features that make a place a place rather than a space. Relph (1976) defines it as “the casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardized landscapes” (Relph 1976, Preface). Phillips et al. (2011), however, challenge this definition due to the lack of concern for the temporal, social, or individual meaning that create places (Phillips et al. 2011, 81). They define placelessness instead as “a lack of ‘insideness’ and meaning, anomie or simply not knowing a place” (Phillips et al. 2011, 81). They continue by attributing this to potential social exclusions or fleeting experiences with a place in which there is not enough time to gain a sense of place (Phillips et al. 2011, 81). When reflecting back on the previous discussion of place attachment, a short amount of time in a place severely limits the likelihood of feelings of social insideness or autobiographical attachment leaving only the physical characteristics of a place to become attached to. Harner and Kinder (2011) argue that it is the physically distinct attributes of a place that allow for the place attachments by individuals and communities, thus the elimination of those attributes results in a placeless place (Harner & Kinder 2011, 751). Korusiewicz (2015) similarly defines placelessness as “the lack of a
recognizable focal point (or points) of mental and material space that one could connect to” (Korusiewicz 2015, 402). It is this lack of unique features that leads to landscapes “looking more and more like everywhere else” (Harner & Kinder 2011, 752).

Regardless of the leading cause of placelessness, the result is always the same: a “sterile” (Korusiewicz 2015, 402), “cookie-cutter” (Hough 1990, 183), “standardized” (Relph 1976, Preface), “anchorless” (Goss 1992, 172), “homogenized” “blandscape” (Zelinsky 2011, Preface; Phillips et al. 2011, 83; Relph 1981, 13). Zelinsky (2011) opens his book commenting on the current state of the American population and landscape. He writes, “We are a population, after all, that spends much of its time outside the home (all too often a cookie-cutter structure devoid of regional resonance, where television mesmerizes us several hours of the day) shopping or eating in look-a-like chain or franchise operations, driving along featureless highways built into governmental specifications, sitting in anonymous airports, and sleeping in forgettable motels” (Zelinsky 2011, 1). A key point Zelinsky (2011) makes here is the lack of a connection between these features and the place where they are located (Zelinsky 2011, 1). Not only are the elements listed above divorced from place, but they are also stripped of the uniqueness that defines places (Zimmerbauer 2009, 247).

Relph (1976) posits that placelessness stems from one of two things. The first is kitsch, or the “uncritical acceptance of mass values” and the second is technique, or the “overriding concern with efficiency as an end in itself” (Seamon & Sowers 2008, 46). Ritzer (1983) addresses the later of these in his discussion of the ‘McDonaldization’ of society. He states “We have become a nation driven by concerns for rationality, speed, and efficiency” and claims McDonalds models this quite well (Ritzer 1983, 371). The ever evolving process of and progression towards rationality has led to the rise of “fast-food restaurants, TV dinners, packaged tours, industrial robots, and open-heart surgery on an assembly line basis” (Ritzer 1983, 371). The goal of these developments is to increase efficiency, predictability, calculability, the substitution of nonhuman for human technology, and control over uncertainty (Ritzer 1983,
As Ritzer (1983) highlights, even the use of cookbooks is a rung along the ladder of rationality as they increase efficiency, predictability, and control over uncertainty (Ritzer 1983, 372). Dehumanization and placelessness result from this rationality as robots replace humans and standardized features replace unique qualities of a place (Ritzer 1983, 378). While producing some benefits, the McDonaldization of society also can create some very “bleak and uninteresting [places]” (Ritzer 1983, 378). Phillips et al. (2011) further link the McDonaldization theory to place and placelessness when mentioning the shift from distinctive shops and landmarks to the “homogenized” features that dominate many United States and United Kingdom towns (Phillips et al. 2011, 83).

Hough (1990) argues that this trend toward placelessness is not limited to those two regions but that it is instead a “universal phenomenon” existing on many scales (Hough 1990, 19). Placelessness should not, however, be confused with unfamiliarity, as just because something is unfamiliar does not mean it cannot elicit an emotional response characteristic of more familiar places (Phillips et al. 2011, 91). To situate a place on the spectrum of placelessness, with completely unique places on one end and fully standardized places on the other, the presence of (or lack of) unique features must be assessed (DeBres & Sowers 2009, 220). The scale from which someone studies the places, be it nationwide, statewide, or focused on one individual instance, on this spectrum also alters where the place falls. Some places can land close to the placeless end of the spectrum when viewed at a very large scale and fall at the placefull side of the spectrum at a small scale. For example, when Googling “beaches,” virtually the same image appears over and over again -- the same type of shops sell beach towels, t-shirts, hermit crabs, floats, etc., the same hotel chains line the oceanfront, and the same items are sold at the restaurants. In contrast at a larger scale, or zoomed in, Googling “Virginia Beach,” for example, returns specific restaurants, shops, and other attractions that can be very placefull for locals. Korusiewicz (2015) argues that based on the assumption that “placeness and placelessness are intertwined,” we can make the claim that “the process of constructing a
place is, in fact, translating the unknown and indifferent into the more known and emotionally valid” thus moving a place along the spectrum defined above (Korusiewicz 2015, 400). Phillips et al. (2011) would agree with this shift from “indifferent” to “emotionally valid” but would argue that while place and place attachment are tightly related to familiarity, placelessness is paradoxically not related to unfamiliarity (Phillips et al. 2011, 91). Just as the human process of developing place attachments is complex (Cuba & Hummon 1993, 557), so too is the assessment of the concept of placelessness.

**Theming**

Theming is “the process by which an environment is given a distinct character” (Muñoz & Wood 2009, 270). Wood and Muñoz (2007) centralize theming to the study of place when they state, “We live in a themed world” (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 243). They continue by listing malls, museums, retailers, amusement parks, events, and restaurants as some of the places who partake in theming (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 243). Muñoz and Wood (2009) argue the most commonly experienced of themed places are restaurants (Muñoz & Wood 2009, 270). Themes are socially constructed elements of the built environment that represent a specific time, place, or culture (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 243). These time periods, places, and cultures are themselves socially constructed as people over time decided how these were each defined (DeLyser 1999, 606; Wood & Muñoz 2007, 244). For example, when asking someone if a series of buildings is a college campus, that person relies on socially defined and constructed images of what does and does not constitute a college campus to answer the question. Because themed worlds act as surrogates for the actual environment they represent (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 243), they, just like places, must be practiced (Cosgrove 1989, 122; Wood & Muñoz 2007, 244). If koalas, kangaroos, and boomerangs were no longer used – or practiced – by many Americans to represent Australia, Outback Steakhouse, an Australian themed restaurant chain, would have to embark on a re-theming venture to use new signs to sell their Australian theme. Just because a
theme is practiced, however, does not mean it is an authentic representation of the place it tries to replicate. Muñoz and Wood (2009) focus on the relationship between authenticity and themes determining that the farther someone is geographically from the host time, place, or culture, the more stereotypical these themes become (Muñoz & Wood 2009, 270). As Muñoz and Wood (2009) found, themed experiences can vary quite dramatically from the authentic experience of the host (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 250).

Wood and Muñoz (2007) list ethnic art, decor, music, external façades, the name, among other stereotypical features as elements that create these themes (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 243). These function as the symbols that both create and reproduce a sense of place, a sense of culture, and/or a sense of time (Zimmerbauer 2009, 246). In the case of restaurants, the food is also a symbol of the host culture, place, or time (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 243). Themed restaurants use stereotypical and expected symbols that have been learned and practiced over time - hence why they are considered stereotypical - to create an experience that is standardized and in a controlled environment (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 243). It is from these standardized experiences that the public visiting these sites gets a sense of culture in a potentially foreign culture meaning the patron may not get the true, authentic experience of that place (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 243). While many patrons visit Outback Steakhouse, to borrow Muñoz and Wood's (2009) example, and understand it as an “idealized and orchestrated portrayal” of Australia, there are others that see Outback as a truly authentic and real representation of Australia (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 243).

The theming of restaurants, as Wood and Muñoz (2007) state, is “significantly visual” as the businesses’ “reality engineers” strategically construct environments that evoke certain feelings from the patrons (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 243; Muñoz & Wood 2009, 270). Muñoz and Wood (2009) continue stating, “When selecting design atmospheric and aesthetic cues, reality engineers rely heavily on socially constructed, yet often inaccurate themes offered by destination image formation agents” (Muñoz & Wood 2009, 270). Accurate or not, these places
rely on objects to create the themes and thus the place. Muñoz and Wood (2009) found that just as the authenticity of a place decreased as the geographic distance from the host increased, so too did they find a change in the visual elements used to construct those themes (Muñoz & Wood 2009, 277). Wood and Muñoz (2007) further note that Outback Steakhouse offers a narrow view of Australia that offended some Australian nationals (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 250). These Australians noted in particular the visual elements of the restaurants as problematic (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 249). When asked how they would change the restaurant, one Australian stated “I would choose decor that represents the way we now live, not something stuffed with kangaroos and koalas” (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 249). As placelessness is generally defined as a place lacking distinguishing features, the use of such standardized symbols to create themed areas, such as koalas and kangaroos in Australian themed restaurants, leads to themed establishments that, when looked at broadly, can be considered placeless while at the same time cultivating a sense of place. These locations stand out distinctly from the surrounding restaurants and stores, which would allow them to be considered placefull, yet as they all feature the same symbols, they form a homogenous landscape making them also essentially placeless. The title of Muñoz and Wood’s article, “A recipe for success: understanding regional perceptions of authenticity in themed restaurants,” implies this idea of standardization, in the form of standard recipes and décor, aims as to reduce uncertainty and thus increase efficiency (Ritzer 1983, 372; Wood and Muñoz 2007, 243).

Place and placelessness govern much of the way in which we interpret the world around us as they determine our level of attachment or detachment to spaces. This includes, on one hand, how to define place, how people interact with place, and how they create and become attached to place. On the other hand, it includes a working definition of placelessness, the results of placelessness, and a discussion of the trend toward placelessness. It finally includes a definition of theming as well as a discussion into how the process of theming plays out. While substantial amounts of literature exists on these topics, I am interested in expanding empirical
geographic research on this subject by exploring how Cracker Barrel tries to create a sense of place while simultaneously existing as a placeless place. While much of the literature on this topic focuses on either how to create a sense of place and place attachments or on the trend toward placelessness, this research fills a gap of how the two – place and placelessness – interact with one another using Cracker Barrel as an example.

**Methods:**

This research aims to increase understanding of how Cracker Barrel creates a sense of place while simultaneously existing as a placeless place. This research requires a two-pronged approach: the first considers the variance among Cracker Barrel stores throughout the country and the second consists of an in-depth look their theming techniques, and the Cracker Barrel “brand” at the individual store level. From here on, I will refer to Cracker Barrels as a whole as “stores” and use “restaurant” only when talking about the restaurant portion of Cracker Barrels. DeBres and Sowers (2009) serve as an example for my methodology. They studied the trend toward homogenized landscapes in Midwestern Main Street postcards using content analysis to understand what items were and were not present in their large sample of postcards as well as semiotic analysis to understand those items’ denotative meanings (DeBres & Sowers 2009, 216-220). Following their model, I conducted my research with a visual methodology examining user-generated Yelp! photos from Cracker Barrels across the country. My intent was to identify those elements that do not vary geographically as well as those that do change with the location of the store. I will also examine how these specific elements work together to create the sense of place found at the stores.
Cracker Barrel Old Country Store is a unique, company-owned and operated restaurant chain with locations on interstates across the country. The store aims to be the patron’s “home-away-from-home” (“FAQs”). Each location features a large front porch with rocking chairs and checkers board game, a general store with hosts of old-fashioned candy and soda, housewares, and other products designed to take the visitor back in time, and a restaurant serving traditional Southern home-style meals and decorated floor to ceiling with antique artifacts. (See Figure 1)

The original Cracker Barrel still exists in Lebanon, TN and was established in 1969. As popularity grew the company expanded, primarily in the Southeast, but today has 650 stores in 45 states. Figure 2 depicts the distribution of stores across the United States and reflects the 637 stores in 43 states included in the available dataset.
I chose Cracker Barrel for this study of place and placelessness for three reasons. First, the restaurant chain has a strong national presence. In order to study placelessness, it is imperative that the places in which the stores are located are different as the idea is to contrast the placefullness of the establishment’s surroundings with the placelessness of the homogeneity store itself. This requires a chain that is nationwide in scale. The second key component of Cracker Barrel is that it is themed. Cracker Barrel’s theme is an old country store with a large emphasis on feeling at home. However, their goal of domestic placemaking, as defined above by Korusiewicz (2015), is only realized by those visitors for whom this old timey country store culture is familiar whether that is because the store is located in an area where this culture
presides, the visitor has previously resided in the host culture’s area, or that these visitors have
stopped in at a similar store elsewhere in the country. Domestic placemaking fails then for all
the other patrons where this culture is not common to their everyday life, and thus this theme
becomes an example of exotic placemaking, also defined above by Korusiewicz (2015). This
paradox is the final reason I chose Cracker Barrel as it sets Cracker Barrel apart from almost all
other themed restaurants whose goals are to create an exotic experience for all their patrons.
Cracker Barrel, instead, must work considerably harder to create the same sense of place for an
individual that is unfamiliar with this lifestyle as for the person to whom it is much more familiar.

This research project utilizes a combination of content and semiotic analysis to answer
the question of how Cracker Barrel tries to create a sense of place while simultaneously existing
as a placeless place and to identify and analyze the signs in the stores that create both the
placefullness and placelessness of Cracker Barrel. Content analyses, in the most basic sense,
“[search] for the presence or absence of items” (DeBres & Sowers 2009, 220). In a project such
as this, content analysis offers an effective way to analyze the large number of images while
limiting bias (Rose 2001, 55). This method is binary – items are there or not there – leaving very
little room for bias. Semiotics refers to the “study of signs” (Rose 2001, 69; Craine & Gardner
2016, 275). At the individual sign level, three components make up a sign. These are the sign-
vehicle, or the icon/object that does the representing, the referent, or the real object that the
sign-vehicle tries to mimic, and then interpretant, or the meaning of that sign (MacEachren
2004, 218). The interaction between these three components of signs as well as the interaction
between the signs themselves is what semiotics is all about. More specifically, this kind of
analysis considers “how denotative signs were manipulated to present a connotative sign to the
viewer” (DeBres & Sowers 2009, 220). For example, in relation to Cracker Barrel, denotative
signs are the artifacts on the walls and the old oil lamps on the tables while the connotative
signs are the hominess and sense of time that these artifacts work together to create. On a
single sign scale, a fishing pole on the wall is both the sign-vehicle and the referent. The
interpretant, however, is the act of fishing, the memories an individual has with fishing, or some other autobiographical connection to fishing. A key here is the interplay between the signs, as many signs “derive their meaning from the other signs and from the wider system of signs” present (Craine & Gardner 2016, 278). A shovel, for example, means something different when in a tool shed than it does on the wall of a Cracker Barrel aside many other artifacts of rural 19th century America. DeBres and Sowers (2009) note that the meaning of connotative signs varies by location, as mentioned above, but also by culture: “Within a particular culture, [connotative signs] can be used repeatedly to sell and reaffirm a society’s core myths and ideals” (DeBres & Sowers 2009, 220). Cracker Barrel uses the various connotative signs at its disposal in precisely this way. The combination of content analysis, which produces results on the whole picture, and semiotic analysis, which provides a more in-depth look at the interaction of the specific signs, will answer my fundamental research question which is how does Cracker Barrel work out the tension between being the nationally recognized, placeless brand it is while trying to embed itself in the local area?

Studying all 650 Cracker Barrels is simply not feasible given the time constrains of the project, so instead I used a spatially stratified random sample. In spatially stratified random sampling, the total region of study, the United States in this case, gets divided into nonoverlapping sections, the 50 states in this study, and then a simple random sample is conducted within each subsection of the region (Cressie 1993, 3d). Using a stratified sample ensures the study will include Cracker Barrels from across the country, while the random sample allows for inferences to be made on the larger population of Cracker Barrels. Despite the varying sizes of states, I chose an equal sample size of one Cracker Barrel per state which is a commonly accepted form of selecting sample sizes (Falk, Denham, & Mengersen 2011, 98). My analysis reflects the 43 states that had Cracker Barrels as of early 2018. After listing each store by state, I used the random number generator provided by Google to randomly select which store in each state I would further examine. The result was 43 stores from around the
country on which to conduct my analysis. The reduction of stores from 650 to 43 opens the door for potential oversight, but a brief scan through other Cracker Barrels revealed a general lack of variation between stores indicating that these results are generalizable.

After selecting the stores, I turned to Yelp!, an online, crowd-sourced business review site, to access user-generated photos of each store. Yelp! is comparable to TripAdvisor but has more of a focus on restaurants. Yelp! provided one common place from which to view each store in my study as well as a customer perspective, rather than company generated images. The goal here was to generate a collection of images that provide a window from which to view each store in question in order to learn how Cracker Barrel creates a sense of place in each store while existing as an essentially placeless place. I downloaded all the images from each store, excluding those images which solely depicted food. The menu does not vary store to store nor state to state, therefore I did not find it necessary to analyze images of food. The images not only let me view the store, but also get a sense of what patrons find most interesting since they are user-generated images. I stored and coded all of these images in Google Sheets using the filter options for counts and further analysis. My codes include simple boolean of inside or outside, inside the restaurant or inside the shop as well as other specifics about items in each image. I especially kept an eye out for elements that tied the store to a specific geographic location or aspects that strayed from the “typical” Cracker Barrel store in order to answer the question of whether or not Cracker Barrel exists as a placeless place. I further used my time downloading and coding the images to gain a strong understanding of how the different elements of the stores combine to create a sense of place. As the study is twofold, so too is my analysis, with one side evaluating the placelessness of Cracker Barrel and the other examining the individual elements present in the stores that together create the sense of place for which Cracker Barrel is known.

Results:
The careful combination of artifacts that create a sense of place are what make Cracker Barrel simultaneously placeless and placefull. My research design process proved to be quite fruitful, providing me ample data through which to work out this paradox. Based on the images in my study, the degree to which Cracker Barrel is placeless is less severe than I originally thought but decorative and architectural elements are still quite similar store to store. These images also paint a clear picture as to how Cracker Barrel arranges the artifacts in their stores to create a placefull environment. How does Cracker Barrel work out the tension between being the nationally recognized, placeless brand it is while also trying to embed itself in each store’s local area. To answer the question I will assess the placelessness of Cracker Barrel, determine how Cracker Barrel creates a sense of place, and explore the interaction between placelessness and placefullness. I will first report on the results of my content analysis that addresses the first piece of this question. I will then present the results of my semiotic analysis which help answer how Cracker Barrel creates a sense of place and how the placelessness and placefullness of Cracker Barrel interact.

The foundation of this analysis is 746 images from 43 different Cracker Barrels. Around one-quarter of these images (192, or 26%) depict the outside of Cracker Barrels. One-half of the images (370, or 50%) show the restaurant inside the locations and another quarter (184, or 24%) of the images focus on the general store portion of the locations. The stores all varied in the number of images posted on Yelp!, with some stores having over 80 pictures, not including any pictures of food, and others having less than 10. Despite the overall numbers of photos, the images all gave a clear picture of these stores both from an explicit, what is present versus what is not, standpoint and from an implicit standpoint of what the patrons found so interesting that they posted the image on a social review site.

Content Analysis – to what extent is Cracker Barrel placeless
After downloading, coding, and analyzing these 746 images, it is clear there are very few differences from one Cracker Barrel to the next. Many of the stores and much of the design remains virtually unchanged, but there are minor differences that I will address later. The homogeneity of the images, however, positions Cracker Barrel as a placeless place. Placelessness, as explained in the literature review, is the result of the “eradication of distinct landscapes” (Relph 1976, Preface), the lack of connectedness to a place whether personally or physically (Harner & Kinder 2011, 751), and results in everywhere looking like everywhere else (Harner & Kinder 2011, 752). Cracker Barrels, while distinctly different than most of their surroundings, especially when moving farther from the original Cracker Barrel in Lebanon, TN, exist virtually unchanged place to place. Cracker Barrels change relatively little to reflect where they are located geographically.

Figure 3. The similarity of Cracker Barrel fireplaces from across the country. The upper left image shows the Yuma, Arizona store, the upper right shows the Londonberry, New Hampshire store, the bottom left show the Sioux Falls, South Dakota store, and the bottom right shows the North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina store. Each shows the stone fireplace with deer head, rifle, and other artifacts that adorn all the

There are several critical elements which are present in each Cracker Barrel, regardless of geographic location. Every Cracker Barrel has a prominent, stone fireplace at the front of the restaurant with a deer head and rifle above it. There are always old portraits, clocks, household items, china, or other homely artifacts on the mantle and the walls above the mantle. Figure 3 shows just how similar each fireplace is, and how each is devoid of any reference to its geographic location. It is interesting to note that New Hampshire, South Dakota, and South Carolina all have snow shoes hanging on the wall while the store in Arizona does not. I originally thought this may be one item only found in the more northern, snowier states but found that while they are not in every store, they do not reside solely where they may be commonplace. One of the paintings in the Arizona store is of a clearly mountainous and wooded scene, which is the opposite of the Arizona landscape, again showing the lack of connection to each store’s actual geographic location. These images reveal how minute many of the changes are and the overall lack of deviation from the standard that exists from location to location.
The decorative and architectural features within these stores are not the only standard elements. The same similarities between stores exist outside the building. Figure 4 highlights the building design to which all Cracker Barrels adhere. The shape, color, and construction materials do not vary. The images show seasonal changes in some of the decor; it appears as though many, if not all, Cracker Barrels have patriotic flags up for the 4th of July and pumpkins in the fall. What does change on the exterior of the store is the vegetation, which will be discussed later. In addition to the outside of the building, the dining areas again vary very little (see Figure 5). All the tables, chairs, flooring, walls, paint colors, and lamps are the same. The
wall decor, while different, is again so mildly different that any change is only noticeable when very closely examining it, such as in this project. Patron’s comments reflect this as well, with one Yelp! user from New Mexico writing, “Typical Interior” (6/14/14) as their comment on a picture of table settings. Another user from Arizona commented, “Wouldn’t be Cracker Barrel without this on the table” (9/20/16) in reference to the infamous peg game and old oil lamps on the table. This uniformity enables every Cracker Barrel to elicit the same sense of place as, evident from these images and comments. While this sense of place may be somewhat different for each patron, it will remain the same for each person from one Cracker Barrel to the next due to its inherent placelessness.

Figure 5. The similarity in Cracker Barrel interior design from across the country. The upper left image shows the Milford, Connecticut store, the upper right shows the Okemos, Michigan store, the bottom left show the Stevensville, Maryland store, and the bottom right shows the Madison, Wisconsin store. Each shows the very similar wall decor, same furniture, and oil lamps. Sources: C., Jose. Interior. Yelp! 30 June 2015, s3-media4.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/UI32EnxXjS8BeNQMLQu9vA/o.jpg; H., Richard. Interior. Yelp!, 31 Aug. 2014, s3-media3.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/zHcMHZC_kYLC_bYiIwuBmW/o.jpg; L., Jessica. Interior. Yelp!, 29 July 2014, s3-media3.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/EGNFrJUZOL64gg6qT8A/o.jpg; M., Bill. Interior. Yelp!, 28 Sept. 2012, s3-media2.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/lOwntwBNTtBzCV2VClJEQ/o.jpg
Despite the similarities described above, there are some notable differences between Cracker Barrel locations, more so than I initially expected. Cracker Barrels differ primarily in three ways. First, the vegetation outside the stores varies by geographic location. This is logical since climate varies so dramatically across the entire country. Figure 6 shows some of the most notable differences. The stores in Florida and South Carolina have palm trees in front of the stores. The store in Arizona, on the other hand, has cacti outside. The stores along the east coast tend to have small trees like crepe myrtles in front of the stores while the stores in the Midwest often have lower shrubs. In my analysis, I found that no two stores had the exact same vegetation. It is clear from this then, that it is easier to create a uniform, placeless place indoors rather than outdoors. Geography and the natural environment are hard to subdue and homogenize.
Figure 6. The differences in vegetation outside of Cracker Barrel. The upper left shows the crepe myrtles of Smithfield, North Carolina, the upper right shows the palm trees in Leesburg, Florida, the bottom left image shows the cacti in Yuma, Arizona, and the bottom right shows the lower shrubs of the Lima, Ohio store. The vegetation is one element that changes store to store.


A second element that changes from store to store is the sports team’s gear that is sold in each store. These products are sold in the “general store” section of Cracker Barrel. It is here that they also sell old fashioned candy and soda, housewares, toys, and other products that generally do not change store to store. Figure 7 shows the common layout of these stores and the typical products they sell. Again, as with so many other elements of Cracker Barrel, there are few differences. The team-branded apparel, however, does change. These changes are
primarily state to state with what appears to be little variation within states, but considerable variation between states. I chose the state of Virginia to verify this and analyzed Cracker Barrels on Yelp! from across the state looking for which sports team’s gear is sold at each. I found very few user photos of sports gear other than an image I found at the Williamsburg, Virginia store. Through participatory observation, however, I found the same Virginia Tech apparel that was displayed in the Williamsburg store was also sold in the Fredericksburg, Virginia store. Figure 8 depicts all the team-branded merchandise I found in the 746 images analyzed. The Yelp! photos of both the Cracker Barrel in Lakeville, Minnesota and the Cracker Barrel in Ooltewah, Tennessee featured team apparel, for the Minnesota Vikings and the University of Tennessee Knoxville, respectively. These three states, Minnesota, Virginia, and Tennessee, are the only stores within my study where users took and posted images focused on the sport’s apparel. I would not be surprised, however, if this was not a more widespread occurrence spanning across the country that simply was not captured and posted by users. If by no other way, it may be possible for patrons to locate themselves geographically by determining the sport’s team represented in the specific Cracker Barrel.

![Northglenn, Colorado](s3-media1.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/UAa7Yh4R8lHMHmMmM2-fPng/o.jpg)

![Davenport, Iowa](s3-media1.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/g8ZwtxPoa6P9OCtT7pUww/o.jpg)

Figure 7. The overview and similarity of the Cracker Barrel “general store.” The image on the left show the store from Northglenn, Colorado and the image on the right show the store in Davenport, Iowa. Both images display very similar lines of products. Sources: M., Billy. General Store. Yelp!, 21 July 2013, s3-media1.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/UAa7Yh4R8lHMHmMmM2-fPng/o.jpg; M., Karla. General Store. Yelp!, 16 Sept. 2015, s3-media1.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/g8ZwtxPoa6P9OCtT7pUww/o.jpg
A final anomaly was a new style of Cracker Barrel that is present at the newest stores. This new model closely resembles the standard and well-known Cracker Barrel appearance, but it has a few new twists. The first store of the new model is located in Morganton, North Carolina and opened June 22, 2105 (“Cracker Barrel Opens”). All fourteen stores built since then follow the new model. Cracker Barrel’s main focus with their expansion has been westward, but they have continued opening stores in states with numerous locations already. Five of the fourteen new stores that Cracker Barrel opened since June 2015 are in Oregon and California which had no previously existing stores. Figure 9 highlights the various changes visitors can expect when visiting these stores. As evident from figure 9, the changes include a new wall color, a new way
to divide the restaurant, new furniture and flooring, and a slight change to the exterior of the building. In addition, the fireplace now extrudes from the wall out into the restaurant itself. Cracker Barrel states on their website that the new changes are designed to, “help the store team to more efficiently deliver the great food and friendly service Cracker Barrel guests have come to expect” (“FAQs”). These changes, while quite obvious, are not so far removed from the original design that the store is unrecognizable. The “must haves” such as the deer head and rifle above the mantle are still included in the new design. I first noticed the changes in the Coeur de Alene, Idaho and the North Las Vegas, Nevada stores as I was downloading images. Once I analyzed the other new stores on Yelp!, I turned to the Cracker Barrel website for an explanation. Again, the changes do not make the restaurant unrecognizable as a Cracker Barrel, but it does take those patrons who are very used to the usual look and feel by surprise.
Figure 9. The new design model for new Cracker Barrels as of 2015. All of these images show the North Las Vegas, Nevada location. (A) shows the new dividers that replaced the lattice work of the old model, (B) shows a slightly different shape to the store facade, (C) shows the restaurant overview with the new furniture and floors, and (D) shows how the fireplace is now extruded into the restaurant. Sources: A., Rob. New Model. Yelp!, 11 May 2017, s3-media1.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/3kN31NetRMZQaClbXrR51g/o.jpg; M. Michael. New Model. Yelp!, 26 Oct. 2016, s3-media4.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/ZEIjZ-mawaXuCrC3xx8OAA/o.jpg; P., Jessica. New Model. Yelp!, 9 Jan. 2017, s3-media3.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/ZdW_NGOKWIC986-nE7JIlw/o.jpg; P., Jessica. New Model. Yelp!, 9 Jan. 2017, s3-media1.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/0gx1aKaI7RcVzdjkK4oPhRA/o.jpg.

An important element but possible limitation of this analysis is its foundation of user generated images. As noted when analyzing sports teams’ apparel, this research analysis is limited to images that visitors felt compelled to take a picture of and then took the step of posting to Yelp!. While the images provide a very good general view of the stores, there might be other specific elements that are either rarely photographed or visitors felt no need to post to a social platform. For example, one common element, along with the deer head and rifle over the mantle, that Cracker Barrel states is in every store is a stoplight hanging over the restrooms. In all 746 images I never found one in which you can see, let alone focus on, a stoplight. This means I can neither confirm nor deny the presence of absence of this item. Another element that I did not see any images of were state-specific memorabilia in the general store areas. Figure 10 are pictures that I took while looking specifically for elements of the local area in the Fredericksburg, Virginia Cracker Barrel. This shows a whole bookshelf of items having to do with Washington D.C. (only 50 miles north of Fredericksburg), Virginia, or Fredericksburg. This again surprised me after never seeing anything like it in the hundreds of images I combed through. I again am unable to make generalizations but could make a conjecture that an area such as this exists in many of the other Cracker Barrels but people simply do not find it interesting enough to take and post images of it. This is definitely a limitation of the research methodology.
Figure 10. Local merchandise that I saw at the store in Fredericksburg, Virginia. This Cracker Barrel sells t-shirts, books, and other memorabilia that has to do with Virginia, Fredericksburg, and Washington DC, which is about 50 miles away, yet I never saw anything like this in the images I pulled from Yelp! Source: Photos taken by author.

The slight variations between the typical stores as well as this new model of design were surprising and unexpected. To answer my question, how does Cracker Barrel work out the tension of being a nationally recognizable, and therefore placeless, brand while still working to incorporate each store’s locality, I found that the stores differ very little and use the placelessness of the stores to create a uniform sense of place across all of its stores. While not completely placeless, Cracker Barrel is essentially placeless, with every store looking, for all intents and purposes, like every other store. Subtle variations in landscaping and décor do exist. However, the majority of the store’s features remain unchanged from one geographic location to the next, and very few elements of the store tie it to its location on the map; it is this locationless quality and standardization that makes it placeless.

Semiotic Analysis – the creation of place through theming

Since place is defined as an area that can be differentiated from everywhere else, be it for physical, social, or autobiographical reasons (Relph 1976, 45), the next question to consider is how are they created? The focus of this study is on the physical side of placemaking, which
can be analyzed through the use of visual methodologies. To physically create a place, the primary contributor is aesthetics; the place must have something distinct about it so that its identity is obvious to those interacting with it. Those involved with creating themed places arguably understand this better than anyone else. Beardsworth and Bryman (1999) state that it is the “ethnic art, decor, music, external façade, name, and various stereotyped signals” that those who construct themes use to create the sense of place (Muñoz & Wood 2009, 270). An important note here is that it is not just one of these but all of these working together that successfully create themed, and thus placefull, places. Cracker Barrel, as revealed in the study images, does just this creating a theme and thus a place with the look and feel of a 19th century country store.

The theming, and thus placemaking, of Cracker Barrel begins before the patrons walk through the door. Often the first part of the store they see are the roadway signs which feature an older gentleman in overalls sitting on a wooden chair leaning up against a barrel all positioned next to the text, “Cracker Barrel;” below this is the slogan, “Old Country Store.” Figure 11 depicts one of these signs. The use of an older figure, overalls, the wooden chair, and the barrel each are individual signs that could point to any number of places or time periods but they combine to elicit a sense of historic rural America. This combination of separate elements is a perfect example of how theming plays out. Overalls, for example, are a new, hip fashion trend and a barrel could easily be used to represent a vineyard, as figure 12 shows, but when the two are combined with the other symbols, in addition to the slogan, there is no longer any question as to what kind of place Cracker Barrel is intended to be.
Figure 11. The Cracker Barrel roadway sign is full of symbols that represent rural life in 19th century America and can be found on the side of many interstates across the country. Source: B., Lora. Sign. Yelp!, 26 Sept. 2017, s3-media4.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/cQHmkAI2wMFAqDAnhGJtyg/o.jpg

If there were any question of Cracker Barrel’s sense of place after looking only the roadway sign, it becomes even clearer when the visitor pulls into the parking lot. All Cracker Barrels across the country, aside from a few new stores with only slight modifications, have the same shape, wooden exterior, and large front porch welcoming visitors back in time. It is items
such as these that “anchor time” as discussed above, and thus just their presence immediately takes visitors not only to a specific geographic location – rural America – but to a specific time period too – 19th century rural America (Tuan 1977, 187). Again, it is these elements that help construct the theme of Cracker Barrel and thus the sense of place. The facade of the building is an iconic shape often seen in Old West towns which, again, add to the sense of place. The rocking chairs on the front porch is a quintessential element of a rural America. While this element, along with many other features included in the Cracker Barrel design, may not be historically accurate of country stores, Muñoz and Wood (2009) highlight that, “when selecting design atmospheric and aesthetic cues, reality engineers rely heavily on socially constructed, yet often inaccurate themes” (Muñoz & Wood 2009, 270). The historical accuracy is not a determining factor in whether or not patrons experience the desired sense of place. Along with rocking chairs, the front porches are adorned with old product signs, farm equipment, and barrels. Each Cracker Barrel has a checkers set and a wooden church pew bench as well. Just as with the roadway sign, all these elements work together to create the theme for which Cracker Barrel is famous.

The experience at Cracker Barrel is continuous throughout the entire store. Once walking through the door, visitors enter what is considered the “general store” portion. The products sold here are not old antiques, but it is possible to imagine any of these items existing in a country home. Along with general household products, the old fashioned candy and soda pull are not only visual sensors but also gustatory sensors, or are related to taste, designed to transport visitors back in time and continue the theming efforts of the Cracker Barrel designers. Many visitors who took and posted photos showing the candy and soda selection captioned the image with some kind of exclamation such as, “Dubble Bubble Gum!,” “How can you visit and not stock up on ['Thin Sticks Candy']?,” “Booyal!,” and “Awesome candy selection!!!” These items certainly resonate with the patrons. Not only do the individual products help build the theme and sense of place, but so too is the decor even within the “general store” portion. Every
Cracker Barrel in the study has various artifacts hanging from the ceiling. These include old Radio Flyer red wagons, wagon wheels, old buckets, shovels and sledge hammers, and parts of a horse harness, just to name a few. In the original design of the stores, these items were all tucked up in the rafters and relatively difficult to see. Another one of the bigger changes in the new model of the store is these were lowered and are therefore more visible. Cracker Barrel designed the checkout counter to reference historic general stores in which some of the products were displayed behind the counter. Figure 13 highlights this. Finally, the staff, also seen in figure 13 wear white or denim (not pictured here) button downs with aprons which again triggers the feelings of small town rural America. The combination of all of these signs - the products themselves, the decor, the staff's uniforms, etc. - together point back and reference this specific time and place in history which is the exact goal of Cracker Barrel’s theme.

Figure 13. The checkout counter in Cracker Barrel is big and looks similar to checkout counters I've seen in older movies where some of the merchandise is on display behind the counter. Employees, also pictured here, wear button downs and aprons. Source: W., Mitch. Checkout. Yelp!, 17 March 2013, s3-media2.fl.yelpcdn.com/bphoto/13L93CVhyssLIEh9A6anbg/o.jpg.
Even before visitors set foot in the actual restaurant, Cracker Barrel’s theme overwhelms them with signs that all build to the sense of place that Cracker Barrel tries so diligently to create. Once in the restaurant portion of Cracker Barrel, the sense of place only increases. This is due to the huge amount of individual artifacts, signs of this rural American theme, that layer one on top of another to drive home this desired theme. The four major elements of the restaurant that help create the theme are the artifacts on the walls, the fireplace, the table settings, and the food. The walls are covered almost entirely with various artifacts ranging from musical instruments to family portraits, from axes to washboards, and from old advertisements to fire hoses. If there is any item that someone might consider to be representative in any way of rural 19th century America, it is almost guaranteed to be hanging on the walls of a Cracker Barrel. In fact 219 images of the 746 total include the wall decor to some extent; these are impossible to ignore. Not every Cracker Barrel has the same set of artifacts, but as discussed above, what variation does exist is so minimal that the differences are negligible to the overall sense of place and theme. None of these artifacts alone represent all of what rural 19th century America was, but together the sense of place is undeniable.

The ties to this time period only increase when looking at the fireplace. The fireplace in every store is positioned just through the entrance way to the restaurant from the “general store.” It is a focal point of both the restaurant and Yelp! user comments as 21 images had comments about the fireplace. While this number seems low it is one of the top subjects within the comments as Figure 14 shows. In many parts of early America, meals were cooked in fireplaces and they provided heat before the invention of furnaces and were thus a central feature to every older home. Cracker Barrel not only has them for aesthetics but they use it as a supplementary heat source in the winter. While there are numerous restaurants that have fireplaces, it would be hard to find many, especially in a national chain, that is not gas powered but instead uses real wood. The big stone fireplaces in each restaurant are a significant factor in creating the theme. It is no surprise, then, that in the new model of store design, the fireplace
was made even more prominent as it is no longer flush with the front wall but rather protrudes out into the dining area. (See Figure 9D).

Figure 14. This word cloud shows the most used words in the user generated captions of the photos they took and posted. Not all the images had captions. “Cracker” and “Barrel” are not surprisingly the most used, but other words like “fireplace,” “country,” and “store” are used quite a bit as well. Source: Created with Jason Davies’s word cloud generator.

The table settings also play a large role in the theming of Cracker Barrels. Neither the table nor chairs are particularly elaborate, but instead are simple, wooden pieces of furniture that a visitor could easily have at their house or have a parent or grandparent with similar furniture. Each table has an old oil lamp, the typical advertisement for specials, and the infamous peg game. None of these items are that extravagant but it is their simplicity and predictability that drive home the sense of place. One visitor commented on a picture of the table setting, “Old timer oil lamp (my grandma had these around the house growing up),” revealing not only the generation who used these but also how this particular patron connected to the decor. The peg game drew lots of attention in the Yelp! images as 49 of the 746 images
were of just that. This is a game in which you move pegs throughout a triangle eliminating a peg with each move. The goal is to have as few pegs left at the end as possible. Yelp! users were very keen on showing how well they did. One Yelp! Reviewer summed up the Cracker Barrel experience quite simply: “Classics at Cracker Barrel. Coffee, Peg Game, and Oil Lamp. Plus a great meal for a great value” in the caption of a picture of said coffee, peg game, and oil lamp. To this user the sense of place comes maybe not entirely from these limited items but is certainly enhanced by them which is Cracker Barrel’s ultimate goal in its theming.

Finally, a critical component of the theming of Cracker Barrel is its cuisine. While I did not specifically download and code any images of food, I looked through thousands of images of food while gathering the images included in the study. If the rest of the store created, as it does through its careful theming, a distinct sense of place, but the food did not match the same style, Cracker Barrel would likely be unsuccessful. For Cracker Barrel, though, the theming extends to the menu, which is the same at every location across the country and features items such as Country Fried Steak, Mama’s Pancake Breakfast, and Chicken n’ Dumplins. The “Southern” diet is unique and very recognizable. As mentioned earlier it is dominated by pork, cornbread and grits, molasses, biscuits, turnip greens, sweet potatoes, chicken, rice, and catfish all of which are found on the menu at every Cracker Barrel across the country (Zelinsky 2011, 179). A key, however, to this cuisine, like any other cuisine established before the rise of the complex transportation systems we have today, is that it was heavily reliant on the specific geographic location and the “climate, soils, available flora and fauna, along with technology, economics, ethnic and cultural heritage, and cultural diffusion” of those areas in which it was established (Zelinsky 2011, 177). The transportation system in place today no longer limits the distribution of food, therefore, these menu items both add to the placelessness and placefullness of Cracker Barrel as they create the sense of being in “the South” but in fact exist in every location across the country. Moreover, it is these southern classics that may create a sense of place more than any other element of the chain.
With such a large variety of objects, and its menu of a variety home-cooked dishes, the theming of Cracker Barrel is designed so that no matter who walks through the doors, there is at least one if not many artifacts that will connect with visitors. Whether the store is reminiscent of a parents’ house, grandparents’ house, their own home, a rural vacation, a movie, a book, or just a drive through the countryside, Cracker Barrel uses artifacts, menu items, and architectural design elements together to create a very overt sense of place that is rural 19th century America. Other than “Cracker Barrel” the next most used word in the comments section of these photos was “country.” This alone is proof that Cracker Barrel is successful at creating the theme and sense of place expressed by its tagline: “Old Country Store.” Other comments such as, “Just like down South in my hometown, North Carolina!” on an image taken at the North Las Vegas, Nevada Cracker Barrel and “Nostalgic place, nice country down to earth place. Just like Mom makes it” both put this sense of place into words. While one key way to create a place is through the physical elements that construct it, it is the “ability [of the physical features] to translate an external phenomenon and link it to internal experience or cultural beliefs” (DeLyser 1999, 608) that provides a foundation for these autobiographical connections that keep visitors coming back.

Cracker Barrel’s mission

All the above results demonstrate how Cracker Barrels are actualized, but the analysis for this research project has thus far relied on visitors’ expressions of their experiences. What a visitor notices, and decides to post on social media, is distinct from the experience of those who were involved with Cracker Barrel’s design and theming. Thus, it is critical to understand Cracker Barrel’s stated goals. Cracker Barrel states on their website, “Making guests feel at home takes care, precision, and of course, lots of love. Every meal detail, no matter how small, counts,” (“FAQs”) showing that nothing is done without a specific reason. In regards to student research, their website states, “We get daily requests for research assistance and general
information. While we regret that we cannot respond to every request, we do hope the following information is helpful” (“FAQs”). Because of this, the official Cracker Barrel website will serve as the official voice of the brand for this research project. As far as a goal, the website states that the founder, Dan Evins, saw an unmet need for people traveling on the ever expanding highway system. His hope was to create a place where people could “stretch their legs, refuel, eat a consistently good meal at a good price” (“FAQs”). Evins wanted to create “a place that preserved the ingredients of country life to share with travelers on the road and families from nearby” (“FAQs”). In this way, the design of Cracker Barrel is meant to elicit similar feelings of coming home after a long day of traveling.

It is clear from Evins’ statement that the intended theme is a country lifestyle and the intended audience were both travelers and locals. Elaborating on the sense of place they hoped to construct, the website states, “Our brand is about being a home-away-from-home for everyone we welcome to our table. In some ways, it’s about coming home to the charm of a simpler time and place” (“FAQs”). The website reiterates this idea of “home-away-from-home” many, many times throughout the various webpages with only slightly different wording each time. It is clear that this is the sense of place Cracker Barrel works tirelessly to create. The other element in the founder’s goal is to be a place for both locals and travelers. As figure 15 shows, 518 Cracker Barrels of 637 total locations on the map are within 1.5 miles of an interstate highway for this exact reason. This creates a challenge, however, when trying to design and decorate a store that fosters personal connections with all the patrons yet also highlights the local area. The items that create a feeling of “home” vary at least to some extent across the country (Fowler & Lipscomb 2010, 107). This might help explain why there are snowshoes on the wall of the North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina store – just in case a weary traveler from Minnesota is passing through. This also helps to explain the sheer volume of artifacts present throughout the store: a wide array of “homey” items are needed to be able to connect with each visitor’s unique understanding of “home.”
Figure 15. This map highlights those Cracker Barrels that are directly off the primary interstates in the United States. 518 of the 637 Cracker Barrels on this map are located directly off (within 1.5 miles) interstate exits. The others are on other major secondary roads. Source: Author is producer.

It is here that the tension lies between placefullness and placelessness. The Cracker Barrel website states in relation to the visitor experience, “maintaining that experience throughout our over 600 locations requires a commitment to consistency and relentless repetition” (“FAQs”). Like any brand, Cracker Barrel wants their stores to be nationally recognizable, yet Cracker Barrel claims to also add a local twist to each store. In a news release, for example, they state, “Each Cracker Barrel location is uniquely decorated with real American artifacts, memorabilia and signage curated by a team of experts. The walls of Cracker Barrel stores reflect the nation’s rich history and by tailoring elements to the local community, offer a homespun appeal for local residents.” (“Cracker Barrel Old Country”). As I explained earlier, there are a few things that change state to state - such as the sport’s team whose gear
Cracker Barrel sells at each store or the bookshelf of Virginia and Fredericksburg focused memorabilia - but overall there is very little in my estimation that changes to reflect the local area or even the state. When looking for information on the North Las Vegas, Nevada store, which follows the new design model, I found the following statement: “In North Las Vegas, guests will see localized pieces that pay homage to the Old West, the Hoover Dam, the circus, and recreation on Lake Mead” (“Cracker Barrel Old Country”), claiming to have deliberately incorporated these specific elements of the local place. After already scanning through the images for this store and not seeing anything particularly noteworthy, I went back to the images looking specifically for these items. Even when knowing what themes to look for, I was still unable to recognize the elements that Cracker Barrel claimed to include in their attempt to “localize” the location. This shortcoming accentuates the placelessness of Cracker Barrel as even their explicit attempt to “localize” the stores results in only creating more of the same.

Discussion:

Cracker Barrel is an essentially placeless establishment in that very little changes store to store that in any obvious way reflects the local area, at least as evidenced by my study images. However, this does not stop it from being incredibly placefull. My research question asked, how does Cracker Barrel work out the tension between being the nationally recognized, uniform, and thus placeless, brand it is and still cultivate a strong sense of place? It is vitally important for a national brand to be easily recognized from the side of the road, yet Cracker Barrel attempts to connect its stores to each locale, a potentially futile attempt. The goal of being a dependable, consistent pit stop for travelers and locals alike creates much of this tension. The following discussion focuses on the trend toward placelessness and the role theming plays in creating both a sense of place and placelessness.

McDonald’s, Wendy’s, KFC, and Burger King were all founded between 1930 and 1969. Cracker Barrel, being founded in 1969, came to be right at the tail end of this era. As more and
more people took to the new roads including the interstate systems, these chain restaurants began opening for business. Dan Evins, founder of Cracker Barrel, saw these restaurant chains and noted travelers lacked a place specifically located on the interstate systems, as opposed to population centers, to “stretch their legs, refuel, and eat a consistently good meal at a good price” (“FAQs”). So this is what he built. Evins, however, played right into the “McDonald's style of operation” where concerns for rationality, speed, and efficiency are of utmost importance (Ritzer 1983, 371). Ritzer (1983) in his article titled, “The McDonaldization of Society,” states that in this model, “speed, convenience, and standardization have replaced the flair of design and creation in cooking, the comfort of relationships in serving, and the variety available in choice” (Ritzer 1983, 371).

In assessing Cracker Barrel in this framework, it is obvious that the Cracker Barrel formula is incredibly standardized. Even the way in which the stores vary from one another (sports team gear, vegetation, and some products in the “general store”) follows a specific pattern. Cracker Barrel owns a warehouse where “reality engineers” curate and store artifacts from across the country so that when another Cracker Barrel opens, they can package up the desired sense of place and ship it off to wherever the new store is located (“FAQs”). Just because the clear sense of place abounds in a Cracker Barrel store, does not mean it avoids the trap of placelessness into which many restaurants, hotels, malls, etc. all fall. Standardization at Cracker Barrel exists past the decor as well. The menus are highly standardized across the country as are the experiences with waiters and waitresses. Ritzer (1983) spends a good amount of time discussing the substitution of humans for robots, the ultimate standardization, which at first I saw no connection to with Cracker Barrel. I then realized that while there is not an actual robot wait staff, there are very specific ways Cracker Barrel employees treat customers. The Cracker Barrel website states, “To this day, our training and management development programs stress the importance of delivering the experience that people expect when they come into Cracker Barrel” (“FAQs”), revealing the importance of this standardization in their
employees’ training. An extreme example of this is comes from the fast-food chain, Chick-fil-a where whenever a customer says, “Thank you,” the employees is guaranteed to say, “My pleasure.” While these employees like Cracker Barrel employees are not machines, the regulations at establishments focused standardization, predictability, and consistency force them to, for all intents and purposes, act as robots.

Along with standardization, Cracker Barrel hopes to be a relatively quick stop, as they know many of their patrons are traveling and arrive with an expectation of a quick meal. This leads to what Ritzer (1983) referred to as the “lack of variety in choice” and loss of “creation in cooking” (Ritzer 1983, 371). The menus, again, while change slightly from season to season, only change across the entire chain when they alter the menu. The chefs at each Cracker Barrel are not experimenting and offering new items on a regular basis. Where Cracker Barrel does slightly better than many of the other fast-food chains is in providing its patrons with choices. At McDonald’s they do not ask the patrons how they would like their burger cooked, whereas this kind of customization is available in Cracker Barrels. The final element of Ritzer’s (1983) warning is the loss of relationships in serving. This is where Cracker Barrel seems to draw the line and stays above the McDonaldization of society. While they state on the website numerous times that friendly service and Southern hospitality are to be expected and achieved in every store, this in itself creates a standardized experience as mentioned above. Their ability to put a positive twist on this standardization making it a consistently positive and caring experience is what sets Cracker Barrel apart. Cracker Barrel even conjectures that it is this paradox that leads to their success as they write, “Our success ultimately depends on our store employees providing excellent food, friendly service and quality merchandise in a warm and inviting atmosphere – all on a daily basis” (“FAQs”). This formula of standardization to experience, convenience in location, and speed of service (to the best of their abilities), has served Cracker Barrel well in its almost 50 years.
Theming is an essential element to Cracker Barrel. This is how they create a sense of place while existing as an essentially placeless place. Theming, however, is one of the primary reasons Cracker Barrel is placeless. Wood and Muñoz (2007) write, “Themed environments seem to flourish by giving a very expected, standardized, and controlled environment” (Wood & Muñoz 2007, 243) effectively connecting theming and placelessness and providing a basis from which to work out this paradox. Theming creates both standardized experiences and placefullness thus proving that it is not a one or the other - placelessness or placefullness - situation, but that it is the interaction between them that has provided Cracker Barrel with so much success.

Studies on theming are often an assessment of authenticity (Muñoz & Wood, 2009; Wood & Muñoz, 2007). This study, instead, uses theming to understand how Cracker Barrel creates the sense of place that is so present in each store. Places, to reiterate, are the physical features of a location that differentiate that space from any other as well as the emotional connections people have with a site. Successful theming is essentially creating the physical half of this definition in hopes that the physical place will elicit an emotional connection to the place thus creating an even greater sense of place. Cracker Barrel relies on the specifically selected artifacts and other visual elements of the stores to pull out a feeling of “hominess.” Fowler and Lipscomb (2015) make it evident that creating a home or sense of home is a continual and ever evolving process (Fowler & Lipscomb 2015, 101-102). Phillips et al. (2011) too stress the amount of time it takes to become attached to any place let alone a home (Phillips et al. 2011, 77). So how then - and why - does Cracker Barrel create a “home-away-from-home” when it seems almost impossible? The time it takes to eat one meal is so short compared to the time it takes to cultivate a feeling of home. But here Cracker Barrel uses their placelessness in their favor because once a patron has been to one Cracker Barrel, they have essentially been to all of them. Thus, when a visitor returns to Cracker Barrel, regardless of whether or not it is the same location, they are returning to the same “place.” Cracker Barrel achieves this singular
sense of place across all stores by creating an essentially placeless place, full of specifically chosen artifacts that point back to the same place. The exact place Cracker Barrel references is, however, debatable. While it is obviously a rural Southern area, determining exactly “whose” South Cracker Barrel mimics, be it rural Tennessee, Louisiana, Texas, etc., is beyond the scope of this study. In addition to the consistency between stores, the lack of an exact referent again adds to the placelessness of Cracker Barrel. Cracker Barrel stands apart from other fast food chains in their goal of creating a “home-away-from-home” which requires not only consistency but the inclusion of items that are very relatable to the patrons. If consistency was the only requirement McDonald’s would feel every bit as homey as Cracker Barrel. Cracker Barrel goes one step further and incorporates theming into their establishment, placing elements from all areas of life such as fishing poles, irons, and portraits on the walls hoping everyone who walks through the door will connect to at least one of these artifacts their own homes or the homes of their parents or grandparents. Cracker Barrel also relies on the socially constructed theme of country living as being naturally “homey” so that even those who have never, for example, left the heart of New York City might walk into a Cracker Barrel and feel comfortable and at home. This is how Cracker Barrel, an essentially placeless place, creates such a sense of place that the lack of local flair does not hinder patrons from feeling at home.

Conclusion:

The whole family climbs back in the car; only a few more hours until they arrive at Grandma’s. Their recent stop in the warmth of Cracker Barrel reminded them fondly of Grandma’s house and leaves them feeling refreshed. While Cracker Barrel is not in fact home, familiarity with the idea of what a rural 19th century American home was like bridges the gap between their actual homes and themed representation of one that this store represents. Cracker Barrel’s meticulous use and combination of artifacts to craft the placefullness that overflows from the stores creates such a strong sense of place that, even their shortcomings in
incorporating local culture and dizzying uniformity which leads to the essential placelessness of the brand, ultimately does not detract from the sense of place visitors feel as soon as they pull into the parking lot. Placelessness, an attribute often used to describe the unremarkable strip malls and office parks of the world, in this case is the exact feature that creates the ultimate placefulness, evoking and re-evoking a sense of home that travelers and locals alike come in waves to experience. It is this standardization of experiences that creates reliability, familiarity, and ease - all elements of a happy home.

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