Sacred Topographies: The Rhetorical Construction of Grandfather Mountain as a Sacred Place

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SACRED TOPOGRAPHIES: THE RHETORICAL CONSTRUCTION OF GRANDFATHER MOUNTAIN AS A SACRED PLACE

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Communication Studies

The University of Memphis

December 2023
Abstract

This study interrogates the ways wilderness spaces become understood as sacred places through rhetoric, using Grandfather Mountain in Western North Carolina as a case study. Using close reading, rhetorical field methods, and social media content analysis, this dissertation examines the rhetorical interpretation, ritualization, contestation, and commodification of wilderness as it comes to be understood and interacted with as sacred. This study offers three significant and interrelated interventions. First, it interrogates how rhetoric works to designate a sacred place. While certain places are understood to be sacred because of their spiritual, historical, or social significance or their natural ecological uniqueness, what can be elucidated is how notions of sacredness circulate and recirculate through discourse and spatiality. Second, this study explores the political, social, and cultural consequences of a place being rhetorically constructed as sacred. Third, this study examines the politics of place and place-making by closely interrogating ideas of sacredness and place, particularly in the context of how nature becomes designated as valuable in its own terms rather than in the capitalist terms of commodification or colonial imperialism.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor and mentor, Dr. Christi Moss, for her guidance and support throughout this project. Christi, you are my mentor, my colleague, and my friend. It is always through conversations with you that I develop clarity and vision for my own work, a demonstration of your skilled mentorship and creativity. Early in our relationship, you said, “I don’t want to make you another me; I want to help you become your best you.” You’ve made good on that promise, and I’m deeply grateful for your affirming guidance.

I have had the great privilege of working with an incredible committee of scholars. Dr. Tony de Velasco, you are the best teacher I have ever had, despite never being in your classroom, thanks to a global pandemic. Your talent as an educator transcends time and space, and your pedagogy has deeply influenced mine. Your many careful reads of my work and our subsequent conversations always leave me inspired, focused, curious, and energized. Dr. David Stephens, you found time to meet with me in conference hotel lobbies from Seattle to New Orleans to ensure this project reached its potential. So much of the scholarship that holds this study together came from your recommendations and our discussions. Dr. Ron Roach, thank you for taking on a Memphis girl with a fascination with Appalachia. You offered to take me to Scotland, and when geopolitics led to the cancelation of that trip, you brought Scotland to me by overseeing an immersive summer full of ethnographic research of Scottish heritage events that deeply influenced my thinking about heritage, history, memory, and place.

Thanks are due to my family, who patiently and lovingly supported me through this project. To my Mom and Dad, who spent years telling me that school was my job, thank you for prioritizing my education—message received. Sean, Lucy, and Noah, you three are my inspiration. Thank you for the sacrifices each of you made during this journey—we did this
together. Being your mother is the greatest gift of my life, and nothing I’ll ever do will compare to the pride and joy the three of you bring me. Chris, thank you for your unending affection, patience, encouragement, and support. It is your love and our partnership that make everything else in my life possible.

Finally, I’m indebted to the colleagues and friends who have cheered me on and supported me every step of the way. I am especially grateful for my dearest Kim Warren-Cox and Catherine Pritchard Childress for their enthusiastic support and friendship.
“A lot happens on a mountain. It hails, and the winds come up, and it rains and snows. The sun gets very hot, clouds cross over, animals shit and piss on the mountain, and so do people. People leave their trash, and other people clean it up. Many things come and go on this mountain, but it just sits there.”

--Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*

“There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places.”

--Wendell Berry, *Given*
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I carefully ease myself off the ski lift at the top of Sugar Mountain in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western North Carolina. It is clear that I am a beginner as I struggle with one foot strapped into my snowboard and the other awkwardly propelling me forward and out of the way of the more experienced skiers who gracefully exit behind me. They are far down the mountain before I manage to strap my free foot onto my board. I am new to the North Carolina High Country and intend to maximize mountain living by learning how to enjoy all seasons here, including the cold, snowy winter. Bill, an experienced skier, and local friend, hops off the lift and stops to chat. I joke with him about the many bruises I’ve acquired during my first week as a snowboarder and he offers his best advice, “Just remember, no matter how good you get the mountain always wins. Every time, the mountain is going to win.” He smiles and skis ahead of me, leaving me contemplating his wisdom as I gingerly inch my way down the icy slope.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Since time immemorial, humans have been drawn to the mountain now known as Grandfather Mountain. Archeologists believe it was a regular stop on the seasonal foraging cycle of the Paleo-Indians.1 The Cherokee called it Tanawha, meaning “fabulous eagle,” representing the resting place of the most powerful spirit in Cherokee mythology. The ridgelines of Tanawha were sacred to these first inhabitants, who found quartz crystals and plants used for both medicinal and spiritual practices on its peaks. It was renamed Grandfather Mountain in the late 1790s by pioneers who recognized the profile of an old man on one of the cliffs.2 Throughout the 1700s and into the mid-1800s, several explorers, scientists, and naturalists traversed the mountain, including Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto, English naturalist Mark Catesby, and French botanist Andre Michaux. By 1838, land grants, epidemics, and ultimately the Trail of Tears resulted in the Cherokee people being forcibly relocated west, and those who remained were contained to a reservation 120 miles away in the Qualla Boundary in Cherokee, North Carolina. Sadly, much of our opportunity to understand the relationship between the Indigenous

people and Tanawha has been lost to time, capitalist exploitation, and colonization. However, it is clear that Tanawha was a spiritually significant and sacred site to the Cherokee, and the notion of the mountain as sacred has persisted, transformed, evolved, and persists today.

Furthermore, Grandfather Mountain has become one of the most iconic and frequently visited sites in the Southern Appalachian region. Many people who come to visit relocate to my neighborhood, which is located less than five miles from Grandfather Mountain, on a mountain full of vacation rental homes. Every morning, as I walk my dog, I pick up trash, trash that was left primarily by tourists who had come to visit the ecological and geological wonder that is Grandfather Mountain. They come to hike, ski, and white-water raft. They come for the views and the fall foliage. They come to connect one another, themselves, and nature. And hopefully, they leave with a deepened appreciation for the place. Simultaneously, however, they take, destroy, pollute, erode, and otherwise harm. And, of course, in many ways, I am one of them. I commute daily through these mountains, leaving a trail of emissions behind me. I recognize that my love for the mountain is what brought me here, and my presence, in ways that I am aware of and in ways I cannot fathom, disturbs the delicate ecological balance of the place that I love. This tension propels me to consider the ways humans think of and behave in this diverse, delicate, and, at times, treacherous mountain ecosystem that has for millennia been considered a sacred place.

It is the perception of the mountain as sacred that has led to its protection and preservation; however, that same designation as a sacred place commodifies Grandfather Mountain and the experiences associated with it in such a way that leads to abuse and overuse. The sacredness of the place is what preserves and destroys, it seems. In his book on sacredness, Gordon Lynch touches on this tension when he argues that “we cannot assume that acting out our
sacred passions produces genuinely moral action” and encourages reflection on the intersection of sacred ideals and practical action. The ambiguity of the term “sacred” is made evident as visitors behave in seemingly contradictory ways, like littering from their SUV windows as they drive through my neighborhood while treating the sacred place of Grandfather Mountain with reverence and care. Importantly, these two places are geographically and ecologically similar but rhetorically constructed very differently. Thus, this ambiguity of the rhetorical construction of and deployment of the sacredness of place is the focus of this study.

1.1 The Ambiguities of Sacredness

One logical starting place in a discussion of the rhetoric of the sacred and Grandfather Mountain is the influential and interconnected ideas of American identity, wilderness, and the rhetorical construction of Appalachia. What emerges here, in short, is that American identity, and Appalachian identity in particular, is inextricably tied to notions of wilderness, that wilderness signifies a spiritual authenticity and national identity in the contemporary American imagination, and that in an increasingly modern world, Appalachia is frequently represented as a region in which access to primitivism, wilderness, and the sacred authenticity it represents is still accessible. This is one way we can account for the romantic pull the Appalachian region

has on the American psyche, the booming tourism industry that has emerged from that
fascination, and the paradoxes and tensions the tourism industry brings with it to the region and
those who live in it.7

There are three primary ambiguities inherent in the designation of a place as sacred. One
is the paradox that when a place is deemed sacred, it becomes protected, preserved, and codified
in a variety of ways while also becoming commodified. We see this in the establishment of
national and state parks, commemorative sites, monuments, and religious sites. This designation
of something as sacred, rare, and valuable acts to increase its visibility, popularity, and
desirability, thereby commodifying it. For example, this problem is foregrounded as we see the
National Park Service enact lottery and timed entrance policies. Additionally, we can thank the
sacredness of wilderness for the establishment of National and State Parks and the biodiversity
their establishment has preserved. At the same time, it is because of the sacredness of wilderness
places marked by State and National Parks that millions of Americans flock to bear witness to
the wonders of the wild in these parks, leaving emissions, trash, and far more than footprints
behind. Gordon Lynch notes how sacredness is always situated and complex, noting,

In the moment of powerful identification with a sacred moral sentiment, we cannot at the
same time maintain a critical understanding of its historically specific nature without that
sentiment dissipating. Yet recognizing that these sacred forms are not timeless but
grounded in social and cultural histories is still important if we are to avoid an
unreflexive acting out of our sacred commitments in ways that may do much more harm
than good.8

This tension is seen in the ways ecotourism serves as both a catalyst for preservation and a

source of destruction.

7. Martin, *Tourism in the Mountain South*.
A second paradox in the notion of a sacred place is an extension of that commodification and has to do with the way access to a place becomes limited, restricted, and governed by rules, norms, and policies. Who has access to a sacred place becomes a site of dominance, control, and oppression. Raka Shome argues spatiality contributes fundamentally to social formations of power, class, and race. She notes,

Space is not merely a backdrop, though, against which the communication of cultural politics occurs. Rather, it needs to be recognized as a central component in that communication. It functions as a technology—a means and medium—of power that is socially constituted through material relations that enable the communication of specific politics.

Acknowledging the spatial materiality of power complicates the issue by raising questions about the origins and consequences of dominant conceptions of who belongs in a sacred space. Shome puts it this way, “these [spatial] relations themselves must be seen as active components in the unequal and heterogeneous production and distribution of identities, politics, and actions.”

Rhetorically constructing a place as a sacred place has consequences for who does or does not belong there. This becomes particularly relevant when we consider the centrality of sacred wilderness to American identity.

The third paradox inherent in the sacred place extends this even further by foregrounding how once a place is recognized as sacred, the performances and displays within that place become governed by explicit rules and, importantly, disciplined within social norms and expectations. In their study of memory places, Dickinson, Blair, and Ott note that these sites are often set apart, distinguished from the every day, and sites to which people travel. That touristic

nature of the memory place creates expectations and necessitates a particular set of performances on the part of audiences. They note the act of visiting a memory place is consummatory and invited by the very existence of such a place. This set-apart nature of the memory place cultivates scripted performances and displays within it. Sacred places also bring with them social scripts, expectations, and patterns of performance and display.

These tensions of preservation and commodification, demand and access, and clear cultural scripts of performance and display create and complicate the rhetorical construction of the sacred place. It is the romantic, primitive wilderness that defines the mythos of Appalachia and Grandfather Mountain and that creates the demand for convenient access and modern accommodations. It is that same mythic pull that simultaneously threatens and preserves both the land and the local culture. As rhetoric works to designate a place as sacred, it also cultivates demand for it, thus endangering it. It also shapes who does and does not belong in it, shapes it into a technology of power, and disciplines the performances and displays of experience within it.

1.2 Justification & Rationale

This study offers three significant and interrelated interventions. First, it will interrogate how rhetoric works to designate a sacred place. While certain places are understood to be sacred because of their spiritual, historical, or social significance or their natural ecological uniqueness, what can be elucidated is how notions of sacredness circulate and recirculate through discourse and spatiality. Conceptualizing a place as sacred has rhetorical force and material consequences; however, there is scant literature on how places come to be understood as and interacted with as sacred sites, or on how we might define a sacred place. J. Christian Spielvogel offers a critical examination of how the National Park Service works to interpret and create meaning at Civil
War Battlefields by positioning them as sacred sites through photography and other forms of commemoration and representation. This sacredness, he argues, emanates from the collective understanding of the Civil War’s moral significance and a narrative of the war that is anchored in emancipation and reconciliation. Here, Spielvogel offers a glimpse at how sacredness might be rhetorically constructed in interpretive sites. Steve Brie, Jenny Daggers, and David Torevell’s edited volume, *Sacred Space: Interdisciplinary Perspectives within Contemporary Contexts* offers a collection of essays on the significance of the sacred place from primarily historical and religious studies perspectives. Similarly, Robert Knight approaches the concept of the sacred place from an architectural perspective. Gordon Lynch argues for the contextually specific, applied, situated understanding of sacredness that rhetoric might offer by advocating for studies that aim “to understand particular social and cultural contexts, using a continually refined model of the sacred to interpret them, with the aim of discovering the kinds of social interaction that result from particular sacred commitments.” This study answers Lynch’s call and will enter these conversations of the sacred place from a uniquely rhetorical standpoint, with a special focus on the sacredness of wilderness places in American culture.

Second, this study will explore the consequences of a place being rhetorically constructed as sacred. Especially pertinent to this study is the notion that regions and places are rhetorical constructions that function in material ways. Powell describes regionalism as “not a thing so much as a cultural history, an ongoing rhetorical and poetic construction.” We might consider

region less in terms of a specific location and more in terms of evolving and dynamic relationships between places, people, narratives, histories, and mythologies. Moss and Inabinet note that regions are inherently rhetorical; “Regions are manifestly persuasive, without civic legitimation processes that nations enjoy.”

Thinking of a region in this way frees it from geographical, historical, and disciplinary boundaries and instead situates ideas of place as fluid, dynamic, and complex social constructs. With this paradigm, approaching the study of place rhetorically foregrounds questions of how regions came to be commonly imagined in a particular way, how those conceptions fit into larger discursive landscapes, and how all of these things work together to shape experience and interpretation. In this particular case, we might think about how our sacred passions for nature and wilderness are cultivated and reified, as well as reflect upon the effects, both positive and negative, of those sacred passions.

Critical regionalism adopts a critical orientation toward the rhetorical construction of place by recognizing place-making as an act of cultural politics. Initially conceptualized as an emphasis on localized practices as a counterforce to neoliberalism and globalization, it also serves to situate regions within larger economic, political, and cultural systems, operating in the tension of situated, local knowledge and broader national or global systems and structures. Moss and Inabinet argue, “Simply elevating the region against the global without the critique and promise of phronesis (situational judgment) is a mistake.” Important to this paradigm is the understanding that conceptions about a particular place are not essential qualities of topography, geography, population, or history so much as they are ongoing discourses that serve certain groups’ interests at the expense of others and that might be contested. In Powell’s terms, it is the

“deliberate use of region as a way to envision and even critique relationships among people and places and envision better alternatives.” A critical regionalist framework denaturalizes region and situates it as rhetorical—a product of human thought more than geography. Therefore, this study offers an intervention into the critical regionalist framework by interrogating how a place comes to be understood as sacred and what the social, racial, economic, political, and ecological consequences are when a place is designated as sacred.

Third, this study examines the politics of place and place-making by closely interrogating ideas of sacredness and place, particularly in the context of how nature becomes designated as valuable in its own terms rather than in the capitalist terms of commodification. This has direct implications for environmental activism efforts. The 2023 protests in Atlanta, Georgia, against the proposed Public Safety Training Facility, known as “Cop City,” provide an excellent example of a cultural moment this work might inform. The training facility is to be built in the South River Forrest, which had previously been part of a city plan to create a green space and recreational area for an underserved part of Atlanta. However, after the city council approved the plan, the local government made a deal to lease the land to the Atlanta Police Foundation instead. In the two years since the project plan was released, protesters have camped in the forest, insisting on its inherent value as a natural space and the importance of access to this natural space for underserved citizens of Atlanta. These protests recently violently escalated, resulting in five arrests, the death of activist Manuel Esteban Paez Terán, and domestic terrorism charges against protesters. In this situation, a nuanced understanding of how a place comes to be understood as sacred and what the consequences are for that understanding could be especially valuable. Edwin Bernbaum’s work addresses how the notion of sacredness, when applied to

20. Powell, Critical Regionalism, 10.
natural or wilderness places, acts as a powerful motivator for environmental conservation. He writes, “It makes the object of reverence priceless so that putting a monetary value on it can even appear to be a form of desecration.” This work extends and nuances Bernbaum’s argument within the specific context of Appalachian outdoor tourism and the myriad of tensions and complexities that come with it.

The aims of this study, then, are to interrogate how rhetoric works to designate a place as sacred, to critically examine how the rhetorical designation of a place as sacred works to script and discipline who belongs there and what behaviors are expected or acceptable, and elucidate the possibilities of sacred place making for environmental activism. The unique political, economic, ecological, cultural, and historical significance of Grandfather Mountain provides an especially relevant and interesting text via which to explore the constraints and promise of the sacred place.

1.3 Literature Review

It has long been established that place can be understood as rhetorical, and while the studies on the rhetoricity of place are increasing in number, the majority of these focus on the rhetorical force of constructed places, such as museums, monuments, and other built sites. Instead, this study begins with the land itself, and while the Grandfather Mountain museum, shops, zoo, and built surroundings are pertinent to and included in this research, the perceived sacredness of the mountain itself is what is central. Jenny Rice notes that “appeals to and performances of regionalism are particular (re)makings of patterns within specific material sites. For this reason, regional rhetorics are more specific and strategic instances of how topos help to

create space.”23 What Rice is asking, essentially, is what do people do in region and through rhetorical appeals to region, and how might these questions identify patterns within specific rhetorical sites.

Rice offers four basic premises of regional rhetoric, beginning with the understanding that region is a rhetorical interface—a site of contestation and negotiation between the global and the local. It is through regionalism and regional discourse that the global becomes immediate for most people. A second premise is that it is less about the conceiving of regions as specific geographic locations and more effective to consider region as a set of relationships, descriptions, articulations, conceptions, histories, and rhetorical acts of place-making. The third premise Rice puts forth is an extension of this as she suggests that regions be considered as folds rather than landscapes and spaces that serve as a backdrop to human action. By separating the concept of region from territory, we open up the capacity to see region as a rhetorical construction that is in constant states of change, evolution, and negotiation. The fourth and final premise Rice puts forth is that regions are strategic, which is what makes them rhetorical. She argues that regionalism is essentially a rhetorical performance that is often perceived as natural or inherent.

Greg Dickinson argues that rhetorical investigations of space and place might replace the term text with texture, accounting for the complex, dynamic, non-linear layering that constitutes any place or space.24 Notions of context, borders, temporality, audience, and consequence are disrupted in the study of place as audience members become part of the landscape or built environment, histories inform and influence current interpretations and expectations, and notably, the object of study amounts to a complex “ever-changing present that is created of past

and future.”\textsuperscript{25} Central to Dickinson’s argument is the idea that place is not a static thing but rather something that is always evolving and changing, and it is through the practicing and performing of place that it becomes, “Moving through place practices the place, taking up its resources, enunciating them, remaking them, inventing new possibilities, closing off others; these are the spatial trajectories that (un)make space and place.”\textsuperscript{26} This upends notions of agency as the site of articulation is cohabitated by bodies, spatiality, topography, and ecology.

Blair, Dickinson, and Ott put forth the argument that the intersection of rhetoric, place, and memory is especially relevant as place serves to shape memory in material ways and memory places are especially powerful rhetorically.\textsuperscript{27} Their edited volume challenges readers to critically examine the cultural politics and rhetorical force of sites of commemoration and collective memory by asking explicitly in their introduction, “What would be the value, and what would be forfeited, if memory studies were to add an additional assumption to its inventory—that public memory is rhetorical?”\textsuperscript{28} A number of scholars have answered this call, critically examining the rhetoricity of museums and commemoration sites.\textsuperscript{29} Others have extended this

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Dickinson, “Space, Place,” 308.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Dickinson, “Space, Place,” 301.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, Eds. \textit{Places of Public Memory}.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Dickinson, Blair, and Ott, \textit{Places of Public Memory}, 22.
\end{itemize}
concern for the rhetorical force of place in sites of protest, region and place-making, landscapes, and nation branding.

In their introduction to *Places of Public Memory*, Dickinson, Blair, and Ott delineate characteristics of memory places that offer a useful starting place in defining sacred places. They begin by noting that memory places signify special importance and become an object of attention. Memory places are recognizable and set apart from other places, much like sacred places. They note, “This signifier [the memory place] commands attention because it announces itself as a marker of collective identity. It is an object of desire because of its claim to represent, inspire, instruct, remind, admonish, exemplify, and/or offer the opportunity for affiliation and public identification.” They go on to note another characteristic of the memory place, like the sacred place, is that it necessitates a particular set of performances on the part of audiences. They argue there is a touristic element to the memory place and that further distinguishes the experience of memory place from the everyday. Finally, they argue that places signified as “memory places” are anchored in collective investments in “authenticity.” While we might categorize memory places as sacred places, not all sacred places are memory sites. Many are


anchored in religion or nature, for example, rather than in history. It might be fruitful, then, to turn our attention toward scholarship in those areas.

Edwin Bernbaum notes, “Of all the various kinds of natural sacred sites, the largest and most comprehensive are sacred mountains.” He argues that the ecological and biodiversity of mountains have the potential to solidify identification with the various ways people revere features of nature. He notes three primary ways in which mountains function as sacred. First, they have centrality in myths, beliefs, and practices. In the case of Grandfather Mountain, its indigenous name of Tanawha reflects the first known story of its sacredness, as the resting place and home of the Great Eagle, a most revered spirit. Second, Bernbaum notes mountains become sacred due to the sanctity of sites they contain such as groves, monasteries, waterfalls, or temples. Grandfather Mountain has its own version of this, too, ranging from the sacredness of McRae Meadows to the Scottish-American community to the noteworthy peaks at its summit to its kitschy but iconic swinging mile-high bridge which has become a pilgrimage for many. Third, Bernbaum argues mountains become sacred sites as people in modern societies seek them out for spiritual and artistic inspiration and renewal, seeing them as “embodiments of values central to the character or spirit of a culture or nation.” In other work, Bernbaum notes themes in the nearly universal understanding of mountains as sacred, pointing out their significance as high places of power, dwellings of deities or deities themselves, paradises, gardens, homes of the ancestors, sites of revelation or transformation, and sources of water, food, or even supernatural blessings. Importantly, Bernbaum cautions against reducing the meaning of mountains to any particular set of archetypes, noting how they function as evolving, multivalent symbols used by

different groups in different ways. This sociological approach to the sacredness of mountains provides important context for a rhetorical examination of sacredness at Grandfather Mountain.

1.4 Research Questions

This study asks four questions about the relationship between sacredness, place, and rhetoric in the context of Grandfather Mountain.

1. How do we define a sacred place?

Philosophers and religious scholars have grappled with defining the term sacred. Andrzej Derdziuk offers a definition of “the sacred” as constituting “a symbol, which is cognizable by the senses and connects a human being with the divine reality.” He goes on to argue that one might understand the sacred via its ontological otherness, which marks it as “worthy of respect and, at the same time, not to be subjected to any interference by unauthorized individuals and institutions.” We might consider the sacred based on its opposition to the ordinary, secular, and profane and define it, at least in part, by its mystery. Émile Durkheim, who was deeply concerned with the power of sacred meanings for societies, echoes this definition by noting that “By definition, sacred beings are separate beings. Their principal characteristic is that there is a break in continuity between them and profane beings.” He later writes, of the sacred and the profane, “In all the history of human thought there exists no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another.” Based on these two interpretations of sacredness, a beginning definition of a sacred place might be a place of liminality where the sacred and the profane might meet.

Later, Durkheim noted two claims regarding sacredness. First, that systems of meaning-making were not rooted in rationality but rather in an emotional understanding of how the world related to objects that were regarded as sacred in that society, and second, that sacred beliefs and rituals played a central role in expressing self-understanding but also in binding members of a group together into a sense of shared morality. He believed the route to understanding how societies work was through careful observation of the sacred meanings societies attributed to things, and the behaviors that followed.\textsuperscript{41}

Durkheim points toward access to the sacred with his notion of the negative cult, or the act of eliminating and distancing oneself from the profane as a condition of access to the sacred. Derdziuk goes on to note that “The sacred has a value in itself. It represents a determined value on the religious and cultural plane, thus, it has impact on human society and obliges individuals to discover another dimension of their existence.”\textsuperscript{42} Derdziuk’s work focuses on religious notions of the sacred, and there are many examples of Grandfather Mountain being perceived as a religious place, beginning with the Cherokee and continuing through the Gospel Singin’ on the Mountain event, The Highland Games Kirkin’ of the Tartans and Flower of the Field Services, and the countless weddings, disposition of cremains, and other spiritual ceremonies hosted on the mountain each year, not to mention the countless individual spiritual experiences that occur on the mountain.

Finally, Gordon Lynch argues for a rhetorical definition of sacredness, that we might in this study extend to the idea of a sacred place. He writes that the sacred is a particular kind of communication. It is through talking, feeling, and acting together in meaningful ways that people experience fundamental, sacred realities. The sacred is thus made up of communicative acts—which might be symbolic actions, the expression of

\textsuperscript{41} Durkheim, \textit{Elementary Forms of Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology}.
\textsuperscript{42} Derdziuk, “The Necessity of Demonstrating Respect for the Sacred,” 23.
collective emotions, as well as more obvious linguistic forms—about those realities that are experienced as exerting an unquestionable moral claim on our lives.\textsuperscript{43}

\textbf{2. How is the concept of sacredness deployed as a mode of argument in place-based controversy?}

Key to Derdziuk’s definition is the notion that the sacred demands reverence and protection. Durkheim echoes this definition, noting that as “sacred beings” undergo periods of crisis and distress, “man cannot watch these occurrences as an indifferent spectator.”\textsuperscript{44} This trait of sacredness might be coupled with Perelman and Olbrechtys-Tyteca’s notion of the locus of quality, which anchors a hierarchy of judgment and action to qualitative considerations such as a location’s unique qualities or fragility.\textsuperscript{45} Often deployed in environmental rhetoric is the locus of the irreparable, which is an appeal based on the notion that protective action is imperative because non-action results in irreparable damage and loss.\textsuperscript{46} Similarly, the locus of the unique situates appeals in arguments of exclusivity and the locus of the precarious anchor arguments in notions of fragility. What all of these rhetorical appeals have in common is a concern for action and protection of something worthy, revered, or sacred. This line of reasoning is made evident in at least two significant controversies relating to Grandfather Mountain that will be examined in this dissertation. The first is whether the mountain should be publicly or privately owned and the second is the route of the Blue Ridge Parkway. In both debates, the idea that the mountain was sacred became a foundation of arguments on opposing sides. Supporters argued that the place was so sacred that it must be publicly owned so that it could be protected and made accessible to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{43} Lynch, \textit{On the Sacred}, 34-35.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Durkheim, \textit{Selected Writings}, 234.
\end{itemize}
all. The opposition argued, similarly, that because the mountain was so special and sacred, it could not be trusted to the government. These logics were repeated later when the Blue Ridge Parkway was being planned and Grandfather Mountain owner Hugh Morton fought doggedly to have the Parkway come near Grandfather, but not on Grandfather, arguing it would “Be a scar on the Mona Lisa” should the road come onto the mountain itself.

3. How does the rhetoric of a sacred place influence performance and display?

J. Caroline Toy argues that “fannish places” might also be considered sacred as fans engage in the cultural performance of a pilgrimage.47 This closely aligns with how outdoor enthusiasts and Scottish Americans engage with Grandfather Mountain. Toy notes, importantly that the term pilgrimage, which is frequently used to describe fandom travel experiences akin to hikers visiting Grandfather Mountain, “is a term with a long history of describing religious devotional acts on the road to, and at, places designated as ‘sacred.’”48 Toy goes on to define fan pilgrimage places as “co-constructed and ritualized sites of interpretation that emphasize the agency and emotional attachments of fans.”49 Importantly, these sites are co-constructed as sacred in an ever-evolving cycle of representation, performance, and (re)representation. Toy defines sacred as an “endowment with extraordinary affective, ritual and discursive significance.”50 This definition stands in contrast to Derdziuk’s by shifting the locus of sacredness to the experience of the beholder, rather than inherent in the space itself, thus broadening the scope of what spaces might be understood as sacred. Durkheim’s definition also centers use and experience over form or substance in defining a given place as sacred, which

49. Toy, “Constructing the Fannish Place,” 252.
50. Toy, “Constructing the Fannish Place,” 255.
echoes Smith’s definition of sacred spaces as being constructed via human-created lens under which the ordinary is given extraordinary significance.\textsuperscript{51} Durkheim also notes the rhetoricity of sacredness by claiming,

Sacred beings exist only when they are represented as such in the mind. When we cease to believe in them, it is as though they did not exist. Even those which have a material form and are given in sensory experience depend in this way upon the thought of the worshippers who adore them; for the sacred character which makes them objects of the cult is not given by the natural constitution, but is superimposed upon them by belief.\textsuperscript{52}

Durkheim goes on to argue that the symbolic nature of the sacred makes sacredness an unstable trait—one that might be constructed, deconstructed, or reconfigured by any given group. In short, sacredness resides in the eyes, mind, heart, and experience of the beholder.

If then, the sacred might be understood through the meanings individuals and communities attach to a given place or experience, then understanding what associations, expectations, and behaviors align with those meanings is worthwhile. Burke’s concept of piety is useful in any study of how the entanglements of representation, beliefs, behavior, experience, and interpretation fit together into some sort of unified whole.\textsuperscript{53} A quick understanding of piety is “the sense of what properly goes with what.”\textsuperscript{54} Piety is a framework through which we might account for why certain behaviors in certain spaces make sense while other behaviors seem taboo. This is especially relevant in places that have been designated as sacred. Burke uses piety to account for all manner of linkages, noting how “piety as a response which extends through all the texture of our lives but has been concealed from us because we think we are so thoroughly

\textsuperscript{53} Durkheim, \textit{Selected Writings}, 234-235.
\textsuperscript{54} Burke, \textit{Permanence and Change}, 74.
without religion and think that the ‘pious process’ is confined to the sphere of churchliness.”

We can consider piety an orientation to experience and sensemaking that guides interpretation and behavior. In other words, piety is a useful paradigm to account for the strikingly similar behaviors we observe among diverse groups and individuals who encounter spaces like Grandfather Mountain, which are not explicitly religious but do signify a space that, by the definitions discussed here, is sacred.

Gordon Lynch notes how the sacred extends beyond a set of beliefs and is instead anchored in symbolic representation, cognitive meanings, and powerful emotions. He argues

Such commonly shared symbols, cognitive categories, and moral sentiments are the ground on which moral communities are formed, whose sense of mutual belonging emerges from a shared sense of sacred reality. What made the fusion of thought, feeling and community possible around sacred symbols was ritual: structured activities that bound these communities to the sacred symbols through moments of collective effervescence.56

What he is noting here is the affective, constitutive, and performative nature of encounters with the sacred.

In a similar vein, Jan Brown, John Phillips, and Vishwas Maheshwari theorize about the intersection of the sacred and the profane in tourism spaces specifically, as increasingly holy sites have become central to region branding and place-making, especially by the tourism industry.57 This collision of consumption and sacredness is foregrounded in sacred places, especially places like Grandfather Mountain, where different visitors likely have different understandings of the historical, ecological, or spiritual significance of the place. The notion of

55. Burke, Permanence and Change, 75.
sacred gets extended beyond religion to nation, region, or, in this case, a particular mountain, and via that extension, norms of performance and display are complicated.

4. What does the sacredness of a place mean in terms of its relationship to the greater region in which it exists? In this case, how does the sacredness of Grandfather Mountain contribute to broader understandings and misunderstandings of the Appalachian region?

Durkheim offers an argument for the constitutive nature of the sacred, “It is only in group life that they [sacred beings] are formed…they attain their greatest intensity at the moment when men are assembled together and are in immediate relations with one another, when they all share the same idea and the same sentiment.”58 This emphasis on the sociology of religious and sacred thinking shows up again in other writings from Durkheim, where he states, “Religion is something eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities; the rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of the assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain, or recreate certain mental states in these groups.”59 We might consider this sociality in terms of collective representations, which Durkheim argues are “the result of an immense co-operation, which stretches out not only into space but into time as well; to make them, a multitude of minds have associated, united and combined their ideas into sentiments.”60 In this case, what we’re examining at Grandfather Mountain represents hundreds, perhaps thousands of years of collective imagining of a sacred place. Such imaginings have implications—both philosophical and material—for the surrounding area.

58. Durkheim, Selected Writings, 235.
60. Durkheim, Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, 16.
The uniqueness of the mountain in the collective imagination cannot be isolated from how the Appalachian region and the people who live there are represented as distinct from the rest of the United States. Appalachia has been likened to an internal colony. This mirrors Richard Drake’s argument that Appalachia is best thought of as its own region, or even set of regions, within the American South. Sociologist Roberta McKenzie echoes this argument, stating, “The region called Appalachia in the United States has been defined over the past half century as a culture apart from mainstream America.” It is fundamentally different, culturally, historically, politically, economically, and agriculturally, from the rest of the Southeastern United States, and this difference matters in any discussion of Appalachian identity, tourism, the sacredness of place, or Grandfather Mountain. At the same time, however, any critical examination of the region’s history shows that it has never been as isolated and different from the rest of the nation as many imagine it to be. Appalachian historian Wilma A. Dunaway argues that since the first European colonization of the new world, Appalachia’s inhabitants have never been totally self-sufficient, nor have they ever been completely isolated from an international market economy. In many ways, this perception of radical difference was imposed on Appalachian communities to meet the expectations of outsiders who were hungry for an “authentic” American experience in an increasingly modern and industrialized nation. A critical regionalist understanding of the “difference” of Appalachia would situate this conception

65. Martin, Tourism in the Mountain South.
within patterns of exoticization and exploitation in other parts of the United States, such as Hawaii, which was in fact a colony and now, like Appalachia, has a tourism-dependent economy anchored in fulfilling the expectations, desires, and fantasies of outsiders.

Additionally, it must be understood that tourism is an inherently colonial industry that exploits the cheap labor of locals, commodifies raw materials such as climate and scenery for usually private, external capital, and fosters dependence on outsiders. All these factors provide valuable context for understanding how contemporary conceptions of Appalachia came to be and what the consequences of those conceptions are. Scholars of Appalachia do not agree on precisely how to define the region and while there are general geographic boundaries, they are not fixed and there is much more diversity in the region than the popular conception realizes. For purposes of this study, references to Appalachia or Southern Appalachia refer less to a specific geographical location and more to the idea of Appalachia in the collective popular imagination. What this study adds to the conversation is an interrogation of how notions of difference factor into conceptions of sacredness and how these ideas work together to influence expectations, behaviors, and politics. In the local-to-global spirit of critical regionalism, this work will examine the hyper-local sacred place of Grandfather Mountain within the larger regional, national, and global topoi of sacredness, place-making, and colonialism.

1.6 Methodology

Each content chapter of the proposed study engages a slightly different methodological approach. Answering Rachel Hall’s call to “let the object lead,”66 I intend to use close reading, rhetorical field methods, and media content analysis in this study as I approach the rhetorical construction of a sacred place in Grandfather Mountain from a variety of angles. In chapter three,

I closely read two civic controversies centered on Grandfather Mountain, the first being a years-long debate over whether the mountain should be publicly or privately owned and the second being a debate surrounding the route of the Blue Ridge Parkway and its relative proximity to Grandfather. Then, in chapter four, I explore how the rhetoric of sacredness influences the experience of Grandfather Mountain State Park and attraction using rhetorical field methods. Finally, in chapter five, I examine how the sacred is constructed, performed, and represented through a content analysis of social media posts from tourists at Grandfather Mountain and official Grandfather Mountain social media accounts. By exploring the sacredness of Grandfather through these diverse standpoints, I aim to provide a holistic view of how the rhetoric of sacredness has been deployed in local political controversies, how it shapes the experience of visitors, and how it is then embodied, performed, and represented via social media. McKinnon, Asen, Chávez, and Howard note that “processes and meaning systems, dynamics of space/place, body knowledge, embodiment, and the rhetorics of marginalized and excluded groups are often difficult to access through texts.” Informed by this, I propose approaching my study of the sacredness of Grandfather Mountain via the close reading and analysis of selected texts along with embodied rhetorical field methods. Here, I will briefly offer an introduction to each methodological approach.

1.6.1 Close Reading of Civic Controversy

At the heart of rhetorical study is the celebration of the expression of difference in specific contexts that might ultimately generate new knowledge and understandings. The ancient sophist tradition of *controversia* situates rhetoric not as an instrument to deploy pre-existing truth or an extension or accessory to dialectical reasoning, but rather as a generative mode of inquiry.

itself and values the practice of arguing all sides of an issue as a way of knowing. Michael Mendelson notes that controversy situates “a system of knowing, of coming into one’s ideas, within the discipline of rhetoric itself since meaning is realized not through recourse outside the argument but is generated within the context of opposing narratives.”68 Thinking of rhetorical study in this way situates language as a site of contestation in a particular moment in time for particular persons in debate.

Approaching language in the paradigm of controversia equips critics to examine inevitable moments of civic and relational controversy as generative sites of knowledge creation. It is through controversy that groups come to create new understandings and truths, what Cicero called inventio. Thomas Slone argues that modern rhetoricians have failed to fully realize the potential of Ciceronian inventio and describes it as an analytical process through which one might form new resolutions or reexamine currently held positions, and that process is only complete when one has considered an issue from all possible sides.69 Mendelson echoes this notion that without disputation there is entropy noting, “Apprehending and working with contraries remains a vital source of rhetorical knowledge…controversia, like argument, is a ‘method,’ a procedure by which we investigate opposition and in the process encounter that which was previously unknown, a procedure through which we expand the scope of our thinking.”70 G. Thomas Goodnight extends this argument when he claims,

Argument is an indispensable element of modernity because it accords humans the capacity and obligation to cooperatively ‘learn’ from mistakes. Criticism engages,

through argument, the question of whether a claim is any longer defensible in light of what we now know about the world, our relationships, and ourselves.”

Such an opportunity to collectively “learn” and evolve from previous understandings and assumptions seems especially pertinent in the context of our modern relationship with the land.

Considered this way, controversy becomes a method by which a critic might come to understand a situation or topic. Michael Leff’s 1992 intervention encourages the close reading of civic controversies as “representative anecdotes” of social situations that offer “substantial representations of opposition positions” that might offer the critic unique insight into social and cultural moments through opposing positions in a given controversy, made accessible via texts. Quite simply, critics may come to understand cultural moments, challenge normative claims, and denaturalize hegemonic assumptions by closely examining the rhetoric of civic controversies surrounding a given issue. When we come to see the discourse of civic controversies as generative sites where normative claims are made, logics for positions are exposed, power structures might be examined, and beliefs are formed, refined, and reformed the value of a controversial approach is clear. What might we learn about ecological values, our relationship to the land, wilderness, Appalachia, or Grandfather Mountain by closely reading both sides of controversies surrounding land use and the ownership, purpose, and future of the mountain?

1.6.2 Rhetorical Field Methods

While close reading offers a unique line of inquiry into how Grandfather Mountain came to be understood as sacred and how that sacredness has been deployed rhetorically, another important method of place-based research is rhetorical field methods. Middleton, Senda-Cook,

and Endres note that there are “processual forms of rhetorical action that are accessible only through participatory methods and that are flattened when those forms of rhetorical action are reduced to exclusively textual representations.” They go on to argue that this method is particularly useful “to analyze situations in which meanings depend on places, physical structures, spatial delineations, interactive bodies, and in-the-moment choices.” Rhetorical field methods foreground the ways in which rhetoric constructs everyday life and elevates the marginalized voices, vernacular rhetorics, counternarratives, and often-undocumented experiences that are central to the critical regionalist framework.

This intersectional, embodied approach to research marries ethnography, autoethnography, performance studies, and rhetorical criticism, and, in doing so, brings a more holistic approach to the study of place by accounting for the social, cultural, and affective nature of the rhetoric of place and allowing the critic to observe the subtle nuance only made evident through lived experience. Senda-Cook, Middleton, and Endres write that doing rhetorical fieldwork involves the critic inhabiting the physical place of rhetorical events, taking field notes, photographs, and other records of the event, and then analyzing that data. Rhetorical field methods “explores the dialectic between rhetorical texts and the lived experiences through which those texts are encountered and come to have significant meanings,” and it is at that intersection of rhetorical texts and lived experiences that the material influence of the rhetoric of the sacred on human understanding and action might best be understood. Central to this is the importance of the “field,” which Senda-Cook, Middleton, and Endres argue must be

foregrounded as it is a “rhetorical place” that “cocreates the rhetoric of its inhabitants.” Ultimately, this points toward how the field itself might be rhetorically examined.

Andrew Hess notes, “Recent rhetorical scholarship has recognized the need for an expansion of rhetorical methods to incorporate new theoretical perspectives, especially those that are interested in the everydayness of rhetorical discourses.” He answers that call by proposing “critical-rhetorical ethnography” which foregrounds participatory, locally situated sensibilities in rhetorical scholarship. While Hess’s method centers inquiry into advocacy, which is less relevant in this study, it is useful as a rhetorical method utilizing embodied data collection such as participant observation. Hess notes these embodied field methods embrace *phronesis, Kairos,* and *inventio.*

Greg Dickinson echoes that argument, noting that “rhetorical investigations of space and place will often demand that we attend to the body of both ourselves as critics and of the bodies (including our own) that are practicing space.” He argues that the critic’s body and embodied experience are central to any rhetorical study of place as “the body and the surrounding spatial bodies—human and non-human alike—are knit together with space governing the body even as the body produces space and produces its own spatiality.” In this vein, place, and embodiment are entangled as the rhetorical power of place invokes bodily responses. Dickinson invites critics to consider rhetorical performances, responses, and enactments in their analysis of space.

**1.6.3 Content Analysis**

To systemically analyze how identity and the rhetoric of sacredness cultivate a particular performance of authenticity at Grandfather Mountain State Park, I examine Instagram check-ins

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using the hashtags #grandfathermountain and #grandfathermountainstatepark. Additionally, I examine the official Grandfather Mountain Instagram account(s). The focus on visual imagery and the ability to use hashtags to classify photos and check in to specific locations makes Instagram the logical platform on which to study place, performative identity, and display. Notably, all of the images that will be examined in this study will be posted publicly visible by the user and classified using a Grandfather Mountain hashtag. In other words, these images were intended to be seen and to be associated with this particular place.

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman argues that television extends the “instancy and imagery” of the photograph and the telegraph. Postman claims photographs record experience differently than language, noting that language requires context, but “there is no such thing as a photo taken out of context, for a photograph does not require one. In fact, the point of photography is to isolate images from context, so as to make them visible in a different way.” 80 I would extend Postman’s argument beyond television to Instagram specifically. The design and interface of Instagram encourage the rapid consumption of images with little attention to language. Unlike Twitter, which is primarily text-based, or even Facebook, which situates text above photos, Instagram highlights images while marginalizing language. While images can be captioned and commented upon, the user must click “more” to expand captions beyond one line. Images dominate the interface, and the large photos with small text encourage passive image scrolling rather than reading. This marginalization of language is important, as images and text operate in different ways. Postman notes, “Larger abstractions as truth, honor, love, falsehood cannot be talked about in the lexicon of pictures. For ‘showing of’ and ‘talking about’ are two

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very different kinds of processes.”

This ambiguity of images, their inability to grapple with abstractions, and the apparent objectivity of “seeing” makes the performance of the sacred via Instagram especially pervasive and problematic because photos are apparent; they seem to speak for themselves, and what they communicate appears natural.

Postman goes on to note that language allows for dispute and dialogue in a way that photographs do not. He writes, “It makes no sense to disagree with an unfaked photograph. The photograph itself makes no arguable propositions and makes no extended and unambiguous commentary. It offers no assertions to refute, so it is not refutable.”

Instagram, with its emphasis on photographs, videos, and hashtags, further extends these epistemological biases of fragmented, context-free, ambiguous, and unquestioned imagery. Additionally, research indicates that users demonstrate a unique preference for Instagram in displaying place-based experiences, especially in national parks.

Importantly, images are not neutral, nor are acts of display or consumption. Looking at or posing for a photo intended to be gazed upon is not natural or neutral; it is social and situated. These photos were taken for public consumption and were intended to communicate and, therefore, are performative and rhetorical. Cara Finnegan notes, “Visuality frames our experience and acknowledges ‘that vision is a mode of cultural expression and human communication as fundamental and widespread as language.’”

Public images, such as the ones examined here, do more than simply showcase a beautiful landscape; they function rhetorically. These images

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constitute *who belongs* in the landscape and reinforce specific *ways of being* in the landscape. These types of public photographs function as rhetorical performances that constitute and circulate particular ways of seeing and being seen in a specific context or location.

As these images circulate on social media they contribute to a generative, normative cycle of collective representation. These images, which frame experiences on the mountain without context, for nothing exists outside of the frame, constitute who belongs on the mountain and how one interacts with the space. Hariman and Lucaites argue that photos offer a performance of social relationships and create a basis for comprehension and response, “precisely because the photo is operating as a mode of performance, its formal implication is that what is shown is repeated, and repeatable, behavior.” They go on to argue that visual practices in public media play a critical, pedagogical role in the constitution of public identity.

As we consider the rhetorical, pedagogical, normative nature of public visuality it is important to remember that in this case, it is mostly white, middle- and upper-class subjects whose images are constructing the visual discourse surrounding Grandfather Mountain—a sacred indigenous site that now anchors a tourist economy dependent upon working-class locals. Hariman and Lucaites note the hegemonic function of photographs, “Once thought to be windows to the real, photographic images become the ideal medium for naturalizing a repressive structure of signs. And there is no doubt they can function that way, as both prized shots and millions of banal, anonymous images reproduce normative conceptions of gender, race, class, and other forms of social identity.”


hashtag over five years, I aim to identify the patterns that create a narrative of who does and does not belong, what behaviors are acceptable and expected, and what the social, cultural, and political implications of that narrative might be.

1.7 Chapter Summaries

Each of the following chapters approaches the rhetoric of the sacredness of Grandfather Mountain differently. Chapter two provides an overview of important concepts pertinent to this study, including philosophies of sacredness, conceptions of region and place, theories about the centrality of wilderness and primitivism in American identity, and the complexities of tourism, especially in Southern Appalachia. That chapter will also elucidate in more detail the methodology for this study. Chapter three examines how notions of sacredness and place are deployed in argument by closely attending to two political controversies surrounding the ownership and use of Grandfather Mountain, the question of whether it should remain privately owned or be sold to the federal government as the nation’s first national park and the debate surrounding the route of the Blue Ridge Parkway, which comes near, but not on to Grandfather. This chapter asks questions about the tension between the reasonable and the rational in argumentation, and how sacredness of place works as a logic governing debate. In chapter four, the Grandfather Mountain State Park and paid attraction are closely examined via rhetorical field methods. Here, I analyze how spatiality and performance constitute particular ways of seeing and being in a sacred wilderness place, and what affective responses such rhetorical appeals evoke. Chapter five extends and expands ideas from chapter four into a broader context by examining patterns of behavior that are documented and displayed on Instagram by tourists to Grandfather Mountain. Identifying these patterns provides insight into how sacred places discipline behavior and set expectations. These images function recursively as they are influenced by the rhetoric of
sacredness at Grandfather Mountain but also become parts of the rhetorical pastiche that makes up our understanding of the mountain as a sacred place. Finally, in chapter six, I discuss the implications of this research and opportunities for the further development of these ideas.

1.8 Conclusion

The Paleo and Cherokee both recognized the sacredness of Tanawha. Later, European settlers followed suit, eventually imposing their colonial, imperial, and capitalist paradigms onto it, resulting in its commodification. But the rarity and specialness of the mountain set it apart, protected it, and simultaneously created increased demand for encounters with it, resulting in the rise of the tourism industry in the region, adding complex layers to the rhetorical construction of the region as a whole and Grandfather Mountain in particular. Although the definitions, representations, and performances of sacredness at Grandfather Mountain have evolved and remain dynamic, one consistent thing is that since humans have been interacting with Grandfather, it’s been set apart. This study will examine how the sacredness of Grandfather Mountain has been rhetorically constructed, how that sacredness has been deployed as the premise of arguments in civic controversies, and how sacredness is embodied and performed experientially and reified via social media. Ultimately, what this study offers is a deeper understanding of how rhetoric constructs, constitutes and governs a sacred place and how that understanding may inform environmental activism across a variety of contexts.
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Chapter 2: Getting to Know Grandfather

My daughter asked to dye her hair red. I found a salon that advertises all-natural hair processing and made an appointment, her first in our new home in the High Country. We walk into the small building with cedar-shake siding. It smells of patchouli and lavender. The shelves are lined with oils, hair and skin products, and crystals. There are plants on nearly every surface, and two dogs lazily eye us as we walk in, but do not move. The owner and only stylist rises from her chair to greet us. She appears to be in her sixties, with long grey-streaked brown curls and a warm smile. As we make small talk while she cuts and styles my daughter’s hair, she begins to tell me her story.

“I came here with my husband and kids on vacation forty years ago. They were babies. I’d not been here before, but I knew immediately, in my bones, that this mountain was my home. After that trip, I told my husband that I was moving, with or without him. He didn’t want to leave Florida, so I left him and raised the kids here by myself. Best decision I ever made. My feet haven’t left this mountain since. It called to me immediately and never stopped calling me. I’ll live the rest of my life in the shadow of Grandfather and when I die, I want to be buried right here.”

People from diverse backgrounds and belief systems across millennia have held similar feelings as the stylist described above. Grandfather Mountain represents a space that has been, since ancient times, viewed as unique. It has held various, and at times competing, meanings to different groups of people in its storied history. The primary aim of this study is to explore the rhetorical construction of the mountain as sacred and examine how that notion of sacredness of place has influenced the way people think about and interact with the landscape of Grandfather and, by extension, how we might more purposefully engage in ecologically conscious and informed rhetorical place-making. Such aims must begin with an understanding of sacredness, place, and how these concepts relate to rhetoric. This study is anchored in Durkheim’s assertion that sacredness is a sociological phenomenon that is not rooted in rationality but rather in emotional experiences and that sacredness is an important mechanism for self-understanding and
group cohesion. It is with this definition of sacred that we will examine how sacredness is constituted, experienced, and performed at Grandfather Mountain.

In what follows, I will discuss the rhetorical construction of place, with a special emphasis on sacred places, wilderness places, and Appalachia. Then, I will elucidate the expansion of rhetorical criticism and the methodological approaches guiding this study of sacred place.

2.1 Theory

To understand how Grandfather Mountain is rhetorically constructed as sacred, an explanation of the role place and regionalism play as contributors to the sacredness of place is relevant. By addressing the theoretical understanding of place, region, and sacredness, a clearer understanding of the sacredness of Grandfather Mountain and the Appalachian region emerges.

2.1.1 Place & Regionalism

Conceptual frameworks for place and region require an alternative critique of texts than those conceived through linguistic measures. In this section, I will argue for a critique that takes the material function of rhetoric into consideration. First, I will explain the interrelated rhetorical constructions of region and place, and then, second, I will argue for a criticism of place that includes texture over text.

Central to this study is an understanding of place and region. Alex Tzonis and Liliane Lefaiivre note, “Regionalism bears the hallmark of ambiguity. On the one hand, it has been associated with movements of reform and liberation…on the other, it has proved a powerful tool

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of repression and chauvinism.” \(^2\) Regionalism, or the foregrounding of the unique aesthetics, histories, and culture of a given place, exists in the paradox and tension of serving as an act of resistance against capitalist and modernist homogenization while also risking unreflective nostalgia and kitsch. Critical regionalism, then, is a theoretical framework aimed at negotiating and interrogating that tension. Birthed as an alternative and resistive approach to architecture in the 1980s, critical regionalism as an architectural concept is concerned with moving beyond Modernism without returning to the past by embracing global influences while maintaining a rootedness in local contexts. Kenneth Frampton notes, “The fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism is to mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place.” \(^3\) It is a rebuttal against the placelessness of modernity and the “endless processual flux of the Megalopolis.” \(^4\)

This study invites us to consider the ways regions are rhetorical constructions that function materially. Douglas Reichert Powell describes regionalism as “not a thing so much as a cultural history, an ongoing rhetorical and poetic construction.” \(^5\) This definition allows us to consider region less in terms of a specific location and more in terms of evolving and dynamic relationships between places, people, narratives, histories, and mythologies. Critical regionalism, then, is concerned with addressing issues of power and oppression in the rhetorical production of the region. It offers an understanding that the identity of any place is rooted in conflict, impermanent, unstable, and open to negotiation. Critical regionalism makes clear that the

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rhetoric of singularity or local distinctiveness often obscures broader, complex networks of interconnected, hegemonic patterns.

One excellent example of this is how the American South, with its bloody and racist history, is often portrayed as the only place racism exists in the United States. Frequently represented as a region filled with backward, uncouth, uneducated, violent hillbillies and rednecks, it makes an easy scapegoat for the racist history and contemporary racism of the entire country. Central to this paradigm is the link of “individual moments of cultural struggle to larger patterns of history, politics, and culture,” recognizing that while the local, regional, national, and global might appear distinct, they actually exist in a dialectical relationship in which they play upon and mutually influence one another. Critical regionalism is about the work of connecting local conceptions of place to broader patterns of politics and culture.

Important to this paradigm is the understanding that conceptions about a particular place are not essential qualities of topography, geography, population, or history so much as they are ongoing discourses that serve certain groups’ interests at the expense of others and that might be contested. In Powell’s terms, it is the “deliberate use of region as a way to envision and critique relationships among people and places and envision better alternatives.” A critical regionalist framework situates popular conceptions of a place within historical contexts, contemporary complexities, relevant counternarratives, and national or global patterns, denaturalizing regions

and positioning them as products of human thought, construction, and strategies and, therefore, rhetorical. This framework is a hopeful one, as it opens possibilities of more creative, compassionate, and conscious ways of envisioning place.

Considering regions as rhetorical constructs within built and natural environments invites us to consider how place requires consideration of materiality as rhetorical text. In what follows, I will address the interaction and construction of place as rhetorical text and advocate for a critique of texture over text. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it has long been established that places function in rhetorical ways, often as sites of domination and power. Dickinson notes how the study of place complicates some of rhetorical criticism's key terms, particularly notions of text, context, and audience. He argues, "Writing about material places, whether sublime, quotidian or somewhere in between, localizes our attention, demands that we critically evaluate power, and requires that we think carefully about bodies, selves, others, and identity." Indeed, noting that place is always situated and organized within ideological and political commitments and functions as sites of rhetorical effort and consequence calls us to consider how a place is performed and practiced once agentic bodies begin to act and interact in place. How bodies enact spatiality becomes itself a fundamental element of the texture of place and, therefore, an element of rhetorical critique. This embodied practice of place is both a result of and constitutive of our understanding of that place. In simple terms, spaces are always evolving and changing as people move through them, interact with them, and shape one another's understandings of them.

The study of place cannot be divorced from the study of temporality and bodies in place. Writing of “practicing of place,” Dickinson notes, “one mode for these negotiations is via rhetoric, especially when we expand our understanding of rhetoric to the suasory interactions of

multiple (human and nonhuman) bodies.”10 The embodied, everyday negotiations involved in the practicing of place make the rhetorical study of place a dynamic thing. Dickinson notes this when he writes, "Moving through place practices the place, taking up its resources, enunciating them, remaking them, inventing new possibilities, closing off others; these are the spatial trajectories that (un)make space and place."11 Audiences are simultaneously audience, text, context, and rhetor as they move through a place.

The simultaneous, co-constitutive nature of rhetorical action(s) and reaction(s) of and in place complicates conventional key terms of rhetorical criticism, such as text. Dickinson argues texture, with its tactile nature, might be a better term to account for the embodied, material nature of the rhetoricity of place. The term texture also expands the concept of text to encompass context. Dickinson argues,

Texture, then, weaves the inside and outside, the here and the there, the now and the then…In texture, these spaces, times, materialities, memories, projections into the future are knit together without creating a whole or complete thing. These are the ways apparently disparate communicative acts are simultaneous. What (and where), then, is the critical text?12

In addition to expanding notions of text and context, the study of place calls into question the separation of audience from text and instead situates audiences as constitutive parts of the spatial texture. What we can take from all of this is places, like regions, are rhetorical suasive constructions and, therefore, should be investigated critically. Such investigation requires innovative and novel ways of thinking about the work of rhetorical criticism.

2.1.2 Sacred Place

As noted in the previous section, situating place as rhetorical invites creativity in our understanding and application of key terms within rhetorical criticism. Place-as-rhetoric especially complicates the notion of text. In a rhetorical critique of sacred place, what counts as a “text”? In this section, we will examine the characteristics that mark a place as sacred and the unique considerations that emerge in the critique of sacred places. To do so, we begin with work emerging from religious studies and then move into the rhetorical criticism of built sites such as commemorative landscapes, sites of public memory, and historically significant sites. Then, we will consider natural environments that are often considered sacrosanct. What emerges here are important themes of ritualization, interpretation, contestation, and commodification.

Religious scholars David Chidester and Edward Tabor Linenthal note that “A sacred space is not merely discovered or founded, or constructed; it is claimed, owned, and operated by people advancing specific interests.” Although not rhetoricians, their definition of sacred places points toward the rhetorical nature of how meaning comes to be ascribed to a given place. In their edited volume on sacred American spaces, they introduce three practices that shape the contours of sacred space: ritualization, reinterpretation, and contest over legitimate ownership of the sacred. These practices offer a useful theoretical framework for examining how rhetoric constitutes and works within a sacred place.

**Constructed Monuments of Public Memory and Historical Significance**

In this section, I will review rhetorical scholarship that addresses how built landscapes come to hold significance in the public imagination and how that significance leads to particular interpretations, rituals, performances, and, at times, controversies.

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Dickinson, Blair, and Ott’s edited volume foregrounds the rhetorical force of memory places as place shapes and interprets memory in especially powerful ways, and both place and memory have rhetorical force.\textsuperscript{14} They define the memory place as recognizable, set apart from other places, and sites that demand particular behaviors from those present, with similar themes to previously discussed definitions of sacred places. They note the touristic nature of memory places and the way public memory sites work with fantasies of authenticity and rootedness. Essays in this volume address the polysemic and contested nature of monuments and museums\textsuperscript{15} and how spatiality contributes to meaning and memory.\textsuperscript{16}

Much of the rhetorical scholarship on sacred places is focused on sites of commemoration and public memory. Patricia Davis, for example, notes how monuments work to create and (re)interpret public memory. She argues, “The rhetorical work monuments perform serves to not only concretize particular historical narratives, but to venerate them. This lends an element of the sacred to the monument, such that any critique leveled at them may be discursively positioned as

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\item \textsuperscript{14} Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott, Eds. \textit{Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials} (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010).
\item \textsuperscript{15} John Bodnar, “Bad Dreams about the Good War” in \textit{Places of Public Memory: The Rhetoric of Museums and Memorials}, eds. Greg Dickinson, Carole Blair, and Brian L. Ott (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 139-159.
\end{itemize}
an act of desecration.”\textsuperscript{17} She goes on to note that due to their very public nature, monuments make sacrosanct assertions about assumed values. In her study of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, she notes, "The element of the sacred assigned to monuments constructs the memorial as symbolic of African American suffering and death while positioning the victims as martyrs to the cause of equality and freedom."\textsuperscript{18} In another scholarly treatment of the same monument, autoethnographers Davis, Arnold, Jovanovic, and Mackie write of the affective experience of an encounter with a place that has been constructed as sacred, “The experience is more visceral than mental; you feel the pain in your body, you feel the pain in your heart.” As four white Southern women encountering the space, they note, “In remembering, we acknowledge, atone, account, and reconcile.”\textsuperscript{19} Although neither study references Chidester and Linenthal, we see reflections of their thinking in how the former deals with (re)interpretation and the latter, with its emphasis on affect, deals with themes of ritualization. In a similar vein, J. Christian Spielvogel takes a rhetorical approach to sacred places by critically examining how the National Park Service (NPS) has interpreted Civil War battlefields as sacred sites by foregrounding themes of emancipation and national reconciliation, which emerged less from historical accuracy and more from patriotic veterans events at the sites in the two decades following the war.\textsuperscript{20} While that interpretation has been challenged since the early 1990s as historians have pushed to recenter the racial politics of the Civil War in the NPS’s

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\textsuperscript{18} Davis, “Our Stories in Steel,” 32.


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reinterpretation of the sites, the public sentiment of battlegrounds as sacred sites of martyrdom and reconciliation has persisted and had political and economic consequences.

Megan Fitzmaurice describes the posthumous emancipation ceremony held as an act of protest and spirituality on a parking lot that had been constructed over an African burial ground in Richmond, Virginia, as a performance that marked the otherwise everyday space of a university parking lot as sacred.21 In this example, we see activists laying claim, through ritual, to a sacred place that had been unrecognized and desecrated by the state. Thanks to the work of a broad coalition that actively produced a sacred space, the displacement and erasure of this part of American history has been preserved. It was the rhetorical work of constructing and communicating the sacredness of the burial ground that transformed how it was understood and thus treated by city officials.

In his study on the National Jazz Museum in Harlem, Gregory Clark examines the rhetorical force of shared aesthetic experiences, much like those reported and observed on Grandfather Mountain. He writes of the “rhetorical power inherent in cultural experiences that are essentially aesthetic in their form” and argues that experiences themselves are rhetorical artifacts.22 Such an assertion foregrounds the necessary coupling of performance and affect studies with rhetorical criticism in the study of place, especially places that illicit such strong emotive responses from visitors. Similarly, Michael S. Bowman argues, "We need to question static notions of place and objects and rhetoric in tourism, which always seem to rely on tacit notions of self-presence, in

favor of a more mobile, contingent, and performance-oriented conception.”  In his study of Scottish heritage sites, Bowman notes how visitors accept ideas of “heritage” and “history” as having self-evident value, much like objects and places deemed “sacred.”

This public memory work offers useful frameworks for the rhetorical study of sacred places; however, ideas about the sacred extend far beyond the rhetoric, materiality, and performance at commemorative sites to include religious and natural places as well. Jan Brown, John Phillips, and Vishwas Maheshwari discuss the complexity of sacred places by examining the tensions that emerge when holy sites that are sacred elements of faith systems become central components of nation or region tourism branding. They note, “The domains of the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ have shared, or parallel systems and structures. Consumer and religious relationships and meanings are both expressed through symbols, rituals, language, and myths. Objects and experiences are desired and consumed, and ‘gods’ searched for and worshipped.”  There is a clear collision of the sacred and the profane when sacred sites such as temples or cathedrals become objects of consumption via tourism and tourists and worshippers coexist in spaces that are holy to some and objects of consumption to others. However, Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry suggest that “For many, consumption has become a vehicle for experiencing the sacred.”  This aligns closely with the phenomenon of tourism to sacred sites, such as Grandfather Mountain,

and the consumption that is part of that experience, ranging from the explicit consumption at gift shops to the more abstract and diffuse ironies of paying for access to views and photo ops.

These studies foreground the politics of place, especially places perceived as sacred, and the complexities that emerge when a place becomes an object to be consumed. The ritualization and contestation of sacred places are both constitutive of and a product of its interpretation and experiential effect. The intersection of economics and sacredness that occurs through the commodification of the sacred experience in the form of tourism is especially interesting when the sacred place is a natural one.

**Sacred Wilderness and Environments**

Here, we will explore how natural environments come to be understood as sacred and what implications and complexities might arise when sacredness and wilderness collide. Edwin Bernbaum writes of the power and promise of sacredness in environmental contexts, noting, “Programmes in environmental conservation need to be grounded not only in solid scientific research and practice, but also in deeply held spiritual, cultural, and aesthetic values and ideas that will engage and inspire people to care for nature over the long term and make the sacrifices necessary to protect the environment.”\(^{26}\) Bernbaum is specifically concerned with the sacredness of mountains as he argues mountains have such diverse ecosystems and landscapes that they offer a variety of appeals to inspire environmental conservation. He points out the personal nature of encounters with the sacred as he notes, “People experience its [a mountain's] sacredness through the particular views they have of it.”\(^{27}\) He resists forcing sacred mountains into universal archetypes and instead encourages a view of mountains as polysemic, multivalent


\(^{27}\) Bernbaum, “Sacred Mountains and National Parks,” 85.
symbols that “open people to new and deeper experiences of what they take to be ultimately real and meaningful in their lives.” So, instead of themes or archetypes, he offers a process-based understanding of how individuals and cultures ascribe meaning to mountains.

Bernbaum states, “Each view of a mountain brings together various ideas, images, and associations so that they resonate with each other to enrich and deepen people’s experience of the site and awaken a sense of the sacred—of another, deeper dimension of reality that gives meaning and significance to the world and their lives.” He argues each encounter and subsequent understanding of a mountain is essentially a metaphor by which the mountain is seen or experienced as something else. He offers the following example: "The view of the mountain as paradise, for example, focuses our attention on the heavenly qualities of the peak and at the same time gives concrete expression to abstract notions of heaven. In the process, our experience of both mountain and paradise are transformed so that one becomes more divine, the other more tangible." Metaphors are generative, as they not only reshape our understanding of each of the two terms, in the example here, heaven and the mountain, but they also create a third, new understanding. Bernbaum describes how this process “reveals a sacred dimension of reality that already exists and transcends both mountain and temple, unifying the two and imbuing them with their aura of sanctity.” We might think of how experiences in sacred places are often described as ineffable. This is precisely where the power of metaphor is apparent as metaphors allow a third, new meaning that transcends the meaning of either of the singular terms they join. Additionally, what we see here is that while natural sacred environments like mountains function similarly to built sacred places such as commemorative or religious sites, there are notable

differences. For example, natural spaces are generally more open to contestation over land use, ownership, and access. Natural sacred places are generally more polysemic in their interpretations.

We might conclude here by considering how the themes of sacred places (interpretation, ritualization, commodification, and contestation) emerge in these three categories of sacred places: sites of public memory and commemoration, sites of religious importance, and wilderness sites. The first commonality is that sacred sites of all sorts are frequently interpreted through narratives that assert implied values and foreground themes of rootedness, authenticity, and connectivity. A second clear theme is that sacred sites tend to discipline behavior, beginning with the pilgrimage to the site and continuing by governing performances and displays within the site. While these experiences and responses differ from site to site—what is expected in a religious temple differs from what is expected on a mountaintop—what is clear is that experiences within sacred sites are governed by shared sets of expectations of appropriate and expected display, affect, and performance. The commodification of the site and the interconnectivity of the sacred and profane is another commonality across these types of sacred sites. The touristic nature of sacred sites, be they historical, religious, or ecological, brings with it an inherent commodification of the sacred as visitors purchase access, experience, and tokens to commemorate and honor their sacred encounter. Finally, the theme of contestation spans historical, religious, and ecological sacred sites. From debates over ownership, access, and purpose to debates over interpretation and design, sacred sites are typically points of political struggle.

While these themes offer a valuable framework for this study, it is important to consider how wilderness sites might differ from built places. The most significant divergence is in the
more subjective interpretations of ecological sacred places. As noted by Bernbaum, wilderness places are often more polysemic in their interpretation and more open to diverse encounters and attachments. While everyone who visits the National Monument for Peace and Justice is exposed to the same images, spaces, themes, and texts, the same cannot be said of visitors to Grandfather Mountain. Some will hike from the bottom to the top, never stepping foot inside the museum. Some will drive to the top and spend the day in the museum and zoo, never stepping onto a trail. Some will visit the area and only experience distanced views of the famed ridgeline. This is not to say that all visitors to commemorative or religious sites have the same experience. That is certainly not the case. But their experiences are likely to be far more similar than visitors coming to a national or state park, where the site itself spans hundreds or even thousands of acres and might be approached from potentially countless perspectives.

2.1.3 A Critical Regionalism of (a sacred?) Appalachia

The rhetorical and theoretical understanding of a place or region as sacred has real-world effects on environmental, political, social, and economic levels. An understanding of place as always in-process and contested invites a critical examination of the meaning of a given place and how that meaning has changed over time. Ideas about place are central to tourism, an industry contingent upon the careful management of the meaning of a place, and Grandfather Mountain represents one of the most prominent and most-visited tourist destinations in the Appalachian region. As such, an understanding of the rhetorical construction of Appalachia is an important context for this inquiry, as it accounts for the fantasies and expectations visitors bring with them when they visit Grandfather Mountain. In the following section, we will trace how the Appalachian region has been rhetorically constructed primarily through tourism and how,
ultimately, the primitive wilderness signified by Appalachia is coded as sacred in the American imagination.

Understandings of Grandfather Mountain simply cannot be extracted from understandings of Appalachia. The primary economic driver of Southern Appalachia is tourism, and it is through tourism that conceptions about the region have been and still are constructed, circulated, and reified. The tourism industry in Appalachia is anchored in notions of profound difference. The landscapes, people, and culture of Appalachia are routinely positioned as uniquely set apart from the rest of the country; this contributes not only to the region’s appeal but also to a sense of sacredness that is often ascribed to the region and experienced by visitors. These conceptions have a profound influence on the politics, economics, ecology, and culture of the region. It is worth noting that tourism has served to preserve, protect, and conserve the natural resources and cultural heritage of the region while simultaneously threatening them. It has both solidified a regional identity and a sense of regional pride while perpetuating and exploiting harmful stereotypes about the region and those who live there. Tourism has had a significant economic impact, bringing millions of dollars to local economies, but it has also limited other types of economic development and kept local workers in low-paying, unstable, exploitative jobs and often priced out of their hometowns. In short, tourism has been a double-edged sword for the region in a myriad of ways, including the cultivation and circulation of the mythology surrounding it.

One of the first and most enduring portrayals of Appalachia is its representation as a garden-of-Eden-like paradise filled with natural health benefits. This conception of the region is all about the land, the air, and the water—to the point that residents are essentially erased. Archeological records indicate that ancient Native Americans were the first to make health and
spiritual-based pilgrimages to the mineral and thermal springs of the southern mountains, and later European settlers followed suit.32 Many of the first tourists to the region were fleeing humid, swampy lowland plantations and were drawn by the mild, mosquito-free summers. The belief that viruses and fevers were less likely to spread in the highland ecosystem, that the mountain air would cure disease of the lungs, and belief in the healing powers of mountain mineral streams and hot springs brought a seasonal migration of low country gentry to the mountain south.

Eventually, the interest in health benefits began to wane; however, the annual pilgrimages continued with a new focus on recreation.33 As better road access made accommodations more accessible, the resorts of the mountain south became increasingly opulent, expensive, and inaccessible to people from the region, leaving the tourists to enjoy a wilderness landscape that seemed devoid of any native people. According to Starnes, the Appalachian wilderness represented “a return to a wild, more natural setting that provided the ideal backdrop for recreation.”34 This notion of Appalachia as a pure, natural, empty wilderness that is ideal for healing, respite, and recreation began in the earliest travel accounts of the region, has persisted through various iterations, and is visible even now in contemporary tourism literature and local color writing. Echoes of these ideas are imprinted on Grandfather Mountain promotional materials and throughout the built environment on and around the mountain, where visitors are encouraged to "be inspired" and "be restored."

These early tourists had very little interaction with the indigenous Appalachian people, but when they did, their accounts reflected a limited and limiting view. Martin recounts the musings of English socialite James Silk Buckingham, who visited the region in 1841 and “found the scenery nobly picturesque and the spring waters delightful, but the mountain people are very mean and dirty.” Starnes argues “most writers described white mountaineers as living an isolated existence that involved farming, hunting, and simply surviving.” Importantly, these early perceptions and descriptions are formative as they cultivate themes later observers would use to describe the region. Economic and social barriers kept tourists and residents largely separated, and quickly, the native population of the mountain south became exoticized in the eyes and minds of visitors. Cultural differences came to be reinforced and amplified through tourism, and the notion of radical difference between the Appalachians and the rest of the country proved to be a persistent force in the rhetorical construction of the area.

With expanding rail access, the tourism industry took on increased importance in the region, and a more cohesive, intentional, and distinctive regional image that would appeal to an increasingly economically diverse group of tourists began to emerge. Ultimately, the prevailing image of the region was the promise of “a wilderness experience and contact with a population strikingly at odds with modern life.” That image was constructed thanks to the rhetoric of local color writers, missionaries, settlement school workers, scholars, journalists, philanthropists, and tourists. Starnes describes the image of Appalachia as “irrefutably different from the mainstream society in industrial America. The landscape was wild, rugged, and virtually unspoiled. The

people, like the land, were historical holdovers from an earlier time.”38 This idea that Appalachian people existed in some earlier phase of social evolution has been stubbornly persistent, fueled limited stereotypes, and tremendously influenced the contours of the tourism industry in the region. Regional commentators began to speculate about the connection between the Scotch-Irish and the southern highlanders. Richard Blaustein analyzes Horace Kephart’s 1913 account Our Southern Highlanders: A Narrative of Adventure in the Southern Appalachians and a Study of Life Among the Mountaineers and notes the many allusions to Scotland in Kephart’s work.39 He points out how Kephart proclaims the southern highlander is “simply his ancient Scotch or English ancestor born over and over again…and back there is where our mountaineer belongs in the scale of human evolution.”40 Notably, several large Celtic heritage events, anchored in the cultural, historical, ecological, and mythic ties between Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Appalachia, draw thousands of kilt-wearing tourists to Grandfather Mountain each year where they, together engage in the rhetorical act of celebrating interpretations of Scottish heritage.

In a similar vein, Martin examines Christian Reid’s Land of the Sky and Adventures in Mountain By-Ways to find similar outcomes, noting, “Reid helped to create impressions of the region’s indigenous people that subsequent tourists sought to validate.”41 Blaustein makes the critically important point that an inherent problem with any work like Kephart’s or Reid’s is that

38. Starnes, Creating the Land of the Sky, 36.
41. Martin, Creating the Land of the Sky, 51.
“once they become authoritative sources, any biases and misinformation they contain are embedded (like fossil insects in amber) in the canonic body of knowledge.” And indeed, these ideas become solidified in many ways, one significant one being tourism.

Tourism booster literature coupled with tourists’ accounts and local color writing tend to inform and reify one another as literature sets expectations of behavior and experiences that are then sought out, performed, and documented by tourists, and that documentation enters the cultural zeitgeist in several ways and continually expands, reinforces, challenges, or in some other way contributes to expectations for the next round of tourists. Martin makes the case that tourism and travel literature is the primary site of the rhetorical construction of the Appalachian landscape and people, noting, “these encounters [between tourists and mountaineers] contributed to the construction of the Mountain South’s image as a backward region inhabited by quaint, yet uncivilized people.” Ironically, however, the image of the mountain south created by these visitors obscured the massive cultural changes that were ushered in, at least in part, by tourism. Martin explicates this irony, “While tourism gave rise to the notion of regional distinctiveness and encouraged the preservation of the supposed cultural legacies of the southern highlands, the growth of tourism paradoxically spawned unprecedented cultural change in the region.” As more tourists flocked to the imaged primitive frontier of Appalachia, imparting their regional influence on the area, the Appalachian region and people were becoming increasingly modern and cosmopolitan. This creates problems for the now-pervasive tourism industry anchored in fulfilling the expectations, desires, and fantasies of visitors. This might best be captured by a quote from George E. Vincent’s 1898 essay “A Retarded Frontier,” which was published in the

43. Martin, *Creating the Land of the Sky*, 43-44.
44. Martin, *Creating the Land of the Sky*, 44.
American Journal of Sociology: “We had heard so many stories of the ignorance of the mountaineers that we were somewhat disappointed by their familiarity with a good many things we had expected them not to know.”

This quote reflects the tremendous influence the rhetorical construction of the region had on the American imagination.

A critical regionalist understanding of these early accounts recognizes that they mark the “invention of Appalachia” by people from outside the region and questions whose interests are served by these understandings of the region, who might be oppressed by them, and what other possibilities exist for thinking about Appalachian landscapes, culture, and people.

2.1.4 Sacred Wilderness, American Identity, and Appalachia

The idea that Appalachia represents something purer, more American, and more authentic than the rest of the country can be, at least in part, tied to the popular representations of Appalachia discussed in the previous section. As expanded rail transportation and later the interstate system and mass-produced automobiles brought increased access to the mountain south, it also ushered in a renewed desire in the imaginations of American tourists for the wilderness and primitivism that Appalachia had by now come to represent. As we will see here, the primitivism and purity signified by Appalachia contribute to notions of sacredness and spirituality in the contemporary American imagination.

Roderick Frazier Nash’s seminal 1967 text Wilderness and the American Mind traces how American conceptions of wilderness have been constructed through various genres of literature, travel writing, and news accounts. He examines how these rhetorical constructions have material implications by linking ideas about wilderness to land management policies and

legislation, culminating in the creation of the National Park Service, National Forests, and robust contemporary ecotourism and outdoor recreation industries. Nash argues that for a significant part of our history, the wilderness was considered a dangerous foe to be tamed, pointing to the numerous instances in Christian mythology in which "wilderness" is deployed as a metaphor for destruction, persecution, and danger. It wasn’t until westward expansion led to a rapidly vanishing wilderness that the “cult of wilderness,” which is anchored in romantic and mythic themes, emerged, and efforts to preserve wilderness became important points of political advocacy. It was only then that affinity for wilderness became a desirable identity marker.

The notion of wilderness being something worth preserving is not at all a given. This idea emerged through public controversy as Americans worked together to form their new national identity. Nash points out that the frontier experience, which is at least partially defined by encounters with the wilderness, was central to this emerging new American identity. As European immigrants to the American continent struggled to survive, they also struggled to form a national identity that differentiated them from their European counterparts. Wilderness, which was scarce in Europe but plentiful in this seemingly vast and ahistorical new American landscape, became a defining characteristic of American identity.

Nash isn’t the first to consider the significance of an encounter with the wilderness on the American psyche. Fredrick Jackson Turner’s 1893 “Frontier Thesis” argues that the frontier experience is necessary for democracy, as he saw it fostering the individualism, independence, and confidence that is necessary for self-government.47 This historically significant essay links wilderness to sacred American values. He claimed that by the 1890s there was no more frontier

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and predicted a “nostalgic regret over the disappearance of wilderness conditions.” His prediction proved accurate, as the ending of the frontier prompted many Americans to seek and retain wilderness in modern and civilized ways through scouting, national parks, and other preservation efforts. This new reverence for the rapidly vanishing wilderness eventually led to the John Muir-inspired cultural phenomenon of outdoor enthusiasm we see today. Mary E. Stuckey examines how National Parks function as agents of American politics as they assert hegemonic understandings of citizenship and elevate certain histories, memories, and knowledges over others. By examining national identity through the lens of tamed, accessible wilderness in the form of national parks, Stuckey points out how the parks rely on an appeal to nationalism and democracy while obscuring the colonizing history of displacement of the United States and the National Park System.

If a defining characteristic of this new concept of "Americanness" was wilderness, nothing represented wilderness more in colonial America than the unexplored West. Henry Nash Smith addresses the mythology of the American West and its persistent pull on the American imagination in *Virgin Land.* He writes, “One of the most persistent generalizations concerning American life and character is the notion that our society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing the population westward through the passes of the Alleghenies, across the Mississippi Valley, over the high plains and mountains of the Far West to the Pacific Coast.” Smith traces the ways Americans have envisioned and represented the American West and its inhabitants since Europeans first occupied the continent by tracing literary representations of the

51. Smith, *Virgin Land,* 3.
frontier and political rhetoric regarding westward expansion. Smith uses Turner’s connection of wilderness to American values to foreground tensions inherent in the newly formed American identity. One example is how Turner’s conviction that the highest social values are found in primitive society just within the agrarian frontier contrasted with the dominant social theory of the time, which valued the modernity of urban and industrial society as a marker of human progress. Smith describes Turner's ideas:

He [Turner] based his highest value, democracy, on free land. But the westward advance of civilization across the continent had caused free land to disappear. What then was to become of democracy? The difficulty was the greater because in associating democracy with free land he had inevitably linked it also with the idea of nature as a source of spiritual values. All the overtones of this conception of democracy were therefore tinged with cultural primitivism and tended to clash with the idea of civilization.\(^{52}\)

What Smith is illustrating here is a pervasive tension between modernity and primitivism, civilization and wilderness, and industrialization and pastoral rurality inherent in Americans’ conceptions of the frontier but also in their conceptions of themselves. This central tension is an animating force behind the cultural phenomena of outdoor enthusiasm and ecotourism, which are driving economic forces in the Southern Appalachian region.

This tension is visible in representations of the wild, which took form in the shape of literary character tropes such as the noble savage, pioneering trapper, and cowboy, each of which embodies rugged individualism, freedom, resourcefulness, spirituality, and grit while also maintaining a sense of mystery, savagery, violence, and danger. In *Playing Indian*, Philip Deloria interrogates the tension of the “unfinished” American identity that originates from the contestation and contradictions of the earliest constructions of Americanness.\(^{53}\)

\(^{52}\) Smith, *Virgin Land*, 257.

While the work of American identity formation began with the task of defining themselves in terms of what they are not (European, particularly British) via encounters with the wilderness frontier, with the continued settlement of the West, the dilemma quickly became modernity. What does it mean to be an American who lives in a crowded city and works in a factory on a continent with rapidly vanishing wilderness places? This central tension might be illustrated by the competing metaphors of the garden and the empire. Politically, socially, and economically, we see this tension in the correlation of the Homestead Act and the Industrial Revolution, representing the garden and the empire, respectively.

Leo Marx takes up this tension using the metaphor of the machine and the garden. The machine, which for Marx represents all things modern and industrial, from urban life and factories to railroad transportation, is contrasted with the garden, which Marx describes as a romanticized pastoral ideal. That pastoral idea is juxtaposed with and sandwiched between two contrasting counterforces, one being the primitive, dangerous, raw wilderness and the other being the exploitative corruption of modern capitalism, represented by a claustrophobic cityscape. The middle ground, for Marx, is pastoral rurality. We might think about how the middle ground for contemporary urban and suburban Americans is the wilderness made accessible in the form of outdoor recreation spaces, such as national and state parks like Grandfather Mountain, that are often comfortably surrounded by spas, restaurants, and luxury accommodations.

Smith identifies the centrality of exploring the western frontier as a liminal space between wilderness and civilization to the emerging American consciousness. He states,

The Atlantic seaboard represented the past, the shadow of Europe, cities, sophistication, a derivative, and conventional life and literature. Beyond, occupying the overwhelming geographical mass of the continent, lay the West. A real where nature loomed larger than civilization and where feudalism had never been established. There, evidently, would grow up the truly American society of the future.  

Of course, such thinking reflects the empire-building ethos of European nations as the West was positioned first as a gateway to India and the wealth of trade opportunities that represented, then as an agricultural utopia that might serve as “the world’s garden.” Even these earliest conceptions of American identity are rooted in imperial colonialism and reflect a lack of concern for or even awareness of the indigenous people who already inhabited the land these Europeans imagined as uninhabited and available, highlighting the fact that American conceptions of the wild have always been tainted by capitalism, racial domination, and power.

The indigenous inhabitants of this “virgin land” presented the earliest European settlers with the reality that there were already aboriginal people with their own cultural and racial identity here, casting their authenticity and claim of “Americanness” into question. American identity has always been a site of liminality and contested and is intimately connected to the tensions of modernity and wilderness. As we’ve discussed, those tensions can be represented in a number of ways, and one embodied manifestation lay in conceptions of the Native American. Deloria elucidates this in the following passage,

Here then, lies a critical dilemma of American identity: to complete their rite of passage, Americans had to displace either the interior or the exterior Indian Other. As long as Indian Others represented not only us but also them, Americans could not begin to resolve the questions swirling around their own identities vis-à-vis Indians and the British. Yet choosing one or the other would remove an ideological tool that was essential in propping up American identity. There was, quite simply, no way to conceive an American identity without Indians. At the same time, there was no way to make a complete identity while they remained.

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55. Smith, Virgin Land, 45.
56. Deloria, Playing Indian, 37.
Native Americans signified a natural, legitimating history and right to the land, a sense of freedom, and an eco-spirituality that European settlers desired. If a defining dialectical tension in American identity formation is primitivism and modernity, Native Americans represented the pull of the primitive and provided a contrast to the European identities that settlers were shedding. At the same time, the presence of aboriginal people on the continent challenged European claim to the land and any sense of a uniquely American identity. Deloria points out how Americans "imagined Indians as both close and distant, assigning values (primarily positive) to them, and then assuming those identities through costume and ritual." Much like the wilderness, "Indianness" as a concept became increasingly desirable as it was tamed, limited, and contained, in this case, to reservations. Once actual Native American people were constrained to reservations and the threat of violence and resistance alleviated, the concept of "Indian" was thoroughly appropriated by Europeans as a romanticized signifier of their American authenticity and historicity, while contemporary indigenous people and culture were essentially erased.

As the frontier border between civilization and the wilderness continued to shift, and wilderness continued to shrink, Americans struggled to maintain their sense of Americanness in an increasingly modern and civilized nation. This crisis of identity might best be understood as a lack of rootedness and shared history inherent in a young nation of immigrants. However, critical race studies demonstrate that this phenomenon is not limited to a singular moment in American history. Contemporary scholars have examined how white fragility coupled with white privilege results in performances of symbolic ethnicity in a variety of ways, especially in relation to space and place, as Americans of European descent still wrestle with issues of authenticity today.  

As we've discussed, Appalachia acts as a signifier for the now-settled western frontier that was so central to American identity formation. For Americans in an increasingly industrial nation, a sense of imperialist nostalgia compounds the romantic pull of Appalachia and the perceived sacredness of Grandfather Mountain. Blaustein argues that “Even as mainstream metropolitan America looks down upon the primitivism of backwoods Appalachia, there is also a sense of remorseful nostalgia, a nagging suspicion that irreplaceable spiritual values are being traded for material rewards of dubious worth.”

This tension of contemporary life in which Americans enjoy the material rewards of modernity while simultaneously longing for something that feels more spiritual and real is manifested in much of the mythos and aesthetics of Appalachia. It is visible in the landscape, as the rugged and dangerous mountains are made accessible in the form of national or state parks and attractions. It is represented in the character tropes of the pioneer, who is resourceful, rugged, and wise but also violent and wild, or the noble savage, who maintains a dignified eco-spirituality as a counterforce to his violence. And for Americans who have the means for leisure travel, popular conceptions about the Appalachian region and the people who live in it represent the ideal setting in which they might temporarily resolve that tension on a vacation “back in time” to a frontier-like wilderness in places like Grandfather Mountain.

Building on the concepts elucidated here, this study will examine how elements of the sacred, such as ritualization, reinterpretation, contention, desire, and authenticity, function rhetorically in the specific context of tourism in Southern Appalachia at Grandfather Mountain. The mythos of the American frontier wilderness and Appalachian otherness, coupled with real and imagined histories about place and identity set within the ecological wonder of Grandfather Mountain.

Mountain, create a fascinating intersection from which to examine the rhetorical force of sacredness in the natural world.

2.2 Methodology

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I learned that two people close to me had died within a five-day span. I was wrecked and lonely in my overwhelming grief. Unable to gather with others who were feeling the loss of my two friends, I found myself hiking the trails of Grandfather Mountain as a way to process my feelings. It simply felt like the most appropriate place to grieve and feel connected, even in my isolation. I hiked for miles over several days. I don't know how far or how long. The memory is a blur now as I try to recall the experience with any sort of objectivity. What I do remember is visceral and affective—watching the sunlight dance off the creek beds and rhododendron bushes, the thrill of locking eyes with deer in the distance, experiencing adrenaline as I climbed steep inclines, and the sense of satisfaction and awe as I took in the view from Linville Peak. Pushing my body to its physical limit eased my emotional anguish. The silence of the trails enveloped my grief. Being reminded of the fragility of life, the certainty of death, and the cyclical nature of all of these things, was a balm for my pain. The mountain comforted me.  

--Abby Arnold-Patti, Summer, 2020

That hike, coupled with countless other personal experiences, stories from others, and everyday observations, propels me to think about how I have experienced the sacredness of the mountain. It drives my inquiry into where that sense of sacredness comes from, how it is cultivated and circulated, and what the consequences of it might be. For nearly forty years, qualitative scholars have turned toward the intersection of personal lived experience and academic inquiry, and this study is, at least in part, a result of that turn.

Rhetoric has made its own turn toward reflexivity and the personal in conversations surrounding what texts a critic is drawn to study, how their interpretation is formed, and the style in which a critique is written. These notions of text, interpretation, and composition are inextricably tied to personal identity, positionality, and subjectivity. There is a certain intimacy that evolves between critic and text, as a critic chooses their text for an often-personal reason and from a particular subject position. The lens through which they view the text is unique, and the
style in which they write reflects their subjectivities. Overall, attempts to mask such subjectivities in scholarship can lead to homogenous bodies of literature that erase the rich diversity and complexity of lived experience and omit the discourses of the marginalized. The relationship between critic and text is intimate, evolving, formative, and generative.

Astute critics are open to the texts that surround them and notice the rhetoricity of everyday life, and those texts that are less obvious or visible and often undocumented can be incredibly valuable. Sandra J. Berkowitz argues, "Critics are (or ought to be) invested in their communities, local, national, international, political, social, religious, and academic." By being invested and embedded in communities, our social positions, geographic locations, and lived experiences lead us to unique texts that otherwise may remain unexamined. Ott and Aoki note how their geographic proximity to the Matthew Shepard murder influenced their attention and response to the media coverage of the tragedy. Ersula Ore opens her book, *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity*, with her personal story of racism and violence at the hands of the state. Authors in Moss and Inabinet’s 2021 edited volume each address their personal

relationship with the South.\textsuperscript{63} In this case, my own experience of being a not-quite-local but not-tourist outdoor enthusiast in Southern Appalachia affords me a unique and nuanced perspective on the sacredness of Grandfather Mountain and the complexity of that designation.

Not only is the interrelationship of text and critic evident in what texts we critique, but it is apparent in the methodological and theoretical approaches we take to our criticism. Charles E. Morris calls this “the methodological ‘queering’ of context” and calls for “engaging the critic-in-context through ‘critical self-portraiture.’”\textsuperscript{64} He argues critics ought to “contextualize oneself and speaking oneself as part of the critical act.”\textsuperscript{65} Importantly, he asks critics to consider what propels their work and what contexts enable and constrain our desires, longings, inclinations, commitments, repulsions, biases, identities, and positionalities in relation to our critical work. While the existence of these enabling and constraining contexts is not revolutionary, the act of transparently and vulnerably discussing them in our scholarship is. This self-reflexivity invites critical reads from diverse positionalities rather than offering our criticism as the authoritative one.

I live and work in the shadow of Grandfather Mountain. I have visited it countless times as a hiker, a tourist, and a chaperone on school field trips with my children long before I began any academic study of it. I am an outdoors enthusiast who chooses to live in Southern Appalachia in part because of the access to rock climbing, skiing, hiking, and mountain biking. My entire family benefits from and enjoys the robust tourism industry that has emerged around these activities in the region where we live. And, simultaneously, we are acutely aware of the

\textsuperscript{65} Morris, “Context’s Critic,” 232.
economic, political, and ecological challenges this industry creates for us and our neighbors. These factors have an immediate impact on my choice of text and how I approach it. The term text is an interesting one, given that the object of my study is a landform that predates language altogether. However, a long trajectory in the contemporary history of rhetorical criticism has moved the field beyond the impersonal, temporal, and spatial boundaries of a singular oratorical address to now include all manner of human symbol use and sites or modes of meaning-making, including a mountain and the linguistic and visual discourse surrounding it. These rhetorical sites might be characterized as locations of contestation or cooperation between rhetor(s) and audience(s) as we negotiate shared meaning and influence in an interdependent society.

The situated, ideological nature of rhetorical criticism is especially relevant in a study concerned with placemaking, wilderness, identity, and human relationships with landscapes, as it allows access to how we come to understand a place as special, sacred, or profane, as fulfilling a particular purpose, as available or unavailable, as necessary or unnecessary, as worth protecting or not. In short, a close analysis of the rhetorical construction of a place provides insight into how value and meaning are assigned to that place and the subsequent behaviors associated with that value or meaning, a worthwhile pursuit on an increasingly overheated planet with dwindling resources.

Edwin Black’s (1965) *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method* marks a crucial turn in method for rhetoricians as he argues that neo-Aristotelian critique is reductionist and fails to account for central elements of rhetoric such as audience, culture, and context. He points out how genres of rhetoric have evolved and expanded over time and no longer align with Aristotle’s forensic, deliberative, and epideictic classifications. Importantly, Black argues a speech has

influence beyond its original time, place, location, and audience. Critics, therefore, need a more fluid method to account for this dynamism. By freeing rhetoric from the constraints of neo-Aristotelian criticism, Black opens a floodgate of innovation in the field, including accounting for culture, expanding ideas regarding audience and agency, and emphasizing that different texts require different methods. Black ultimately lays the groundwork for a continually evolving definition of rhetorical criticism and, importantly, what might count as a rhetorical text.

Black laid the foundation for Raymie McKerrow’s (1989) concept of critical rhetoric, which argues that rhetorical critics should concern themselves with revealing how rhetoric works to create and maintain power structures.67 McKerrow challenges critics to critique dominant discourses, demystify power, unpack systems of oppression, and work to realign injustice. From a critical rhetoric stance, the critic must address how power and authority are rhetorically constituted and used, how audiences are interpellated into particular subject positions,68 and how power manifests from and within those positions. McKerrow maintains the traditional position that discourse is the primary domain of rhetoric, but he is innovative in his call for critics to examine how a text is working to maintain and (re)assign power, or to consider what rhetoric does. In this case, a critical orientation to the rhetorical construction of Grandfather Mountain draws attention to how issues of race, class, power, and commodification play out in a sacred outdoor space.

While McKerrow broadens conceptions about what rhetoric does and what role rhetoricians might have in world-making, Michael Calvin McGee expands notions of what constitutes a rhetorical text. McGee digresses from Black in terms of the purpose and focus of rhetorical criticism; however, Black’s expansion of method set the stage for McGee’s theorizations about what constitutes a text and how texts function rhetorically. McGee argues that an increasingly mediated and fragmented culture results in “interpretation being the primary task of speakers and writers and text construction the primary task of audiences, readers, and critics.” This represents a fundamental shift in the locus of rhetorical agency that later scholars will address in more detail. In short, McGee claims that rhetoricians must respond to the postmodern condition by redefining our concept of what constitutes a rhetorical text. He claims by privileging rhetoric as the master term in rhetorical criticism, we make clear the difference between rhetorical and literary critique, and we are then able to respond to all modes of influence. He argues:

With rhetoric as a master term, we begin by noticing that rhetors make discourses from scraps and pieces of evidence. Critical rhetoric does not begin with a finished text in need of interpretation; rather, texts are understood to be larger than the apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent. The apparently finished discourse is in fact a dense reconstruction of all the bits of other discourses from which it was made. It was fashioned from what we call ‘fragments.”

McGee’s intervention, coupled with his earlier (1980) concept of the “ideograph” significantly expands the scope of what one might consider a rhetorical text and creates space for the examination of images, sounds, spaces, places, landscapes, commemorative and interpretative sites, and even entire regions. Additionally, McGee’s work foregrounds the fragmented, fluid, dynamic way rhetorical fragments circulate, disappear, reemerge, and change through a cultural and discursive ecosystem. No one text sits in isolation as meaning-making in a cultural and discursive ecosystem.

76. Dickinson, “Space, Place.”
particular rhetorical moment is a con-constructed site of articulation that involves the rhetor, the audience(s), and historical as well as contemporary contexts. This also means that the locus of meaning-making resides in these sites of articulation where audience(s) and text(s) collide rather than exclusively in each text itself. If we want to analyze how the mountain we call Grandfather came to be revered and beloved, we might start by closely examining the numerous, diverse, at times competing texts about the mountain, with the understanding that these texts might take any number of forms, never exist in isolation, and each might best be understood as an individual node of a larger network that, when combined, constructs our expectations, understandings, and experiences of Grandfather.

Each of these methodological innovations expands both the object and process of rhetorical critique, allowing scholars to become open in their approach to a given text. This willingness to evaluate a text on its own terms, or as Rachel Hall calls it, “letting the object lead” creates opportunities to expand the aesthetic creativity of rhetorical criticism, create space for the centering of traditionally marginalized voices, and explore the rhetoricity of everyday life. Hall notes that “It is entirely possible that the methods of one discipline will not be enough for the task at hand, and you never know which methods you will need until you are knee-deep in a particular study.” It is with openness and curiosity about the text itself rather than any particular methodological commitment that I approach this inquiry into the sacredness of Grandfather Mountain.

This study will begin with a close reading of two civic controversies surrounding Grandfather Mountain to examine how arguments anchored in notions of the sacred have been deployed by various, at times competing groups in controversy. These arguments matter as all
arguments are conceived in, born from, influence, and even create social and cultural moments and ideological commitments. In his 1992 essay “Things Made by Words,” Michael Leff offers a compelling and clear bridge between “the artistic integrity of a discourse” and its “social impact.” He argues that ideological critique and textual criticism exist in a dialectical relationship with one another, each informing the other despite their differing orientations. Leff proposes the close reading of controversies as “representative anecdotes” of social situations that might offer “substantial representations of opposing positions,” offering the critic unique insight into social and cultural moments via specific texts. This echoes Lloyd Bitzer’s argument that situations or exigencies call discourse into being, accounting for the direct correlation between phenomenological experience, sociality, and text. Bitzer notes, “The exigence and the complex of persons, objects, events, and relations which generate rhetorical discourse are located in reality, are objective and publicly observable historic facts in the world we experience.” Kenneth Burke makes a similar argument when he positions language as a mode of symbolic action of a fundamental means by which one might understand the perceptions, observations, conclusions, and motives of individuals. What all of this points toward is an understanding that experiences are born from rhetorical spaces, texts, systems, and structures and cannot be separated from them. Human experiences, such as an encounter with the sacred on Grandfather

Mountain, are wrapped up in and cannot be extracted from the symbols that create, mediate, replicate, and transform them. Rhetoric, particularly close reading of civic controversy, recognizes that language is more than just a channel of information exchange but instead a site of contention and creation and that arguments reveal ideology and underlying logics and make normative claims.

However, the work of McGee and others reminds us that rhetoric is not bound to texts or language. Rhetoric, in all its forms, produces knowledge, communicates norms, and offers interpretations of social experience. Therefore, any study of place is incomplete without the embodied, sensual, affective, and experiential understanding offered by rhetorical field methods. Dickinson persuasively argues that the rhetorical study of place insists upon careful attention to bodies, movement, and materiality. He writes, “The body and the surrounding spatial bodies—human and non-human alike—are knit together with space governing the body even as the body produces space and produces its own spatiality. Space and the body are co-implicated.”

Chapters four and five address Dickinson’s concern for the relationship between bodies and space. Chapter four presents a close rhetorical analysis of the Grandfather Mountain attraction, which includes a museum, zoo, gift shop, café, and suspended bridge. I examine this important interpretative site using rhetorical field methods, an approach that marries ethnography, autoethnography, performance studies, and rhetorical criticism. Middleton, Senda-Cook, and Endres note that there are “processual forms of rhetorical action that are accessible only through participatory methods and that are flattened when those forms of

rhetorical action are reduced to exclusively textual representations."\textsuperscript{88} They go on to argue that this method is especially useful “to analyze situations in which meanings depend on places, physical structures, spatial delineations, interactive bodies, and in-the-moment choices.”\textsuperscript{89} This rhetoric in-situ grants the critic access to the embodied, affective experience of a place and how people interact with it through immersion in place.

Spatiality, landscape, architecture, sound, and materiality coalesce in compelling, suasive ways that cultivate a sense of history, identity, and place. Rhetorical field methods situate the critic’s body at the center of these often non-discursive rhetorical forces, opening and attuning them to the sensuality and complexity of the rhetoric of place. This intersectional method invites a more holistic approach to the study of place as it accounts for the social and cultural nature of the rhetoric of region and allows the critic to observe the subtle insights and nuance only made evident through lived experience. If the aim is to understand conceptions and experience of place, then rhetorical field methods, which “explores the dialectic between rhetorical texts and the lived experiences through which those texts are encountered and come to have significant meanings,”\textsuperscript{90} is certainly a logical approach. Adopting this participatory epistemology and methodology is central to representing the complex local knowledge of a given place, thereby avoiding a colonial, objectified interpretation. Middleton, Hess, Endres, and Senda-Cook echo this, noting, “the participatory critical rhetoric researcher withholds final judgment until the participants’ voices have been fully contemplated.”\textsuperscript{91} This suspension of judgment decolonizes

\textsuperscript{88} Middleton, Senda-Cook, and Endres, “Articulating Rhetorical Field Methods,” 387.
\textsuperscript{89} Middleton, Senda-Cook, and Endres, “Articulating Rhetorical Field Methods,” 388.
\textsuperscript{90} Middleton, Senda-Cook, and Endres, “Articulating Rhetorical Field Methods,” 392.
rhetorical criticism and foregrounds the nuanced, complicated, often marginalized local voices that are so central to the ethos of critical regionalism.

Additionally, rhetorical field methods insist upon critical reflexivity. McKinnon, Asen, Chávez, and Howard note that “rhetorical criticism occupies the end of a methodological continuum where the performer left a unique and indelible imprint on the subject.”92 They call for critics to be self-reflexive and transparent about their social location in relation to their research, and their affective responses to texts, and consider carefully how context shapes both text and interpretation, especially in terms of the rhetoricity of place.

Dickinson calls on critics to “attend carefully to the performances of the people inhabiting the space,”93 and chapter five focuses attention on the embodied, performative ways in which visitors engage with the sacred space of Grandfather Mountain through a close content analysis of Instagram posts visitors publish of their visit. The Grandfather Mountain attraction encourages social media engagement by offering suggested hashtags and photo opportunities as visitors move throughout the space. The poses, captions, hashtags, and locations of these photographs offer themes useful in understanding how visitors understand and engage with the space. These images have relevance beyond the personal archive and social network of the original poster, as the hashtags categorize these public-facing images together and associate them with Grandfather Mountain and they then become pedagogical, creating expectations of what an experience at Grandfather Mountain is like and instructing others on how to behave there. Instagram, with its image-centric interface and hashtag and location searchability, provides an

excellent space in which themes and patterns of bodies-in-performance-of-place at Grandfather Mountain might be critically examined.

In conclusion, the rhetorical criticism of place is a dynamic, complex, layered endeavor that necessitates creative and diverse methodologies. The theoretical and methodological expansion of rhetorical criticism spanning the last five decades provides a framework from which this study of sacredness and place might emanate. A sociological understanding of the sacred as constitutive and affective, a critical, rhetorical understanding of region, and an appreciation of the rhetorical construction of Appalachian difference and primitivism provide the contours for this close, multi-modal examination of the rhetorical construction of Grandfather Mountain.
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Chapter 3: Sacred Struggles: Rhetorical Analysis Of Controversies Surrounding Grandfather Mountain

“Really, some of this boils down to whether you believe in the right to private property.”

-Hugh Morton, 1990

In the introduction to their edited volume, David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal discuss the spatial practices that imbue sacred places with meaning. They describe what they call the “poetics and politics” of sacred space.¹ This chapter is particularly concerned with the politics of sacredness at Grandfather Mountain. Chidester and Linenthal note,

Sacred space is inevitably contested space, a site of negotiated contests over the legitimate ownership of sacred symbols…since no sacred space is merely ‘given’ in the world, its ownership will always be at stake. In this respect, a sacred space is not merely discovered or founded, or constructed; it is claimed, owned, and operated by people advancing specific interests.²

Here, we will examine prominent controversies in which the ownership, purpose, meaning, and politics of Grandfather Mountain were contested. By closely attending to the arguments and logics deployed in these controversies, we will come to see how an understanding of a place as sacred is often anchored in logics that are reasonable, but not necessarily rational. This gap between the reasonable and the rational is not uncommon in regard to the sacred. Durkheim argued that societies create symbols and classifications that are in fact not rooted in rationality but rather in an emotional understanding of the relationship between the world and a given sacred object, or, in this case, place.³ He theorized that in modern societies the power of reasonable but irrational sacred commitments might be lessened due to advancements in

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². Chidester and Linenthal, American Sacred Space, 15.
scientific rationality, but as we’ll see here, that is not the case when it comes to Grandfather Mountain.

3.1 Historical Context

The first recorded private owner of Grandfather Mountain was Civil War veteran Walter Waightstill Lenoir. Lenoir, who owned much land in the high country, is famously quoted as saying, “I am rich enough to feel how poor I am. Rich enough in land to be very poor until I get rid of it or have the means to improve it.” In 1886, Samuel Kelsey, a New York developer, and Hugh MacRae, an industrialist and railroad tycoon from Wilmington, North Carolina, formed the Linville Improvement Company and acquired 16,000 acres of land that encompassed Grandfather Mountain, with the intention of bringing the improvement Lenoir spoke of. The company developed the resort community of Linville, adjacent to Grandfather Mountain, and marketed properties to investors based on the views of Grandfather’s peaks.4 Other resort communities were later developed in the areas surrounding Grandfather Mountain. Investors in these resort communities were banking on the mythic pull of the mountain on the imaginations of tourists.

They were correct, and by 1993, six million people had traversed terrain that had for the previous millennia sat virtually untouched, and a local economy firmly anchored in tourism had been established.5 As early as 1918, just two years after the establishment of the National Park Service (NPS), officials approached the Linville Improvement Company about acquiring their holdings on Grandfather Mountain for a national park. While Samuel Kelsey advocated for the

sale, his business partner Hugh MacRae insisted on including the value of the timber in the selling price of the property and threatened to start cutting trees if the park service did not raise their offer. The NPS could not afford MacRae’s asking price and instead authorized the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. Kelsey spent the next decade advocating for Grandfather to become publicly owned; however, public ownership did not occur until 2008, when the estate of Hugh Morton, MacRae’s grandson who inherited the land, sold the mountain to the state of North Carolina, and it became a state park.  

Hugh Morton, the longest private owner of Grandfather Mountain, is considered by many to be a driving force in the economic development of the region and the ecological preservation of Grandfather Mountain. He is popularly remembered as an environmentalist and advocate for the region. However, others contend that Morton was strictly a venture capitalist and that any conservationism that occurred did so only because it aligned with his business interests. Either way, the narrative of Grandfather is inextricably tied to the contested legacy of its development and the pursuits of Hugh Morton. Morton’s influence on the politics, economy, and ecology of the high country cannot be overstated. One of his most influential contributions to the contours of the region involves the second controversy this chapter will examine: the route of Blue Ridge Parkway.  

In May of 1955, 22 years after the initial conception of the Parkway, the North Carolina Highway Commission posted maps at the Watauga County courthouse in Boone, North Carolina outlining their intention of seizing lands for the Blue Ridge Parkway through eminent domain.

Tager, Grandfather Mountain.  
The seized land included 779 acres on the side of Grandfather Mountain. Hugh Morton, like many other private landowners in the region over the previous two decades, would need to negotiate compensation for his land. Morton, who had successfully advocated alongside other North Carolinians to bring the Parkway through their state rather than Tennessee in hopes of driving tourists to the attraction he was building atop Grandfather Mountain, was now faced with the prospect of losing parcels of his own land to the project. Blue Ridge Parkway historian Anne Mitchell Whisnant foregrounds the contentious nature of the Parkway’s development, noting:

> The Parkway’s final form was neither inevitable nor obvious at all. Nor was it foreordained by nature or completely preplanned by landscape architects who imposed (without significant conflict or opposition) their fully formed Parkway vision. At every point, the Parkway developed out of a dialogue (sometimes amicable, sometimes conflicted) among the parties planning for or affected by the project.\(^8\)

A favorite recollection of Morton among locals is the time he confronted contractors making test borings for a proposed tunnel with a double-barreled shotgun in hand, ordering them off his mountain. In his effort to prevent the seizure of his own property, Morton used his tremendous influence to turn the North Carolina state government, which had until that point been highly cooperative with the NPS, against park officials, got much of his lands deeded back to him, and brought a 100 million-dollar federal project to a screeching halt in what amounted to the most public and protracted controversy in the Parkway’s history.

These are but two of many contentious moments in the storied history of Grandfather Mountain. By closely examining the discourse of these controversies, we might see how appeals to sacredness work to frame arguments as reasonable despite their apparent irrationality.

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3.2 Controversy as Rhetorical Method

At the heart of the rhetorical study is the celebration of the expression of difference in specific contexts that might ultimately generate new knowledges and understandings. In short, the close study of controversies has something to teach us about values, logics, motives, and the interconnected complexity of civic life. Protagoras advocated for antilogic or arguing both sides of a question without any objective criterion of truth, which he viewed as ultimately inaccessible. Isocrates, who is best understood in the sophist tradition, believed that human knowledge is limited, and there is no one right course of action in every situation. He elevated doxa as a source of political wisdom, drawing a through line from lived experience to rhetorical text to political action. This ancient sophist tradition of controversia situates rhetoric not as an instrument to deploy pre-existing truth or an extension or accessory to dialectical reasoning, but rather as a generative mode of inquiry itself, and values the practice of arguing all sides of an issue as a way of knowing. Michael Mendelson notes that controversy situates “a system of knowing, of coming into one’s ideas, within the discipline of rhetoric itself since meaning is realized not through recourse outside the argument but is generated within the context of opposing narratives.”

Thinking of rhetorical study in this way situates language as a site of contestation in a specific moment in time for particular persons in debate. This positions rhetorical criticism as not so much a pursuit of any sort of ultimate truth but rather an understanding of how language is working as a site of contestation in a particular cultural and political moment.

Approaching language in the paradigm of controversia equips critics to examine inevitable moments of civic and relational strife as generative sites of knowledge creation. It is through controversy that people come to create new understandings and truths, what Cicero

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called *invento*. Thomas Slone argues that modern rhetoricians have failed to fully realize the potential of Ciceronian *invento* and describes it as an analytical process through which one might form new resolutions or reexamine currently held positions, and that process is only complete when one has considered an issue from all possible sides.\(^\text{10}\) Mendelson echoes this notion that without disputation, there is entropy, noting, “apprehending and working with contraries remains a vital source of rhetorical knowledge…controversia, like argument, is a ‘method,’ a procedure by which we investigate opposition and in the process encounter that which was previously unknown, a procedure through which we expand the scope of our thinking.”\(^\text{11}\) G. Thomas Goodnight extends this argument when he claims, “Argument is an indispensable element of modernity because it accords humans the capacity and obligation to cooperatively ‘learn’ from mistakes. Criticism engages, through argument, the question of whether a claim is any longer defensible in light of what we now know about the world, our relationships, and ourselves.”\(^\text{12}\)

Considered this way, controversy becomes a method by which a critic might come to understand a situation or topic, and even more importantly, controversy might be viewed as a method by which one nuances their own position, discovers points of convergence in seemingly disparate positions, or formulates new logics altogether. It is through controversy that collective “truths” get worked out. In this case, it is through controversies that Grandfather Mountain came to be understood as sacred, and that understanding, in turn, shapes how arguments about the mountain are formed.

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Michael Leff’s 1992 intervention encourages the close reading of civic controversies as “representative anecdotes” of social situations that offer “substantial representations of opposing positions” that might offer the critic unique insight into social and cultural moments through opposing positions in a given controversy, made accessible through texts. Simply put, critics may come to understand cultural moments, challenge normative claims, and denaturalize hegemonic assumptions by closely examining the rhetoric deployed in civic controversies surrounding a given issue. Using stasis theory, we might come to see points of convergence and better understand points of divergence; however, this is only possible through closely considering arguments from both sides. When we come to see the discourse of controversies as generative sites of knowledge production where logics are exposed, beliefs are formed and refined, and power structures might be exposed, the value of controversy becomes very clear. What might we learn about ecological values, our relationship to the land, wilderness, Appalachia, or Grandfather Mountain by closely examining both sides of significant and impactful controversies surrounding ownership, purpose, and future of the mountain?

In this chapter, I will follow traces of discourse about Grandfather Mountain across time and space by examining controversies surrounding the ownership of Grandfather Mountain spanning a generation. One might consider the argument over ownership and use of the mountain as a continuous battle spanning a century that has taken various forms over time. For the sake of clarity and brevity, this chapter will focus on two specific and especially public, interrelated, and contentious boiling points in this long and evolving controversy: attempts to secure Grandfather Mountain as a publicly owned national park and the relationship between Grandfather Mountain and the Blue Ridge Parkway. Samuel Kelsey, one of the original investors in the Linville

Improvement Company and part owner of Grandfather Mountain, spent decades advocating for public ownership of the mountain and its establishment as a national park. His son, Harlan Page Kelsey, continued his father’s legacy and fought a generation later. Hugh MacRae, Samuel Kelsey’s business partner, was his opponent in the debate over ownership of the mountain and fought publicly and relentlessly to maintain Grandfather Mountain as private property. His heir, grandson, and eventual sole owner of the mountain continued his grandfather’s logic and extended it into the question of what if any, land on or adjacent to Grandfather Mountain should be claimed by eminent domain for the Blue Ridge Parkway. While there are numerous texts espousing positions on these debates, this chapter will focus exclusively on the rhetoric of Harlan Page Kelsey and Hugh Morton, as they were the major players and business associates with the deepest investments and most prominent voices guiding these very public controversies.

3.3 Case Studies

This section applies Leff’s theorizing to the two controversies introduced in the opening of this chapter: Samuel Kelsey’s desire to make Grandfather Mountain public by selling it to the NPS and Hugh Morton’s campaign to ensure the Blue Ridge Parkway came near, but not onto, his mountain. These represent two boiling points in an extended controversy over ownership of the mountain. By closely attending to the rhetoric deployed in these controversies, we begin to unpack the governing logics of arguments surrounding the contestation and commodification of a scared place.

3.3.1 Controversy on (and about) the Mountain

In 1916, Hugh Morton’s uncle, Nelson MacRae, offered to donate 1,400 acres at the top of Grandfather Mountain to the Interior Department as a national park. Congress authorized the Park Service to accept the land; however, Park Service head Stephen Mather rejected the
donation when he realized the company intended to retain ownership of and profit from all the lands around the donated summit. This was the first of many moments in the contemporary history of the mountain when access, ownership, and commodification became points of interest and contention. By 1924 the federal government had established a committee to choose a site for a national park in the southern Appalachian region. A group led by Hugh MacRae that included government officials from Asheville, Charlotte, Linville, Blowing Rock, and Boone, the North Carolina Park Commission, and timber companies that owned land in the Great Smokies all advocated for a site that encompassed Grandfather Mountain and the Linville Gorge.

By this time, the Linville Improvement Company was struggling. A slump in travel during World War II, excessive timber mining and the ecological damage caused by it combined with a decreased demand for timber had left the company financially devastated. Its head, Nelson MacRae committed suicide, leaving his bereaved father, Hugh MacRae, to deal with the desperate state of affairs. Hugh MacRae acknowledged the untenable financial state and wrote to his associate Harlan Kelsey, son of Linville Improvement Company founder Samuel Kelsey, that the company “would not be able to disregard the intrinsic value of the mountain and make the equivalent of a large donation toward the success of the park plan.” He argued for “fair consideration” for the value of the land which he insisted would take account for the value of the timber. In their state of financial distress, the company again began timber mining on land adjacent to Grandfather and the proposed Parkway route, leaving federal officials concerned about destruction of the landscapes along the already established and under-construction Parkway. Morton hoped to save the company by selling the land at top dollar to the federal government and warned, “We are going to continue to cut timber and are going to sell either the timber or the land as a whole to the first purchaser that will pay us a satisfactory price. We would
rather see the property made a park, but we are not going to hold it indefinitely, hoping it will eventually become a park.”

Morton and the Federal government failed to agree upon a price, the sale never came to fruition, and instead the Great Smokey Mountain National Park was established.

Eventually, in early 1945, the Linville Improvement Company gave Kelsey, who had long advocated for public ownership of the mountain, the option to purchase 5,555 acres of land, including Grandfather Mountain, for what Kelsey deemed a fair price of $165,000 or about $30 per acre, for donation to the Park Service. However, this was not enough land for a National Park. From 1944 until 1947, Kelsey served as an intermediary between the NPS and the Linville Company and orchestrated a public relations campaign to “rescue” Grandfather Mountain by establishing the Grandfather Mountain Park Association to raise funds to secure more land from the Linville Improvement Company and establish Grandfather as a National Park. He termed this an “urgent challenge” and emphasized that Grandfather was “threatened with immediate calamitous destruction of its virgin glories by lumbering operations and commercial exploitation.” His rallying cry of “Shall Grandfather Mountain Be Saved?” was seen in statewide press and the halls of Congress. While he was successful with his initial purchase, his 8-year attempt at securing the funds for more acreage at Grandfather Mountain was not.

Still private property and still struggling financially, MacRae proposed a system of roads on both sides of Grandfather, along with an expanded Parkway there. Kelsey thought the company had already “done very much to spoil the beauty of the mountain as a natural park” and told MacRae, “If you carried out your idea of extending a road system on top of the mountain,

making of it another Blowing Rock or even a Chimney Rock, then its value as a National Park is ruined forever.”  

Kelsey acknowledged that his father, Samuel Kelsey, a founding partner of the Linville Improvement Company, and MacRae had a shared vision of creating Grandfather into a site of recreation but ultimately surmised “both you and he had in mind more the exploiting of the mountain for the purposes of making money rather than dedicating the mountain itself as a beautiful natural object…unspoiled.”

The future of the mountain was hanging in the balance when Hugh Morton, Hugh MacRae’s grandson, returned from World War II to take the helm of the family business and brought with him a vision of aggressively developing and marketing the mountain itself as a tourist attraction. Unlike his predecessors, Morton was convinced that the mountain itself, positioned as a tourist attraction, would be the financial windfall needed to keep the company afloat. In a 1947 Raleigh News and Observer article, Morton wrote, “Grandfather’s beauty would be the commodity which we would sell…all the timber on the 5,500-acre tract will not yield as much income as will several rich crops of tourists.” Morton withdrew the possibility of public ownership, refusing to consider any public purchase deal, and the decade-long attempt to secure Grandfather Mountain as public lands ended. Less than a year after Hugh MacRae died, the company dissolved, its assets were distributed to shareholders, and Morton became the sole owner of the entire mountain, which he quickly turned into a profitable tourist attraction.

As all of this was happening, legislation authorizing the construction of the Blue Ridge Parkway had passed, and the states of North Carolina and Tennessee had been in contentious

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debates over the route of the Parkway, which would connect the Shenandoah National Park to the Great Smokey Mountain National Park. Hugh Morton was influential in ensuring his home state of North Carolina would benefit handsomely from the tourism the Parkway promised to bring. He campaigned not only to bring the Parkway through North Carolina but especially to ensure the Parkway would come near his attraction at Grandfather Mountain. His friendly collaboration with Parkway planners and developers ran afoul when controversy arose over the specific route the road would take on Grandfather Mountain. In short, the Park Service advocated for what is commonly referred to as the “high route,” hoping to maximize scenery for Parkway motorists. Morton advocated for the “low route,” which would ensure the Parkway would not be visible from and thus disturb the view from his mountain top attraction. After protracted debate, the Parkway was built on what is popularly referred to as the “middle route;” however, this option required tremendous cost and engineering ingenuity as it passes over an unstable boulder field.

The final section of the Blue Ridge Parkway to be completed, often referred to as the “missing link,” was that middle route, commonly known as the Linn Cove Viaduct, an engineering wonder built by the NPS to protect the ecologically sensitive forest through which this section of the Parkway winds. This route is the result of a years-long battle between Morton and the NPS that is generally remembered in local folklore as a victory for an ecologically minded independent thinker, Morton, who valued individual property rights, private enterprise, and environmental protection. This, of course, grossly oversimplifies and distorts historical events, offering a narrative in which a clear hero, Morton, defeats a villain, the NPS, to save the sacred and beloved Grandfather Mountain. This accounting obscures the historical, ecological, political, and cultural complexities that unfolded in the decades-long battle. In what follows, we
will examine how Morton managed to, as Parkway Superintendent Sam Weems said in 1965, “bring to a screaming halt a $100 million plus Federal project jointly designed and agreed upon in good faith.” While a myriad of factors contributed to the disruption and ultimate rerouting of the final section of the Parkway, one significant one is the rhetoric of Morton, which positioned the mountain itself as sacred and mobilized it as a symbol of American values. Here, we will examine how notions of sacredness shape the rhetorical strategies of both Harlan Kelsey and Hugh Morton in their debates over the conservation and commodification of Grandfather Mountain as they negotiated its ownership and stewardship.

3.3.2 Harlan P. Kelsey and the Argument for Public Ownership

Historian Anne Whisnant notes that Harlan Kelsey repeatedly asserted that unless the mountain came under federal protection via public ownership, it would suffer “immediate calamitous destruction by the exploiter armed with axe and saw, to devastate and despoil.” In 1946, he penned an editorial in the *Asheville Citizen-Times* titled “Grandfather Mountain—‘Gem of the Southern Appalachians’.” He opens his argument by describing the awe expressed by French botanist Andrew Michaux expressed upon summitting Grandfather. Then, he proceeds to describe the uniqueness of the mountain, pointing out that while it is not the highest of the Appalachians, it is the highest in the Blue Ridge range and that geologists hypothesize it may be the oldest. He notes the flora and fauna that are unique to Grandfather, establishing its difference from the surrounding mountains. The first several lines of his editorial are dedicated to setting Grandfather Mountain apart from the surrounding, even adjacent, mountains in the region.

His next move is to personify the mountain, playing upon its famous profile ridgeline that “presents the aspect of a gigantic and almost perfect old man’s profile, peacefully reposing and gazing skywards and directly away, most impolitely, from his more modest yet beautiful and attractive spouse, Grandmother Mountain, but a few miles distant.” Then, he describes the mountain as “a mecca” for vacationers and notes the many “glorious” sites and “thrilling” experiences vacationers might expect. His conclusion, however, is where his argument lies and is worth quoting at length:

Grandfather Mountain, with its contiguous peaks, streams, and primeval forests is one of our few remaining great scenic and recreational areas in Eastern America still unspoiled by the axe and cheap commercial exploitation. The National Park Service stands ready to be its careful guardian and administrator for all future time, if the state of North Carolina and its citizens are willing to invest the moderate amount it will take to purchase the different tracts from present owners. It is an investment that will bring perpetual cash returns to the state an untold health and pleasure to thousands of happy visitors not only North Carolinians but citizens of every state in the union and every country on the globe. Yet this “gem of the Southern Appalachians” is in imminent danger of private exploitation and unless definitely taken over and preserved may soon be lost forever to the state of North Carolina and the nation. Such a disaster is unthinkable—but wishful thinking instead of positive action will not prevent such a catastrophe!

In a statement titled “Grandfather Mountain—Shall It Be Saved” issued to the North Carolina State House of Representatives, Kelsey makes nearly identical rhetorical moves; however, for this audience he includes appeals to patriotism and American identity.21 Again, he opens with an exaltation of the mountain, with a focus on its ancientness and its uniqueness: “In the morning of the world a mighty convulsion heaved heavenward the Appalachian System—first-born of the earth’s mountain ranges.” Here we again see the personification of the mountain as it is “born” in a creation story not

unlike those of many religious traditions. He then goes on to describe the mountain as a “venerable landmark clothed with an exquisite virgin mantle of rare forest trees and flowers;” Kelsey spends a full five paragraphs recounting the uniqueness of Grandfather Mountain’s natural features.

Then, in this appeal to elected officials, he introduces a new rhetorical strategy by connecting Grandfather Mountain to the very essence of American democracy and westward expansion:

The projection far into the Southland of these lofty ancient Appalachians, greatest masses of mountains east of the Rockies and the highest mountains covered with hardwood forest in America, profoundly affected the civilization that so soon after the discovery of America was to be imposed upon the Atlantic side of the continent. To the steep mountainsides and into the fertile coves and valleys, came the hardiest and most virile of the invading tides of white men, to battle with nature and carve new homes out of the wilderness, inspired with the fierce desire for new freedoms, and security to work out their own destiny. And thereafter out of these same mountains have come brilliant statesmen and leaders in every line of endeavor to do their part in the building of a great America.

This passage is especially compelling as here Kelsey links Grandfather Mountain directly to values sacred and central to American identity such as wilderness, independence, democracy, manifest destiny, homesteading, and rugged masculinity.

Having established Grandfather Mountain as naturally unique and representative of American values and identity, he returns to religious language once again by referring to it as a “blessed Mecca” and then presents it as under threat: “However, with the insistent economic demands of a fast-growing population, the virgin resources of soil and forest have been far too ruthlessly exploited, with little thought of the future, and today the few remaining primeval wilderness areas are in imminent danger of despoilation.” In the next line, he even uses the term desecrated, clearly implying that it was sacred in its prior state.
Kelsey closes his treatise with language that is clearly intended to cultivate a sense of urgency. He writes of the “vital need for setting aside and preserving inviolate before it is too late, every remaining suitable area still available.” He warns that “the most outstanding and superb feature along the Blue Ridge Parkway [Grandfather Mountain] today is threatened with immediate calamitous destruction of its virgin glories.” In his final plea, Kelsey returns to themes of patriotism, coupled with the urgency he has now inserted into the argument:

This is an urgent challenge not only to Grandfather Mountain’s homeland State of North Carolina, but to the entire nation. Is it not an inescapable duty to our citizens of today owe to succeeding generations, to save this masterpiece of Nature intact and unsullied, it is certainly a service which when accomplished, will for all time greatly redound to the honor of those who have a part in preventing its destruction.

Kelsey’s call situates the public purchase of Grandfather Mountain as an urgent national issue that patriotic and admirable Americans are obligated to address for the collective good. Interestingly, his former business partner and opponent in this debate, Hugh Morton, uses similar strategies to formulate his argument for a much different plan.

3.3.3 Hugh Morton & The Case for Privatization

Historians have criticized Morton’s seemingly dual and competing commitments as the owner of Grandfather Mountain. Drew A. Swanson writes, “Morton wanted to develop the mountain at the same time he declared himself a protector of a natural treasure.”22 Morton was effective in swaying public opinion toward the continued privatization of the mountain and generally turned public sentiment against the NPS, even as plans for his company to further

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develop the top of the mountain were already in place. He anchored his argument over the Blue Ridge Parkway route in environmental protection while simultaneously developing a significant section of the opposite side of the mountain into the Grandfather Golf and Country Club. Randy Johnson, former Morton employee and the originator and first manager of Grandfather Mountain’s backcountry trail program writes, “Mr. Morton found profit in preservation at Grandfather Mountain.” To do so, he rhetorically situated unspoiled wilderness as sacred and under threat by reckless and domineering government bureaucrats. He then positioned himself as a brave and independent guardian of that sacred wilderness, committed to making it available to the public, who were eager to pay for access to it. Blue Ridge Parkway historian Anne Mitchell Whisnant writes,

> the key issues [of the Parkway controversy] had to do with the Parkway’s expected effects on Morton’s newly-hatched tourism enterprise, where visitation had ballooned from about 12,000 in 1946 to about 200,000 a decade later. Environmental protection in the way we now understand it—or in the way Morton himself later came to see it—played almost no role in the controversy.

As we will see here, Morton effectively deployed ideographs such as <protection>, <wilderness>, <stewardship>, <conservation>, and <nature>, terms used by Kelsey to make the case for public ownership, to advocate for privatization. To do so, Morton mirrored Kelsey by positioning the mountain as threatened; however, in this case, it was the federal government and the NPS, rather than private enterprise, posing the threat, and positioning himself as a statewide leader against encroaching Federal overreach.

Morton’s arguments were anchored in the same ideas as Kelsey’s—primarily that Grandfather Mountain is unique, unspoiled, ancient, wild, and therefore sacred. This language permeates not only his discourse regarding the stewardship of the mountain but also, a bit ironically, his language advertising and promoting his developments on the mountain. Pamphlets advertising the residential golf course he built boast of “residential streets,” “modern golf course irrigation system” which produces “instant grass” and claims it all to be “encircled by thousands of acres of unspoiled wilderness,” with “crystal clear mountain streams,” where “preservation of the natural beauty of the setting as been a foremost objective.”

In a 1972 booster video produced and narrated by Morton, he declares, “The unspoiled ruggedness of these rustic peaks make Grandfather Mountain a mountain of all mountains.” He goes on to describe the “rare and delicate” flora and fauna, and uses terms like “ancient,” “mysterious,” and “grand” to describe the landscape. He concludes the 11-minute video by noting the “mountain people’s admiration for this mountain is easy to understand but difficult to describe,” again, setting the mountain apart from its environs and positioning it as categorically different than other mountains in the region.

Morton described the NPS’s proposed Blue Ridge Parkway route as going “over the top” of Grandfather Mountain, although Whisnant claims the “top route” was actually several hundred feet below any of Grandfather’s summits. Morton often described the “high route” as “a switchblade to the Mona Lisa” that would leave “a great scar.” This language, which likens the mountain to one of the most well-known and revered artistic masterpieces of all time, became

27. Whisnant, “Roads Taken and Not Taken,” 3.
a rallying cry for Morton and his supporters and was used in numerous correspondences regarding the matter, further positioning Grandfather as valuable, unique, delicate, and under threat.

In a press release published in newspapers across North Carolina, Morton writes that the route proposed by the Park Service would “be destructive” to the landscape and would “desecrate with deep gashes a mountain which is probably venerated more than any other in the state.” Again, here, we see the invocation of the term desecrate to ominously describe a possible fate of the sacred mountain if it falls into the wrong hands. Morton’s well-documented political and financial influence is evident as a number of newspapers across the state framed his argument in favorable terms and encouraged North Carolinians to help Morton defend “his popular spot” with comparatively little coverage of opposing views.

Like Kelsey, Morton rhetorically situated the sacred place of Grandfather Mountain as under threat and in need of protection. In a 1962 speech delivered in Roanoke, Virginia, to members of the National Association of Travel Organizations, Morton proclaimed that the NPS had maintained “an army of occupation attitude for 20 years” and claimed the organization had honed in on North Carolina with “a special kind of National Park Service arrogance and abuse.” He held particular disdain for Park superintendent Conrad Wirth, who he referred to as a “tricky operator.” Similarly, in response to a report by the Highway Commission and United States Park Service in which they announced their Parkway plans, Morton responded, “it is high time the Park Service stop it’s foolish attempts to steal the rest of Grandfather Mountain.”

Morton has positioned the NPS as an invading, conquering, deceitful, criminal force infringing on the rights and property of the individual. He will return to this strategy over and over again, and in doing so will enlist the support of Governor Terry Sanford and other state-level politicians as well as wealthy North Carolina business owners. Additionally, this language capitalized on general anti-bureaucratic, anti-federal government sentiment among rural North Carolinians. He closed his rebuttal to the Highway Commission Report by arguing “This mountain is not mine nor theirs to gut and deface and kill off its wilderness characteristics. They should know this—and I certainly do.” But of course the mountain quite literally was his and as these statements were being made, he was expanding roads, paving parking lots, and building gift shops and golf courses on it.

Morton’s opponents, mainly federal government officials, Kelsey, and environmentalists from other parts of the country, were angered by the irrationality and apparent duplicity of his argument: the Parkway would be “a scar to the Mona Lisa” but the development of his tourism enterprise would not. Morton repeatedly defended his company, despite its environmentally disastrous record, objecting to Kelsey’s “portrayal of the Linville Company as the villainous woodman, axe held high preparing to devastate Grandfather down to the last sprig of chlorophyll” claiming that “is contrary to our opinion of ourselves and we had just as soon not be looked upon in such light.” Instead, Morton argued he and his company were local, private land owners with a special understanding of and appreciation for the mountain that outsiders from the federal government lacked.

This foregrounding of private land ownership reflects another of Morton’s rhetorical strategies that mirrors Kelsey’s: an appeal to American values. However, in this case, Morton anchored those values not in collectivity and notions of preservation for future generations like Kelsey, but instead in neoliberal, conservative ideals such as individual property rights, land ownership, capitalism, and private enterprise. Morton successfully painted the Park Service as heavy-handedly forcing a private citizen to sell their property, and even his appeals to environmental protection were often couched in the notion that one cannot profit from a view that has been spoiled. This argument resonated deeply with local Appalachian people who were skeptical of outsiders, having already seen their region radically changed by the tourism industry, spearheaded mostly by outsiders, and yet profited very little from that change.

Eventually, Morton released his “Capsule of Facts Substantiating Opposition to a Possible Change in the Established Right of Way for the Blue Ridge Parkway at Grandfather Mountain” to media outlets.³⁴ This epistle establishes a connection between the environmental and economic concerns as it situates the construction of the “high route” of the Parkway as destructive to the ecology of the mountain, but also as destructive to the number one commodity and economic driver in the region—scenery. The “Capsule” contains six points, each supplemented by Morton’s own photographs. In it, he argues the construction of the proposed route would be treacherous and expensive due to the mountain’s slopes and that the construction would be “unsightly” and would cause “incalculable damages,” making it “fantastically impractical.” Ironically, Morton used his own projects on Grandfather Mountain, the only development ever constructed on the mountain, to illustrate and support his point. Morton

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³⁴ Hugh Morton, “A Capsule of Facts Substantiating Opposition to a Possible Change in the Established Right of Way for the Blue Ridge Parkway at Grandfather Mountain,” Land files, Blue Ridge Parkway Archives, Asheville, NC.
claimed the Park Service’s preferred route would deface the view from his mountain-top attraction and argued that it would cripple the local economy, offering a photo of Grandfather Mountain’s filled parking lot as evidence of its economic impact.

Throughout the “Capsule,” Morton connected heavy federal spending with local economic losses and ecological destruction. He argued the “high route” would result in “several hundreds of thousands of dollars and an unsightly gash that would change the whole face and character of [North Carolina’s] most beloved and respected mountain” and would result in “incalculable damages to existing business enterprises.” He closed this argument by noting the “most costly construction known to Blue Ridge road building would be a consequence of the higher route. It would produce an unsightly scar and change the whole face and character of North Carolina’s most loved and respected mountain.” This statement is juxtaposed with a photo of a bulldozer pushing soil that was taken during Morton’s construction of the Yonahlosee Trail on Grandfather.

What we see throughout this manifesto is Morton directly connecting economics and ecology, costs and conservation, and environmentalism with enterprise. Regardless of Morton’s true intentions and values, this strategy proved effective with the majority of North Carolinians and solidified Morton’s legacy as both a savvy businessman and an ecologically-minded conservationist in spite of his record of development on and commodification of the mountain. More importantly and ironically, the popularity of Morton’s argument resulted in the protection of an especially delicate section of the mountain while still ensuring vehicular access to the area via the Linn Cove Viaduct on the Blue Ridge Parkway. It also set the stage for the eventual sale of the mountain to the state of North Carolina by his heirs after his death to seemingly align with

his desire to “protect the mountain,” despite the fact that he fought doggedly against such a sale during his lifetime.

3.4 Rhetorical Themes of a Sacred Place Across Time and Space

3.4.1 Sacredness of Nature

Both sides routinely used ideas about ecological preservation as themes for their arguments, perhaps reflecting America’s conflicted conceptions of wilderness and land stewardship at this particular moment in history. Eklund notes that mid-twentieth century Americans had especially complicated ideas about the shrinking wilderness on their continent and their increasing estrangement from the land. This tension is especially apparent in conversations surrounding national parks as sites of preservation that also function as tourist attractions. The overarching concern for scenery was a driving force for the Park Service, as they argued public ownership and the high route would increase access for more Americans to enjoy and appreciate the Blue Ridge Mountains, and for Morton, who argued public ownership would lead to destruction on the mountain and insisted on the importance of protecting the views from his attraction.

Morton successfully convinced North Carolinians that the proposed Parkway route would destroy Grandfather’s “rugged, unconquered wilderness qualities.” But the reality is, thanks to massive timber mining and related fires, flooding, soil erosion, and tourism, by the 1930s, Grandfather Mountain and the surrounding southern Appalachians were no longer wilderness at all. Instead, Grandfather Mountain had become a packaged, sanitized, safe wilderness that was easily accessible to almost anyone. Historian Anne Mitchell Whisnant writes:

By 1968, the mountain that Morton ever afterward insisted ‘didn’t deserve to be conquered’ by the NPS had been partially timbered and paved, crowned with a swinging bridge and several other decidedly nonnatural structures, and swarmed with visitors. Twinned with the ubiquitous swinging bridge icon was the
mountain’s new mascot, a black bear named Mildred, who arrived from Zoo Atlanta in 1966, at once evoking the (now safely captured) wilderness of the ‘unconquered’ mountain and the warm fuzziness of sentimentalized, marketable nature.\footnote{Whisnant, Super-Scenic Motorway, 289.}

Whether it be true untamed wilderness or “sentimentalized, marketable nature,” rhetorical appeals to wilderness, primitivism, and nature as sacred and worth protecting emanated from both sides of this debate and were particularly resonant with Americans in an increasingly urban and modern world.

**3.4.2 Grandfather Mountain as Inherently Sacred**

The sacredness of Grandfather Mountain was so firmly established and deeply entrenched in the popular imagination that it anchored the arguments of both Kelsey and Morton and required no evidence or justification from either of them. Indeed, neither man presented a rational argument making a case for the sacredness of Grandfather Mountain; it was simply assumed that the mountain was magnificent, ancient, unique, unspoiled, and therefore sacred. Eklund notes how “Morton tapped into a public sentiment that already identified Grandfather Mountain as a special place worth protecting and parlayed that sentiment into years of public good will.”\footnote{Eklund, “Making the Mountain Pay,” 49-50.} The unquestioned premise that the mountain is special, coupled with the unique reverence for wilderness held by mid-twentieth century Americans resulted in the effective deployment of terms such as “wild,” “rugged,” “unspoiled,” “nature,” and “protection,” “preservation,” and “conservation,” to be sacrosanct, despite the development and destruction already leveled on the mountain and the construction that was underway as these debates were taking place.
Additionally, we see both Kelsey and Morton deploy religious terminology and metaphors to further cement that this particular tract of land is no ordinary place. It is “a mecca.” It is “miraculous.” It is “heaven-like.” It is “mysterious.” It is “venerated.” It is “awe-inspiring.” What it clearly is not is just another mountain. To further cement this point, both men personify the mountain, and Morton links it to one of the most recognizable artistic masterpieces in the world. In short, we see both Kelsey and Morton emphasize heavily that this particular rock is not like the others.

These descriptors were exhaled often from both sides of the debate but never supported in any meaningful way, nor were the apparent contradictions inherent in these arguments questioned or addressed. It was simply taken for granted that one, wilderness is sacred and two, Grandfather Mountain is a uniquely wild, and therefore sacred, place. Indeed, there was absolutely no debate surrounding the interpretation of Grandfather Mountain as sacred. The controversy arose instead over access to and commodification of the sacred mountain.

3.4.3 Threats to the Sacred Place of Grandfather Mountain

Having firmly, though irrationally, established that wilderness is sacred and that the wilderness of Grandfather Mountain is uniquely sacred, both men continue to follow the same rhetorical paths by next positioning this especially sacred mountain as under threat. For Kelsey, the threat is capitalism, embodied in the commercialism that is rapidly shaping the contours of Morton’s mountain—road expansions, a golf course, gift shops, a swinging bridge, and a whole host of future development plans on the books. For Morton, the threat is overreach from heavy-handed federal bureaucrats who fail to understand or appreciate the environment or culture of Southern Appalachia or respect the sacrosanct veneration of private property.
Both Morton and Kelsey use the term “desecrate” to describe what will come of the sacred mountain should it fall into the wrong hands. Importantly, both Morton and the Park Service were intent on making scenery—the top commodity Grandfather has to offer—easily accessible to as many people as possible. This begs the question: What is the desecration? Herein lies the point at which Kelsey’s and Morton’s positions differ: For Kelsey the desecration would be for the commodification of Grandfather’s scenery to benefit private, for-profit enterprise. For Morton, the desecration would be for Grandfather to be “stolen” by the federal government. Important to both appeals is a sense of urgency. Kelsey and Morton both cultivate that sense of urgency by making clear that one, time is of the essence for a decision to be made and two, once that decision is made it is permanent and will have consequences for all Americans for generations to come.

3.4.4 Grandfather Mountain as Symbolic of American Values

Both men make appeals to American reverence for wilderness; however, their arguments diverge as they couple that concern for wilderness with competing American values. This is what seems to sway public opinion in Morton’s favor, especially in North Carolina where state officials had the power to determine the ultimate route of the Parkway and fate of the mountain. Kelsey leans into the newly emerging progressive, public-spirited argument of protecting natural resources of the era. His arguments reflect an ethos of collectivity, personal sacrifice for social good, and faith in government stewardship. Morton, on the other hand, anchored his position in conservative, Cold War-era sentiments that were highly suspicious of government bureaucracy and placed a high value on private enterprise and individual property rights.

Even though Morton was an intergenerationally wealthy businessman from Wilmington, his argument resonated deeply with poor and working-class Appalachians who lived in the areas
surrounding Grandfather Mountain and who had seen their agrarian economy rapidly transformed into a tourism economy, largely by outsiders. This change had countless impacts on the culture of the region, but most significant for this analysis is that it cultivated a deep suspicion of outsiders, and it created an economy in which local people were eager to ensure the tourism industry in their region survived, for their survival depended on it.

3.5 What happened here?

Ultimately, thanks in part to his tremendous political and business influence and public relations savvy, Morton’s plans for Grandfather Mountain and the Blue Ridge Parkway prevailed, despite the countless hypocrisies and incongruencies in his argument. The Linn Cove Viaduct was constructed around the mountain, through the “middle route.” The mountain remained his private, for-profit tourist attraction until after his death, and remarkably, he is popularly remembered as a conservationist who “saved Grandfather.” Rhetorical theory offers a few lenses through which this historically and ecologically significant controversy might be understood.

3.5.1 Stasis Theory: Finding Common Ground

Stasis theory offers a process by which we might identify what both sides of a controversy agree upon, and the point at which contention begins. In this case it is clear that the interpretation of Grandfather Mountain as sacred was agreed upon. That conclusion was anchored in ideas about its ancientness, its uniqueness, and its beauty. The idea that Grandfather was under threat is also a point of agreement; however, the two sides begin to form here as exactly who or what is threatening the mountain varies. But the notion of an ecologically significant and fragile mountain being under threat and in need of protection remains consistent across the spectrum of opinions in this controversy. The point of contention arises in the point of
policy: what should we do about this? How should we protect Grandfather? Who should protect Grandfather? This is a useful exercise as it foregrounds points of commonality between rhetors but also because it focuses our attention directly to the point of divergence.

**3.5.2 Locus of the Irreparable**

In *The New Rhetoric*, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca note that agreement upon certain common values very often results in differences of opinion once the conversation shifts from the theoretical to the pragmatic, or from the general to the specific.\(^{38}\) This is exactly what we see happening in this controversy as the sacredness of Grandfather Mountain, the threat to it, and the need to protect it were never points of contention. The point of divergence was in the specifics of *how* best to protect this treasure from destruction. This leaves interlocutors to determine how best to execute their values in specific contexts. For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, this is called the loci of the preferable, or “premises of a general nature that can serve as the bases for values and hierarchies.”\(^{39}\) In short, it is a way of accounting for why, with all other things being equal, one course of action might seem preferable to other potential courses of action. In this case, the need to protect sacred Grandfather Mountain was presumed by all sides. The question became, to borrow from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s language, what was the preferable way of doing so?

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca offer six possible *loci* from which such determinations might be made: quantity, quality, order, the existing, essence, and the person. They then elucidate each of the six. Here, in the controversy surrounding Grandfather Mountain, what we see is the *locus of the irreparable*, an extension of the locus of quality, works as a guiding logic

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shaping the contours of both Harlan Kelsey and Hugh Morton’s arguments. J. Robert Cox defines the locus of the irreparable as “a way of organizing our perceptions of a situation involving decision or action; its use calls attention to the unique and precarious nature of some object or state of affairs and stresses the timeliness of our relationship to it.”

Kelsey and Morton both frequently invoke the uniqueness and precarious nature of Grandfather Mountain to ground their arguments. The threat of the imminent loss of something unique and irreplaceable creates a sense of urgency and importance. Cox puts it this way: “An act, object, or condition gains value in our eyes when it is seen in any one of the foregoing senses—as transitory, fragile, or as secure but now threatened by radical action. The precarious becomes identified with the locus of the irreparable, however, when that which is threatened need not be lost, when choice is possible.” Grandfather Mountain is presented as timeless, certainly not transitory, in the rhetoric of Kelsey and Morton. However, it is very much represented as fragile and threatened. For Kelsey that threat is Morton and his development. For Morton that threat is the federal government and its overreach. Both of these threats came to be symbolized by the route of the Blue Ridge Parkway. Should the “high route” be taken, the views from the summit of Grandfather would forever be spoiled. Should the “low route” be taken, Morton’s development could continue unchecked until the mountain itself became a resort town and strip mall.

Central to the effectiveness of this rhetorical maneuver is the notion that what is threatened might be saved, if only the correct action is taken. At the heart of this appeal is the impermanence of human life, and a recognition that individual and collective choices have

impacts that last beyond the scope of a single human life. How North Carolinians chose to proceed with the “missing link” of the Blue Ridge Parkway or the ownership of Grandfather had implications that far exceeded the interests, and indeed the lifespans, of any single individual involved. Therefore, the decision had a sense of permanence to it. A decision must be made regarding this sacred site, and it is irreparable. And here, of course, is where our controversy begins.

3.5.3 The Reasonable and the Rational

Chaim Perelman writes, “It is the dialectic of the rational and the reasonable, the confrontation of logical coherence with the unreasonable character of conclusions, which is the basis of the progress of thought.” This is an especially useful insight as a close reading of civic controversy also provides unique insights into the evolution of public opinion and thought. By exploring this tension between the rational and the reasonable in the debates surrounding Grandfather Mountain, we begin to see one, why one side of the controversy prevailed over the other and two, what this might teach us about the generative nature of the controversy and the shifts in public sentiment on important issues such as environmental stewardship.

A brief discussion of definitions is useful here, as these two terms, rational and reasonable, are derived from the same root and are both used to describe a position that “makes good sense.” However Perelman explicates how these terms are in fact not only not interchangeable, but they are fundamentally different, and that difference might account for why Hugh Morton, an outsider and venture capitalist who published photos of his own bulldozers blasting the mountainside not only swayed public opinion in his favor but also was remembered as a beloved conservationist who saved the mountain.

Perelman notes,

The *rational* corresponds to mathematical reason, for some a reflection of divine reason, which grasps necessary relations, which knows *a priori* certain self-evident and immutable truths, which is at the same time individual and universal; because by being revealed within a single mind, it imposes its themes on all beings of reason, because it owes nothing to experience or to dialogue, and depends neither on education nor on the culture of a milieu or an epoch.\(^{43}\)

Part of what he means here is that the rational holds no space for emotion, personal values, histories, or lived experiences. It is universal, and, therefore primarily useful as a theoretical construct rather than a practical lens for understanding complex human allegiances. If one deals with Grandfather Mountain strictly in the register of “the rational,” there is nothing sacred about it at all. Rationality, based on Perelman’s definition, has little influence on the controversies discussed in this chapter as constructing a road over ecologically delicate mountains terrain is commonplace, and using this logic, Grandfather Mountain is just a rock, no different than the rest of the Blue Ridge or greater Appalachians, which have been built over, timber mined, coal mined, and generally exploited for generations.

By contrast, the reasonable, according to Perelman, is a far more subjective thing. He writes, “A rule of action defined as reasonable or even as self-evident at one moment or in a given situation can seem arbitrary and even ridiculous at another moment and in a different situation.”\(^{44}\) In short, for Perelman, the reasonable is tied to culture, context, values, and lived experience. While the rational might be anchored in positivist logic, the reasonable stems from *doxa*, or common knowledge derived from experience. So, while rationally, Grandfather


Mountain is no different than many other mountains in the region, the fact that it is so revered is reasonable. Perelman argues,

The *rational* in law corresponds to adherence to an immutable divine standard, or to the spirit of the system, to logic and coherence, to conformity with precedents, to purposefulness; where as the *reasonable*, on the other hand, characterizes the decision itself, the fact that it is acceptable or not by public opinion, that its consequences are socially useful or harmful, that it is felt to be equitable or biased. When the rational and the reasonable mutually support each other, when reasoning according to principles ends in a satisfying decisions, there is no problem.45

This is why the debate regarding Grandfather Mountain was never over if the mountain was sacred, nor was it ever over whether the mountain was under threat or ought to be protected. Those arguments were rational to all involved. It was what constituted a reasonable response and course of action that generated contention.

Importantly, this debate over the right course of action happened at a moment of tremendous change in the attitudes of Americans toward ideas about environmental stewardship and protection and among Appalachians in their perception of how their region fits into the national and international economies. The idea of National Parks was still a relatively young concept. Modernity had taken full hold throughout most of the country, and untamed wilderness was increasingly rare and valuable in the public imagination. The Cold War left Americans especially skeptical and suspicious of big government and social welfare programs. People in the Appalachian region had seen their private property seized through eminent domain, their lands exploited by coal and timber mining, and their economy changed from a self-sufficient agrarian lifestyle to one anchored in tourism and dependent on outsiders. Morton’s appeals spoke directly to their experiences in spite of the irrationality of his argument.

This might also aid in explaining how Morton, with his disastrous environmental track record and hypocritical behavior, was so effective in swaying the opinion of North Carolinians. He made appeals based on their lived experiences: suspicion of outsiders, disdain for perceived government overreach, fears of anything resembling socialism, and a deep reverence for conservative ideals such as private enterprise and individual property rights. Morton’s argument, which coupled two seemingly incongruent ideals, neoliberalism and conservation, seemed reasonable to mid-twentieth century North Carolinians who, like most Americans, placed a high value on wilderness but who also had lived experiences that led them to be suspicious of the federal government and protective of their land and livelihoods. Additionally, we can better understand how the Linn Cove Viaduct—by far the most challenging for engineers and most expensive solution to the completion of the Blue Ridge Parkway was the prevailing solution. It provided scenic views to motorists, it did not damage the ecosystem of the mountain, and it did not infringe upon Morton’s private enterprise. It was reasonable, even though it was a supremely irrational decision to complete the motorway.

By closely attending to what is reasonable in a given moment in time, we might uncover the ways in which public opinion evolves. Perelman notes, “The reasonable of one age is not the reasonable of another: it can vary like common sense…The reasonable of today is not the reasonable of yesterday, but is more often an effort toward more coherence, toward more clarity, toward a more systematized view of things which is at the base of change.” 46 Tracing the ebbs and flows of what is accepted as reasonable methods of environmental stewardship challenges dichotomous thinking and offers us valuable insight into the values and logics of a specific group of people at a specific moment in time. While the rational might provide guidance for scientific

inquiry, the reasonable is far more useful in understanding human affairs, as it holds space for the complexities and incongruencies of lived experience.

3.6 Implications and Conclusion

Attending closely to civic controversies such as this one is a generative method for understanding how language works to inform and shape political action, how public opinion evolves over time and varies across contexts, and how we might best shape arguments on similar issues moving forward. Hugh Morton’s victory offers valuable insight into how we might conceptualize nature in more reasonably nuanced ways, beyond rationality and the stark dichotomies of development or conservation and public or private ownership, to have perhaps a more complex understanding of humanity’s impact on wilderness and our ability to coexist with the natural world. The reality is we are living in a late-stage capitalist society on a rapidly overheating planet, and effectively connecting environmental conservation with business interests and profit potential is perhaps a valuable lesson we could learn from the complicated character of Hugh Morton.

This chapter demonstrates the power of language to shape and reflect how we conceptualize place. The linguistic strategies of Hugh Morton and Harlan Kelsey distinguish, metaphorize, and anthropomorphize Grandfather Mountain to constitute it as sacred. Similarly, their linguistic strategies transformed a politically neutral place into a place symbolic of opposing political ideologies, calling attention to the intersection of language and our understandings of landscapes.
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Chapter 4: From Words to Wonder

The first time I reached the summit of Grandfather Mountain, Calloway Peak, was with my 12-year-old daughter. We breathlessly devolved into giddy, euphoric giggles as we climbed the final ladders to ascend into the clouds. It was overcast, and we couldn’t see any long-distance views but that only added to the feeling that we were in the sky, away from the rest of the world, in a magical place where others hadn’t been before, someplace set apart. The air was thin and cold even though it was July. The trees were dwarfed from the high winds. The rocks were jagged, and many were covered in spongy moss. It was truly other-worldly. We carefully inched our way to a relatively level spot where we sat, picked, and ate a few blueberries, and looked down upon the birds soaring below us, between us and the rest of the world.

That first visit occurred long before I lived near Grandfather Mountain or began to study it. We came to the mountain the way most people do—as adventure and awe-seeking tourists. We bought tickets, enjoyed the audio tour from our SUV, stopped at the museum and zoo, and finally proceeded to the “top lot,” where we visited the mile-high suspension bridge and decided to hike from one of the trailheads near the summit. This made reaching the 5,946-foot peak possible for my young daughter. But possible does not mean easy. There were sections of the ascent that required the use of installed ropes and ladders. We saw many people turn away, fearful of the final stretch, which was a nearly vertical ladder climb over a rock face. The photos of that first visit are especially awe-inspiring and precious to my daughter, who felt tremendous pride for her accomplishment. Since that first encounter, I’ve returned to Grandfather Mountain countless times as a hiker, tourist, field-trip chaperone, researcher, and festival goer. While each visit is unique, there are themes that emerge across contexts with each encounter with the mountain that account for, demonstrate, and reify the sense of sacredness generally held for Grandfather Mountain.

Chapter three offered a close reading of the discourse of two prominent figures in the history of Grandfather Mountain embroiled in a controversy over the stewardship of the mountain as a way of interrogating its rhetorical construction as a sacred site. This chapter
extends that investigation by taking a rhetorical approach to the spatial, narrative, and performative interpretation of Grandfather Mountain as sacred through rhetorical field methods. Coupling the close reading of discourse with the rhetorical analysis of space and experience expands what we see and offers a richer critique of the rhetorical construction of a sacred topography.

4.1 Getting to Know Grandfather: Context & History

When people say, “I visited Grandfather Mountain,” it could mean any number of things. The mountain itself is a massive landform that spans three counties. There are private homes, neighborhoods, and small businesses that are “on Grandfather Mountain.” Grandfather Mountain also includes 2,400 acres of backwoods, trails, and wilderness managed by the North Carolina State Park System and The Nature Conservancy and accessible for free from numerous points throughout Caldwell, Avery, and Watauga Counties and off the Blue Ridge Parkway. But what most people think of when they refer to Grandfather Mountain is the privately-owned attraction at its peak that includes a zoo, museum, walking and hiking trails, two gift shops, a restaurant, a fudge shop, and the iconic mile-high suspension bridge.

From its initial purchase by the Linville Improvement Company, the mountain was seen as a valuable catalyst for local real estate, and as early as 1889, the potential profitability of Grandfather Mountain itself as a tourist attraction was evident as hotels were opened, bridges and access roads were constructed, railroads came through, and resort communities surrounding the area were built. In addition to its value as a tourist attraction, the Linville Improvement Company profited from the thousands of acres of timber available on Grandfather Mountain. The rapid development of this timber and tourism economy quickly depleted natural resources and increased land value, leaving many locals to abandon their family farms for work in timber mills,
railroads, and hotels. Journalist and Appalachian historian Miles Tager notes, importantly, “one thing didn’t change working for the development corporations: the locals stayed poor.”

By 1960, Hugh Morton, grandson of Linville Improvement Company executive Hugh MacRae and heir to the property, had widened and extended access roads, built the suspension bridge, and founded the Wilmor Development Corporation, which built a country club and resort community along the north slope of Grandfather. The Wilmor Corporation would go on to propose the development of ski resorts, condos, houses, and shopping centers on the remaining wild and unprotected land of Grandfather; however, public pushback coupled with a realization that it would become increasingly difficult to market an overdeveloped mountain retreat halted the plan in the 1980s when the Ridgeline Law was passed, prohibiting buildings above certain elevations. In a notable change of course in 1989 and into the 90s, Morton began working with the North Carolina chapter of The Nature Conservancy to preserve 1,406 acres of Grandfather’s backcountry, and in 1992, the mountain was selected by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Culture Organization as a Biosphere Reserve.

In addition to ecotourism and outdoor adventure, the mountain is home to two very large annual events: a gospel music festival, Singing on the Mountain, which has featured legends such as Dolly Pardon and Johnny Cash, and the four-day Scottish heritage Highland Games Festival which draws over 30,000 visitors from around the world. Countless smaller events, such as private weddings and field trips or public guided night hikes and synchronous firefly viewings, occur throughout the year. In fact, there is a full-time event planner on staff. Generally,

then, we might consider four primary ways people encounter Grandfather Mountain, beyond, of course, enjoying the stunning view of its ridgeline from the road or their vacation rental’s deck. The first and most common is visiting the privately-owned tourist attraction. In fact, the name “Grandfather Mountain” has all but become synonymous with the attraction. A second way many people encounter the mountain is through special events such as the Highland Games Festival or Singing on the Mountain. These events draw thousands to the mountain each year. Interpretative, educational events like field trips, ranger-guided nature walks, and wildlife docent-led animal encounters are another avenue via which individuals encounter Grandfather. Finally, there are those hikers and outdoors enthusiasts who come to the mountain through backcountry hiking and camping, many of them never visiting the attraction or even encountering many other humans. This chapter will address each of the four primary ways individuals meet Grandfather Mountain. Using rhetorical field methods, a blending of ethnography and rhetorical criticism, I aim to identify how the rhetoric of a sacred place is cultivated and circulated experientially at Grandfather Mountain during these encounters.

4.2 Theory

As discussed in Chapter 2, place functions rhetorically. An analysis of the rhetorical consequence of the spatial practices at Grandfather Mountain might best begin with nuancing the definitions of place and space using Michel de Certeau’s distinction between the two.4 Essentially, place is a structuring of space that provides stability, fixes time and history, sets ideas into positions, and halts change. Space, on the other hand, foregrounds time in its fluidity

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and constant evolution. The practice of certain performances, rituals, positionalities, and narratives transforms a space into a particular place. As put by Aoki, Dickinson, and Ott, “The function of place is to solidify time and history and, thereafter, to solidify subjectivity or, put differently, to suture the subject into carefully constructed material narratives that limit agency.” This difference provides an avenue for critically examining the way a space is structured into place. It introduces questions about who is served by the spatial orientation of a place, what narratives and subject positions are foregrounded, and what is occluded by the grammar of place.

However, the rhetorical analysis of place presents unique challenges. First, place-as-text complicates the borders of the object of study. Place is diffused, and the experience and interpretation of place begins outside of its perimeter. Places are not only part of a larger physical landscape, but they are also situated in cultural, cognitive, emotional, and memory-based landscapes. Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki note the “experience of a particular place comprises not just the tangible materials available in that place, but also the full range of memorized images that persons bring with them.” Conceptualizing place this way invites us to consider the complex, intertextual, layered sets of associations that interlocutors bring into a broader experiential landscape, which takes into account greater material, ecological, historical, and

cultural components. Additionally, these experiential landscapes interpellate individuals into subject positions that then shape their perception and interpretation of the experience. Dickinson, Ott, and Aoki argue that “spaces of memory are better thought of as constitutive elements of landscapes than as discrete texts, that landscapes entail both physical and cognitive dimensions, and that such landscapes offer fully embodied subject positions, which literally shape visitors’ practices of looking.” One primary way this happens is through the regional narratives and myths surrounding a given place. 

Experiential landscapes such as Grandfather Mountain State Park and attractions rely on a variety of rhetorical tools to tell a story, and this chapter examines what story is told experientially and to what effect. Narrative has been understood as a rhetorical technique since ancient times and is situated within the broad tradition of dramatism. Walter R. Fisher, however, elucidates and extends the impact of narrative critique by foregrounding the rhetorical power of narrative to provide structure and meaning to human experience. This is especially needed and powerful when that experience is awe-inspiring and ineffable like the sublimity so commonly felt in wilderness settings like Grandfather Mountain. Fisher emphasizes that stories are central to the shared understandings that make civil society possible. He defines the narrative paradigm as a way of viewing both real and imagined stories “as historical as well as situational, as stories competing with other stories constituted by good reasons as being rational when they satisfy the demands of narrative probability and narrative fidelity, and as inevitably moral inducements.” This framework, coupled with the concern for power and oppression inherent in critical rhetoric and critical regionalism, allows one to examine what stories emerge as dominant and defining
narratives of a place, what groups are served by those narratives, and what counternarratives might teach us.

Importantly, this paradigm challenges the notion that rhetoric must take an argumentative form as Fisher argues that stories are moral constructs, are far from neutral, and dominant stories, fictional or not, work to “establish a meaningful lifeworld.”  

In essence, Fisher argues that as narrative beings, it is from stories that we come to form good reasons that lead to decision-making and meaning-making. These stories do not occur in a vacuum as they are culturally, historically, biographically, and politically situated. Further, what constitutes “good reason” is governed by the logics of a given narrative or narrative probability and fidelity. Additionally, Fisher argues that stories have a constitutive nature, as they implicate audiences and roles. Importantly, “if a story denies a person’s self-conception, it does not matter what it says about the world.” This chapter, then, critically examines what narrative(s) emerge from the interpretation, ritualization, and commodification of Grandfather Mountain, with special attention paid to the discursive, aural, and spatial rhetoric encountered by visitors when they make pilgrimage to it.

The mythic pull of wilderness, westward expansion, primitivism, and the pioneering American spirit are deeply associated with the Appalachian region and with Grandfather Mountain in particular. Barthes defines myth as a “mode of signification” and notes how it works to suspend the complexity of lived experiences for “truncated iconographies.” If we understand this semiotic definition of myth as its concern with the relationship between a signifier and the

signified, then part of the work of critical regionalist scholarship is to complicate and deconstruct that relationship when it comes to region or place. Moss and Inabinet note that one aim of critical regionalism is to “disrupt nostalgia: the myths of the past are often a hindrance to understanding power relationships.”

Investigating Grandfather Mountain through the lens of narrative myth affords an opportunity to consider how iconographic signs come to signify essential ideas about the sacredness of a given site. Barthes cautions that

there is a culpable duplicity in confusing the sign with what is signified. And this is a duplicity peculiar to bourgeois art: between the intellectual sign and the visceral sign, this art hypocritically arranges an illegitimate sign, at once elliptical and pretentious, which baptizes with the pompous name natural.”

Using narrative myth in the service of critical regionalism serves to closely examine the “natural givens” of a place. To the extent that myth “transforms history into nature,” the role of the rhetorical critic is to denaturalize assumptions, complicate dominant historical narratives by introducing nuance, and complicate mythical tropes.

Closely interrogating the narrative of Grandfather Mountain, as interpreted, experienced, and performed, offers an opportunity to explore how the mountain works as simultaneously sacred and consumptive. To do so, it must be considered as an experiential landscape consisting of four overlapping, interconnected experiences, all of which are situated within mythic narrative themes of wilderness and westward expansion: 1) a visit to the Conservation Campus, an interpretative site that is comprised of a museum, an art gallery, a restaurant, a gift shop, a zoo, and an educational space, 2) festivals and special events, which are frequently held on the property, 3) educational and interpretative events, and 4) backcountry hiking and camping on the undeveloped acres of Grandfather.
Contemporary rhetorical theory invites us to consider a museum, a gift shop, a festival, a field trip, or a hiking trail as a text that communicates a particular narrative, and any thorough analysis must take into account that this sort of text is unique in that it is experienced, practiced, and performed within spatial and temporal confines. Dickinson makes clear that the act of being in a place creates, maintains, challenges, or transforms the place. The intersection of rhetoric, bodies, affect, and performance might best be understood, then, through the theorizations of performance ethnographer Dwight Conquergood. Conquergood argues that the participative, immersive nature of fieldwork serves “as a corrective to foreshorten the textual distance” between researcher and researched. Conquergood notes how performance forces “into my awareness the complex ethical tensions, tacit political commitments, and moral ambiguities” of a given study. Conquergood calls the researcher to embed themselves into the studied text, be it a community or a place, in order to avoid writing from a place of disinterested and uninvolved observer. Contemporary rhetorical methods demonstrate how rhetorical criticism can account for the embodied nature of spatial rhetoric and avoid the ethical pitfalls and arrogance inherent in detached analysis and critique by immersive in-situ fieldwork.

4.3 Method

Carole Blair makes the argument that experienced rhetoric in context is significant and worth critical attention. McKinnon et al. add to this position by noting, “field methods facilitate

15. Dickinson, “Place, Space.”
an embodied presence for experiencing text and context…[that] provides the critic with opportunities to explore broader characteristics of a context that enable or disable specific kinds of rhetorical practices.” This chapter answers this call to situate and examine rhetorical practices in their spatial, affective, and contextual richness via rhetorical field methods.

Such methodology necessitates a broad understanding of text to include sensory experiential information, performative and affective displays, and spatial practices in addition to traditional discourse. Field methods broaden and invite texts that have not necessarily been archived and cataloged or even documented. It is here, in the field, where the rhetoric of everyday experience is enacted, circulated, and experienced. A rhetorical field method “invites rhetoricians to attend to the way discourse moves, articulates, and shapes the material realities of people’s lives in the every day, in the public, and in their communities. It also allows scholars to attend to the often-unseen ways that individuals and groups respond, resist, and try to revise these instantiations.” Such broadening of the term text is central to the critical analysis of place as it provides nuance and context to more traditional forms of rhetorical criticism that focus on oral or written texts.

Rhetorical field methods encourage engagement with and observation of audiences, foregrounding the agency and influence of audience in the rhetorical act. The constitutive force that shapes identity formation and cultural or political allegiances might best be understood by critical scholarly engagement in the moment audience and text meet in the field. Moreover, the immediacy and physical presence inherent in rhetorical field methods allow critics an opportunity to embody and experience the spatial rhetoric of a place, including the critic in the

place-making process and permitting analysis of the intersection and co-constitutive nature of bodies and place.

Inherent in this methodology lies the ethical concerns ethnographers have long grappled with. The colonial history of field methods demonstrates the clear need for researchers to practice careful and critical self-reflexivity and transparency and to hold a deep concern for the communities in which their work is situated. McKinnon et al. note, “field methods necessitate that critics consider their responsibility to the people and communities represented by our research. Thus, we think of responsibility as a dialectical relationship that exists between the critic, those represented in the research, and the reader.”21 Performance ethnographer Dwight Conquergood called this the “dialogical performance.”22 This means balancing, ethically and mindfully, the similarities and differences between individuals and groups, being ever aware of one’s own biases, transparently accounting for one’s processes, attending to the intricacies of lived experiences, and holding oneself accountable to not only academic audiences but also to the communities that are connected to the research produced.

For this chapter, I am drawing upon four years’ worth of visits to Grandfather Mountain in different seasons and for different purposes. While I made four trips designated for research purposes, this work is influenced by visits made for pleasure as well. As mentioned in previous chapters, I live and work in the shadow of Grandfather Mountain, and my family routinely enjoys the trails that makeup Grandfather Mountain State Park. Also, we live daily with the benefits and challenges of being members of a tourist community that is anchored by Grandfather Mountain. We have incredible infrastructure and well-funded public schools.

22. Conquergood, “Performance as a Moral Act.”
Simultaneously, we must plan our routines around the ebbs and flows of tourist traffic and crowds; our community is in a perpetual housing crisis with soaring real estate costs, and many of our neighbors work very long hours for very low wages in the tourism and hospitality industry. My local knowledge, coupled with the close critical attention to rhetorical field methods, offers a unique perspective into the cultivation and circulation of the rhetoric of sacred place at Grandfather Mountain. In what follows, I will offer four accounts of encounters with the mountain, representing the four primary ways visitors come to Grandfather Mountain: a visit to the attraction and museum, attendance at a festival or special event, participating in an interpretive or educational event, and backcountry hiking or camping. Each offers a unique perspective, and there are themes that emerge across each of these contexts, which offer insight into the spatial practices that lead to the interpretation of a place as sacred and what the consequences of those practices might be.

4.4 Analysis

It is only through careful interpretation that a place is understood as sacred, situating interpretation as a logical starting place for elucidating how sacredness of place is rhetorically constructed. This analysis then, begins with an examination of how Grandfather Mountain is interpreted by interrogating how a sense of sacredness is rhetorically cultivated through the space, image, sound, architecture, and language visitors encounter when they visit the Conservation Campus at Grandfather Mountain. However, interpretation is only the starting point in understanding a place as sacred. We must also examine how that interpretation leads to patterns of ritualized behaviors at sacred places. Dickinson notes that place must be practiced, and that it is human action that transforms fluid, ambiguous space into stable, fixed place. If a

fundamental element of a sacred place is ritualization, an examination of the spatial practices governing behavior within an experiential landscape and imbuing it with meaning might unveil the rhetorical construction and circulation of that ritualization, and insight into the creation of a sacred place.

Durkheim defined sacred objects not by any innate quality of the object itself but rather by the distinctive ways in which people experienced them and behaved in response to them. Sacred objects, for Durkheim, are objects set apart, objects that are radically different from the everyday and warrant special treatment and protection. We might easily extend that definition to include places like Grandfather Mountain. Gordon Lynch explains that the protection of the sacred comes in both physical and mental or emotional forms “through people learning to think and feel about sacred objects in the right kind of way.”

It is exactly this sort of instruction that is provided when one visits Grandfather Mountain and here, the functions of interpretation and ritualization meet as Grandfather Mountain is interpreted as radically unique and set apart and visitors are then encouraged to engage with sacred symbols and shared experiences that culminate in what Durkheim calls “moments of collective effervescence” that create a sense of community, all of this coalescing in a sense of sacredness.

Lynch argues, “Sacred rituals are not necessarily formal or traditional rituals but actions that draw us into contact with sacred realities…through such social acts, sacred thoughts, emotions, and communities can be forged.”

Here, we will examine the spatial practices that cultivate such actions with an understanding that spatiality is a form of

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communication with rhetorical force, and that the cultivation of the sacred is anchored in
symbolic action. Chidester and Linenthal note, “To understand the symbolic orderings of
American sacred space, considerable attention will have to be paid to the interpretive
labors that have gone into making space significant.”26 To critically engage with a sacred
place then, we must investigate how interpretation and ritualization strategically cultivate
certain ways of thinking about the place and the human relationship with it.

Sacred space is always entangled with profane forces. Commodification pervades the
production of sacred space, including at Grandfather Mountain. Chidester and Linenthal argue,
“Quite literally, sacred space can be bought and sold…the very production of sacred space
depends upon money.”27 In this particular case there are two primary places we observe the
commodification of the sacred place. First, visitors pay for access. This amounts to a very literal
commodification of the sacred in which consumers purchase access that grants them the
opportunity to experience the sublime and sacred. Then, there are two gift shops atop
Grandfather, both offering all manner of souvenirs to commemorate, and thereby reify, the
sacred experience. This intersection of consumption and sacredness is not new. Durkheim noted
that “the totem is the flag of the clan,”28 pointing toward the way souvenirs from places like
national or state parks, for example, are set apart and treated with respect and care. Belk,
Wallendorf, and Sherry write, “For many, consumption has become a vehicle for experiencing

26. David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, American Sacred Space (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,
1995), 12.
27. Chidester and Linenthal, American Sacred Space, 28.
the sacred.” This is certainly something we see cultivated by the spatial practices at Grandfather Mountain. That consumption is further encouraged by reminders throughout the experience that the money spent on Grandfather Mountain goes to a stewardship and conservation fund, situating the consumption as a charitable act that aligns with the values of conservation espoused in the rhetoric of the attraction.

4.4.1 Themes

This chapter set out to examine the four primary experiences available at Grandfather Mountain: The Conservation Campus, special events and festivals, interpretive and educational events, and backcountry hiking. However, it is difficult to analyze them separately, as they overlap and inform one another, and frequently work in tandem as a visitor might visit the Conservation Campus before or after a hike, field trip students or community members attending an interpretative event might gather at the campus, or festival goers at the base of the mountain might venture on a back country hike while visiting or journey up for a trip to the museum or the swinging bridge. Generally, there are three themes that emerge from the experiential landscape of Grandfather Mountain: 1) the spatial practices at Grandfather Mountain flatten and erase time, 2) the spatial practices at Grandfather Mountain constitute the visitor into specific subject positions, and 3) the spatial practices at Grandfather Mountain separate nature from human culture almost entirely.

First, the spatial practices at Grandfather Mountain flatten and erase time and instead foreground place. This serves to set the mountain apart from the surrounding environment, including other mountains in the area that are, for all practical purposes, nearly identical to Grandfather. This “set apartness” is central to the sense of sacredness. Lynch notes, “what we
take to be sacred…is experienced as timeless…it stands removed from the unfolding drama of life.”

Time on Grandfather Mountain is a subjective, elusive thing and while generally a trip to the Appalachian region might feel a bit like a trip back in time, the spatial practices of Grandfather Mountain make time stand still. The mountain is presented as timeless, ahistorical, and even beyond history, contributing to the perception of it as ancient, untouched, removed from modernity, and, therefore sacred. Aoki, Dickinson, and Ott caution that “Privileging space over time can have the function of derailing critical engagement with the topics at hand by de-historicizing, naturalizing, and thus de-politicizing the concerns raised within the space.”

This is exactly what happens at Grandfather as its spatial orientation occludes the way human agency, from the construction on the mountain that created the parking lots, bathrooms, shops, and trails to the tourists’ presence on the mountain, is always impacting the natural world. This orientation contributes to a sacred experience as the tourist is invited to experience a seemingly timeless and pure nature encounter devoid of human intervention. The very serious implication here is that on a planet undergoing historical, life-threatening, human-induced change, it is dangerous to present the natural world as unchanging, timeless, and untouched.

Second, the spatial practices at Grandfather Mountain constitute the tourist into the subject position of the awe-inspired pioneer, explorer, or naturalist. Such positioning offers visitors a sense of direct access to and possession of the natural world in convenient and curated ways. In his work on early modern travel narratives, Stephen Greenblatt argues that rhetoric of wonder and awe, much like the discourse at and of Grandfather Mountain, occludes the violence that informs and sustains the exploitation of nature.

of colonization and possession. Grandfather Mountain presents an unspoiled, seemingly untouched wilderness for visitors to discover, conquer, and consume. Aoki, Dickinson, and Ott note,

> In the European desire to possess lands, people, and animals outside of Europe, a vision of wonder covered over the violence of colonization in party by placing the other in a timeless deep past. In colonizing time, museums can visually and materially re-present the colonization of peoples and lands even as they claim to understand and explain them.”

At Grandfather Mountain, contemporary visitors are invited to encounter a timeless, untouched wilderness as a conquering pioneer or an ancient Scottish warrior, exerting their dominance and control.

Third, the spatial rhetoric of Grandfather Mountain separates nature from contemporary human culture almost entirely. While the Highland Games is most certainly a cultural event, it is a rhetorical interpretation of ancient Scottish history and culture using symbols that are largely themselves 19th century interpretations introduced by Sir Walter Scott, that is celebrated here. In these encounters with Grandfather Mountain modernity and nature are never presented as compatible. In fact, the gulf might best be understood through the lens of the sacred and profane. Durkheim notes, “In all the history of human thought there exists no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another,” than the sacred and the profane. It is by flattening time, constituting visitors into specific subject positions, and framing the mountain as radically distinct from its surroundings that Grandfather Mountain is interpreted and understood as sacred.

The dominant theme, then, of a trip to Grandfather Mountain is one of transcendence, and this contributes to its sacredness. On the mountain, Scotland and North Carolina become one, untouched ancient geology is accessible and available today, and contemporary tourists become early American pioneers. Grandfather Mountain is rhetorically positioned as a liminal place where visitors might step out of the profanity of everyday modern life and into the sacred wilderness. Sometimes that step is through a literal built threshold separating the outside world from Grandfather, like the trailhead. Other times the step from profane modernity to sacred wilderness is more metaphorical, as the sound of old-time banjo music fills the car on a drive to the top. In either case, Grandfather Mountain itself is interpreted as a direct mediator of transcendence and a place where the tensions and dichotomies of modern American life might temporarily be relieved.

4.5 Encountering Grandfather: Four Stories from the Mountain

4.5.1 Reading the Regional Context

Scholars of the rhetorical impact of place make clear that before a critic attends to a text, they must first examine the experiential rhetoric of the surrounding landscape. In this spirit, I begin this section with a description and analysis of the landscape leading to the entrance to the Grandfather Mountain attraction, in the hope that I might attend to the “geographically and culturally determined experiential habitat rendered by the visitor’s journey.” The attraction is located two miles north of the resort town of Linville, North Carolina and one mile south of the scenic Blue Ridge Parkway. From any direction, visitors approaching the attraction traverse

winding mountain roads dwarfed by soaring peaks and dotted with attractions such as gem mines, mountain coasters, zip lines, and ski resorts. Interspersed among the rental cabins and chalets are many dilapidated homes and barns, some occupied, many abandoned. These serve as a grim reminder of the socioeconomic and ecological history of the region for those who know their historical context; however, for most visitors, they only add to a romanticized nostalgia for the tropes of Southern Appalachian mountain life. Art galleries, gift shops, salons, and restaurants sit alongside open-air produce stands offering fruits, vegetables, and jams. The few roadside billboards promote local attractions. One reads “Epic: Fail” with images of unspoiled landscapes beneath the first word and a polluted landscape beneath the other. In addition to Linville, towns surrounding Grandfather include the ski villages of Sugar Mountain and Banner Elk, the retirement community of Seven Devils, and Boone, the largest town in the area, named for the famous frontiersman and home to the Appalachian State University Mountaineers and the Watauga High School Pioneers. A mountaineer ethos and a sense of primitivism are established through the landscapes and the built environment surrounding the attraction well before visitors arrive.

4.5.2 The Conservation Campus

Today, I am visiting the Conservation Campus as a researcher. Notebook and pen in hand, I am attuned to the place differently than the many other visits I have made over the years. But, as I walk into the sunny lobby, I am reminded of the times I’ve been here with my three children, with my spouse, with my mother, and with my son’s school group. As many times as I’ve been to Grandfather Mountain, this particular part of the experience—the Conservation Campus—is where I’ve spent the least amount of time. It is where the children get restless, bored, and grumpy. It is where, even now as a researcher, I find myself impatiently wanting to get to the good part—beyond the walls of the Conservation Campus and to the mountain. And as I compose these case studies it is the only Grandfather Mountain encounter I struggle to write about personally. It feels distanced, divorced from my experience with Grandfather Mountain and divorced from the land upon which it sits. It feels contrived as a display rather than as an experience. Passive and solitary. It exists in a web of tensions: modernity and
primitivism, development and wilderness, and commodification and conservation. The Conservation Campus ultimately works to erase its own existence in ways that make it rhetorically complex as it attempts to negotiate those tensions.

In her essay on the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, Patricia Davis examines how the memorial consists of a monument and museum, two separate structures with different functions that inform one another, much like the Conservation Campus functions in tandem with the special events, festivals, and topography of the mountain itself. Davis’s work foregrounds the complexity of interpretative sites like the Conservation Campus atop Grandfather Mountain and how such sites “construct, sustain, and contest hegemonic southern memories.”

Since spaces like museums are granted a particular cultural authority that is rarely questioned, they are especially powerful rhetorical forces in shaping our collective understandings of a given subject, moment in history, or in this case, place. It is important to remind ourselves, though, that “museums advance particular historical narratives, creating memories that help define and respond to the values of the communities in which they are located and the constituencies they hope to attract.” Interpretative spaces at Grandfather Mountain such as the Conservation Campus act as sites of cultural exchange, negotiation, persuasion, and pedagogy, and the narratives they fashion and advance are certainly not neutral. Importantly, the Conservation Campus, which functions primarily as a museum, is the main hub of activity on Grandfather Mountain. It is there that visitors first stop on their route to the top and where groups assemble before traveling to the summit. The Conservation Campus is home to not only a museum, but also an art gallery, a gift shop, a restaurant, and several open classroom

spaces that are used for meetings and educational purposes. So, an important analysis of Grandfather Mountain begins with a close read of this important interpretative place.

Approximately 300,000 people visit the Grandfather Mountain Conservation Campus annually, and it is open year-round apart from Christmas Day and Thanksgiving. In 2019, the attraction netted over 7 million dollars in admissions, concessions, and souvenirs. The attraction serves as the anchor point for interpretive and educational events and many other special events that take place on the mountain. Based on annual admissions, approximately 15 million people have now traversed a terrain that had sat virtually untouched for millennia before its development. The existence of the attraction atop Grandfather Mountain is the result of millions of dollars of construction work, massive bulldozing of trees, blasting of boulders, and grading of slopes to make the mountain accessible. And yet, the space maintains a sense of untouched wilderness and sacredness. This section offers a rhetorical examination of how the mountain attraction negotiates the tensions of modernity and wilderness, profitability and conservation, and preservation and access as it presents the sacredness of Grandfather Mountain in convenient, consumable, comfortable ways. Since the attraction is the central entry point to Grandfather Mountain and is practically synonymous with the mountain itself, an extended description and analysis of it is the foundation for an examination of the various spatial practices encountered by visitors who come to Grandfather in a variety of ways and for diverse purposes.

Through a selective presentation of the mountain’s history and an emphasis on ecology, conservation, and stewardship, the Grandfather Mountain attraction invites visitors to enjoy an authentic encounter with one of the most rugged and biodiverse ecosystems on the planet while simultaneously occluding the ecological and economic violence that makes such encounters
possible, creating a sense of a pure encounter with a sacred, unspoiled wilderness. The attraction rhetorically collapses ancient geological history, an 1800s pioneer aesthetic, and the present moment for visitors, allowing them to encounter the mountain without attending to the economic, ecological, technological, and political history and context central to making their presence possible. The rhetoric of ecology, conservation, and stewardship works to mask the capitalist exploitation inherent in the existence of the attraction, the damage the attraction and its guests cause the delicate ecosystem, and the oppressive nature of the tourism economy.

Ultimately, the attraction has an opportunity to fulfill its goals of conservation and education in a more transparent and instructive way by narrating its own history with more nuance and with careful attention to the connections between economics, politics, ecology, and sustainability.

Visitors pay $22 per person to visit the attraction. Upon entry, guests receive a map and a CD to play in their vehicles as they drive up the mountain. On the way to the top, visitors may stop at any number of overlooks, picnic areas, or marked nature trails. Just over halfway to the “top lot” is the museum, an operating woodworker’s shop, a fudge shop, a small zoo, a restaurant, and a gift shop. The main attraction, however, is at the top where tourists will find a second gift shop, a series of more challenging hiking trails, and the iconic mile-high suspension bridge, which is the photo spot for visitors.

The narrative of a frontier adventure is established early in visual and aural ways. The 17-track audio tour features old-time bluegrass music and a narrator with a deep Southern Appalachian accent and highlights the many plant species and rock formations visible from the road, points out picnic spots and nature trails, describes weather patterns, and recounts stories of wildlife encounters on the mountain. The few references to modern human interaction with the mountain are limited to stories of the Highland Games, descriptions of a few commercial and
movie scenes filmed on the mountain, and a discussion about the sustainable resources used to construct the buildings on the mountain. These are brief, cursory references, as the emphasis of the audio tour is very much on non-human life, weather, and geology. Narrators encourage visits to the two gift shops, the fudge shop, the wildlife sanctuary, the museum, and, of course, to courageously cross the mile-high bridge. The CD concludes by asking visitors to donate to the Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation “to ensure the pristine preservation of Grandfather for generations to come.”

The Wilson Center for Nature Discovery, the official name of the museum, is part of a larger building that also contains Mildred’s Restaurant, named for the famous bear who was the original resident of the wildlife preserve, a gift shop, and a newly expanded classroom space. Surrounding it is a parking lot, a paved walkway through animal enclosures dotted with benches and picnic tables, and a fudge shop. The frontier aesthetic is reinforced in the log cabin-style buildings and primitive architecture. The hand-carved trinkets, moonshine wine, fruit jams, and tumbled gems in the gift shop elicit a frontier nostalgia and compliment the architecture, music on the audio tour, and surrounding landscape to invite the visitor into the subject position of pioneer. It is important to note that very few pioneers ever traversed, much less settled on Grandfather. Hence, the museum tells no specific story of frontier life and instead relies on the diffuse, slippery pioneer mythos and aesthetics that characterize the entire region to situate visitors. For example, the nearest and largest town is Boone, North Carolina, named for Daniel Boone. Visitors often stay and dine in Boone, where they might attend an Appalachian State University Mountaineers or Watauga High School Pioneers athletic event, take in the Horn of the West theatrical production, which tells the story of American westward expansion, or enjoy the art and bluegrass music of street buskers downtown.
The museum includes an extensive and impressive collection of ecological displays, including a botanical garden, flora and fauna walls, a tree timeline, an interactive 3D topographical map, geological and mineral displays, bird migration maps, wildlife photos, and taxidermy exhibits, lifelike wax models of plant life, and an interactive weather exhibit. Docents often roam the small museum, interacting with visitors and offering to let them handle artifacts like elk antlers, petrified wood, and quartz pieces found on the mountain. There is virtually no focus on any of the human history of the mountain, except for very brief references to explorers Daniel Boone, Asa Gray, and Andre Michaux on historical markers near the main entrance at the base of the mountain. Ironically, there is a large, prominently located digital display in the lobby of the Conservation Campus showcasing photos from the mountain posted by visitors on social media with a sign encouraging readers to check in with their own adventure photos. The museum presents visitors with a timeline of Grandfather that jumps from ancient history to pioneers to the present moment, omitting the violence of Cherokee removal, the ecological violence of timber mining and construction, and the economic violence of speculative real estate development that set the contours of the ecological, political, and economic reality of the region. Instead, a partial and curated history that invites tourists to feel as if they are encountering an untouched wilderness and contributing to its preservation is presented.

In addition to the audio tour CD, visitors are given two brochures upon entry to the attraction. The first is an invitation to donate to the Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation, the nonprofit that benefits from attraction ticket and merchandise sales. Guests are reminded that “ticket sales go directly toward preserving the mountain and its inhabitants, maintaining the park in the best public interest, and participation in educational and research activities.” The second is an overview of the attraction featuring stunning photos of plants and
animals alongside images of visitors interacting with the landscape. The language on this brochure again centers readers in the present moment, articulating the mountain as simultaneously timeless and ahistorical. The cover reads, “A mile above sea level, you enter a different world,” situating the visitor in a time a place set apart. Subheadings on the brochure follow this rhetorical pattern of anchoring visitors in their present experience with the ancient wilderness:

“As horizons wide, so do the smiles.”

“Rare wildlife, rarer experiences.”

“The views are ancient. The experiences are all brand new.”

“High above sea level, you’ve never felt so grounded.”

The sacredness of the Grandfather Mountain experience is foregrounded in this language that juxtaposes sacred and profane, past and present, and clearly marks the mountain as a liminal and sacred place where the two might meet. The brochure concludes by reinforcing what visitors have now already read and heard on the audio tour: “Keeping Grandfather Mountain Green: Every ticket sold helps keep Grandfather Mountain pristine and beautiful for generations to come, thanks to the careful oversight of the Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation,” again reinforcing the notion that visitors’ presence on the mountain is contributing to its sustainability.

What is notably absent from this narration of the mountain is any mention of Hugh Morton or the Linville Improvement Company, the Wilmor Group, or the significant controversies discussed in the previous chapter. Also absent is the social impact of the development of Grandfather or the ancient and rich history of the Cherokee people and their relationship to Tanawha. In the shadow of the insistent rhetoric of ecological preservation and
unspoiled wilderness lies the paved roads travelers use to drive their cars to the summit, the
smoothly paved parking lots upon which they park, the near constant maintenance of the
suspension bridge, the newly installed WiFi throughout the attraction, and the economically
decimated communities of local people in the valleys below.

Visitors are instead invited to encounter the mountain in the present moment as wild and
untamed, much like the pioneers did, while their attention is directed away from the modernity
necessary for them to be there in the first place. The attraction immerses tourists in ancient
geological history and encourages them to savor the present moment they are experiencing in
nature, and even take a piece of ancient geological history with them by way of the gift shop,
while obscuring over one hundred years of economic and ecological exploitation. A 1967
government report on poverty in Appalachia states,

The brief prosperity brought on by the bonanza of modernization broadened the
mountaineer’s economic horizon. It aroused aspirations, envies, and hopes. But
the industrial wonders of the age promised more than they in fact delivered, for
the profits taken from the rich natural resources of the region flowed out of the
mountains, with little benefit to the mountain people themselves. For a relative
handful of owners and managers, the new order mountaineers, the new order
yielded riches unimaginable a few decades before; for thousands of mountaineers,
it brought a life of struggle, hardship, and despair. Considered from this
perspective, the persistent poverty of Appalachia has not resulted from the lack of
modernization. Rather, it has come from the particular kind of modernization that
unfolded in the years 1880 to 1930.

When one considers the economic and ecological consequences of the modern development of
the mountain, it is no surprise that those years are omitted from the narrative of Grandfather
Mountain presented in the Conservation Campus. In the same vein, it is clear that the subject
position of pioneer, not Cherokee, local resident, or even tourist, is the most comfortable
perspective from which to encounter the mountain. The story of the relationship between the
pioneer and the mountain is one of adventure, promise, and self-fulfillment, while stories of Cherokee, locals, and tourists are narratives of exploitation, tragedy, and violence.

The recalled past presented in the Grandfather Mountain attraction fashions a collective memory in which the relationship between humans and the mountain, between investors and local residents, and between modernity and wilderness is flattened and sanitized. Parts of the story that would make visitors, many whom consider themselves outdoors enthusiasts and environmentalists, uncomfortably aware of the economic and ecological impact of their presence on the mountain are erased. Instead, the attraction is focused almost exclusively on ecology and preservation, allowing visitors to come, encounter, and leave feeling good about their impact.

4.5.3 Special Events: The Grandfather Mountain Highland Games

*It is my first summer in the High Country. I am astounded that I need a light sweater on a July morning in order to comfortably enjoy my coffee on the front deck, the one that affords me a view of Grandfather’s iconic profile. As I savor the quiet, crisp air and my warm coffee I am startled and delighted when I hear the sound of bagpipes in the distance. When I hear them again, later that afternoon and the following morning, I begin to investigate. It is then that I learn of the Highland Games and begin to discover the rich ecological and cultural connection between Appalachia and Scotland.*

As I arrive at the world-famous Grandfather Mountain Highland Games Festival for the first time, I am immediately struck by the elaborate campsites lining both sides of the highway leading to McCrae Meadows, where the games are held. After taking a few laps around the event site to orient myself to the space, I decide to spend some time walking through the campgrounds. Many of the campsites are incredibly extravagant, containing multiple campers and tents. I notice string lights, rugs, screened-in dining tents, elaborate bar set ups, memorials to deceased family members and friends, play areas for children, and even a makeshift chandelier hanging from a tree. These temporary home-spaces reflect a great deal of care and effort, making clear to me that this is something festival goers invest deeply in—both in terms of finances and time.
As I stroll through the campsites, I notice bands of children running, many in kilts, barefoot, and shirtless, unsupervised, through the camping area, vendor area, and around the games track. A group of young boys toting foam swords and shields bustles by me and scamper up a rock, ignoring the “stay off the rocks” signage and ropes. I wonder if they are related. I wonder where their parents are. I wonder why they aren’t following the rules. I continue my stroll, but soon, when I meet June MacFarlane, I remember these boys and have insight into what this place and this event means to and does for attendees.

June appears close to my age, in her late thirties. She is working her clan tent, which amounts to visiting with people like me. She is wearing a black t-shirt with “Clan MacFarlane” proudly displayed across the chest, tucked neatly into a kilt, and tennis shoes. Her hair is in a ponytail, and she seems to know the other three men in the tent. She’s snacking on a box of Cheese-Its and watching the heavy athletics competition. I strike up a conversation by asking how long she’s been coming to these events.

She answers,

Well, this is the only one I really come to. They happen all over the country, but Grandfather is the biggie, and it’s the only one I’ve ever attended. But I can’t remember ever not coming here. I’ve been coming here all my life. We use this event as our family reunion. I didn’t know everyone didn’t do that until I was a tween and my friends either didn’t have family reunions or had them at someone’s house or a park or something. I always saw Highland Games as my family reunion. And it is! My entire extended family comes, camps, and go to the games. This event and this place are special to me because this is where I see my people. As a kid this was the one weekend a year, I’d get to see all my cousins.

I feel a pang of envy as I didn’t grow up with extended family and certainly didn’t grow up with family reunions like this. How impactful it must be to have been raised in such a culturally rich environment. I now realize the boys I saw running around the campsites are likely siblings, cousins, and friends who have been coming here since birth.
June continues, “My mom went to college in Ohio where she met my dad and that’s where they stayed. So, I’m from Ohio, but all the rest of my family is from North Carolina, Tennessee, and South Carolina. I’d see them once a year, here. And it’s so pretty. This place is just special no matter what. It’s so pretty, I mean look.” June gestures toward McCrae Peak, the jagged rocky peak towering above us. “Anyway, as a kid I’d run all over this place with the other kids. Some of us who weren’t related became close friends, like cousins, because we’d see them year after year, like summer camp or something.” June’s summer camp analogy resonates and is exactly what I was thinking as I listened to her tell this part of her story. I grew up going to the same religious summer camp with the same core group of kids year after year. I’m beginning to see how Grandfather Mountain, for June and people who shared this experience with her, is like that summer camp is for me—sacred, memory-filled, and centrally formative.

June continues,

My grandmother’s ashes are spread here. We did that about six years ago during the Flower of the Field ceremony. So, coming here pays homage to her. Ohio is home, of course, but Grandfather Mountain is a kind of home for me too. And my husband and children are my family, but I come here and have a bigger family for a few days. Some of them I’m blood related to and most of them are people I’ve met here through the years, and we just come back over and over and sing and drink and play and tell stories. I feel connected to them because we all share some history.

I am unsure if she means Scottish ancestral history or if she means history of being here together for the Highland Games, but I realize it doesn’t matter. The two bleed into and inform one another. Grandfather Mountain represents a site where ancient Scottish history, imagined history, personal histories, ancestral ties, and contemporary ties all mix together into a soup of meaning making and experience here, now. Once again, time is flattened at Grandfather Mountain.

June continues,

A lot of people go to many festivals and get into the competitions and performances, but not me. I’m really just here for family tradition. This is the only one I go to and I don’t do
any of the stuff. I’m here for a vacation and for the people. We always do Grandfather. People come and go. Sometimes you’ll connect with someone for one festival one summer, and sometimes those connections grow over years and years. They’re all special and worthwhile.

We’re interrupted by a voice crackling over a walkie-talkie that was lying in her lawn chair. She picks it up and responds, “Okay, head back to the tent.” I look at her quizzically. “Oh, that’s my son. He’s off playing, but I make him carry a walkie-talkie so I can check in on him.” I realize one of those boys I saw may very well be June’s child. Our conversation ends, and I move on before the voice on the other end of the walkie-talking returns to the tent, but the interaction has richly informed my interpretation of the games as a meaning-making, identity-forming, heritage-creating experience for families.

My time at the Grandfather Mountain Highland Games includes lots of music, including an introduction to “a new, truly American style of Scottish piping,” haggis alongside hotdogs, a Presbyterian worship service, a parade of tartans, and a Flower of the Field memorial service. I watch athletic competitions that remind me of childhood elementary school field days and am awed by the grace and agility of the dancers. The opening ceremony consists of a mash up of the Canadian, Scottish, United Kingdom, and American national anthems that culminated in a surprisingly patriotic group sing-along thirty-thousand voices strong, certainly a moment of “collective effervescence” that left me with chills. Each of these moments points toward the generative creativity of these events. With the pervasive sound of bagpipes filling the air, most festivalgoers dressed in tartans or Renaissance era clothing, sword demonstrations, and sheep herding competitions, it is easy to forget that one is standing in a field in modern-day North Carolina and not ancient Scotland. Once again, time and space become malleable things at Grandfather, and I find myself caught up in the collective jubilation, forgetting momentarily that
I am here as a researcher, a bit of an outsider, and certainly not a 15th century Scottish maiden. I am reminded of all of these things when my husband picks me up after a long day of field work, and we grab Chipotle on the way home.

Ultimately, for festival attendees, McCrae Meadows at Grandfather Mountain becomes sacred ground not because it resembles the highlands of Scotland (although it does), but instead because it is the place where thousands of people for multiple generations have gathered to create and perform heritage together, providing them with a sense of community and connectivity with one another and with the mountain. For this community, it is not the geology, flora, fauna, or wildlife that makes Grandfather Mountain special. It is, instead, the way this place has become a gathering place, a home place, and a centering place for a very specific diasporic cultural group. It is the memories, the connections, and the shared experiences that cultivate a sense of sacredness at McRae Meadow every July.

4.5.4 Interpretative and Educational Encounters

Grandfather Mountain is home to countless interpretative events throughout the year. Field trips, guided hikes, synchronous firefly tours, and flora and fauna walks happen every day the park is open. Additionally, docents wander the Conservation Campus engaging with visitors by answering questions, offering details, and often allowing visitors up close opportunities to handle wildlife or artifacts. I recently attended a third-grade field trip to Grandfather with my son, curious about how this experience might align with or diverge from the less structured times I’ve visited the mountain.

The group is greeted by two docents in the lobby of the Conservation Campus and divided into two groups. One group is sent to explore the museum while the other group is taken into the classroom for guided wildlife encounters. I follow my son and his friends into the
museum described in the previous section. The children explore the many displays, especially
the interactive bird migration exhibit and the weather station, which simulate wind force. They
are less interested in the taxidermy and geological displays until a docent comes out holding
large elk antlers. Unsurprisingly, there is interest in the more static artifacts when the children
are invited to touch them. In the middle of the day during the school year, the museum is
relatively empty beyond our group.

Quickly bored with the inside displays, the small group of boys I am responsible for
chaperoning head out to the animal enclosures. They are excited to see a bald eagle and one of
the resident bears. The otter enclosure was empty, disappointing one boy in our group. His friend
comforted him by reminding him, “There are otters in the creek behind the school! You know
what they look like.” This exchange reminds me that Grandfather Mountain, while special, is
much more “everyday” for these local children who live in its shadow. They encounter otters and
bears and remarkable rock formations and quartz in their everyday lived experiences, again
reminding me of how the rhetoric of sacredness works to mark this place as unique.

Our time in the museum is coming to an end, and we are summoned into the expansive,
modern classroom space for our wildlife encounter. The children are seated at long tables and
four docents walk in, each carrying small animal enclosures. A snake, a spider, an opossum, and
a salamander are brought into the room. The children squeal and wiggle with delight and
excitement. Their teacher quiets the class and the lead docent, a young woman dressed head-to-
toe in heavy duty khaki, begins by assessing the comfort level of each child with the animals.
She leads a 20-minute introduction to life cycles and habitats; then the children are invited to
come near each animal enclosure for a better look. The docents ask questions of the children,
“How do you think this spider survives the winter?” “What do you think this snake eats?” The
children offer their best guesses, and the docents correct, affirm, and explain details about each animal.

Finally, the classes reunite, and all 30 children are bussed to the top lot and walked across the mile-high suspension bridge. This is, by far, the highlight for the kids. Some are nervous and do not cross at all. Many hold hands with one another or chaperones and timidly inch their way across. Others are thrilled and jump and skip across. Many ask their teachers or chaperones to take their picture followed by “Send that to my mama.” While they enjoyed the bridge, for these young visitors, the adrenaline rush of the high-altitude bridge trumped any concern for the view. As our time at the suspension bridge comes to an end, and we load the bus to head down the mountain, I overhear my son and his friends discussing their bravery for crossing the bridge.

What is striking about this particular visit to the Conservation Campus is how very mundane and every day the museum, wildlife encounter, and mile-high view seemed to be to these children for whom this environment is home. This foregrounds the notion that the difference or sacredness of Grandfather Mountain is indeed a learned rhetorical construction that is still being taught to these young children. From their experience, much of Grandfather Mountain isn’t too different from some of their backyards. This once again emphasizes the sociological and rhetorical nature of sacredness—it is cultivated, learned, taught, and social in nature rather than innate, even when applied to natural environments such as this one.

4.5.5 Wilderness Backcountry Encounters at Grandfather Mountain

Hiking on Grandfather Mountain takes many forms. It is not unusual to see novice hikers and families with small children hiking around the base of the mountain at any number of the state park access points. The higher the elevation, the less likely one is to encounter other hikers on the trails. I have hiked Grandfather many times with my family and alone. Recently, I hiked
the longest trail in the system, which begins in an unremarkable parking lot near a grocery store and ends atop one of the highest peaks in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

I secure my car in the parking area and first visit the trail head restrooms before gathering my backpack. The bathrooms are basic, rest stop like. I notice the bear-proof garbage cans, which are so commonplace in the area that they become nearly invisible to locals. However, today, this time I notice, I suppose, because I am headed into the woods and up the mountain alone. I do not have bear spray and suddenly feel a bit nervous about that, even though, at this point, I am practically in a grocery store parking lot and likely in an area that is far too full of human activity for there to be bears nearby.

I approach the glass encased bulletin board next to the trail entrance. It contains a large map of the trail and surrounding area, a poster informing visitors of bear safety tips, another poster educating visitors on “leave no trace” principles, and one more poster encouraging hikers to avoid contact with wildlife. Next to the bulletin board is a backcountry hiking registration card station, with cards, pens, and a deposit box. Hikers must register themselves before entering the trail and are responsible for removing their registration card when they return to the parking area. Each night park rangers check the box and sweep the trails to ensure no hikers are missing. The registration process is quick and simple, and yet feels a bit ominous. Finally, I am ready to begin my adventure, and I walk through a wooden frame that makes a door-like structure separating the trail from the “not-trail” space I had been in before. Interestingly, the built environment marking the trail creates a literal barrier between Grandfather Mountain and the surrounding area. As I cross the makeshift threshold, I enter something that has spatially been signified as different and separate. Within just a few yards, I have crossed from the profane into a sacred place.
The hike is about 14 miles. I take my time, stop at every waterfall or creek, spot some deer, and pass a handful of other hikers during my time on the trail. At the beginning of my trek, I could hear the road noise from the nearby highway, and occasionally, I’d catch a glimpse of a truck through the trees. But as my elevation increases so does my seclusion and quickly, I am in near total silence save for the crunch of the leaves under my shoes and the sound of nearby birds.

The experience feels wildly distant from my everyday life that takes place nearby. I feel miles and miles away from civilization but in reality, I am quite close to a grocery store, a McDonalds, and my house. The forest seems to envelop me, and the deeper I go, the more removed I feel from modernity and civilization. The sense of isolation is a startling contrast to my Highland Games experience, where I felt connected to thousands of others. On the backcountry trails, it is just me and Grandfather, for better or for worse. Occasionally I pass a fellow hiker or small group of hikers. We greet one another with head nods, hellos, and “You’re almost there!” But for the most part, I’m alone, and the isolation is liberating and empowering. I feel strong, brave, and competent. I feel connected to nature, my ancestors, and the animals I encounter. We’re all out here alone, together, doing our best. Other times, the isolation is intimidating. Fears of injuring myself or encountering a bear intrude into my consciousness.

I lose track of time easily and find myself checking and double checking my watch and my pace to ensure I’m back to the trailhead before dark. I do not want park rangers to find my card still in the registration box and have to come searching for me. I imagine myself as a pioneer, a hunter-gatherer, a medicine woman. I wonder about the first people to summit Grandfather. Who were they? What did they think of this walk? How did they do it without the trail maintenance, the built in steps, and the ropes and ladders to help steady themselves on the steep ascents? Although alone, I feel a deep sense of connectivity with these forebears who I’ll
never know. Once again, even alone and with little built environment around me, the
Grandfather Mountain experience alters time and positionality.

4.6 Conclusion

As these vignettes demonstrate, the subjugation of time and the foregrounding of place,
the constitution of visitors into fantasy-inspired subject positions, and the separation of the
natural and human worlds all rhetorically construct Grandfather Mountain as a sacred place.
While these themes are present in each context, they are particularly palpable at the Conservation
Campus, where the pedagogical function of this experiential landscape is most overt, and where
the modernity necessary to make the visitor’s presence possible is most clear.

The violence and tragedies that punctuate the modern history of the mountain cannot be
undone. The Cherokee people are mostly gone from the area, and much of their history has been
lost. The damage from the timber-mining induced mudslides of the 1940s is done. The roads to
the top of Grandfather have been paved and the buildings have been built. The economy of the
area has been irreversibly transformed to one dependent upon tourism. Speculation about what
could or should have been done differently makes little difference now. The 2008 establishment
of the Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation represents a seismic shift in the trajectory
of the attraction and the surrounding lands. Visitors still come as they always have; however,
now they leave having been educated on the ecological wonders of the area and hopefully have a
deeper appreciation for the land. To that end, the experiential landscape of Grandfather Mountain
serves both the area and the visitors well. However, much is lost in the mission of conservation
and education by omitting the more uncomfortable parts of the mountain and the attraction’s
history. The evolution of the mountain, from profit-driven tourist kitsch to the Conservation
Campus, presents a unique opportunity to invite tourists to critically explore the tensions of
modernity and wilderness, and ecology and tourism. If the mission of the site has shifted from profit to pedagogy, understanding the Cherokee and their removal, the economic development spurred by Grandfather Mountain’s development and the consequences of that development, the history of timber mining and mudslides, and other such issues are central to that mission.

What all of this shows is that “memory is not necessarily authentic, but rather useful.” The historical fragments fashioned together into the narrative told by the Grandfather Mountain experience create a useful memory. It is useful to the extent that it educates tourists on the mountain’s ecology, and it allows them to freedom and access to enjoy it. How much more useful might it be if visitors were invited to consider the economic and ecological tensions that have plagued the region for more than a century and continue to threaten it? Appalachian journalist and historian Miles Tager pushes readers into this tension, “Bulldoze in your mind all the concrete and macadam, billboards and landfills and resort homes into a big pile. The resulting mountain would dwarf Grandfather and every other peak in the southern Appalachians.”

The Grandfather Mountain attraction—the very site that spurred much of that concrete and macadam and many of those billboards and resort homes—has an obligation and an opportunity to the mountain and the people who live in its valleys to do the same.

Gordon Lynch writes,

In the moment of powerful identification with a sacred moral sentiment, we cannot at the same time maintain a critical understanding of its historically specific nature with that sentiment dissipating. Yet recognizing that these sacred forms are not timeless but grounded in social and cultural histories is still important if we are to avoid an unreflexive acting out of our sacred commitments in ways that may do much more harm than good.

40. Tager, Grandfather Mountain: A Profile, 53.
41. Lynch, On the Sacred, 41.
The sense of sacredness generated by a visit to Grandfather Mountain is a positive thing in so much as it increases a sense of wonder and care for the environment. However, by failing to address the complexities of development, the tensions inherent in ecotourism, and the contention over this sacred wilderness, much of the pedagogical power of the Conservation Campus and the Grandfather Mountain Stewardship Foundation is lost. Lynch argues, “When seen through the prism of the sacred and the profane, complex human lives are reduced to where they can be plotted in relation to particular, highly charged moral boundaries.” Herein lies the danger of interpreting the mountain and its ecology as sacred. When we reduce complex environs to symbols, even sacred symbols, we negate, flatten, and sanitize the social, economic, ecological, and political complexities surrounding them, and arguably, the most important lessons Grandfather Mountain might offer lie in those cultural complexities. Chidester and Linenthal agree, noting,

American historical experience has shaped the production of space in American in distinctive ways that need to be acknowledged. The production of sacred space also involves time; it depends, not only upon a symbolic conquest or construction of place, but also upon the temporal processes of ritual and practice, memory and narrative, and the ongoing engagement with historical factors and change.

The flattening of time and the erasure of human agency in the presentation and interpretation of Grandfather Mountain occlude this important process, leaving the sacredness of the mountain as simply a given.

Commemorative and interpretative sites are instructive, not only about our past but also about our future. We tell our histories in part to learn who we are and where we came from. The study of history is not only about the past, but also about our present values and identities, and

importantly, how we think about the future. What history we tell reveals much about society and about ourselves today. The history and exploitation of Grandfather Mountain and the people who call the area around it home have much to teach us in this particular cultural and environmental moment. Embracing and articulating the entirety of the ecological and ethnological histories, even the destructive parts, is central to more deeply understanding Grandfather and completing the transformation from kitschy tourist attraction to eco/ethnological preserve that began three decades ago.
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Chapter 5: Playing Pioneers and Indians

I am lucky enough to live in the shadow of Grandfather Mountain. I see the famous “profile” of Grandfather from my front deck. Vacation rentals and summer homes far outnumber the full-time residents in my town and on walks through the neighborhood, I stop every few feet and pick up trash littering the side of the road left by the tourists renting cabins and visiting the snow tubing and ziplining attraction at the end of my street. I’m often puzzled by my observations of tourists who visit the mountain. They are overwhelmingly white and wealthy. They come for the natural beauty, outdoor adventures, and escape from modernity promised by a vacation in Appalachia, however often what I see is a commodification and exploitation of the very land they’ve traveled to see.

It is from this personal proximity to both the ancient and sacred land of Tanawha and thousands of tourists who visit her each year that this research emerges. Observing the ways mostly white, wealthy tourists interact with indigenous sacred land that is now a United Nations designated Biosphere Reserve raises important questions about access, consumption, commodification, race, class, performance, and display in a sacred place. In Chapter 3, I interrogated the contours of debates surrounding Grandfather Mountain and in so doing foregrounded logics governing the contestation of sacred places. Chapter 2 examined how the experiential landscape of Grandfather Mountain rhetorically interprets the mountain as sacred and encourages particular performances within it. In this chapter, I use themes that emerge from Instagram check-ins at Grandfather Mountain to examine how race and class afford a particular type of access to and performance within the sacred place of Grandfather, and how the uses and affordances of Instagram provide a medium for the performative display and reification of a sacred place, representing for a global audience the interpretation of the mountain as sacred. Since the majority of images of visitors to Grandfather Mountain are of white tourists, and outdoor recreation is generally a white-dominated space, the racial politics of outdoor recreation and sacred wilderness will be critically foregrounded in this analysis. I will begin by discussing whiteness as a construct of both privilege and a lack of a clearly defined cultural heritage and
identity. Then, I will examine how the rhetorical construction of wilderness spaces and Grandfather Mountain in particular as sacred cultivates a unique kind of interaction between the white tourist and the land. Next, I will discuss how the uses and affordances of Instagram make it an especially fruitful site for understanding performance and display. Finally, I will conclude by describing how the coalescing of whiteness, sacred wilderness, and display are visible in the themes of the photos and captions of Instagram check-ins at Grandfather Mountain, and what implications such public displays have for larger understandings of Grandfather and other sacred wilderness sites.

5.1 Theorizing Whiteness, Cultural Projection, & Visuality

5.1.1 Witnessing Whiteness

Phenotypically, socially, and culturally I am a white woman. Thanks to my relatives who live on the Pine Ridge Lakota Sioux reservation in South Dakota, my friends and colleagues of color, and my education I am perhaps more sensitive to and aware of structures of white supremacy than many white people, but overall, I’ve lived with some degree of the ignorance that white privilege affords. Additionally, I’m not a native Appalachian. My experience with Appalachia prior to moving to the area as an adult was the occasional vacation to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park where I enjoyed family-friendly hikes, pretty views, and kitschy hillbilly themed attractions. In other words, I was (am) on some level the subject of my own critique, and I pursue this examination of white, middle- and upper-class tourism in Appalachia in response to Nakayama and Krizek’s invitation to reflexivity. My goal is to disrupt the “white social practice of not discussing whiteness.”

By examining the ways white tourists interact with and on indigenous sacred land, I aim to “particularize white experience,” and displace it from the normative center by offering a critical look at the “everydayness of whiteness” in this particular space. Because whiteness is situated as normative, it retains a certain invisibility, which allows for slippage between various subject positions and allows for the power and privilege embedded in whiteness to remain largely unseen, especially by white people. As articulated by Raka Shome,

Whiteness, as an institutionalized and systemic problem, is maintained and produced not by overt rhetorics of whiteness, but rather by its ‘everydayness,’ by the everyday, unquestioned racialized social relations that have acquired a seeming normativity and through that normativity function to make invisible the ways in which whites participate in, and derive protection and benefits from, a system whose rule and organizational relations work to their advantage.

Further, the visual saturation of white bodies in certain spaces reinforces whiteness as a “dominant and naturalized power.” In short, noting the ability of whiteness to be both everywhere and nowhere, simultaneously invisible and visually saturating, is central to understanding the hegemonic power of the ubiquitous nature of white subjectivity. My aim is to denaturalize the seemingly “natural” by turning a critical eye toward the taken-for-granted nature of nearly exclusively white bodies occupying the sacred site of Grandfather Mountain.

Nakayama and Krizek argue that whiteness “is able to mask and re-secure its space through a movement between universality and invisibility.” An unmarked subject position, coupled with a history of social, economic, and political power, allows whiteness to occupy a

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more universal discursive space. Shome notes a “sense of material and cultural entitlement that is enabled, the social agency that is produced, when we see the world constantly in our image, through our needs, and through our frame of reference.” 6 It is that entitlement and social agency that allows whiteness to “maneuver through and around challenges to its space.” 7 The ability for whiteness to function as both universal and particular allows white people to select their ethnicity like an accessory, allowing them to try on ethnic identities without it becoming a substantial part of their everyday lives, what Mary Waters calls “symbolic ethnicity.” 8

Waters argues that symbolic ethnicity persists because “it meets a need for community without individual cost.” 9 The need of European immigrants in the earliest years of the emerging American nation to establish a new national identity, as discussed in Chapter 2, makes sense. But why would contemporary whiteness with all its pervasiveness, privilege, and power need or desire symbolic ethnicity? Shome answers, “When whiteness begins to feel insecure about its power and future, different strategies of self-naming emerge. Instead of positioning itself as the ‘norm,’ it begins to mark itself as the ‘other,’ as ‘different’.” 10 The increased (although still insufficient and threatened) attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion in organizations across the country, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the overall “browning of America” set the stage for a collective reflection on racial identity. While this has led to personal reckonings, reconciliations, proactive initiatives, and ally-ship for some, for others it has led to less productive outcomes. In this case, I argue, virtue signaling through the performative display of

symbolic ethnicity in and on a site that is constructed and interpreted as sacred, at least in part, due to its close association with American identity.

Shome describes “an interesting strategy of contemporary whiteness: the identification and acknowledgement of a part of itself as bad, corrupt, oppressive, and needing to be fixed, and a separation of itself from that part by denying identification with it.” Shome describes “an interesting strategy of contemporary whiteness: the identification and acknowledgement of a part of itself as bad, corrupt, oppressive, and needing to be fixed, and a separation of itself from that part by denying identification with it.”11 Positioning oneself as somehow apart from urban modernity and closer to the primitive wilderness than the average person is one way this desire can be met. Of course, only from the privileged position of whiteness can one performatively traverse such borders. Doing so works to absolve guilt through proximity, appropriation, and commodification, or as bell hooks calls it, “eating the Other,”12 rather than meaningful dialogue and ally-ship. Additionally, such performances locate the problem of whiteness, and by extension the solution to racial inequality, in individuals rather than systems. The understanding of Grandfather Mountain as a sacred, spiritual place situates it as a rhetorically powerful backdrop against which such performances take place.

hooks writes of the longing for and commodification of Otherness by whiteness, arguing that “within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.”13 She notes that Western whiteness in particular marks encounters with the Other as more exciting, exotic, intense, threatening, spiritual, sensual, or authentic, resulting in the social position of Other as having collateral in the cultural marketplace. Adding to this appeal is the belief held by many whites that contact with the Other represents a progressive change toward racial equity and cultural pluralism. hooks describes how “cultural appropriation of the Other assuages feelings of deprivation and lack that assault the

psyches of radical white youth.”¹⁴ She argues the desire for “a bit of the Other” is really about “enhancing the blank landscape of whiteness” rather than meaningful dialogue. The ability of middle- and upper-class whiteness to expand across racial, ethnic, and aesthetic borders to consume what elements of identity and space they want is made especially apparent against the backdrop of sacred wilderness that has been made accessible, safe, tamed, and ready for their consumption at Grandfather Mountain. Just as early European settlers defined themselves via encounters with the wilderness and appropriation of indigenous culture, many contemporary white Americans seek encounters with the wilderness in their pursuit of a sense of cultural authenticity. It is with this historical and critical understanding of conceptions of land and racial identity that we might best come to understand the contemporary “cult of wilderness” and its display on social media, with a particular concern for how it informs a sense of sacredness at Grandfather Mountain.

5.1.2 Erasure in Frontierland: Setting the Stage for Cultural Projection

Raka Shome argues spatiality contributes fundamentally to social formations of power.¹⁵ She notes, “Space is not merely a backdrop, though, against which the communication of cultural politics occurs. Rather, it needs to be recognized as a central component in that communication. It functions as a technology—a means and medium—of power that is socially constituted through material relations that enable the communication of specific politics.”¹⁶ Adopting this critical orientation to space situates this interrogation of the whitewashed sacred wilderness of Grandfather beyond the typical economic paradigm that often frames the issue of racialized

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¹⁴. hooks, “Eating the Other,” 370.
outdoor recreation. Acknowledging the spatial materiality of power complicates the issue by raising questions about the origins and consequences of dominant conceptions of who belongs on a hiking trail, in a national park, or on a ski slope. Shome puts it this way, “These [spatial] relations themselves must be seen as active components in the unequal and heterogeneous production and distribution of identities, politics, and actions.” In short, who “belongs” in the sacred wilderness is not an arbitrary or neutral thing.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the recalled past presented at Grandfather Mountain State Park fashions a collective memory in which the relationship between humans and the mountain, white pioneers and indigenous people, wealthy outside investors and poor local residents, and modernity and wilderness is flattened and sanitized. In the museum, gift shops, and on printed materials promoting the park, parts of the history of Grandfather Mountain that would make visitors, many who consider themselves outdoors enthusiasts and environmentalists, uncomfortably aware of the ecological impact of their presence on the mountain are erased. The racial violence inflected upon the Cherokee to pave the way for white settlement and development of Grandfather Mountain is not described, and the economic violence suffered by the locals trapped in an abusive tourism economy is hidden from view. Instead, the rhetoric surrounding Grandfather Mountain is focused almost exclusively on ecology and preservation, flattening time, minimizing human influence, and constituting visitors in the subject position of outdoor adventurer or pioneer, allowing tourists to come, encounter the “unspoiled wilderness,” and leave feeling good about their impact.

This absence is significant, as it is this absence coupled with the fluidity of whiteness, that allows for particular displays of identity to emerge in this sacred place and in turn be displayed on social media. In their analysis of the Cody Firearms Museum, Ott, Aoki, and Dickinson describe how

In Lacanian terms, desire arises from lack (manqué), the always missing signifier in the Symbolic Other, what Lacan terms the objet petit a (i.e., the unattainable object of desire or object-cause of desire). Since the objet petit a is not actually in an object in ‘reality’ (i.e., it has no positive consistency; it does not ‘objectively’ exist), it is necessarily articulated via fantasy.19

They go on to describe how this fantasy depends crucially on absence. Absent a signifier, in this case images of the displaced Cherokee, the poverty-stricken local, or the bulldozers that paved the parking lot on the mountain summit, tourists can freely envision themselves as the rugged, pioneering outdoorsman or the eco-spiritual naturalist. Tourism rhetoric promoting the state of North Carolina, and especially the western part of the state, relies heavily on frontier mythology, and themes of Grandfather Mountain Instagram check-ins echo two archetypes from frontier mythology—the pioneer and the noble savage.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Appalachia acts as a signifier for the now-settled western frontier that was so central to American identity formation. For Americans in an increasingly industrial nation, a sense of imperialist nostalgia compounds the romantic pull of Appalachia. Balustein argues that “Even as mainstream metropolitan America looks down upon the primitivism of backwoods Appalachia, there is also a sense of remorseful nostalgia, a nagging suspicion that irreplaceable spiritual values are being traded for material rewards of dubious

worth.”

hooks offers an extension to Rosaldo’s theorizing of imperialist nostalgia noting that one strategy of coping is “reenacting and reritualizing in different ways the imperialist, colonizing journey as a narrative fantasy of power and desire, of seduction by the Other.”

She argues that part of the Western fascination with primitivism is “its focus on overcoming alienation from the body, restoring the body, and hence the self, to a relation of full and easy harmony with nature or the cosmos.”

She goes on to describe this phenomenon in economic terms: “Currently the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabitants is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualization.”

This is exactly what is displayed in posted photos from Grandfather Mountain—the commodification of Otherness as an act of spiritual purification against a backdrop of seemingly pure, untouched, sacred wilderness. These experiences that seem to transcend time, space, and social location are documented, displayed, and in turn become important fragments that work rhetorically to reify the notion that Grandfather Mountain is sacred.

The tension of contemporary life in which Americans enjoy the material rewards of modernity while simultaneously longing for something that feels more spiritual and authentic is manifested in much of the mythos of Appalachia. Richard Starnes writes, “In a region with heavy tourist traffic separateness becomes exotic, distinctive, and, most important, marketable.”

Indeed, the landscape and the people of Appalachia are often understood through

22. hooks, “Eating the Other,” 374.
23. hooks, “Eating the Other,” 373.
the lens of difference and isolation from modern American society. Historian Drew Swanson interrogates the ways in which Appalachian landscapes function as a laboratory for the practice of American ideas of nature. He points out the many historical accounts of Appalachia that invoke ideas of the frontier and foreground the natural environment over human culture noting how the field notes, journals, and publications of botanists and other explorers consistently describe Appalachian exceptionalism and link it to rugged nature, isolation, primitivism, and cultural difference.25 Similarly, Appalachian historian David Whisnant argues the romantic myths of Appalachian culture as primitive has led to the robust tourism industry that dominates the region as well as the exploitation and neglect of many of the region’s challenges.26 This tension of difference, modernity, and primitivism is visible in the landscape, as the rugged and dangerous mountains are made accessible in the form of national or state parks or attractions. It is represented in the character tropes of the pioneer, who is resourceful, rugged, and wise but also violent and wild, or the noble savage who maintains a dignified eco-spirituality that serves as a counterforce to his violence. And for Americans who have the means for leisure travel, this mythic region and the people who inhabit it serve as an ideal setting in which they might temporarily resolve that tension and experience a sense of sacred transcendence.

Brown, Phillips, and Maheshwari blur the lines between “sacred” and “profane” as they argue that the two domains share parallel systems and structures, particularly in the form of commodification, consumerism, and tourism. They note,

objects and experiences are desired and consumed, and ‘gods’ searched for and worshipped. The processes are similar, and yet it is held that the ‘profane’ are as much

25. Drew A. Swanson, Beyond the Mountains: Commodifying Appalachian Environments (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2018).
underpinned by a value system as the ‘sacred.’ The ‘sacred’ behavior is, like the ‘profane,’ reified through objects and experiences, which may be used or consumed.\textsuperscript{27} For them, experiences such as travel and outdoor recreation, which generally are considered profane endeavors, are situated among patterns of consumption directed at self-actualization, social esteem, and self-fulfillment, not unlike sacred spiritual and religious practices. They lay out a number of parallels between sacred practices and consumption in the form of tourism, including the centrality of myths and stories, tenets of beliefs and practices, totems, symbols and icons, legitimizing language, and the importance of particular actors. They note the near cult-like following many locations have garnered through successful place branding, as evidenced by shirts, hats, bumper stickers, and other such totems that reflect a deep, spiritual-like identification with certain tourism sites. Similarly, Phaedra Pezzulo argues that for better or for worse, tourism is a tremendously impactful cultural and political practice that warrants critical attention.\textsuperscript{28}

It is the fluidity of whiteness, the blank canvas of a sacred mountain wilderness devoid of any historical, ecological, or economic context, and the desire occupy a social location with the cultural capital that comes with Otherness that coalesce to cultivate a particular type of symbolic ethnicity and cultural projection in the sacred site of Grandfather Mountain. Richard Merelman defines cultural projection as a particular type of performative display that is “the conscious or unconscious effort by a social group and its allies to place new images of itself before other social groups, and before the general public.”\textsuperscript{29} He argues that racial identity is informed by


\textsuperscript{28} Phaedra C. Pezzulo, Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007).

cultural projection, and that dominant groups engage in cultural projection to create, maintain, and display positive self-images for themselves and for others.

Victoria Gallagher extends Merelman’s idea of imperialist nostalgia to examine “the specific means through which cultural projections come to influence specific audiences, as well as the culture at large” to construct social meanings related to racial identities.30 Gallagher’s rhetorical take on Merelman’s ideas involves examining the substances of the images themselves as well as the ways audiences use those images to make meaning. Here, I continue Gallagher’s rhetorical read of images as rhetorically powerful artifacts of cultural projection, racial identity, and the construction of place to examine how Grandfather Mountain is interpreted as sacred and how encounters with that sacredness are performed and displayed for a global audience via Instagram.

5.2: Method: Representation, Social Media, and The Anti-Grammar of Instagram

Central to these conceptions are issues of representation, and in the hyperconnected, mediated world in which we live a significant medium through which normative claims are made and popular narratives are formed and circulated is social media and advertising. Through a content analysis of magazine advertisements Derek Christopher Martin argues that outdoor enthusiasts are represented as “almost exclusively white.”31 He elucidates what he calls a “racialized outdoor leisure identity” by examining patterns of representation in outdoor leisure advertising and claims that a lack of representation results in fewer Black Americans participating in outdoor recreation. In his examination of representations of Native Americans, Phillip Deloria asks, “What are the histories of expectation that distinguish that which seems

right and natural from that which seems simply bizarre?” He argues representation in popular culture is a foundational element to the formation of these “histories of expectation.” One could easily ask the same question about the unexpectedness of seeing a person of color on a ski slope or backpacking at Grandfather. There is nothing unusual about that behavior other than the fact that it goes against expectations. Deloria unpacks the power of expectations, noting, “expectations and anomalies are mutually constitutive—they make each other. To assert that a person or an event is anomalous cannot help but serve to create and to reinforce other expectations.” And these expectations, as we’ve noted here, are not inconsequential. Hegemonic expectations of belonging or unbelonging or the seemingly naturalness or unnaturalness of a given body in a particular place are socially and rhetorically constructed, situated within dominant logics of power, and have material consequences. There are, however, always exceptions to these representations and expectations that challenge and surprise us, as Deloria makes clear. Dillette, Benjamin, and Carpenter show how Black Twitter users utilized the platform as a space to share their travel experiences and create important counternarratives of belonging that challenge hegemonic ideas about race, tourism, and leisure.

Sean Smith argues that Instagram specifically can be read as a form of travel literature and the dominant theme is colonial iconography. Smith argues, “In the mediatized field of tourism, Instagram acts both as an archive for discourse about a destination and as a vector through which experience can be performed.” Smith draws a direct connection between social

33. Deloria, Playing Indian, 5.
media, tourism and authenticity noting, “Never more so than in the social-media era, the changing nature of communication bears directly on tourism—an industry long marked by selling a commodified relation to the Other as an encounter with authenticity, or in the backpacker vernacular, with ‘experience’ that leads to the reification of self-identity.”37 He argues that tourists travel to pursue experiences they have seen on social media, perform actions at that destination that affirm a particular way of being in the space that aligns with what they have already seen, often on social media, and then add their images to the ever-growing body of “travel literature” dictating who belongs where and how one ought to behave when they arrive.

What Smith’s intervention makes clear is that one, social media has a significant influence on tourism and two, overall, the genre of images that constitute socially mediated travel literature reflects an ethos of colonial imperialism that mirrors that of the first European settlers on this “virgin land.” From the emphasis on the romantic picturesque and exotic to the erasure of the often-poor locals, travel iconography on social media reflects a vacant land available for the taking, much like colonial conception of the American continent.

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman argues that the television extends the “instancy and imagery” of the photograph and the telegraph. Postman claims photographs record experience differently than language, noting that language requires context, but “there is no such thing as a photo taken out of context, for a photograph does not require one. In fact, the point of photography is to isolate images from context, so as to make them visible in a different way.”38 I would extend Postman’s argument beyond television to include social media generally and Instagram in particular. Heikinheimo et al. examined data from Flickr, Instagram, and

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37. Smith, 174.
Twitter to investigate which platform is best for the study of nature recreation and place-based experiences, especially national parks. They found that overwhelmingly Instagram was the most popular platform for posts associated with national parks. They noted that almost half of Twitter users analyzed shared their geotagged national park post to Twitter via Instagram. Sean Smith argues, “Instagram is an intriguing case for scholars of tourism and mobility. The platform functions as a form of multimodal travel writing, where, in the radically participatory framework of social media, authors-cum-users enact the mediated travel performances they no longer read about in books but scroll through with their thumbs.” Understanding Instagram in this way situates social media as central to every step of the tourism experience, from the selection of destinations to the cultivation of expectations regarding locations, to the performative display of encounters and experiences on the trip. Importantly, the first-person nature of social media authorship coupled with photographs lend a particular ethos of authenticity to the normative claims implied or explicitly proclaimed in posts.

The design and interface of Instagram encourages the rapid consumption of images with little attention to language. Unlike X (the platform formerly known as Twitter), which is primarily text-based, or even Facebook, which situates text above photos, Instagram highlights images while marginalizing language. While images can be captioned and commented upon, the user must click “more” to expand captions beyond one line. Images dominate the interface, and the large photos with small text encourage passive image scrolling rather than reading. This marginalization of language is important, as images and text operate in different ways. Postman

notes “larger abstractions as truth, honor, love, falsehood cannot be talked about in the lexicon of pictures. For ‘showing of’ and ‘talking about’ are two very different kinds of processes.”

This ambiguity of images, their inability to grapple with abstractions, and the apparent objectivity of “seeing” makes the cultural projection of symbolic ethnicity and proximity to the sacred on Instagram especially pervasive and problematic because photos are apparent; they seem to speak for themselves, and what they communicate appears natural.

Postman goes on to note that language invites dispute and dialogue in a way that photographs do not. He writes, “It makes no sense to disagree with an unfaked photograph. The photograph itself makes no arguable propositions, makes no extended and unambiguous commentary. It offers no assertions to refute, so it is not refutable.” This does not mean photographs are beyond dispute but rather that they present as an objective and neutral representation of reality when in fact, as we will examine here, they function in profoundly rhetorical ways. Instagram, with its emphasis on photographs, videos, and hashtags, further extends these epistemological biases of fragmented, context-free, ambiguous, and unquestioned imagery. Importantly, images are not neutral, nor are acts of display or consumption. Looking at or posing for a photo intended to be gazed upon is not natural or neutral, rather it is social and situated. These photos were taken for public consumption and were intended to communicate and therefore are performative and rhetorical. Cara Finnegan notes, “Visuality frames our experience and acknowledges ‘that vision is a mode of cultural expression and human communication as fundamental and widespread as language.”

41. Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death, 72.
42. Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death, 72.
examined here, do more than simply showcase a beautiful landscape, they function rhetorically. These images constitute *who belongs* in the landscape and reinforce specific *ways of being* in the landscape. These types of public photographs function as rhetorical performances that constitute and circulate particular ways of seeing and being seen in a specific context or location.

As these images circulate on social media they contribute to a generative, normative cycle of collective representation. These images, which frame experiences on the mountain without context, for nothing exists outside of the frame, constitute who belongs on the mountain and how one interacts with the space. The cyclical nature of tourism images is reflected in the ways in which, increasingly, vacation planners take to social media as a source of place-specific information. Studies indicate that over half of respondents described Instagram as a source of travel inspiration. More than 20 percent of travelers report using social media as a source of information. Additionally, research shows that social media has a significant impact on tourists’ expectations of a destination. Hariman and Lucaites argue that photos offer a performance of social relationships and create a basis for comprehension and response, “precisely because the photo is operating as a mode of performance, its formal implication is that what is shown is repeated, and repeatable, behavior.” They go on to argue that visual practices in public media play a critical, pedagogical role in the constitution of public identity. Similarly,

44. Hannah Louise Parsons, “Does Social Media Influence an Individual’s Decision to Visit Tourist Destinations? Using a Case Study of Instagram” (PhD diss., Cardiff University, 2017).
E. Cram reminds us that photography is a rhetorical process and self-portraiture acts as a technology of embodiment: “the camera brings forth an image of a body located in a specific time and space and produces a subject to be encountered. Images of the face or full body are produced so that spectators encounter the image on the terms of the photographed.”

As we consider the rhetorical, pedagogical, normative nature of public visuality it is important to remember that in this case it is predominately white, middle- and upper-class subjects whose images are constructing the visual discourse surrounding Grandfather Mountain—a sacred indigenous site that now anchors a tourist economy dependent upon working-class locals. Smith argues the image-based nature of Instagram as travel literature has shielded it from the postcolonial critique of traditional text-based travel literature, noting how motifs of the exotic, the promontory gaze, and fantasized assimilation emerge as tropes in travel images and proximity to “Others” embodied in locals and the exoticized land imbue the experience with authenticity.

Hariman and Lucaites note the hegemonic function of photographs, “Once thought to be windows to the real, photographic images become the ideal medium for naturalizing a repressive structure of signs. And there is no doubt they can function that way, as both prized shots and millions of banal, anonymous images reproduce normative conceptions of gender, race, class, and other forms of social identity.”

Here, we will critically examine those banal, anonymous images that constitute and reify who has access to the sacred wilderness and what that access ought to look like.

49. Smith, “Instagram Abroad.”
My interest in the intersection of class, race, and wilderness began from anecdotal observations and interactions. However, to systemically analyze how class, race, and place cultivate a particular performance of sacredness at Grandfather Mountain, I examined Instagram location check-ins using the hashtags #grandfathermountain and #grandfathermountainstatepark from January 2018 until July 2023. The focus on visual imagery and the ability to use hashtags to classify photos and check in to specific locations makes Instagram the logical platform on which to study place, performative identity, and display. Notably, all the images examined for this chapter were made publicly visible by the user and were classified using a Grandfather Mountain hashtag. In other words, these images were intended to be seen and to be associated with this particular place. A recent search of #grandfathermountain tagged photos yielded 111,000 posts. Searching #grandfathermountainstatepark results in a similarly overwhelming number of posts to examine. I scrolled through posts and conducted a thematized content analysis from which three themes emerged. I determined a theme existed when I categorized 50 photos that fit within it. I have focused on images rather than their captions, partially for the sake of focus and brevity, but also because of the image-centric nature of Instagram. Additionally, while tourists captioned their photos in a variety of ways that could certainly be sorted into recurring themes, the images clearly articulate themes that are not necessarily reflected in the captions. As mentioned previously, text and images work differently, and in this chapter, I’ve focused on images. A follow up study might approach these posts using big data and a larger sample size or include an examination of captions alongside images, to closely account for the rhetorical differences in discourse and visuality. Increasingly, Instagram users are creating reels rather than photos. This change affords users with new ways to make use of the platform and represents yet another opportunity to extend this research.
In the next section, I will describe three major themes that emerge from the thousands of Instagram photo check-ins at Grandfather Mountain and discuss how these photos function rhetorically as a display of cultural projection and pedagogically as they normalize who belongs on the mountain and how one should behave in a sacred wilderness place.

5.3 Playing Pioneer and Indian in a Sacred Place

As one might expect, the vast majority of Instagram photos tagged #grandfathermountain or #grandfathermountainstatepark feature landscapes; however, three themes emerge from these landscape photos that articulate particular ways of being within that landscape. The first theme is pioneering conquest. Images like the ones below show tourists standing on dangerous ledges and atop high peaks in triumphant, traditionally masculine poses, demonstrating their ability to conquer the elements and the mountain.
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Certainly, many of the trails within the state park are strenuous and many of the peaks and ledges are quite dangerous and require a degree of bravery and skill to traverse; however, just as many of these images are taken a few feet away from a parking lot and gift shop and are accessible by car. This decontextualization is purposeful and meaningful, as it works rhetorically to mark the subject photographed as a brave adventurer and skilled outdoorsperson who is somehow closer to nature and capable of accessing the wilderness in ways that the average person cannot. These poses center the human body in ways that foreground its dominance over the elements. Positioned as the conqueror, these subjects appear strong, confident, exuberant, and triumphant.

The regional rhetoric of Southern Appalachian tourism constitutes visitors into the subject position of pioneer, and positions itself as the frontier, and the relationship between perceptions of wilderness and frontier mythology is significant. Images such as these work to


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reinforce the modern, western idea that nature is separate from and prior to humanity, and that colonial domination of nature separates the primordial/natural from the civilized/historical. In other words, it is the presence of these dominating, white, wealthy, conquering bodies that civilizes this space—not the presence of the indigenous bodies who occupied the land for centuries or the locals who occupy it now. The subjects of these photographs position themselves as more comfortable in the wild than the average person, adding that “bit of spice” hooks claims whiteness craves.

A second, equally pervasive theme is the eco-spiritual ethos reflected in the images below. Meditative or yoga poses, poached from eastern spiritual practices, show up consistently in the photos of white tourists at Grandfather Mountain. These photos represent the dual appropriation of white tourists imitating eastern spiritual practices on indigenous sacred land.

54. hooks, “Eating the Other.”
The physical positions of these white bodies situate the subjects of these photos as close to marginalized, brown bodies that are often perceived by whites as more spiritual, sensual, or authentic. Deloria writes of Europeans’ tendency to “play Indian” as a way to mark their own identity and encounter the authentic amidst the anxiety of urban industrial life, and images such as these are yet another iteration of this phenomenon. He argues this appropriation has occurred since the American Revolution when colonists dressed as Native Americans at the Boston Tea Party, and has continued in the form of scouting organizations, geometric patterns, and bold colors in fashion, sports iconography, counterculture aesthetics, and even Halloween costumes. These performances emerge from the tensions inherent in racial stereotypes such as the noble savage, and demonstrate the privilege of whiteness to traverse racial borders, distance itself from the position of oppressor, and choose which elements of the Other to consume. hooks describes this phenomenon in economic terms: “Currently, the commodification of difference promotes

paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other’s history through a process of decontextualization.”  

The Instagram photo, with its lack of context and minimalist language provides the perfect medium for such decontextualized displays. In these images we see white bodies posed in ways that distance them from white culture and more closely align them with “the exotic” Other.

Finally, the theme that is the most dominant is simply that of the landscape itself and travelers within it, like the photos here:

57. hooks, “Eating the Other,” 373.
While such photos might on the surface seem unremarkable, they are worth examining. These photos are symbolic of the reverence people hold for this particular landscape. Often, we do not photograph things that do not matter to us. The fact that thousands and thousands of people come to Grandfather Mountain and photograph trees, boulders, waterfalls, and ridgelines is a reflection of the way nature is nearly worshipped in this particular context. Additionally, the photos that feature travelers in these more neutral poses reflect a desire to demonstrate proximity to the beauty and wilderness of Grandfather Mountain. They communicate, “I was here,” which only matters when “here” is somewhere significant.

All three themes reflect the sacredness of Grandfather Mountain, and that sense of sacredness clearly shapes behavior and display on the mountain. The domination of white bodies permeates all three categories of photos, but of course there are always exceptions like these images, which feature brown bodies:
Ultimately, a few things become clear from an analysis of these images. First, Grandfather Mountain is revered. It is viewed as a place worth photographing, a place where people gather, a place that proximity is a sign of privilege and worth documenting and displaying. Two, in implicit ways Grandfather Mountain, like other outdoor wilderness places, is a racialized place. This racialization is problematic on a number of levels, but they are especially
troubling when understood within the context of sacred wilderness places like Grandfather Mountain functioning rhetorically as a symbol for American identity.

5.4 Conclusion

Importantly, these images were not just taken but taken to be displayed. The desire to showcase these cultural performances demonstrates hooks’ claim that often whiteness operates from a position of both privilege and lack of discernable identity and seeks to dissociate from certain parts of itself by publicly positioning itself as Other, or as Amanda Edgar describes it, “passing is an attempt to perform another group’s authenticity.” It is no surprise that these mostly wealthy, white ecotourists traveling to “peer over the edge” into the wilderness would be concerned with authenticity. Hariman and Lucaites note, “A relationship that is hard to imagine is in need of images.” The ubiquity of images like the ones described here demonstrates the insecurity about authenticity of white tourists desiring to distance themselves from certain elements of their racial identity and connect, even momentarily, with the natural world from which capitalism and colonialism have distanced them.

The pervasiveness, invisibility, and fluidity of whiteness allow these images to circulate as normative; however, when viewed critically as part of a larger pattern that exists with important historical and cultural contexts, it becomes clear that they serve white hegemony by positioning its subjects as aligned with sacred American values such as wilderness and by alleviating white guilt, angst, and alienation through appropriation, symbolic ethnicity, and cultural projection.

59. West and Carrier, “Ecotourism & Authenticity.”
60. Hariman and Lucaites, “Public Identity,” 58.
The stories we tell ourselves and one another about who we are and where we belong are central elements of our racial socialization. These stories are taught, learned, and contested as dominate narratives make normative claims of authenticity, identity, spatiality, power, and sacredness. It is important to remember, however, that these stories are social constructions that can and should be critically examined and challenged. Social media represents a significant democratizing force in shaping cultural narratives, especially about travel and leisure as travelers are increasingly seeking information on social media platforms more than traditional forms of travel literature and promotional materials. Uncertainty and anxiety about the meaning of American white identity are nothing new and are reflected in American history, literature, and in everyday social interactions in a variety of settings, especially it seems, within the context of sacred wilderness. The whitewashing of wilderness as a sign of domination is a disservice to everyone as it maintains a hierarchy of belonging and access to natural lands, and, by extension, the fullness of American identity and experience. Patterns of representation in social mediated travel literature make normative claims of who has access to sacredness that are increasingly and importantly being challenged with important counternarratives that nuance and complicate expectations of who “naturally” belongs in the wilderness.
Bibliography


Chapter 6: Conclusion

Gordon Lynch calls for a rhetorical approach to the study of sacred places.\(^1\) This study answers that call, with a focus on the intersection of wilderness, cultural politics, and American identity. Gregory Clark makes a compelling case for the rhetorical power of American tourism, specifically the symbolic experiences tourists share in American landscapes. Clark interprets Burke’s argument in *A Rhetoric of Motives* as opening the scope of rhetoric to include “the full range of symbols that constitute a person’s social and cultural experience,”\(^2\) and importantly for Clark, this includes for Americans’ encounters with national parks, state parks, and other interpretative natural sites. This definition of rhetoric accounts for the less overtly persuasive and argumentative ways in which place, space, and experience cultivate a sense of identification, for the ways in which individuals negotiate their personal and collective identities through rhetorical encounters with place, and for the ways groups imbue places or experiences with meaning.

Lynch writes that “people learn to think or feel about sacred objects in the right kind of way.”\(^3\) He later goes on to ask directly: “What are the moral implications of the presence or absence of specific sacred forms in this concrete situation?”\(^4\) Here, I’ve explored both of these questions by examining how that “learning to think or feel” about sacred places happens rhetorically and what the moral implications of that are in the specific context of Grandfather Mountain, an outdoor wilderness spaces that has been, for generations, considered sacred. This study has examined the various ways rhetoric works to transform American wilderness spaces into highly symbolic sacred places and the consequences of places being understood as sacred. Through that

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examination, I offer insight into rhetorical understandings of sacred places, how notions of sacredness inform and shape arguments, how a sense of sacredness influences the politics of performance and display and the symbiotic relationship between a sacred place and its surrounding region. This study contributes to the growing body of critical regionalist rhetorical scholarship on the Appalachian region, and, finally, this work demonstrates the continual expansion of the scope of rhetorical criticism and rhetorical methods.

6.1 A Rhetorical Understanding of Sacred Places

Generally, sacred places fall into three categories: religious, commemorative, and natural. As Chidester and Linenthal argue, these sacred places are subject to interpretation, ritualization, contestation, and commodification. In these pages, I’ve offered a rhetorical take on this framing of sacred natural places, demonstrating how rhetoric works to constitute a place as sacred through interpretation, ritualization, contestation, and commodification. To summarize, we might begin by examining the act of interpretation, which relies on narratives that make implicit, and sometimes explicit, value claims. In this case, Grandfather Mountain is first understood within the larger mythos of wilderness spaces, which are central to American identity and notions of sacred American values such as freedom and independence. As Chapter 4 elucidates, that theme is further cemented by the interpretation of the mountain offered at the Conservation Campus and through the Grandfather Mountain Museum experience, which flattens time, erases human interference with and development on the mountain, and constitutes visitors into subject positions that frame the experience as a pure encounter with an untouched wilderness that absolves them of any potential guilt they might have associated with their own ecotourism footprint. This interpretation of the mountain/tourist relationship cultivates the patterned,

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ritualized behaviors examined in Chapter 5, as visitors come to expect, seek out, perform, and display spiritually charged transcendent experiences with a virgin wilderness, available for their consumption and domination. The act of visiting Grandfather Mountain is itself a sort of pilgrimage for outdoors enthusiasts and casual tourists alike, and the experiential, affective encounters visitors to the mountain enjoy both reflect and constitute its sacredness.

Grandfather Mountain, like other sacred sites, has a long and storied history of contestation over its ownership and stewardship. While Chapter 3 of this study focuses on a particular boiling point of contestation, we might more broadly consider how once a place is understood as sacred, issues of access, ownership, stewardship, decorum, and expectations emerge and often embroil communities in passionate debates and controversies that have material, political consequences. Finally, Brown, Phillips, and Maheshwari make clear that sacred places cannot escape capitalism. One defining characteristic of a sacred place is the way in which it becomes commodified through the purchase of access, proximity, experience, and artifacts. On the surface, this might seem like a blurring of the sacred and the profane; however, in our capitalist paradigm, the act of consumption is perhaps as sacred an act as any. Commodification of the sacred place and associated experiences lead to an increase in its desirability and cultural capital. Proximity to the sacred, then becomes an act of performative display. In this case, that display contains themes of authenticity, class, and race.

Answering Gordon Lynch’s call to situate the study of the sacred in specific historical and social contexts, this study applies these concepts of interpretation, ritualization, contestation,
and commodification to Grandfather Mountain. By doing so, themes emerge that offer insight into the ways rhetoric constitutes a wilderness or natural place as sacred:

1. **Sacred places are understood in terms of their difference.** Grandfather Mountain is interpreted as categorically different and set apart from surrounding mountains. We routinely see it described in terms of awe and the sublime. Grandfather Mountain is personified, praised, and routinely classified as distinct. This emphasis on difference commands attention and situates the place as an object of desire, thus commodifying it and contributing to patterned, ritualized performances within it.

2. **Related, sacred places are considered rare, precious, irreplaceable, and worthy of special protections.** Grandfather Mountain has been, for nearly a century, positioned as threatened. Arguments anchored in its precariousness and the irreparability of damage (or potential damage) have been a defining characteristic of the rhetoric surrounding the mountain since the first Europeans encountered it.

3. **Sacred places align with the values of the social group for whom the place is sacred.** Grandfather Mountain has been symbolically associated with “Americanness” in often unsettling ways with implicit and, at times, explicit links to neoliberalism, capitalism, individualism, wilderness, whiteness, and colonialism. These associations result in the place being viewed as a conduit for American authenticity.

4. **Sacred wilderness places are often interpreted and interacted with in ways that obscure human culture altogether.** Gordon Lynch notes that the sacred is often experienced as non-contingent or standing “removed from the unfolding drama of life.”

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and development. There are important rhetorical consequences to privileging space over
time and nature over culture, as doing so depoliticizes the place and the processes that
contribute to our current understanding and interpretation of the place, thus derailing
critical engagement with it.

6.2 The Rhetorical Power of Sacredness: Sacred Places in Contention and Debate

Chapter 3 speaks to the ways the sacredness of a place leads to inevitable contestation
over ownership, access, and stewardship of it. Durkheim makes the case that common to all
understandings of sacredness is the sense that sacred objects and sites are categorically set apart
from the rest of social life and that protecting the sacred is an unquestionable moral
responsibility.9 Our understandings of sacredness exert a powerful claim over conduct, and any
perception of a breach of appropriate conduct elicits powerful responses. While the sacred might
on the surface feel permanent and stable, the truth is that sacred realities are continually being
shaped by personal, historical, social, and political contexts. It is through contention that the idea
of the sacred evolves and is refined over time. As Lynch notes, “The sacred is constantly
produced through social action and imagination, and as such constantly subject to acts of
reproduction, evolution, and challenge.”10 Attending to the ways contention bubbles up on
matters related to the sacred presents an opportunity to witness and critically engage with that
evolution.

A close reading of the discourse of such controversies provides valuable insight into the
rhetorical force of sacred places. Three especially relevant themes emerge:

1. Sacred sites, particularly sacred natural sites, are illogically accepted as sacred, and such acceptance is reasonable despite its irrationality. In the case of Grandfather Mountain, its sacredness is never justified or explained but instead is offered as a priori, and it is from this common assumption that different responses and positions emerge.

2. Sacred sites are rhetorically constructed as being under threat and worthy of protection. Notions of a sacred place’s fragility and impermanence cultivate a sense of urgency and passion that fuel debates surrounding them.

3. Rationality, as defined by Perelman,\(^{11}\) is not a useful metric for assessing the feasibility or effectiveness of arguments over sacred places. Instead, the reasonable, with its tolerance for ambiguity, incongruence, and the overall messiness of human experience is a much more suitable paradigm through which one might formulate effective arguments surrounding the sacred.

This close reading of controversy surrounding the mountain also foregrounds the value of stasis theory as a mode of reading debates. By identifying points of agreement, we can focus our attention on where positions diverge. In this case, we see absolutely no debate over the sacredness of Grandfather Mountain or its need for protection from outside threat. The controversy was anchored in questions of policy regarding how best to respond to the threat. The seemingly incongruent, paradoxical, and at times outright hypocritical position of Hugh Morton was effective not because it was rational but because, to the people of Southern Appalachia, it was reasonable. His argument offered a policy to protect the mountain that was anchored in

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logics that resonated deeply with the lived experience of members of his primary audience:
Southern Appalachians. The success of Morton’s irrational argument reminds us of the centrality of “local knowledges” in forming rhetorical appeals about place.\(^\text{12}\)

### 6.3 Performing Sacredness

Durkheim’s sociological definition of sacredness points toward ways of perceiving the sacred as it gets acted out in our contemporary world.\(^\text{13}\) Specifically, Lynch argues sacred symbols, which are materially expressed in concrete ways, are bound up with emotions and categories of human action.\(^\text{14}\) Fundamentally, what he is arguing here is that interaction with a sacred place requires feeling the right kinds of feelings, expressing them in the right ways, and performing structured activities in predictable forms. In short: ritual. Central to the thinking of Durkheim, it is through acting out of sacred rituals that a sense of community and identity are formed. Lynch writes:

> We can confidently assert that society without the sacred is impossible. Understanding oneself to be a member of society is not simply a matter of identifying with a particular geographical location, or history, or set of networks. It is also a matter of moral imagination. Society is not simply the sum of who lives in a particular location. It is an imagined community, constituted on the basis of moral boundaries that indicate who can and cannot be counted as properly human.\(^\text{15}\)

The profound power of a socially constructed and socially bound understanding of the sacred foregrounds all the more the importance of examining issues of access, performance, and display in sacred places. The ways in which sacred rituals are intertwined with notions of belonging or unbelonging are explicitly clear in some

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contexts, for example, a non-Catholic may not receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion from a Catholic church. It is clear based on participation in a sacred ritual, who is part of the group and who is not, and the rules are explicit. The same concept applies in more subtle, and arguably more powerful ways as certain bodies are implied to belong or not-belong in rituals that affirm Americanness and authenticity in sacred wilderness places. Simply put: participation in ritualistic behavior in sacred places constitutes and reifies its sacredness and functions as a marker of inclusion or exclusion for the social group for whom the site is sacred.

Chapter 5 of this study examines the economic and racial politics of the ritualized performances and displays of tourists at Grandfather Mountain. Taken within Durkheim’s sociological understanding of sacredness, the saturation of white bodies performing various displays of “American authenticity” in wilderness spaces is significant, given the long history of wilderness being symbolically associated with American identity. In fact, it is this close alignment of wilderness with American identity and values that contributes to the interpretation of wilderness as sacred. The whitewashed and class-dependent display of national identity through the lens of pilgrimages and performances at sacred wilderness places like Grandfather Mountain contributes to hegemonic understandings of citizenship and makes implied claims about whose histories, memories, experiences, and knowledges are relevant and valuable. A critical examination of such pilgrimages and performances foregrounds the fact that even in our most affectively

powerful moments of sacred transcendence, we are still conflicted moral agents caught in complicated social webs of injustice and inequality.

6.4 Sacred Places in Region

The idea of Grandfather Mountain as sacred cannot be extracted from ideas about the greater Appalachian region. The two are mutually constitutive and reify one another. As discussed in Chapter 2, the Appalachian region has become representative of the mythos of the American West and all that it represents in the collective American psyche. That certainly has a profound influence on interpretations and expectations of Grandfather Mountain. Similarly, ideas about the sacredness of Grandfather Mountain are extended to the surrounding region. The sacredness of the mountain is inextricably tied to mythic imaginings about the primitive, pristine, authentic America that is accessible in the Appalachian region.

The sacredness of Grandfather Mountain and its desirability make it the anchor of a deeply entrenched tourism economy and all the complications associated with it. The ecotourism that provides jobs for residents has protected ridgelines from development and halted excessive extractive and ecologically destructive industries such as timber and coal mining has also led to low-paying and exploitative jobs, overextended infrastructure, housing crises, and environmental damage to the natural sites tourists are so eager to see. Historian Juan Antonio Blacno puts it this way, “Tourism is a sort of chemotherapy—you have cancer and it’s the only possible cure, but it might kill you before the cancer does.” This is an apt metaphor for the state of the high country in general, and Grandfather Mountain in particular. To eliminate tourism would be to take what

little employment opportunity is left from the people who call the region home. To eliminate tourism would cripple the pipeline of appreciation and awe visits to the mountain inspire. At the same time, the steady stream of tourists represents death by a thousand cuts to the delicate ecology that draws them to the region and maintains an oppressive economic structure for locals. Equally pertinent are the ways in which ideas about the primitivism of Appalachia fuel tourism, set tourists’ expectations, and capitalize on stereotypes of Appalachian people and culture.

6.5 Critical Regionalism & An Understanding of Sacred Places

Sacred places are often steeped in myth and nostalgia. If one aim of critical regionalism is to disrupt nostalgia to expose power relationships, then understanding myth, which often functions as a basis for nostalgia, is central to critical regionalist scholarship. Barthes describes myth as a “mode of signification.”19 This semiotic definition of myth is concerned with the relationship between a signifier and the signified, and thus any work that demystifies, complicates, and deconstructs the relationship between a place and popular or nostalgic conceptions of it must deal with myth. In the case of Grandfather Mountain, the mythos of the American West and all the tropes and values associated with it are closely tied to the entire Appalachian region and the mountain in particular. These mythic associations, rhetorically cultivated and reified in the ways described in this study, contribute to its interpretation as a sacred place. Barthes argues that myth works to suspend complex, everyday truth and instead offers truncated iconographies that come to signify essential ideas about a given region, oversimplifying, decontextualizing, and depoliticizing the associated systems, structures, and power dynamics. Using myth in the service of critical regionalism attends to the seemingly natural givens of a region or a place, foregrounds

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the sociological nature of sacred places, and draws critical attention to their political force for the entire region surrounding the sacred site.

Critical regionalist research aims “to open the intellectual project to local participation and specifically to be instructed by the voices and experiences of those normally excluded from powerful strands of public discourse.” 20 Quite simply, one primary way to understand a region is to spend time in it, with the people who know it best. Central to critical regionalism is respect for local, vernacular knowledge and a focus on material outcomes that improve the lives of local people. Critical regionalist scholars are deeply invested in place, locality, and a sense of solidarity with the communities in which they live and work. Regionalist scholarship is never neutral and is itself a political act. Powell argues, “Writing about a region creates and sustains a definition of that region and, in so doing, deliberately defines the region to create new, potentially revelatory perspectives. It is about being aware of the fact that one’s own work participates in that broader constellation of discourse about the region.” 21 This study of Grandfather Mountain contributes to the ever-evolving rhetorical construction of it and serves as a political act of cultural production that generates another fragment of the rhetorical pastiche that creates Grandfather Mountain and the communities surrounding it.

6.6 Expanding the Scope of Rhetorical Criticism

This study has examined Grandfather Mountain’s sacredness using a variety of rhetorical lenses—close reading, rhetorical field methods, content analysis, and even autoethnography. As Burke notes, different lenses generate different ways of seeing, different schematic frameworks,

different observations, and ultimately different conclusions. This study illustrates the great promise of rhetorical scholarship, which lies in its creativity, its flexibility, and its refusal to remain bound in a singular methodological or theoretical paradigm. What this study demonstrates is that rhetoric is not just written or spoken words, but rather it is the entirety of the lived experience. Understanding rhetoric as all modes of influence, symbol-use, and meaning-making, coupled with an understanding of place as a discursive construct composed of literary, oratory, visual, olfactory, sonic, and other signifiers create a foundation for the study of place that deploys a variety of methodological approaches and offers a kaleidoscope-like view of how a place functions. The marriage of ethnographic and autoethnographic sensibilities with rhetorical criticism demonstrated here provides a fruitful avenue through which we might come to understand how people give meaning to, develop attachments to, and interact with place.

6.7 Implications and Opportunities for Further Research

We can consider the notion of sacredness as primarily a form of communication, as it is only through making common, the most elemental definition of the term communication, that sacredness becomes a shared reality and a point of commitment for individuals and groups. The sacred is made up of communicative acts—symbolic associations, interpretations, and reinterpretations, moments of contestation and debate, affective experiences, linguistic maneuvers, and ritualized displays that ultimately result in material, political, and cultural consequences. Importantly, none of these symbolic associations and commitments remain abstract. Instead, they exert powerful moral claims in our lives. Durkheim argued that it was through sacred symbols, passions, and rituals that one might best come to understand how societies work, and, importantly, there is no inevitability as to what comes to be regarded as

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sacred within a given group. He argues that it is not economic or political structures, technological innovations, or demographic shifts that are most influential to a society, but rather the sacred symbolic associations that best account for a group’s values, motives, and priorities. In short, what objects or places are deemed sacred and how people experience and behave in relation to them is not at all preordained or rational but is a central part of understanding a society. In the United States, few things are as symbolically charged as notions of wilderness, making the critical examination of sacred wilderness places a valuable line of academic inquiry.

Lynch argues that sacredness provides groups with “a common reference point against which events are interpreted and public action has to be justified.” Coming to see how sacred commitments are formed and enacted in the context of natural spaces is then useful for environmental activism. Advocates could benefit from a nuanced appreciation of how notions of sacred place shape logics, commitments, values, beliefs, and decision-making. Formulating environmental arguments and policies with such understandings opens the door for new alliances, new types of arguments, and more effective dialogue and debate.

Additionally, Lynch points out that it is not uncommon to fail to understand the harmful impacts of our sacred commitments. He argues we must maintain “A double consciousness of retaining a commitment to the moral and meaningful life to which sacred forms point, while at the same time understanding that sacred forms always create a moral shadow.” In the case of Grandfather Mountain, and perhaps other sacred sites of American wilderness, that moral shadow takes at least two forms. One, the tensions and paradoxes inherent in ecotourism and outdoor recreation. The commitment and desire of outdoor enthusiasts to see and experience

sacred wilderness places threatens and damages those places. With every awe-inspiring pilgrimage to Grandfather Mountain comes emissions, trash, and slow destruction, thanks to the increased human imprint on the site. Second, the alignment of wilderness places with American identity is a primary way such sites are interpreted as sacred; however, the whitewashing and class-based nature of outdoor recreation and outdoor culture reflects the racist and capitalist violence inherent in American society. This foregrounds the critical value of expanding access to sacred wilderness places, attending closely to representations of such places in popular culture, and critically examining the themes of inclusion or exclusion present in narratives surrounding sacred places.

This inquiry originated from my conflicted feelings, observations, and experiences as an outdoors enthusiast and critical scholar. It seemed everywhere I looked, I noticed troubling tensions surrounding issues of environmental protection, race, and class in wilderness spaces and among other outdoorspeople. Lynch describes it in the following passage:

Most live with the complexity of the gravitational pull of multiple sacred forms on their lives, sometimes noticing the emotional and moral inconsistencies this generates, and sometimes not. For the majority, the default is to live life in the realm of mundane responsibilities, activities, pleasures and concerns, into which sacred meanings erupt only at specific moments of collective moral experience. There is no single way of being in the modern world, merely different ways of charting one’s life across the complex moral terrain cast by the fragmentation of the sacred.26

Recognizing that “complex moral terrain” requires one to disrupt the moral certainty of our sacred commitments and be open to the messiness, unpredictability, and situatedness of experience. We must remain skeptical of any notion of a coherent moral self and continually evaluate our sacred commitments and the implications—both positive and negative—of them.

Bibliography


