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PLANNING FOR PEOPLE IN COMMUNITIES AND OUTDOOR RECREATION  
PLACES: FOSTERING COMMUNITY COHESION, SHAPING PLACE  
MEANINGS, AND EXPLORING IMAGINARIES

A Dissertation Presented

by

Yumiko Lea Jakobcic

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Specializing in Natural Resources

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines people's relationships to place and community. The papers are linked by three broad themes: 1) place meanings, 2) community connections to resource places, and 3) innovative qualitative research methodologies.

The first paper used ethnographic methods in a case study of Vermont's Winooski Valley Park District to examine how regional park districts can strengthen community relationships. It explored how the district serves visitors and communities, stimulates community interactions and cohesion, and perceives the outcomes of these efforts. Results showed that regional park districts connect people with nature and with others across neighborhoods, communities, and regions. These unique places require partnership and programming to link citizens, formalize commitments to diversity, and provide opportunities to develop social relationships.

The second study used rhetorical discourse analysis to examine narratives associated with forest-based settings. Research about place meanings in outdoor settings often focuses on the positive attachments individuals have with places, but the role of rhetorical discourse in constructing meanings about place and self is often overlooked. This study examined the modes of argumentation used by narrators to organize stories, and analyzed narrators' explicit and implicit claims and rhetorical styles in shaping place meanings. The findings reveal that place meanings intersect across personal, social and cultural contexts, with rhetoric associated with place ownership, unusual events, and memory as key elements of place meanings.

The third paper is a case study of Burke, Vermont, examining how interviewees use imaginaries to think about communities and to reinforce meanings about place and people. This study explored how community leaders, permanent residents, and second homeowners discursively (and differentially) imagined Burke and explained its changes over time. Results show that the three groups of interviewees approached the topic in quite different ways. Community leaders discussed imaginaries within discourses of growth, local residents discussed imaginaries within discourses of history, and second homeowners discussed imaginaries within discourses of utopia. This research expands traditional approaches to understanding rural community change effects, and considers the role and functions of imaginaries in addressing social change and community planning processes in transitioning communities.

These studies are relevant to environmental professionals and community planners by showing that planning and management of place is not only about organizing physical spaces – but rather about the careful attention given to understanding people, their relationships, and their ideas about place. These studies also inform theory about the social construction of place meanings associated with parks, communities and places generally.

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# CHAPTER 1: COMPREHENSIVE LITERATURE REVIEW

## 1.1. Introduction

In the United Nation's recent report by the Secretary General António Guterres, he noted, "We are in a climate crisis. Science is telling us that climate change is happening now, and faster than we had predicted" (United Nations 2019). The current news reports are full of stories about wildfires, drought, flooding, and other natural disasters. During this unprecedented time, fostering relationships between people and nature is critical. As a parent, I feel a sense of urgency and commitment to the sustainability and restoration of our planet for future generations. As a scholar, I feel driven to understand and document ways people engage with nature, place, and with their communities. I seek to understand how we can strengthen these relationships. Thus, this dissertation is about people's relationships to place (both natural and built) and to community. The papers submitted for this dissertation are linked by three overall themes: 1) place meanings, 2) community connections to resource places, and 3) innovative qualitative research methodologies.

The first study (Chapter 2) sought to understand how regional park districts contribute to strengthening community relationships, using a case study of Vermont's Winooski Valley Park District (WVPD). Using autoethnographic methods, we explored how the WVPD serves visitors and adjacent communities, its efforts to stimulate community interactions and cohesion, and a manager's perceptions of the outcomes of these efforts. The data analysis examined how social and cultural values emerged in managerial practices, and looked for evidence of how these strengthened community

relationships. Five themes were identified: connecting across people and place; collaborations creating community; fostering cross-cultural relationships; socializing youth; and sustaining community. The data showed that regional park districts connect people with nature while also connecting people across neighborhoods, communities, and regions. While some relationships developed organically, managers also used on-site programming to intentionally engage community members. The unique characteristics of regional park districts suggest a need for increased levels of partnership and educational programming to link citizens, formalize commitments to diversity, and provide opportunities to establish social relationships.

The second study (Chapter 3) uses rhetorical discourse analysis to examine a set of narratives associated with forest-based settings. Research about place meanings in outdoor settings often focuses on the positive attachments individuals have with places, and on how places foster personal identity development. Within this work, analyzing place meanings through narrative is common. Overlooked, though, is that narratives *do* more than simply assert identity: they also rhetorically construct meaning. Together, two researchers topically organized stories using classical methods described by Rodden (2008), first examining the modes of argumentation (logos, ethos, pathos) used by narrators. They then focused on formal rhetorical practices (Arnold 1974) supporting place meaning development, analyzing narrators' explicit and implicit claims and supporting evidence. Next, viewing these "small stories" in a contemporary manner as products of interview-based interactions between people who knew, or knew of, one another (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012), researchers sought to interpret the non-formal claims, tone and linguistic devices that contributed to shaping place meanings.

Rhetorical qualities of the narratives were compared across speakers and types of narrative action to reflexively check our own claims about place meanings. Results of this study show that narrators use various persuasion strategies and styles to infuse places with personal and social meanings, make claims about important (often unusual) aspects of place, identify cultural symbols important to place meaning, and contextualize memories of place. The findings reveal that place meanings intersect across personal, social and cultural contexts. Studying the rhetorical discourses of place narratives can provide more nuanced understanding of social processes related to creating place meanings in outdoor recreation and resource-based contexts.

The third study (Chapter 4) is a case study of Burke, Vermont, examining how people use *imaginaries* (Salazar and Graburn 2014) to think about communities and to reinforce meanings about place and people. This study explored how community leaders, permanent residents, and second homeowners discursively (and differentially) imagined Burke and explained its changes over time. Imaginaries can be seen as rhetorical discursive devices used by groups of people to legitimize what Cohen (1985) called “the symbolic construction of community.” The analysis in Burke showed that the three groups of interviewees approached the topic in quite different ways. Community leaders discussed imaginaries within discourses of growth, local residents discussed imaginaries within discourses of history, and second homeowners discussed imaginaries within discourses of utopia. This research expands traditional approaches to understanding rural community change effects, and considers the role and functions of imaginaries in addressing social change and community planning processes in transitioning communities.

This comprehensive literature review offers context for the three studies. The organization reflects the three themes identified above: place meanings, community connections and resource places, and innovative qualitative research.

## **1.2. Literature Review**

### **1.2.1. Meanings of Place**

This dissertation examined several aspects of place including place meaning, sense of place, place attachment, and how people talk about and imagine place. Kolan and Poleman (2009) argue that having an in-depth understanding of our place is fundamental to our ability to live thoughtfully and sustainably. They use the term *place* to mean “the geographic context in which nature and culture intertwine and unfold” (Kolan and Poleman 2009, 32).

The research for this dissertation showed that people spoke about – and imagined – place in the stories they told. They often talked about place while adding elements of personal and social meaning, and they contextualized place by sharing memories and stories about unusual things that happened in that place. People *speak* a place into reality, investing it with meaning, which is applicable to all the studies in this dissertation, in slightly different forms.

The first study (Chapter 2) discusses ways to manage parks and visitor experiences. In this application, language about place can be used by managers to encourage certain visitor behaviors. In the second study (Chapter 3), language at the narrative level is examined to provide a deeper understanding of social processes related to creating place meanings. In the third study (Chapter 4), the theory of social

imaginaries is applied to examine how people imagine and speak publicly about rural community development and social change over time.

#### 1.2.1.1. Place Meaning

In Paper 2 (Chapter 3), we examine how narrators rhetorically construct meaning while talking about school forests, and in Paper 3 (Chapter 4), we examine how community members imagine a place over time. In both cases, the construction of meanings about place are inspired by personal experiences of a physical place. Place meaning can be described as beliefs about a place that reflect the value and significance of a setting to an individual (Stedman 2002). Place meanings can develop from a variety of positive and negative emotions and experiences (Manzo 2005). These definitions suggest that cognitive and affective aspects are important in evaluating place meanings. Further, place meanings are the foundation for attachments. For example, Wynveen et al. (2012, 296) examined the relationship between place meaning and place attachment and found that the “strength of importance of the meaning... and the combination of different meaning types contributes to different intensities of place attachment among recreational visitors.”

#### 1.2.1.2. Place Attachment

As with place meanings generally, place attachment has been defined as an emotional, cognitive, and functional bond with a place (Jorgensen and Stedman 2001). Altman and Low (1992, 4) describe place attachment with the following assumptions: “(1) place attachment is an integrating concept comprising interrelated and inseparable aspects; (2) the origins of place attachments are varied and complex; (3) place attachment contributes to individual, group, and cultural self-definition and integrity.”

Morse and Mudgett (2018) studied place attachment in Vermont and found that people who were content to stay in Vermont, rather than out-migrate to other regions of the country, were driven by a fondness for rural place-based attributes and family ties. In another study by Morse et al. (2014), interview respondents ranked their attachment to the state of Vermont higher than to their own properties. The researchers found that the interviewees considered visual quality to be the most important cultural attribute (above recreation, historical legacy, and spirituality). Nearly 60% of interviewees managed their own land for aesthetic qualities. The findings of this study suggest that “discourses manifested through landscape may be long-lived, outlasting the original activities that produced them” (233) and suggest there may be a gap between the making of place and the imagining of ideal spaces.

#### 1.2.1.3. Sense of Place

There are many definitions and interpretations for sense of place, but Jorgensen and Stedman (2001) define it as “a multidimensional construct comprising: (1) beliefs about the relationship between self and place; (2) feelings toward the place; and (3) the behavioral exclusivity of the place in relation to alternatives.” Adopting a social constructionist approach, Stokowski (2008: 44) describes sense of place as an emergent social phenomenon, in which: “Ultimately, space becomes place when it is identified, named, and talked about, shaped by human experience (individual, social, cultural), and expressed across communities of interacting, interlinked people.”

The way that people talk about place – and their ownership of place – can reveal a lot about their place meaning, sense of place, and place attachments. Narratives

about place are particular useful tools to examine people's relationship with place. De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2015, 22) suggest that,

Narrative can be, and often is, a *method*, a mode of inquiry into the human realm. In addition, the idea of narrative can be employed in the context of *theory* about some aspect of the human condition, for instance cognition or personal identity. Finally, it can be considered in the context of *practice*, that is, the various human "doings" that are part of everyday life. In view of this threefold utility and value, one might ask, how could the idea of narrative *not* be at the very center of the social and human sciences?

Narratives can be viewed as a particular form of discourse. Johnstone and Eisenhart (2008, xvii) describe discourse analysis as the process by which someone may

... explore what can be learned about language and about speakers by studying language in use ... they examine written texts or transcripts of spoken or manually signed discourse rather than relying on their own intuitions about grammatical possibilities. They are interested in the structure and function of pieces of talk or text that are larger than a single sentence, and how the structure of sentences is influenced by how they function in the linguistic and social contexts in which they are deployed.

Notably, in much of the research about place, place is conceived as geographic locale, to which individuals feel some affinity. Conceptual approaches that address the language-based and discursive qualities of place meanings offer a perspective for understanding the emergent, contingent qualities of our experiences in place, the ways in which we people make sense of place, and the changeable nature of places over time.

### **1.2.2. Community Connections and Resource Places**

Communities' members are not only connected by geography, they are connected by relationships related to the places that they value. Special places are important because, as the literature shows, people connect to them and typically want to work to manage and protect them. This happens at all different scales, from local to regional to international. The research for this dissertation showed there are many

linkages across all these levels and they invoke particular issues in community management of resource places. Some of these issues have to do with multi-scalar coordination, diversity, and rural community development.

#### 1.2.2.1. Multi-scalar Coordination

In this dissertation, numerous communities and institutions contribute to the protection of resource places. In the first study (Chapter 2), the Winooski Valley Park District (WVPD) works with its member municipalities (Burlington, Colchester, Essex, Jericho, South Burlington, Williston, and Winooski) to manage and protect its natural areas, and to inspire a land ethic in its visitors. The WVPD has to be mindful of expectations from city and town administrators, scientists, and community members.

In the second study (Chapter 3), the University of Vermont works with faculty, staff, students, alumni, and local community members to responsibly manage forest resources while also fostering a new generation of natural resource professionals. Similar to the WVPD, these parties sometimes have conflicting interests. One example in the interviews highlighted the difference in expectations between preservation of the forest and utilizing “what the forest will yield” – but what the forest “yields,” of course, is not only natural resources, but also opportunities for student learning and growth. In the third study (Chapter 4), the community leaders of Burke must consider the hopes and fears of various community members as the community changes over time. Local leaders must balance the desire to prevent development from affecting the character of the town with the desire to foster enough development to provide employment opportunities to residents and to draw in tourists.

One source of tension in multi-scalar coordination occurs in finding the balance between transboundary (top-down) and community based (bottom-up) management. Government officials and scientists may dismiss citizens' environmental knowledge because they view it as poorly informed or anecdotal. Local knowledge has even been referred to as "barstool ecology" (Robbins 2004). One can study the role of human actors to help resolve these tensions. Anthropologists believe it is imperative to promote community participation in conservation (Brosius and Russell 2003). Proponents of community-based management argue that increased local-level involvement leads to more equitable and effective management of natural resources (Abbot et al. 2007). Furthermore, Mary Douglas' examination of how institutions think suggests that incentives are not necessary at small scales because it is rational to cooperate voluntarily for the benefit of the collective good; however, this concept can be lost at larger scales (Douglas 1986).

Without adequate community participation and input, it can be difficult to establish the necessary understanding and motivation for environmental protection (Stern et al. 2003). Some researchers believe that the success of transboundary management directly corresponds with the extent to which stakeholders can establish and sustain effective partnerships. Abbot et al. (2007) introduced the idea of a hybrid combination of transboundary and community-based management. This method would help to better represent the local inhabitants' characteristics, livelihoods, and attitudes to prevent the assumption that their interests align with the regional goals (Abbot et al. 2007).

Co-management serves as a possible solution to top-down and community-based tensions. The World Conservation Congress defines co-management as “a partnership in which government agencies, local communities and resource users, non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders negotiate, as appropriate to each context, the authority and responsibility for the management of a specific area or set of resources (IUCN 1997).” When it is implemented carefully, it can lead toward greater stakeholder investment and a stronger commitment toward conservation (Chase et al. 2000).

Ventriss and Kuentzel (2005) argue, though, that the citizen stakeholder approach to public participation may obscure as much as it reveals. Public representatives must often qualify as stakeholders to participate, which can unintentionally limit the boundaries of change, and public participation as a whole has become somewhat idyllic, distracting from the promotion of social movements (Ventriss and Kuentzell 2005). This research again emphasizes the need for careful consideration of how communities and institutions work across boundaries and scales to protect resource places.

#### 1.2.2.2. Diverse Communities and Natural Places

A community-related theme that became evident in this research is human diversity as it pertains to the protection of resource places. The Winooski Valley Park District, highlighted in Paper 1 (Chapter 2) of this dissertation, hosted a very diverse group of park visitors. People of color have had, and continue to have, significant interest in the environment (Taylor 2008); however, this interest often goes unnoticed by researchers because it does not occur in traditional environmental settings such as

membership in popular environmental groups. Their interest may be better observed through voting patterns or donations to environmental projects and efforts (Taylor 2008).

Studies about diversity and resource places have also revealed racial and ethnic variation in travel and leisure activities. Caucasians' overall level of involvement in outdoor recreation is greater than African Americans, but African Americans exhibit higher rates of participation in bicycling, car-camping, hiking, nature walking, and fishing (Floyd 1999). In a study of Lincoln Park in Chicago, results showed that people of color came from farther away, often by car, with large family-oriented groups and used the park less frequently than non-minority visitors. For example, the average group size was only 1.6 for Caucasians, but 3.7 for African Americans, 4.4 for Latinos, and 5.0 for Asians (Gobster 2002). These issues were also relevant in the study of the WVPD (Paper 1), given that many visitors to those regional parks were from immigrant groups resettled in the Burlington area.

An example of inequitable access to recreation and leisure is when parks have picnic tables separated and cemented to the ground. Research shows that people of color prefer tend to visit parks in large, family-oriented groups. When park managers choose to separate picnic tables, they are favoring some park users over others, whether or not they are conscious of it (Gobster 2002). In order to prevent environmental injustices, resource managers must acknowledge that management is political and that some management strategies favor some people over others, and ultimately select the strategy that will promote equal access to resources (Salazar 1996). In Paper 1 (Chapter 2), we

found that managers must make special efforts to attend to and understand the needs and desires of all park visitors.

### 1.2.2.3. Rural Community Development

In Paper 3 (Chapter 4), we studied how people imagined community change and development in a rural Vermont town called Burke. We were curious, specifically, about how community members discursively imagined the town. Bridger (1996) examined the relationship between community imagery, rhetoric, and changes in the built environment. He argues that communication and rhetorical processes are important aspects of local change (Bridger 1996). He uses the term “heritage narratives” to refer to selective representations of the past; these provide a framework for contemporary events and can help guide decisions about the future. Heritage narratives are inherently political and are a resource that can be mobilized in communities. Bridger argues that the way issues and problems are represented and communicated can seriously affect planning processes and outcomes. Planners must be sensitive to the ways in which other people use language to understand, represent, and manage social change. This requires examination and reexamination of claims about what a community means and who gets to define the meaning of particular places (Bridger 1997).

Not all residents are alike, even in small rural communities. A study of four Vermont towns, for example, examined similarities and differences between seasonal and permanent residents’ attitudes toward community development and preservation (Park et al. 2019). Results of survey data analysis showed that permanent residents are more supportive of community development than seasonal homeowners, though both groups expressed similar attitudes toward preservation of community resources. The

study also suggested that the rate at which a town grows has an effect on how community members feel about community development and preservation proposals (Park et al. 2019).

Kuentzel and Ramaswamy (2005) studied the relationship between economic and social trends, tourism development, and residential development in Stowe, Vermont. They found that the link between Stowe's tourism amenities and the development of more homes is not direct. Seasonal home purchases are influenced by economic conditions, whereas permanent home purchases may be influenced by local business opportunities (Kuentzel and Ramaswamy 2005).

There is an extensive literature about the patterns and trajectories of change in rural regions of the United States and around the globe – but much of this work is quantitative in nature, emphasizing economic factors and local and regional histories of resource dependency and change. In Paper 3 (Chapter 4), we focus as well on symbolic values of landscapes and places (Greider and Garkovich 1994), as these are elaborated in how people imagine their communities during periods of transition and change.

### **1.2.3. Innovative Qualitative Research Methods**

This dissertation used several innovative methods (autoethnography, rhetorical narrative analysis, and imaginaries research) that are not entirely common in the research literature of recreations, parks, and natural resources. One contribution of this dissertation is that we have attempted to develop these methods more fully to expand the scholarly research literature.

Strauss and Corbin (1990, 17) define qualitative research as, “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other

means of quantification.” Qualitative research can be applied to study individuals, groups or organizations, social movements, and relationships. This type of work requires researchers to be able to “step back and critically analyze the situation, to recognize and avoid bias, to obtain valid and reliable data, and to think abstractly” (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 18).

#### 1.2.3.1. Autoethnography

In the first study (Chapter 2) of this dissertation, the method of autoethnography was used to examine how a regional park district serves its communities. Autoethnography has not been widely used in the literature on parks, recreation and tourism – perhaps in part because it is so challenging to write. Nevertheless, this qualitative method can offer new insights about the field in studies of communities and places.

Ethnography is a process by which researchers closely and deeply study cultures. Brewer (2000, 10) defines ethnography as:

The study of people in naturally occurring settings... by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally.

Autoethnography is an autobiographical form of writing that makes the researcher’s own experience a study in itself (Ellis and Bochner 2000). Leon Anderson proposed the term “analytic autoethnography” in 2006. This term refers to research where the researcher is 1) a full member of the research group or setting, 2) identified as such in published texts, and 3) committed to developing theoretical understandings or broader social phenomena (Anderson 2006). This method uses the author’s experiential

data to create a narrative that gives voice to both participants and the researcher (Brown 2003). While conducting the autoethnography, I sought to understand both the “emic view” (the insiders’ view) and the “etic view” (the researcher’s view) through observations, conversations, interpretation, and experiences (Rossman and Rallis 2003). In an autoethnography, the etic view is particularly important because it makes the researcher’s own experience a study in itself (Ellis and Bochner 2000).

Rossman and Rallis (2003) suggest the following questions to help guide ethnographic analysis:

*What are people doing? What are they trying to accomplish?*

*How do they do this? What specific means and/or strategies do they use?*

*How do members talk about, characterize, and understand what is going on?*

*What do I see going on here? What did I learn?*

As I approached my autoethnography, I used these guiding questions, but also found myself often asking *why?* I could make connections or guesses that people were utilizing the park for leisure, exercise, or because there were specific resources available like the community gardens or picnic shelter. But I also found myself wondering why they were doing not only their favored activities, but acting positively on behalf of the parks as well. Why would a group of athletes voluntarily pick up trash? Why would parents send their children to nature-based camps? Why were there so many people wanting to continue their activities in the park after it closed at dusk? Why were they drawn to this place?

In an autoethnographic analysis, Rossman and Rallis (2003) suggest one might also ask of a researcher:

*How do I define my identity?*

*How do I define my role in this place?*

*What assumptions am I making?*

*What am I learning from this experience?*

Self-reflexivity is a critical component of autoethnography (Humphries 2005). Qualitative research results can be affected by whether the researcher is “part of the researched and shares the participants’ experience” (Berger 2013, 219). Qualitative researchers often declare their positionality, or their background as researchers and their relationship to the research and audience, in a positionality statement. Defining one’s own position in relation to their research may help them to be more objective, and it will help audiences understand the perspectives brought forward into the research (Hay 2016).

In terms of my positionality, I am a second-generation Japanese-American cisgender woman in her mid-thirties. I am a mother, a partner, and an academic. I have had the privilege of attending good schools and pursuing a PhD. I have held a number of professional positions which have shaped who I am, beginning as a park ranger, then an intern studying human diversity at The Nature Conservancy, the Executive Director of the Winooski Valley Park District, and the Director of Grand Valley State University’s Office of Sustainability Practices.

Growing up in a multiracial family, I became aware of the impacts that appearance can have on perceptions about education and socio-economic status. Consequently, I think I have become more conscious of biases (which is not to say that I am immune to them myself, but feel I am consciously and perhaps unconsciously more mindful of them). Becoming a parent has raised my consciousness and desire to advocate for more comprehensive support for families. I am also passionate about natural areas and outdoor recreation and spent a great deal of time in nature as a child. I feel very strongly that all children should have access to experiences in nature.

As a researcher, my background likely influences my curiosities and the way I view things. I may be more likely to consider the perspectives of, and implications for, a more diverse set of research participants. As a natural resource practitioner, I may be more mindful of ways to engage a wider diversity of park users, as well as a wider diversity of voices in my research efforts.

My appearance, personality, and the roles I held may have influenced how research participants engaged with me, particularly in the first study where I held multiple roles. By examining my own positionality, I tried to be especially conscious of this, both in my interactions with others, and in the notes I took for the research study.

While conducting the first study, I was also serving as the Executive Director for the Winooski Valley Park District. Concurrently, my partner and I served as the Park Caretakers. We lived at its headquarters, a park called the Ethan Allen Homestead, from May 2011 to May 2014. The Ethan Allen Homestead is located in Burlington, Vermont and is within walking and biking distance from approximately 42,400 people (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). As caretakers, we served as the primary contacts for park

visitors outside business hours. We did everything from providing directions, to helping people water their gardens, to playing with children, to assisting pets and wildlife. The caretaker role gave me an inside view of what occurs at the Winooski Valley Park District and who uses the parks. It also gave me the opportunity to develop relationships with park users and immerse myself in events and processes that occur at the park. These experiences raised important questions about how managers and visitors together might “create community” in on-site experiences. Additionally, the research also raised questions about issues of diversity and community – questions that were also amenable to study with autoethnographic methods.

#### 1.2.3.2. Language, Discourse, Rhetoric, and Narrative

In the second study (Chapter 3), we examined language, discourse, rhetoric, and narrative and their role in the creation in place meanings related to school forests. We were especially interested to develop a better understanding of narrative as these relate to place meanings, since much of the literature on this topic just assumes that stories are obvious in visitor interview texts. In our study, interviews were conducted with current and former faculty, staff, alumni, community members, and professionals thought to be associated with UVM’s school forests. The transcripts were analyzed to identify narratives, and these were evaluated for the rhetorical language practices used by interviewees in their stories. Two researchers examined the transcripts independently and then collaboratively to meet the qualitative research standards of credibility, transferability and confirmability of results (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Riessman 1993). Over the course of several months, we worked together to utilize techniques of reflexivity and peer-debriefing.

We used both classical and contemporary methods of analysis. The classic study of rhetoric traces to the ancient Greeks, and Aristotle identified three types of claims: (1) *logos*, claims based on logic; (2) *ethos*, claims based on ethical appeals; and (3) *pathos*, claims based on emotional appeals. We evaluated our interview texts for their narrative qualities, and then evaluated the rhetorical aspects of those stories, using Arnold's (1974) approach to rhetorical analysis. Rodden (2008) suggests that logic is a meaningful pattern of language, with its aim being proof. Whereas logic is meaningful pattern, rhetoric is a *convincing* pattern. He argues that not all narratives persuade, and that motifs are the instruments of persuasive narrative. Persuasive narratives occur through a sequence of images or symbols, and stories persuade an audience by using analogies and other stylistic devices (Rodden 2008).

Then, using more contemporary methods, we viewed the School Forest narratives as "small stories" (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012), and examined the non-formal claims, styles and linguistic devices that contributed to place meanings. De Fina and Georgakopoulou (2012, 116) use the term small stories as "an umbrella term that captures a gamut of under-represented narrative activities, such as tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared (known) events, but also allusions to (previous) tellings, deferrals of tellings and refusals to tell." Small stories are those that are told in everyday settings and between people who often know one another – features that characterize our study contexts.

#### 1.2.3.3. Imaginaries

In the third study (Chapter 4) of this dissertation, we utilized the theory of social imaginaries to examine a study of rural community tourism development and

change. We reviewed twenty transcripts from interviews conducted with community leaders, local residents, and second homeowners living in Burke, Vermont. Of those, seven were community leaders, six were local homeowners, and seven were second homeowners. All twenty people spoke using some form of imaginary. A total of 198 imaginaries were identified within the transcripts. Gravari-Barbas et al. (2017) identified imaginaries using a variety of literary devices, including fantasies, personification, metaphors, stereotypes, and narratives. We initially followed this practice by looking first at the interview texts to identify short segments of texts that used figurative language (texts marked by denotations and connotations; attributions about the character of place; imagery; visual descriptions; adjectives; and rhetorical claims based on emotion).

Next, researchers sorted the contextualized imaginaries texts into categories using a reflexive hand-sorting method to identify topics and patterns in the data. Eighteen topics were initially identified, then these were grouped thematically relative to three types of imaginaries – two suggested by literature (social and spatial imaginaries) and one (social change) emerging from the analysis. Given three types of interviewees, results were compared across those groups.

We then conducted a detailed review of transcripts to identify and record the specific symbols used by interviewees to construct their imaginaries. Then, having examined the linguistic and textual qualities of interview data, we attempted to interpret the discursive patterns used by interviewees to construct imaginaries related to place, landscape, other people, the community itself, and processes of social change in Burke.

### 1.3. Importance of the Research

Though the social and cultural values of regional parks may seem obvious, there is little research on specific managerial practices and outcomes at regional parks. Social and cultural values can be hard to calculate, but their contributions to the community can be significant. Regional park districts can facilitate connections between people and nature, as well as amongst diverse community members. The study in Chapter 2 addresses the gap in literature by addressing the question: *How do regional park districts facilitate and strengthen community relationships?*

The study in Chapter 3 expands current research about place meanings to explore their rhetorical construction within narratives, addressing a gap in the literature regarding a broader utilization of social theory and use of a wider set of methods. It asks the question: *How do individuals employ rhetorical discourses in constructing place narratives – and what can the resulting stories reveal about place meanings?*

The study in Chapter 4 contributes to literature on social imaginaries, and tourism imaginaries specifically. Imaginaries are shared conceptions of reality – and even if they are not factually “true” they have potential social and practical implications. They may either increase the scope of thinking about future community options – or they may constrain innovation, mislead, or create divides between people. This study asks the question: *How do people use spatial and social imaginaries to symbolize community change and reinforce social and cultural meanings about place?*

These studies together can offer practical contributions to planning. Healey (2010, 225) argues that place management and development work “is not as simple as identifying what needs to be done and then implementing it... it arises from complex

back-and-forth processes of discussion, experimentation and challenge.” Further, she argues that, “Such a project has the potential to transform the material conditions of people’s lives and to contribute to reducing the damage that human activity has done to the life-sustaining conditions of the wider environment. It also has transformative potential in changing the way political communities think about places and how they relate to them” (Healey 2010, 241).

#### **1.4. Conclusions**

I am grateful for the opportunity to conduct this research and look forward to applying it in my role as the Director of the Office of Sustainability Practices at Grand Valley State University. The lessons learned in the regional parks study are directly applicable to some of the work I do now, when thinking about the university as a small set of communities. Being mindful of the strengths and roles of each team member, our strategic partnerships, and intentional programming can help to build community among our faculty, staff, and students.

Similarly, the lessons learned in the rhetoric study are also applicable to my work in many ways. In the future, I look forward to analyzing the ways people engage with our office through interviews, written communication, event evaluations, and social media to see how they’re experiencing our programs and services. I also look forward to further examining the concept of place as a networked idea and, in general, helping students to acknowledge and recognize their sense of place as they engage with our student farm, arboretum, ravines, hiking trails, and other natural areas on campus.

The theory of social imaginaries would be a fascinating way to frame a study on sustainability at Grand Valley State University. As director, I am often asked to comment on strategic plans and visions for the future. I try to solicit as much feedback as possible from our campus community, but I have not yet taken into account how people imagine or interpret it, or the meanings they have created linguistically, discursively, and symbolically about events, people, and places.

Together these papers contribute to a better understanding of people's relationships with nature and with one another. These studies are relevant to environmental professionals and community planners by showing that planning and management of place is not only about organizing physical spaces – but rather about the careful attention given to understanding people, their relationships, and their ideas about place. These studies also inform theory about the social construction of place meanings associated with parks, communities and places generally.

**CHAPTER 2: THE ROLE OF REGIONAL PARK DISTRICTS IN  
STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS**

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## 2.1. Introduction

Regional park districts are areas of managed land arrayed across landscapes and political boundaries, protected for purposes of conservation and/or recreation, and administered as a single unit by a non-profit organization, city, county, or a multi-jurisdictional “district” (National Recreation and Park Association, 2012). In outdoor recreation resource administration, regional park districts have received considerably less scholarly attention than local or national parks or other recreation sites (Wilson, 2016). Yet, the National Recreation and Park Association’s Special Park District National Database Report (2012) highlights over 35 regional park districts in the United States.

Regional park systems were created originally to conserve significant ecological settings and habitats through practices of ecosystem management. Within this philosophy, cross-border collaborations (Timothy, 2001; Ali, 2003; Dimitri & Timothy, 2010; Więckowski, 2010) are encouraged because cumulative environmental effects unnoticeable at local levels tend to become apparent at regional levels (Graham, Hunsaker, O’Neil, & Jackson, 1991). By spanning boundaries, regional parks can link habitats, maintain ecological values and increase opportunities for capacity building around ecological issues (Wilson, 2016).

Beyond their ecological values, though, regional parks also play an important role in stimulating community-level values. Researchers have proposed, for example, that regional parks can improve community quality of life and foster positive social and cultural values across regions (Wilson, 2016). Serving residents living in urban, suburban and rural settings (Doyle, 2016; Houck, 2016; Klinkhamer, 2016), regional

parks afford opportunities to develop social interaction and place affinities beyond community borders. They can help to “transcend socioeconomic and identity politics by providing meaningful and relevant public spaces where diverse members of society can feel at home” (Wilson, 2016, p. 280). Regional parks are also valued as places where people can pursue leisure and health goals, develop cross-community relationships and interactions, and grow in knowledge and excitement about both nature and community (Wilson, 2016). The recreation and programming efforts of regional parks are also assumed to enhance environmental education and literacy (Chawla, 2012), particularly for youth.

Though the social and cultural values of regional parks seem apparent, there is very little scholarly research specifically about managerial practices and outcomes at regional parks. Comparative social science research sometimes includes regional parks, though these areas are often classified as “community parks.” Further, social and cultural values may be intangible, and studies have inconsistently applied these concepts (see Scholte, van Teeffelen, & Verburg, 2015). Given these issues, and drawing from broader scholarly literature in recreation and sustainability, we aim in this paper to focus specifically on the social and cultural values of regional parks. We propose that regional parks management has the potential to promote two broad social goals: facilitate connections between people and nature in local communities and regionally, and foster interactions across diverse community members. Thus, we ask: *How do regional park districts strengthen community relationships?*

To address this question, we present a case study from Vermont’s Winooski Valley Park District (WVPD). Using autoethnographic methods, we explore how the

WVDP accommodates visitors and serves adjacent communities, the agency's efforts to stimulate community interactions and cohesion, and a manager's perceptions of the outcomes of these efforts. This research has implications for understanding how regional park districts can enhance social and cultural values while also supporting the ecological goals associated with managing landscapes.

## **2.2. Social and Cultural Values of Regional Parks**

Regional park districts expand the availability of outdoor recreation settings and are assumed to contribute to both individual well-being and community resilience (Wilson 2016). As public social and cultural settings, the managerial practices of regional park districts are informed by research traditions within the fields of leisure, recreation, parks and sustainability. Social and cultural values remain difficult to define and measure, however (Kenter et al., 2015). In this review, we consider the ways that recreation and leisure researchers have conceptualized social and cultural values of parks and open space, focusing specifically on the health benefits of connecting people and nature, benefits of open space and nature engagement for childhood development, and the social benefits of interactions across diverse community members and cultural groups.

Regional parks provide natural settings and open space amenities that have been shown to support physical, social, and emotional health across individuals' lifespans. The creation of the Chicago Park District, for example, was influenced by ideas of healthy outdoor play to "ease the hardships of the poor" (Klinkhamer, 2016, p. 318). As Wilson (2016) explained, "social values include the benefits of close contact

with nature to reduce stress, aid in healing, increase cognitive skills, and contribute to individual and community health and wellness” (p. 280). An early study of urban open spaces confirms the importance of these places by showing that, “the most highly valued open spaces are those which enhance the positive qualities of urban life: variety of opportunities and physical settings; sociability and cultural diversity” (Burgess, Harrison, & Limb, 1988, p. 471).

The importance of parks and open space for children’s physical and social development is a basic tenet of recreation and leisure services (Louv, 2005). Interactions among children in nature provide physical, mental, emotional, and cognitive benefits (Strife & Downey, 2009; Chawla, 2012). Play spaces are often experienced in unique ways by different participants, and some take on characteristics of small, localized ‘communities’ with associated narratives and myths (Horton & Kraftl, 2018). Educational experiences in nature can strengthen individual affect, learning, and positive sentiment for outdoor play and nature even among young children (Mullenbach, Andrejewski, & Mowen, 2018). Developmental activities in childhood can also have long-term benefits (Berman et al., 2008). Childhood experiences in nature are known to be predictors of whether individuals develop concern for environmental issues and pro-environmental behaviors later in life (Prévot, Clayton, & Mathevat, 2018).

Experiences in childhood also influence choices in later life, and also the ways that individuals engage with other social and cultural groups. Demographers project that over half of all Americans will belong to a minority group by 2044 (Colby & Ortman, 2015). Aligned with these trends, some park districts emphasize programming that

engages visitors who more closely reflect the nation's demographics (Walton, 2016). Outdoor recreation research consistently reveals racial and ethnic variation in travel and leisure activities (Ghimire, Green, Poudyal, & Cordell, 2014), and leisure activities can provide a common ground for people who do not share the same history, language, or culture (Yuen, Pedlar, & Mannell, 2005). Though scholars have studied outdoor recreation participation by cultural groups (Chavez, 2001; Floyd, 1999; Gobster, 2002; Neal, Bennet, Jones, Cochrane, & Mohan, 2015), there is little published research about the managerial practices of regional parks in serving diverse populations. Considered in the broader context, though, Jennings, Larson and Yun (2016) describe the benefits received from urban green spaces as cultural ecosystem services, and explain their relevance for issues of social justice and societal equity.

Regional park districts also enhance community ties by offering settings where people of diverse backgrounds can mingle (Neal et al., 2015). Delivery of inclusive programming is known to foster cohesive behaviors and a collaborative community spirit (Walton, 2016). Efforts to engage the community can promote support for conservation practices (Brosius & Russell, 2003) and elevate support for parks (Stern et al., 2003). To this end, educational and outreach partnerships also foster linkages across organizations and communities and stimulate growth of bonding and bridging social capital (Doyle, 2016; Walton, 2016). Thus, research suggests that regional parks have the potential to improve local communities by educating citizens and fostering an ethic of care for landscapes, connecting citizens in interpersonal relationships, and providing places for people to pursue leisure and health goals.

## **2.3 Methods**

### **2.3.1. Study Area**

The Winooski Valley Park District (WVPD) was established in 1972 as Vermont's first regional park district, with intent to develop access to the Winooski River, picnic areas, and wildlife sanctuaries. The WVPD's mission is "to plan, acquire, and manage lands and waters within the boundaries of its member municipalities for conservation, preservation of natural areas, establishment of parks, and resource-based education and recreation" (WVPD Master Plan, 2012). The WVPD is organized as a non-profit that maintains 18 parks and over 1,750 acres of natural areas. In 2010, the WVPD served an estimated 110,700 residents in seven municipalities: Burlington, Colchester, Essex, Jericho, South Burlington, Williston, and Winooski (WVPD Master Plan, 2012). Although Vermont is not highly ethnically or culturally diverse, this region is a designated refugee resettlement area, and about 9,000 (8%) residents in WVPD communities are persons of color (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

The Winooski Valley Park District is an ideal site for a case study. Case studies can serve as examples of unique and exemplary situations, or represent "average" examples (Yin, 2004). With a 45-year history (uniqueness), and its multi-faceted ecological and social characteristics (common to regional park districts), the Winooski Valley Park District addresses both aspects of case study research.

### **2.3.2. Data Collection**

The data presented here derive from the first author's experiences as Executive Director of the WVPD from 2010-2014; she lived at park headquarters during three of those years. Concurrently, she was a doctoral student, and in that role, conducted

autoethnographic research related to her managerial experiences. The data and analyses presented here are informed by four years of managerial practice at the WVPD and three years living on-site, two of which were spent conducting focused research.

Autoethnography is an intensive, qualitative research method grounded in assumptions that “the reading and writing of self-narratives provides a window through which self and others can be examined and understood” (Chang, 2008, p. 13). Central to autoethnography is the idea that people are enmeshed in communities; thus, “self-analysis rests on an understanding that self is part of a cultural community” (Chang, 2008, p. 26). The methods of autoethnography require a researcher to function in two roles simultaneously: the person conducting the study and the study participant (Hoppes, 2014; Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The researcher-as-participant thus gains an “insider’s view,” ultimately producing an analysis using autobiographical forms of writing that stimulate cultural interpretation.

Data collection methods in autoethnography include note-taking, discussions with others, personal reflection, emotional recall, and identification of themes (Hoppes, 2014). To systematize the data collection and analyses, the first author kept a daily diary to record events and reflections; she also retained copies of managerial communications (planning and policy documents), minutes from meetings, and informal notes (about park issues, concerns, and successful activities). Daily diary notes were recorded longhand, along with schedules of each day’s events. Documents were reviewed to provide context for events and clarify participants and event goals. Discussions with others included those closely aligned with the WVPD (Board of Trustees members, visitors, employees) and those indirectly related (employees of other parks, local

municipal employees, others). Discussions ranged from informal conversations to informational meetings to brainstorming sessions, and provided context for managerial practices.

### **2.3.3. Analysis**

Autoethnographic analysis proceeds through self-reflection, critical interpretation of data, and writing explanatory narratives. The focus is on deep examination of the processes by which social life is constructed in specific settings (Chang 2008; Denzin 2014). The analysis presented here used descriptive writing to document the people, places, and experiences associated with managerial roles, and analytical writing to reveal connections across the data.

In this study, analysis focused on the ways social and cultural values were explained and evaluated within the diaries and other material prepared by the lead author during her employment. The first author collected data, produced transcriptions and collaborated with the second author in conducting the qualitative study. The second author (her advisor at the University of Vermont), collaborated especially during data analysis and writing, actively participating in textual analysis, thematic organization, and interpretation. Our collaborations relied on weekly (and sometimes more frequent) shared conversations, writing and revision over the course of a year.

Data analysis included the following procedures. Diary entries were transcribed and reviewed to uncover examples, descriptions and self-reflections about managerial activities, programming practices, issues and problems. A content analysis and iterative reviews of the diaries helped to organize and categorize textual materials (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Then, working inductively through personal reflections and

shared conversations, we identified themes across the data and interpreted their meanings relative to the research question. Interpretations and key examples from the diary entries data were used to develop the conceptual foundations of this paper. We crafted a written narrative with intent to provide a deep, reflexive analysis of events and experiences from this WVPD setting. We did not assess inter-rater reliability because we worked closely and continuously throughout the process of analyzing the data and writing results.

In autoethnography, analysis/interpretation are subject to the standards of trustworthiness and reliability expected of qualitative, interpretive research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Richardson, 2000). In this study, these standards were supported by the first author's long engagement with the study site, her continuous procedures of diary writing and record keeping, detailed accounting and description of events and understandings, triangulation of sources, and our shared, comprehensive analytic and writing processes. This study's intensive, long-term engagement in the field, thick description of results, and collaborative processes of analysis also establish credibility and confidence in the research findings as well as confirmability through the presentation of participant viewpoints. Further, autoethnographical research should be evaluated on its interpretive merits (Richardson, 2000), including: (a) substantive contributions in deeply exploring social experience; (b) aesthetic qualities of the presentation to introduce new understanding; (c) the reflexivity of the author, self-awareness, and self-exposure; (d) the impact of the work; and (e) the reality of the work as a credible source of lived experience. This study provided: (a) a deep exploration of on-site experiences at a regional park, (b) new ideas linking regional parks and social

aspects of community, (c) self-awareness and self-exposure by the author, (d) placing value on the social and cultural aspects of regional parks and (e) documented living and working experiences.

## **2.4. Results**

Data analysis focused on the extent to which social and cultural values were revealed in managerial practices, and evidence of how these fostered interpersonal and community relationships. Five thematic categories were derived from the analysis: connecting across people and place, collaborations creating community, fostering cross-cultural relationships, socializing youth, and sustaining community. Data are presented below (*in italics*) in the “voice” of the first author in her dual role as researcher and Executive Director, and results are organized within themes.

It should be noted that, in this study, negative examples of social and cultural values were limited, but those observed in the data primarily took the form of visitors behaving poorly within their own social groups (refusing to leave the park when it closed; consuming alcohol). In general, this regional park district was notable for its lack of social unrest or anti-social behavior.

### **2.4.1. Connecting Across People and Place**

Reflecting on my time as manager, I remember gleeful shrieks of children playing outside. People carrying canoes passed by our house, and our water spigot squeaked as gardeners filled watering cans. I was delighted to hear this buzz of activity, which signified that our parks were well-used and loved.

The WVPD excelled in bringing recreationists from different communities together. For example, a group of kiteboarders from different towns, ages and lifestyles formed as individuals discovered Delta Park, where the terrain provided an ideal launching location. Originally drawn by common interests, these recreationists eventually collaborated on beach cleanups, learning about local species and helping to re-establish the walking path after it was covered by debris. I recorded this story in my diary:

*Long but exciting day today... a kiteboarding group with members from different towns volunteered to clean up Delta Park. They worked SO hard.... to ensure good relations with the WVPD and continued access to their launch site, they really go above and beyond to help us maintain the park. Today, there was a family with a little girl, an educator ... a couple of older men, and a handful of men in their twenties. (June 25, 2011)*

Another diary entry documents the shared engagement of community members in a park event:

*Today was Green Up Day. We set up an info table at Riverwalk (and) had Cadets at the Homestead, the Stream Team at Salmon Hole, and (a town's) Environmental Board at Casavant Park. It's always lovely to see so many community members coming together. (May 5, 2012)*

These activities show the value of outdoor experiences in bringing together people with common interests from across local communities. It was gratifying to see personal connections made through uses of, and appreciation for, the natural features of our parks. Places have meaning to people. Diary entries reinforce the lesson for managers: a regional park is a place where visitors gain understanding of local landscapes and the neighbors with whom these landscapes are shared.

### **2.4.2. Collaborations Creating Community**

Beyond providing settings where people informally encounter others, the WVPD also offered programs intended to foster community interactions. In collaboration with local organizations, the district hosted plots for community gardens, handicap-accessible raised garden beds, a teaching garden, and space for the Ethan Allen Homestead Museum. Community partners collaborated in opening these spaces to citizens. It was common that groups and individuals connected with others on-site. Activities not intended to bring groups together nevertheless fostered social interactions. Emergent relationships were supplemented by strategic managerial efforts to broaden visitors' experiences. My diaries document various educational collaborations, some involving school groups:

*We had another chaotic and successful Conservation Field Day today. Six schools attended with over 300 kids...almost all of the education groups were present – Green Mountain Club, VINS, Lake Champlain International, Fish and Wildlife, UVM, etc. It's amazing that these busy folks take the time to spend a day with us and with all of the children. (May 22, 2013)*

These experiences showed that a regional park district can effectively bring together both individuals and organizations – and that through their involvement, people become enmeshed in the emergent communities and networks of park participants.

### **2.4.3. Fostering Cross-Cultural Relationships**

The WVPD's Ethan Allen Homestead included the New Farms for New Americans (NFNA) farming plot, so refugee families became frequent park visitors. Developed by the Association for Africans Living in Vermont (AALV), this program helped Vermont's 6,300 new immigrants maintain their cultural practices. Without this program, these refugees "would not be able to grow large quantities of fresh vegetables

for their families, grow culturally significant crops, or address food and financial security” (AALV 2018).

The Homestead became a space where refugees felt comfortable, and they used it for farming and other purposes. They visited the park on days when the program was not operating to sit with friends, chat and take walks. They brought families to the picnic shelter for parties, and learned to drive in the parking areas. My diary recalls:

*It's been another busy day at the park! We had students from Hunt Middle School here all afternoon, and AALV was having a picnic.... They are always so friendly and they offer [everyone] all sorts of delicious foods. (May 31, 2013)*

*The Museum hosted a naturalization ceremony ... (I)t was wonderful to see all of the new Americans and their families. Everyone had an interesting story – some were refugees, others were joining their partners here. ... One person brought twelve family members to the ceremony. ... we [brought] over all the chairs from our house, and we still had twenty people standing. (July 4, 2012)*

In 2011, students from Yestermorrow Design School built a wash station for the NFNA program. They hosted a “frame raising” party involving nearly sixty people, with New American farmers working alongside students and neighbors to lift the frame into place. The Yestermorrow instructor described the event as “equal parts manual labor, community building, and potluck.” I wrote in my diary:

*[The teacher] was here with his students. The farmers came out in full force and [brought] lots and lots of food. Most of us were new to the whole frame-raising thing, so the students led the charge with farmers and community members stepping in to help as needed... (October 30, 2011)*

There were many advantages to the partnership between the AALV and the WVPD. The partnership provided opportunities for community members to meet, reinforce cultural identity, and establish new cross-cultural relationships. These activities connected old and new residents as people shared traditions and knowledge.

#### **2.4.4. Socializing Youth**

Regional park districts can provide children with access to nature and educational programming, contributing to their physical, mental, and emotional development. My diary documented numerous instances where youth were engaged in park activities:

*The YMCA “Nature Camp” people are here to set up. They rent the classroom for five weeks and have half- and full day camps for kids of all ages. (July 17, 2011)*

*Conservation Field Day was this morning and I haven’t seen our final figures, but I have to imagine there were 300 kids here. All the member municipalities were represented. My favorite parts of the day are the beginning and the end when the students are ... in one big cluster. ... The sea lamprey guy is always a hit too ... we always have kids crowding around him and trying to get the thing to suction to their arms. (May 8, 2012)*

In 2013, the WVPD established an adventure day camp that introduces youth to nature and fosters a sense of place by encouraging curiosity, observation, and respect. WVPD also has a winter youth camp with snowshoeing, animal tracking and nature exploration. Though campers typically do not know each other at first, they develop friendships during the week – then “camp friends” register for future sessions. The ability of regional parks programming to foster and sustain linkages among young people was central to the mission of this park district.

#### **2.4.5. Sustaining Community**

The connections park visitors made with others and with landscapes often created long-lasting bonds. We began loaning out equipment to increase access to recreation opportunities – simple acts that stimulated interactions and fostered new connections. I would fasten a child’s snowshoes and send them on their way– only to hear another family call out, “That looks like fun!” The families would strike up a

conversation about their children, whether they had snowshoed before, and if they came to the park often.

A thoroughly enjoyable aspect of my job was getting to know our visitors and seeing them form friendships with one another. One example was our “Eco-Stewards” group, which formed so that interested citizens would learn skills to identify and remove invasive species. We intended to bring naturalists and volunteer participants together for introductory trainings and then have them adopt parks individually. But, training classes became on-going conversations, leading to group adoption of parks, potluck dinners, and so on.

One of my favorite groups formed around the Community Teaching Garden. Members came from across local communities, and few knew one another. After weeks of working together, growing food and sharing meals, friendships blossomed. People would arrive together, and hang around after class chatting late into the evening.

*The Teaching Garden is having a canning workshop in the Museum tonight.... It's so fun to watch them start out as strangers in the spring and become like a little family by the time the harvest rolls around. (August 30, 2012)*

Many events celebrated community. I have fond memories of mowing a “dance floor” in a field for the Vermont Community Garden Network’s annual Harvest Party. Cars lined up along the driveway, and music and laughter echoed through the park. Often, friendships formed from growing and sharing food at the WVPD. A few people dedicated considerable time tending to the historic Fanny Allen garden at park headquarters, modeling excellence in relationship-building by involving others in activities and inviting people to their home for conversation and meals:

*[A guide] gave us a tour of the garden and Allen House today. It was initially meant to be a staff tour in case we got questions about the Allen House, but a few curious visitors wandered over while we were near the garden, and by the end of it, we had a crowd. (June 7, 2013)*

Observing their impact made me realize the importance of hiring staff and recruiting volunteers who can facilitate community interactions. While many connections that developed from the park district started as chance encounters, the people and programming reinforced and solidified social bonds, both within existing groups and across groups and cultures.

## **2.5. Discussion**

The autoethnographic analysis presented here focuses on an understudied topic – regional park districts – and examines how managerial efforts at these sites may promote social and cultural values and foster community relationships. In this study of the WVPD, five themes were derived from analysis of autoethnographic data: making connections across people and place, collaborating to create community, enhancing cross-cultural ties, socializing youth, and sustaining community relationships. Though park units may differ in priorities, the research presented here and the derived themes illustrate important social and cultural values for regional parks managers generally.

The use of autoethnographic methods provided a unique vantage point for analyzing social and cultural aspects of regional parks management. As both Executive Director and primary researcher, the first author was uniquely positioned to observe, as well as shape, deliver and evaluate, the managerial practices associated with community-building processes. As noted in the diary excerpts, WVPD sites were places for people of all ages and backgrounds to gather, learn, share, enjoy, and build linkages

across diverse communities. The results of this research support prior studies confirming the values of parks and green spaces for individual health, youth development, and overall community well-being (Wilson, 2016).

This autoethnographic research also revealed new insights about more personal aspects of regional parks management: that “community relationships” also include managers and staff, whose success depends to a certain extent on fostering successful interpersonal interactions, collaborations, and programming. Chang (2008, p. 13) explains that autoethnography is a useful “instructional tool to help not only social scientists but also practitioners ... gain profound understanding of self and others and function more effectively with others from diverse cultural backgrounds.” To that end, this study identifies an understudied aspect of managerial practice: the influence of the work and its consequences on the manager herself. Personal aspects of managerial practice have implications for job and life satisfaction, as well as for the ways that managers may be motivated to act as change agents within and beyond park systems.

While this study did not specifically address gender issues, prior research has revealed that women consistently express higher levels of environmental identity than do men (Prévot, Clayton, & Mathevat, 2018). As an autoethnographic study, this research implicitly raises questions about women in park leadership roles, their levels of environmental identity, and their work practices. To what extent do gender and environmental identity intersect with a manager’s interest in fostering social and cultural aspects of park experiences? These are questions for future research.

This research also offers new perspectives on the social and cultural values of regional park districts, revealing multiple stories of community that were interwoven

through WVPD experiences. In these, discourses of place, self, and meaning (Stokowski, 2002) were expressed across activity groups, cultural groups, general visitors, park partners, and managers. Place discourses can illustrate cohesive aspects of communities, as well as highlight pressure points between groups – and opposing discourses may be implicated in park management conflicts. Though this paper focused on positive social and cultural aspects of regional parks districts, there are always instances of negative interactions in public settings: some visitors become belligerent; some damage resources; some inadvertently break rules. Future research about place discourses could provide deeper understanding of community interactions in regional parks management. This will involve using an array of methods to look more broadly at positive, negative, and neutral impacts of regional park management efforts – and short and long-term consequences – for community relationships.

Autoethnographic methods permit in-depth exploration of issues and the details of personal experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), but broader approaches are also needed to study the practices and effects of managerial actions. Researchers should also attend to social trends that may affect visitor experiences and managerial efforts. Demographic changes across society, patterns of leisure time use, and the contemporary prevalence of social media and electronic technology will likely affect future visitor engagement with regional parks. The WVPD is also located in a more rural setting, and it does not experience the pressures of more urban places; it also does not have extensive resources to support its operations. Future research should consider the question of whether social and cultural values are differentially affected in different kinds of regional park settings. Further, while social and cultural values were

documented, this study did not examine whether regional park visitors actually realized the benefits described.

## **2.6. Management Implications**

Because regional parks span political and administrative boundaries, coordination across government agencies and stakeholders is necessary. Managing resources involves balancing multiple jurisdictions with diverse needs (Grant & Quinn, 2007) while also providing meaningful on-site experiences for visitors. The research presented here showed that regional park districts provide common ground for a wide range of visitors from different age groups, genders, professions, interests, rural and urban settings, and ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Fostering and sustaining community relationships over time should be seen as central to successfully managing regional park districts. Though their social and cultural benefits may be difficult to quantify, regional parks can bring significant value for individuals, local communities, organizational partners, and even parks staff.

The unique qualities of regional parks suggest a need to foster relationship development across visitors, and to enhance partnerships and programming to link citizens, managing agencies and external organizations. Diversity was also shown to be important, and to this end, managers should hire staff, recruit volunteers and engage in partnerships that directly support and reinforce community relationships fostering desired social and cultural values. Promoting place-based narratives, and building strong community relationships can contribute to the resilience and sustainability of regional parks. For example, community members who use regional parks are more

likely to vote for and support them (National Recreation and Park Association, 2018), bringing more attention to and protection for natural areas and open space.

While the value of community relationships is not measured as easily as acres conserved or species protected, methods of documenting and assessing the social and cultural contributions of regional park districts are necessary for securing funding and other tangible and intangible support for these parks. Some social values can be represented quantitatively (the number of community members visiting the park, return visitors, participants in programming, volunteer hours served). But qualitative approaches that tell the personal stories of managers and participants through their experiences may more effectively express these values if published in annual reports, master plans, and other park publications. As settings for development of individuals, communities, and society, regional parks have never been more important for addressing social and cultural quality of life issues, while also attending to landscape quality.

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**CHAPTER 3: CREATING PLACE MEANINGS: THE RHETORICAL QUALITIES  
OF OUTDOOR EXPERIENCE NARRATIVES**

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***Running Head:*** Rhetoric and Place Meanings

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### 3.1. Introduction

Inspired by diverse theoretical perspectives, research about *place* in outdoor recreation, natural resources and environment contexts has coalesced around the idea that places are not only physical locations or settings for action; they are also “symbolic contexts imbued with meaning... The meanings individuals and collectives ascribe to a place are reflections of cultural and individual identity” (Kyle and Chick 2007, 212). Accordingly, researchers in these fields have generated an expansive scholarly literature about place meanings – often examined in conjunction with individuals’ attachments to places, and individual or collective senses of place (Lewicka 2011; Stewart, Williams, and Kruger 2013; Manzo and Devine-Wright 2014). During the past several decades, many of these studies have privileged narrative analysis as an especially useful method for uncovering and revealing place meanings. This is congruent with the narrative turn in the social sciences more generally, supporting the idea that, “our sense of place and community is rooted in narration ... stories can serve to create places” (Johnstone 1990, 5).

Scholarship about what has come to be called “place narratives” often orients specifically to issues of *place identity* – a concept described by Taylor (2010, 40) as “the importance of people’s experiences of places for their identities.” In this research, spoken or written narratives recounting personal experiences in meaningful places are thematically analyzed for their contributions to cognitive, emotional and attitudinal aspects of individuals’ identities (Taylor 2010; Van Patten and Williams 2008). The emphasis on individual identity is not surprising given that place narratives are usually personal stories, with the narrator as primary actor.

While this research tradition has contributed much to understanding individuals' identity development within place experiences, it ignores other important theoretical issues related to narratives. One of these is that narratives are discursive productions, not straightforward representations of events, experiences or selves, reflecting the world as it "is." Rather, narratives "are constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretive" (Riessman 1993, 5), and are crafted by authors with particular goals in mind (Bamberg 2012). As Georgakopoulou (2011, 405) explained, "... 'doing self' is not all that storytellers do. They also do rhetorical work through storytelling." That is, place narratives should be viewed as rhetorical speech, explicitly or implicitly intending to influence or persuade others (Foss 2018).

Another assumption in place narrative research is that narratives are often seen as artifacts with simple structures defined by beginnings, middles, and ends – thus ignoring other potentially important structural configurations that might emerge from less-formal circumstances of telling stories. Spontaneous narratives obtained on-site at outdoor places may not always be coherent, well-organized, or reflective (this is not a judgment about the skills of narrators, but rather an observation about utterance forms). This suggests that place narratives may be more varied than researchers typically expect.

What seems to be missing in research about place narratives, then, is a broader utilization of social theory and a wider set of methods. To this end, we seek to expand current research about place meanings to explore their rhetorical construction within

narratives. We ask: *How do individuals employ rhetorical discourses in constructing place narratives and forming place meanings?*

The research presented here derives from interviews about relationships with School Forests – tracts of land that have historically been owned by universities for uses including outdoor classes, academic research, recreation, and community activities. School forests are lands that function to some extent as public places, local places that may also have regional or landscape-level importance. Though these sites differ from the iconic landscapes that are often studied in place research, these settings may be even more meaningful to people who use them.

## **3.2. Literature Review**

### **3.2.1. Place Meanings**

How do people interact with resource places? Research on *place attachment* suggests that individuals develop connections with places by engaging in activities that depend on specific settings, as well as through the formative influences of place experiences for personal identity (Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, and Watson 1992; Lewicka 2011). The length of time people are associated with places (Smaldone, Harris, and Sanyal 2008) and how they value and use places (Manzo 2003) can affect personal levels of place attachment. More broadly, community members' place meanings can influence land management decisions (Stewart, Williams, and Kruger 2013).

Place attachments and meanings, however, do not simply arise from personal attitudes, knowledge, beliefs, emotions or values; they are also influenced by social, cultural and historical contexts. In particular, researchers studying *sense of place* have

noted the importance of social interactions and relationships for fostering individual and collective senses of place (Eisenhauer, Krannich, and Blahna 2000; Kianicka, Buchecker, Hunziker, and Müller-Böker 2006; Kyle and Chick 2007; Lee 1972; Stokowski 2002). These and other studies of cultural and natural places also emphasize the role of language in transforming physical spaces into centers of personal, social and cultural meaning (Greider and Garkovich 1994). As Tuan (1991, 686) explained, “language makes place.” That is, seen from the purview of constructionist and interactionist theorizing, “meaning is not simply something ‘expressed’ or ‘reflected’ in language; (meaning) is actually *produced* by it” (Eagleton 1996, 52).

The turn to language and discourse is evident in studies of place and place meaning across the social sciences, reinvigorating applied fields including museum studies, community development, landscape analysis, heritage studies, marketing, environmental interpretation, and more. Researchers interested in human-environment relationships (Di Masso, Dixon, and Durrheim 2014) have given increasing attention to discursive aspects of place attachment, sense of place, and place meaning – and to a specific kind of discourse, narration.

### **3.2.2. Narrative Research and Place Meanings**

One method for accessing the language-based symbolic meanings that people attribute to place is narrative analysis. Though the term *narrative* is sometimes used colloquially to reference all kinds of descriptions and accounts, it refers more formally to the processes and products of story-telling in written and spoken discourse. Structurally, narratives organize actors, events and consequential action over time (Riessman 1993; Bamberg 2012). Even if stories are not arranged in tidy order or in

sequential form, their power comes from presenting a narrator's experiences and point of view (Stewart 2006; Lehtonen 2000).

Over the past several decades, narrative research has been applied extensively to understand place attachment processes, sense of place and meanings associated with on-site experiences (Kyle and Chick 2007; Glover 2003; Van Patten and Williams 2008). In many of these studies, narratives are studied thematically; they are also assumed to reflect the attitudes, values and emotions of speakers, reinforcing the importance of narrative for development of personal identity (Champ, Williams, and Lundy 2013; Tucker 2005). One critique of this work, however, is that there should be no a priori expectation that the primary focus of a place narrative is self-identity; stories about place may do other kinds of "social" work as well (Georgakopoulou 2011).

Accordingly, a wider use of interactional theorizing related to narrative situations (and other discursive contexts) is needed. Chief among these might be the persuasive (rhetorical) aspects of crafting and narrating stories (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012). Beyond its structural form and contents, a narrative should be viewed as a discursive site of contestation in which the relationships, realities and meanings of the world are continually constructed, shaped, challenged and redefined. To this end, rhetorical analysis is an important methodological tool for examining how narrators devise stories to justify place meanings as well as self in place.

Rhetorical aspects of place meaning remain understudied, though examples can be identified (Stokowski 2013). Dickinson, Blair and Ott (2010) examined linkages among rhetoric, memory and place at museums and public memorials. Taylor (2010) drew upon argumentation theory to study women's narratives about home, community

and identity. Derrien, Stokowski, and Manning (2015) compared claims made by community leaders and agency managers with respect to night skies management at Acadia National Park. These studies and others (for example, Feldman, Sköldberg, Brown, and Horner 2004) suggest an untapped potential for analyzing place meanings through analysis of rhetoric within narrative. In this effort, it is not only narrative itself that influences place meanings – but the narrative practices that employ rhetorical techniques to claim and justify the meaningfulness of personal experience.

### **3.2.3. Rhetoric within Narrative**

*Rhetoric* refers to symbolic communication intended to persuade audiences (Brock, Scott, and Chesebro 1990; Reisigl 2008). In philosophy and the humanities, classical traditions of rhetorical criticism have been used to uncover the structural qualities of persuasive discourse, the nature of persuasive claims, and styles of rhetorical presentation in formal public discourse (Arnold 1974). The interpretive methods of contemporary rhetorical studies expand classical approaches to evaluate mundane as well as formal texts, interactional qualities of rhetorical engagement, and spoken, written and mediated discourses (Eisenhart and Johnstone 2008).

Rodden (2008, 151) explained that “rhetoric (as rationally based argument, per the classical canon) is [a] convincing pattern” of persuasive assertions (claims) about the nature of reality. That is, “Rhetors make claims, they often believe the claims to be true, and they seek to establish claims upon grounds thought to be true and unassailable” (Bitzer 1978, 72). Claims are crafted and shaped, according to Aristotle (Rodden 2008), within three general modes of rhetorical influence: (a) *logos*, or a speaker’s efforts to move audiences by use of appeals based on logic, reason, facts or

data; (b) *ethos*, efforts to persuade audiences based on a speaker's credibility and trustworthiness; and (c) *pathos*, the efforts of communicators to elicit emotional responses from audiences.

The classical canon of rhetorical analysis tends to focus on public, political and organizational discourse; for example, Feldman, Sköldbberg, Brown, and Horner (2004) offer a classical analysis of narrative claims and arguments following Arnold (1974). Expanding on this method, Rodden (2008, 166) suggests that persuasion occurs not only via claims, but by “sequences of images and symbols” overlaid across narrative events. That is, stories persuade partly by rational argumentation but also by abstraction, using analogy, metaphor, and other stylistic devices. In his contemporary view, Rodden (2008, 167) suggests that, “As the narrative weaves images and moves from motif to motif, it appeals primarily to the reader's imagination, not to his reason.” Thus, both classical approaches (addressing argumentation strategies within narrative through analysis of claims) and contemporary approaches (addressing abstraction through symbolic and stylistic analysis) are useful approaches in rhetorical analysis.

Opening narrative to rhetorical investigation raises new questions about the persuasive qualities of stories – not only formally-structured, well-crafted stories that are narrated publicly or in writing (fiction, history, political discourses, for example), but also personal stories that derive from everyday experiences and are presented less formally. The term “small stories” (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008) has been used to describe everyday narratives, which display a “gamut of frequent and salient narrative activities in conversational contexts, such as the tellings of ongoing events, future or hypothetical events, shared or known events, also allusions to previous

tellings, deferrals of tellings, and refusals to tell” (Georgakopoulou 2011, 404). Small stories are less formally organized, more spontaneous, and can “be treated as entry points to the working out of conceptual ideas in local contexts” (Lorimer 2003, 214). They also are the often products of dialogue between people who know one another or share common social contexts such as work settings or the leisure-based settings of everyday life. Further, as products of personal experience, small stories provide eyewitness accounts that are difficult for others to contradict (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012, 98) because “... ‘experiential’ evidence is much more difficult to reject than rational argumentation.” In the research presented here, we use the small stories idea – along with both classical and contemporary approaches to rhetorical analysis – to study place meanings within narratives.

### **3.3. Methods**

The study described here was part of a larger research project related to School Forest lands – forest parcels owned by the University of Vermont primarily for purposes of research, instruction and outdoor recreation. The University owns four forest parcels, with oversight and management provided by the Rubenstein School of Environment and Natural Resources. Among the four School Forests, the one closest to the university is the Jericho Research Forest, located about 15 miles away. Bordered by several towns, it receives considerable educational and research use, and some public recreation use. It is the largest school forest (476 acres) and was acquired in 1941. It includes a mix of natural northern hardwood and white pine stands, and plantations of native and exotic conifers. It is currently used by courses in forestry and natural

resources. It hosts the 1802 Thompson House and the Forest E. Orr Conservation Center which includes a multi-use classroom space, restrooms, and a small kitchen.

According to the University of Vermont website,

The forest at Jericho provides an excellent opportunity to explore forest conservation through land use history. Although once a very productive farm, the land was nearly completely exhausted by 1939. A conservation plan written in 1937 provides a valuable historic reference and details the extent of soil erosion, forest stocking, and condition of agricultural fields. Through tree plantings and natural regeneration and succession, a healthy, productive forest now grows on the site today (University of Vermont 2020).

Many people have enjoyed the forest over the years. In 2013, the University of Vermont's Students of Vermont Field Studies: Working Landscapes Geography/Service Learning 192 course conducted an interdisciplinary study of the Jericho Research Forest. As part of their study, the students aimed to show the "liveliness of the forest" and that the entire place is used or valued by someone. They also noted that the forest is not a bounded space, but instead is "traveled through and across by people, animals, weather systems, and plants" (D'Allessandro et al. 2013, 27).

### **3.3.1. Sample**

Including known contacts and referrals obtained through snowball sampling, a total of 65 people who were thought to be involved in School Forest-related activities (education, research, recreation, commercial, other uses) were contacted in 2017-2018 and asked to participate in the study. These included former and current University faculty, staff, and graduate students; community leaders and residents in forest-adjacent towns; representatives of local, regional and state agencies and organizations (government leaders and land managers, preservation society directors); and forestry professionals (consulting foresters, town and county foresters). Several interviewees

had held multiple roles (graduate students became professional foresters, for example) over time. Because the researchers were known to some participants and had shared contexts with others, contacts (and later interviews) were more conversational than formal.

A total of three rounds of e-mail messages soliciting telephone interviews were sent, and 28 people agreed to participate. Another 10 declined by email, most indicating that they had little use of or connection to these forests; some provided referrals to others thought to be more informed. The 27 people who did not respond to email requests were community leaders and members of local organizations. Follow-up calls and inquiries revealed that most of these had no or minimal connection with the School Forests.

### **3.3.2. Interview and Questions**

Questionnaire items were designed by all authors, and semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted by the third author. Prior to each interview, we shared copies of the questions with participants and explained that we were especially interested in stories about their School Forest experiences. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to an hour, though a few were longer (one with an enthusiastic participant lasted 2 ½ hours). Overall, 26 interviews were audio-recorded then transcribed; two interviews were not recorded (one due to technology failure; one a refusal to be recorded), but notes were also written by hand during all interviews. Only one person chose to review their transcript; he made no changes.

Interview questions addressed topics including personal history with School Forest lands; uses of these lands over time; notable experiences and memorable events

occurring during use; personal meanings of place; and perspectives on the future of School Forest lands. Though study questions addressed all four forests, 85.7% of interviewees (24 of 28) had experience at and spoke primarily about the (name) Forest.

### **3.3.3. Data Analysis**

The 28 completed interviews generated 200 typed, single-spaced pages of transcriptions. To examine the content and meanings within textual data, we independently read and discussed interview transcripts, then used collaborative, iterative processes of data reduction, interpretation and analysis. Throughout, we worked to achieve qualitative research standards of credibility, transferability and confirmability of results (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Riessman 1993). To address issues of credibility (confidence in the research findings), the authors drew upon our relationships and knowledge: we are long-term members of the academic unit that manages these forests, and were colleagues with, or known to, many interviewees. We have broad and deep understanding of School Forests and their uses, and we continuously used techniques of reflexivity and peer-debriefing. To understand the social and cultural contexts of reported experiences, we developed thick descriptions of rhetorical-discursive processes, and of place meanings embedded in narrative form and style (transferability). We worked together towards confirmability, using multiple analysts throughout the project, multiple approaches to rhetorical theory, and by maintaining regular notes supporting an audit trail.

Initial review of the interview data identified several forms of talk: factual information, general descriptions, examples, reflections, and stories. With respect to stories, multiple readings showed that many stories were intact (complete stories with

actors, events and resolution, told generally from start to finish); a small number were incomplete (partially-told or lacking standard narrative elements). These variations are common in personal experience stories (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012).

This paper focuses on the stories narrated by interviewees as identified in transcripts. Four interview questions generated an abundance of place-related narratives (n=126). Question 6 asked whether *anything exciting or especially interesting ever happened while you were using the School Forest lands*. Question 7 asked about School Forests as potentially meaningful places: *How would you describe this place? Are there specific places on this landscape that are/were especially memorable or special to you?* Together, Questions 6 and 7 generated 85% of the place narratives, with the remaining 15% produced in answer to Questions 8 and 9 (*What are your impressions about the relationships between School Forests and local towns or residents?; What is the role and importance of School Forests in future?*).

Iterative readings of the transcripts revealed that 21 of 28 interviewees had offered intact narratives in responses to Questions 6-9 (two others provided incomplete stories; five told no stories; none of the seven currently used School Forest lands). Review of the remaining 21 transcripts revealed that interviewees narrated stories containing various kinds of rhetorical claims and arguments. Stories were not neutral: interviewees introduced claims about events and the forests, they gave evidence and examples, and drew conclusions to reveal personal and shared meanings about people and place. Given the prominence of persuasive elements in these narratives, we chose rhetorical discourse analysis as the analytic method.

Following classical methods described by Rodden (2008), we first examined the modes of argumentation (logos, ethos, pathos) used by narrators to topically organize stories. We then focused on formal rhetorical practices (Arnold 1974) supporting place meaning development, analyzing narrators' explicit and implicit claims and supporting evidence. Next, viewing these "small stories" in a contemporary manner as products of interview-based interactions between people who knew, or knew of, one another (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012), we sought to interpret the non-formal claims, styles and linguistic devices that contributed to shaping place meanings. Rhetorical qualities of the narratives were compared across speakers and types of narrative action.

### **3.4. Results**

Results show that place meanings intersect across personal, social and cultural contexts, and develop rhetorically within place narratives. In the analysis below, we illustrate these findings with quotes identified by interviewee (I-#) and story number.

#### **3.4.1. Claiming Places Rhetorically**

Rhetorical claims typically draw upon three modes of argumentation: logos, ethos, and pathos (Arnold 1974). Because many earlier studies of place attachment emphasized feelings and emotion as the basis for place meaning, we had expected that interviewees would craft their stories primarily around emotional appeals. Analysis showed, however, that narrators used rhetorical approaches based in ethos (44.1% of stories) and pathos (42.3%) nearly equally, and both far more frequently than logos (13.6%). No one used only logos appeals – but 38.9% of the stories incorporated more

than one of these three modes. Stories based in ethos foregrounded the narrator's qualifications in making claims about place: "*I ran the forestry summer camp for quite a number of years*" (I-18, Story #043). Stories emphasizing pathos drew upon emotional perspectives: "*I just have really good memories of walking with my dog and seeing all the stuff ... we could go there every day*" (I-15, Story #035). Stories oriented to logos used claims based on logical reasoning, facts and data: "*... the reclamation process is evident on the land*" (I-13, Story #061).

Claims are assertions that speakers take to be true, and beyond modes of argumentation, most interviewees made explicit and implicit claims specifically about *place* in their stories. Yet place was not just the geographic site of the forest or the landscape: it was also a referent for self and others (colleagues, students, community members) involved in forest activities. Often, others were described by their unique teaching and outreach skills, as described in a story told by a professor watching colleagues lead a community program:

*...every month they'd try to do a Saturday experience up there at the forest ... [that time] it must have been 40 people ... mostly local people who ... wanted to see what was going on. [And they said] "look...you can't be viewing trees as entities that are static." They start, they grow, they decline, they can be used. ... [So] they walk everybody over to this one tree ... and then R. whips out a chainsaw and cuts it down. [And everyone gasps.] And R. says, "no, everybody be calm here." [So, they cut it up in pieces, and took the pieces over to the shop, and] R. turned one of those bowls that he does. ... I've never seen anything like it ... [R. 's] a genius. He knew what was going to happen. I had no idea that people's minds could be, you know, opened like that. (I-05, Story #008)*

Narratives also contained an abundance of explicit claims about the forest itself as a special place, and about working in the forest. Special qualities of place were, counterintuitively, often associated with this forest's lack of special qualities: "*So the*

*beauty of (this forest) in my mind is that it isn't unique... it had been a victim of being over-cut ... it was agriculturally used ... it has a history of a bizarre set of ownerships with different goals"* (I-05, Story #006). All interviewees felt their on-site work to be important, and expressed positive sentiments about the forest as a meaningful place. As one person explained, *"I lived every minute of every day thinking about things related to (the School) ... (that forest) was a key part of the early School's environment"* (I-03, Story #004). For many, one reason this forest was so special was that it was located (#) miles away from the university campus, allowing all sorts of memorable events to occur with little oversight. Nighttime nature walks, chainsaw training, vandals getting into research plots, people lost in the woods, dealing with nature and the elements, transportation break-downs – all contributed to deep memories of place, and could be summarized by the punch-line to a one interviewee's story: *"Oh man, the things we used to do (there) would give risk management people heartburn now"* (I-11, Story #120).

Across the interviews, it was the relation between faculty members and students that received most attention from narrators. Claims coalesced around two themes: experiences in nature, and relationships with others. Going out into nature for classes was *"a huge part of going to school (here) ... there was a sense of pride that there was a place where we could do this stuff, and my engineering student housemates though it was amazing, cuz they had nothing like it. Which only ratcheted up our love and pride"* (I-22, Story #123). Professors felt that, *"People's lives ... changed because of their interactions with (this) forest"* (I-05, Story #010). In addition to nature interactions, relationship benefits were seen by both students and professors. One

former student said that it was *“really cool, just getting out into the woods with your professor”* (I-12, Story #034). Professors also observed changes among their students: those who were shy, or poor students, veterans or students with special needs *“did good work at (the forest) ... and felt really good about it”* (I-10, Stories 16-18). Additionally, working back on campus with the wood from harvested trees *“just really helped connect (students) with the place”* (I-10, Story #018). These narratives support an implicit claim that students (and people generally) grow and change positively through outdoor, forest-based experiences.

### **3.4.2. Rhetorical Style and Place Meanings**

Narrative claims organize and assert a speaker’s ideas. Layered over claims are the stylistic devices used to emphasize and elaborate assertions. In voicing meanings about place, interviewees used identifiable stylistic devices, including comparison, juxtaposition, superlatives, and an overarching metaphor.

Contrast and comparison were used generally throughout all interviews to compare this (rural) forest place with other places (the “urban” university campus; other forests; more formal classrooms and offices) and to differentiate people who worked in this forest from others (faculty on campus; administrators; people in surrounding communities). Contrast and comparison were also overtly used in many interviews with reference to trees and the ecological qualities of forest sites. For example, one retired professor spoke about memorable past events by discussing a single tree that was *“really an ugly tree, and it had wild branches on it, and it was somewhat crooked, and I thought, oh that’s never gonna be a good tree.”* But he *“worked on it”* and eventually *“it started looking like a pretty good tree again. You know, straight and more useful than a*

*tree with a lot of crooked branches”* (I-04, Story #005). Here comparison illustrates an implicit claim that problems in nature could be improved by human labor and insight, a claim also elaborated in other stories.

Juxtaposition, however, was used to make the reverse claim: some events were uncontrollable. A good day with students out in the forest became a near-disaster when a strong storm rolled in; the forest was small but large enough to get lost in; despite the work that went on, the site was sometimes vandalized. Juxtaposition also highlighted unexpected events at the forest, including the time when

*...out of the middle of the woods walks this woman who had to be eighty years old. Had her grey hair put up in a bun. Umm, walking wearing what I came to know as ‘sensible lady shoes.’ Lace-up shoes with a small back heel. And she comes walking out of the woods. Now, what’s your conclusion? This woman is lost. Okay. No, she’s not lost. She came back, she wanted to see the farmhouse. She had lived there. (I-18,Story #086).*

Superlatives were also used stylistically in these narratives, often linked with repetition and expressed in pathos modes of argumentation. One narrator spoke of a large “beautiful” stand of trees: *“There was just a beautiful forest that was all sugar maple trees. I imagine a few of them were close to a hundred feet in height. Beautiful. Beautiful forest”* (I-04, Story #079). The “big” and “old” trees of this forest were mentioned many times: *“You know, using the forest to ... teach people how to measure big trees. There were some big old, really great trees near the farmhouse there”* (I-22, Story #060). And another, *“[It] has some big trees, complex structure. That’s a great spot. So I love teaching there ... students can see time in forest history right there really clear”* (I-28, Story #097). Descriptors like beautiful, big, old and great are imprecise words that capture emotions about place, awe and a sense of spiritual connection. As

one interviewee explained: “*And so you go back to that [historic] forest, and you can see a conservation history that makes you feel the power of nature to renew itself, if given the opportunity. It's a very powerful place for that, very powerful. Sacred, actually*” (I-10, Story #066).

Stylistic analysis of place narratives also revealed that narrators independently developed an (implicit) overarching metaphor to reference this forest, its people, and their experiences: they came to see it as a small, utopian society. Interviewees crafted stories around the exceptionalism of this place and the people associated with it. Narratives framed the forest as a small world physically and geographically removed from the university and broader society. Interviewees spoke of this place as a site where passionate people worked, learned and created memories together. Notably, those passionate people were foresters. As one interviewee pointed out, “*There was a time when no one cared about these lands, except for the forestry program*” (I-05, Story #010).

This overarching metaphor was illustrated in stories about an unusual cultural symbol: a forest-based pizza oven that became a key symbol of community. Many interviewees talked about firing up the pizza oven and socializing: “*And then we built a wood fired pizza oven, and we had a big celebration out there, and it was awesome*” (I-10, Story #019). One commented, “*I have never seen a community build faster. Students started coming out on their own on Saturdays and using [the pizza oven] ... We would fire that thing up, and you know, I'd bring dough and sauce and they'd bring whatever they had. And we had, you know, venison pizzas and homemade cheese pizzas*

... *It was amazing*” (I-05, Story #009). The pizza oven in the forest became a key symbol for place-based community enculturation.

### 3.4.3. Rhetoric and the “Small Stories” of Personal Experience

Modes of argumentation, rhetorical claims and stylistic devices, then, converged to produce place meanings elaborated within personal experience narratives. Informal stories gained power from experiential evidence drawn from everyday happenings. Three primary themes emerged from rhetoric within place narratives: the symbolic ownership of place; the unusual or extraordinary events of place; and the intentionality of memory in crafting place meanings. We propose that these themes might be central rhetorical components of place meaning elaborated in personal experience narratives.

The theme of **symbolic ownership of place** was shown in the use of ethos and logos modes of argumentation, explicit claims about the forest and its people as special, and in the stylistic devices of contrast, superlatives, and overarching metaphor. Ideas of ownership were revealed in implicit claims suggesting the elevated status of insiders compared to outsiders. Among academic interviewees, implicit claims about the values inherent in the teaching and research professions and explicit assertions about foresters’ strong conservation ethics were central components of stories told by interviewees. This forest was highly valued because it was “our place” – the place of our research work, the place we taught students so well, the place where we engaged successfully with one another.

At the same time, interviewees did include specific others in their narratives about events and school gatherings: “*We had some good times at [the forest], where the*

*whole school, graduate students, undergraduate students, would get together and do things*” (I-02, Story #102). The specialness of place was enlarged because *“everyone had a good time...”* (I-11, Story #105). Interviewees also identified those they considered to be outsiders, who were sometimes stereotyped as people who lacked important knowledge about the forest or failed to appreciate it. For example, one interviewee spoke about runners sharing the forest trails with hunters, describing both in a negative light: *“You guys doing the running, you got to wear orange or something – orange, red, don’t go through the woods wearing a white t-shirt and brown shorts, you know, some moron’s gonna shoot you”* (I-11, Story #031).

The rhetorical ownership of place by academic interviewees meant that others with ties to the forest were sometimes forgotten. Most non-academic interviewees, for example, knew little about the forest, visited it only irregularly, or (incorrectly) regarded it as off-limits for local users. These interviewees also expressed low or neutral levels of positive place sentiment. Those living near the forest and using it recreationally, however, were an exception; one explained: *“I just love being out there. It’s an incredibly beautiful place .... And hardly anyone uses the place”* (I-15, Story #35). Thus, some community members formed emotional connections to the forest even absent University ties.

A second theme related to place meanings was the rhetorical emphasis given to describing **unusual or extraordinary events** of place. These narratives were constructed around ethos and logos modes of argumentation, and used juxtaposition and superlatives stylistically. In these stories, narrators told about unusual happenings relating to nature itself or to experiences at the forest. One interviewee recalled:

*[We] had sixty high school students for two solid weeks ... we took them on night walks ... so we could see interesting things like the glowing fungi, they could experience insect feeding on the tops of trees as the dung was being dropped out of the trees upon them, and of course they thought that was pretty gross. But that's what's happening out there at night.” (I-20, Story #055)*

Some events were unusual because they occurred so infrequently. A former student recalled the first time his class used chainsaws: *“I remember it being extremely dangerous to give people with no chainsaw experience chainsaws, and then point them in the direction of a log pile”* (I-09, Story #015). Another shared a story about doing prescribed burns in the forest: *“many times of course we had burning permits and everything in place, and we'd do the ignition and start the burning, and airline pilots would call in the fire, and fire trucks would arrive.... I think it was because they wanted to see what was going on ... rather than put the fire out”* (I-20, Story #056). These extraordinary events, then, increased the specialness of place.

Other events were unusual because narrators made nature a collaborator in the experience of place-making. This rhetorical practice was evident across the interviews, as shown in a story provided by a former student:

*I remember it was like a typical early summer morning, and it was humid, and we were just out in the woods running our transects and stuff .... and we heard this, this sound. And it was just a very odd noise .... So we kind of slowly crept up over the ridge and kind of looked down. And there was, there in the leaves, not twenty feet away, was a brand-new fawn. And it had just been dropped. The thing – it was trying to stand up, get to its feet, and obviously the female had heard us coming and had bounded off. ... this little fawn like looked at us, kind of like saying ‘are you my mom?’ And it was just so ... raw. It was just such a cool experience. (I-12, Story #033)*

Finally, beyond the rhetorical uses of symbolic ownership and unusual experiences, personal experience narratives revealed a third theme: the **intentionality of**

**memory** for crafting place meanings. Stories are memories, of course; they look back in time. But they do so on purpose, suggesting also that memory is intentionally deployed in crafting place meanings.

Unlike people interviewed on-site at resource places, interviewees in this study were narrating past, not current, forest experiences. The stories they told were “seasoned”: reflected upon, sorted, evaluated and practiced in the mind, if not orally. Moreover, some narrated forest experiences involving significant life events, in stories that relied primarily on pathos. One narrator, for example, met his wife during a summer program at the forest: *“So that’s something that has always tied me emotionally to that place”* (I-05, Story #007). Another interviewee, a former forestry student and now a professional forester, explained, *“Yeah, (that forest) was where you first got to deal with the reality ... and for a lot of us, that just turned on the excitement, and I got even deeper connected in my studies, and became better friends with my classmates through it”* (I-22, Story #072). Thus, memory is not just neutral in storytelling; it is strategically used to create place (here, a past place) and contextualize place meaning.

### **3.5. Discussion and Conclusions**

This paper examines rhetorical aspects of place meanings as vocalized in personal experience narratives related to School Forest settings. We found that individuals using these sites were connected in multiple ways, often over long periods of time. Their interactions with place and with one another offer insights about the

kinds of attachments people develop with familiar outdoor places and about the discursive-rhetorical foundations of their place meanings.

Interviewees made explicit and implicit claims about their work and activities on the forest lands, the people with whom they interacted, and nature itself. The prominence of ethos and pathos modes of storytelling reflected narrators' long-term involvements with School Forest lands – multi-functional landscapes for teaching, research, recreation, sport, and community activities. Interviewees used specific stylistic devices to reinforce images of place, and personal narratives were crafted rhetorically to describe an imagined utopian society supported by memorable forest experiences, unusual on-site events, and a sense of place ownership.

This research has implications for advancing the study of place meanings in nature settings. First, the rhetorical discursive approach to place meaning extends and elaborates traditional theories and methods associated with cognitive and emotional meanings of place. Second, research conducted within an outdoor context where participants are involved in multiple, diverse activities oriented to both leisure and work can reveal a wider array and complexity of place meanings than studies of just one setting (for example, outdoor recreation). Third, interviewees' long-term relationships with place (and sometimes one another) produced a series of intersecting stories articulated within shared socio-cultural contexts – linkages of place experience that have often been ignored in research about place meanings in other recreation and community contexts (though see Kyle and Chick 2007; Lee 1972).

Prior research about place, place attachment and place meaning has typically examined the *contents* of narratives (topics, themes) to interpret narrators' stories in

terms of their internal cognitive and emotional states. The research described in this paper advances the study of place meanings beyond content to evaluate rhetorical claims, strategies and styles used to narrate stories that convey personal, social and cultural meanings about place. Analysis of the rhetorical aspects of stories, then, shifts the focus from individualistic to interactionist and discursive perspectives. Within this approach, place meaning is theorized to be a product of rhetorical aspects of personal experience narratives.

Studying the rhetoric offers opportunities to examine the discursive processes of creating place meanings. The findings of this study, for example, lead us to propose that place meanings expressed through personal experience narratives will exhibit minimally three key rhetorical processes: use of claims related to an individual or group's sense of place ownership; rhetorical claims-making about events narrators see as unusual (stylistically enhanced with abstract ideas, superlatives, and perhaps an overarching metaphor); and the intentional (and possibly strategic) use of memory in creating place meanings.

On a broader level, narratives that call upon shared history, emotion and imagery can reinforce discourse communities (Johnstone 1990) – but they also reveal tensions in how groups claim places for themselves. In this study, the forest lands claimed rhetorically by interviewees are owned by the University, which defines the policies for their use. Thus, place meanings must be contextualized within social structures and cultural circumstances.

The findings of this research also have practical applications. In contrast to Dickinson's (2011) study of forest-based education for children, for example, this study

revealed a slowing of time in the School Forests, a stated sense of escape from the outside world, and an emphasis on nature ethics and life-long connections with others. Though School Forests were conceptualized as spaces of production and use, a sense of place seemed to be fostered within the educational programs. These differences in outcomes may relate to the longevity of the program of work: professors and researchers often spent years working in the same forest settings, and introducing new classes to the site over time. Thus, sense of place may be seen to develop by repetition.

The research described here shows that individuals' place meanings are interlinked within social and cultural contexts. As a result, environmental managers can deliberately work to create relationships across groups to foster positive place meanings, using strategic programming, community outreach, partnerships, and by designing places as social sites for sharing stories and making memories (recall the pizza oven). Special consideration could even be given to creating unusual events and opportunities within natural spaces.

### **3.5.1. The Value of Rhetoric for Place Meaning**

The School Forests research shows how interviewees used the form of narrative and the features of rhetoric (claims, style) within narrative to express meanings about forest places, experiences, and people. Place meanings were not merely asserted, and they were not simply fully-formed or pre-existing in the minds of interviewees. Instead, they were *argued into being* as speakers narrated their stories. Research about rhetoric within narrative can help to reveal the processes by which place meanings arise, and the social and cultural influences on their construction, narration and persistence over time.

In environmental scholarship, there has been relatively little recent work on rhetoric within narrative (though see Stokowski 2013). Scholarship about place narratives has primarily relied on categorical approaches drawn from content and thematic analyses, and to a limited extent on discursive approaches (Manzo and Devine-Wright 2014). This research suggests several areas for future study. Given the large number of stories in our data, we chose to analyze intact narratives (those with an obvious beginning, middle and end, told sequentially). Though this is common in narrative studies of place, it may systematically miss place meanings within informal narrative structures and “small stories” (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2012; Bamberg 2012; Lorimer 2003). Future research involving non-intact stories may provide opportunities to expand the methods and perspectives about place meanings research.

Related to this issue is that not everything is narrative; speakers also utter non-narrative descriptions, factual information, side comments, questions and other functional speech content. In this study, we excluded these other utterances from analyses. Yet some of this material is implicitly rhetorical (it demonstrates authority, position, values, and so on), and future research should consider its use and implications for place meanings. Further, interviewees have divergent skills in narrating stories; some are natural story-tellers, while others are not. Our response to this was to collect long interviews that included an array of narrative content, and to resist favoring well-spoken interviewees in analysis and reporting. Researchers should be attentive to these issues, and to the interactional qualities that foster useful narrative data.

This study provides a detailed look at the rhetorical qualities of everyday place narratives, and at rhetorical and narrative processes related to development of place

meanings in outdoor settings. The approach used in this study extends prior research about place meanings, and our interviewees' diverse roles reveal a wider array of place meanings developed through long-term relationships with forest places and others. These results encourage further work into how place meanings are produced in all forms of symbolic communication, and especially rhetorically.

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## CHAPTER 4: THE ROLE OF IMAGINARIES IN RURAL COMMUNITY TRANSITIONS

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***Running Head:*** Imaginaries and Community Transitions

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#### 4.1. Introduction

Across the social sciences, the topic of *imaginaries* has risen in popularity over the past several decades. The concept of *imaginary* refers in colloquial usage often (negatively) to the fantasies produced by one's imagination. In the social sciences, however, an imaginary is not necessarily negative: it is an idealized construction of reality seen to have potential personal, social and cultural utility. In this sense, imaginaries are "implicit schemas of interpretation" (Strauss 2006), or "complex systems of presumption" (Vogler 2002). Not only the product of individual minds, imaginaries should also be seen as socially constructed and shared, with personal and social impacts (O'Reilly 2014). The anthropologist Strauss (2006) sees imaginaries as a contemporary term for what used to be called culture, or cultural knowledge.

In contemporary tourism and community research, authors have highlighted the relevance of imaginaries for understanding tourists and tourist destinations (Chronis 2012; Salazar and Graburn 2014). Imaginaries are congruent with tourism practices because, as Salazar and Graburn (2014, 1) explain, "tourism involves the human capacity to imagine or to enter into the imaginings of others." Graburn and Gravari-Barbas (2011, 159) encourage "the study of imaginaries as a means to analyze the spaces in which we live." Imaginaries do not merely reflect spatial or social reality, nor are they merely personal fantasies. Rather, they are fluid meanings about events, places and people, created linguistically, discursively and symbolically, and continually activated and circulated in the meaning-making practices of people and place.

To date, tourism researchers have given specific attention to the spatial character of tourism imaginaries. For example, Gravari-Barbas, Staszak and Graburn

(2017) define *tourist imaginaries* as “spatial imaginaries (a system of representations socially and culturally pertinent to comprehension of a geographical object)” that are related to tourist destinations. Their study of the processes and imaginaries by which social actors turn tourist destinations into eroticized places implicates visitors as well as local actors, and marketing and media campaigns. These authors point out that imaginaries are dynamic, on-going processes and meanings that fluctuate with the rhythms of place-making.

The discursive, social and collective qualities of imaginaries in various contexts have been addressed within the *theory of social imaginaries*. Taylor (2004, 23) describes social imaginaries as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.” Heikkilä (2007) further explains that social imaginaries are “native” ideas about reality as produced in everyday life and shared in common local cultures by people in place. That is, “the social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society” (Taylor 2002, 91). To this end, imaginaries can be seen as rhetorical discursive devices used by groups of people to legitimate what Cohen (1985) called “the symbolic construction of community.”

In this paper, we apply the theory of social imaginaries to a study of rural community tourism development and change. Social imaginaries are implicated in tourism, rural community development, amenity and lifestyle migration, place meanings research, and social change – all arenas of personal and collective imagination, fantasy

and longing (O'Reilly 2014; Salazar and Graburn 2014; Stokowski 2016) as well as practical arenas of communal life. In this study, we ask: *How do people use spatial and social imaginaries to symbolize community change and reinforce social and cultural meanings about place?* To answer these questions, we interviewed community leaders, local residents, and second homeowners, and used discourse analysis.

## **4.2. Literature Review**

### **4.2.1. Rural Community Development**

Over the past half century, an extensive literature about the patterns and trajectories of change in rural regions of the United States and around the globe has emerged. Much of this work has been quantitative in nature, emphasizing economic factors and local and regional histories of resource dependency and change (Johnson and Fuguitt 2000; Johnson 2012). Two key topics in this literature focus on attitudinal differences between local people and newcomers regarding perceived impacts of development (Smith and Krannich 2000; Clendenning, Field and Jensen 2004; Flora and Flora 2013), and the quality of life values associated with recreation, tourism and amenity resource development (Deller et al. 2001; Kuentzel and Ramaswamy 2005; Gosnell and Abrams 2011; Park et al. 2019). Amenity places are those considered to be especially attractive based on natural features (scenic views, pleasing landscapes, opportunities for recreation activities) or cultural qualities (parks, museums, high-quality residential areas), such that they are good places to live or work. Related to the research about rural development and quality of life is a broad literature on symbolic

values of landscapes and places – research that derives from a variety of disciplines and draws from an array of theoretical perspectives.

The foundations for scholarly work about imaginaries have parallels in rural planning literatures, landscape studies, and in rural community change. For example, Greider and Garkovich (1994, 2) studied the symbolic values of rural landscapes in examining how, “Our understandings of nature and of human relationships with the environment are really cultural expressions used to define who we were, who we are, and who we hope to be at this place and in this space.” Their constructionist approach explored cultural meanings of landscapes, the symbolism, values and beliefs associated with these, and the discursive processes that support the social negotiation of landscape meanings. Further, in a study of New England landscapes, Morse et al. (2014, 233) suggest that “discourses manifested through landscape may be long-lived, outlasting the original activities that produced them.” This study showed that over half of the interviewees worked to maintain a pastoral landscape, even though they are not actually making a living from agricultural activities or by utilizing the land in that way. Though neither of these papers mentioned imaginaries, their cultural perspectives are congruent with the scholarly work on imaginaries in other fields.

In community studies, Bridger (1997) discussed “heritage narratives” as selective representations of the past adopted by community members and applied to support specific interests in debates about the future of a community. He wrote (p. 78), “listening critically to heritage narratives entails a constant examination and reexamination of claims about what communities mean and about who has the power to define the meaning of particular places.” Community heritage stories can take on

mythic status as creation narratives (Stokowski 2016); they can offer a rationale for group membership and belonging (Anderson 1983), and they can help to circumscribe community boundaries and personal or collective identities (Cohen 1985). They accomplish all of these symbolically and discursively, calling upon not only “realistic” ideas and experiences, but also those that can be imagined.

#### **4.2.2. Constructing Place Meanings through Imaginaries**

There is an extensive history of studies of the imaginary in the humanities and social sciences which broadly frames imagination in contrast to reason and rationality (Adams et al. 2015; Arruda 2015). Within this literature, imaginaries can be examined with respect to the social practices, patterns and performances of how people live, their relationships, and the ways they structure and engage with the world around them (Adams et al. 2015).

Personal imaginaries may be seen as “the mental activity of producing iconic or linguistic images” (Arruda 2015, 128), whereas the social imaginary refers to “a network of significations, collectively shared, that each society makes use of to think about itself” (Arruda 2015, 128). Scholars recognize that imaginaries are situated culturally and emerge from within specific socio-cultural situations. Further, imaginaries are discursively presented and managed, typically as persuasive claims that are constructed socially and politically within an emotional logic (Rodden 2008; Gravari-Barbas et al. 2017). But imaginaries also have performative and structural qualities: on a micro level, they are replicated by individuals within specific contexts (for example, tourism settings), and they also function at macro levels to reinforce societal patterns. Thus, research about imaginaries requires cultural analysis (Lehtonen

2000) of situated discourses, and must attend to both micro and macro levels of analysis.

In this study, we defined imaginaries as ideas created imaginatively in the minds of interviewees, contextualized by everyday events, and accessible to researchers through language-based qualitative interpretation. We evaluate the content, form and style of imaginaries across three groups of residents in the town of Burke. This method expands traditional approaches to understanding processes of rural community change, and is inspired by the approach to tourism imaginaries outlined by Graburn and Gravari-Barbas (2011).

### **4.3. Methods**

This study was conducted in Burke, VT, a rural town comprised of three villages: East Burke, Burke Hollow, and West Burke. The 2018 Burke Town Plan notes that:

Our agrarian past has left a legacy that is prominent in our landscape and continues to influence the character of our community. While we are indebted to our past, the Town's recent history has been one of transition... Our resource-based economy, founded on agriculture and forestry, is now built on recreation and an enviable quality of life. (Burke Town Plan 2018, 4).

The town hosts an extensive system of trails managed collaboratively with other entities: with Kingdom Trails for mountain biking, hiking, and Nordic skiing; with the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers for snowmobiling; with the Burke Mountain Resort for mountain biking and hiking; and with Vermont State Parks for hiking (Burke Area Chamber of Commerce 2019). Kingdom Trails has become a major mountain biking destination for enthusiasts from across the Eastern and Midwestern

United States. Burke Mountain Resort has had a more difficult history. First opened in 1955, the lodge was expanded in 1966 when the first chairlift was installed. Lacking snowmaking equipment, the resort went bankrupt in 1987. Sporadic efforts to restart skiing operations were accompanied by other bankruptcies in 1990 and 1995 along with ownership changes in 2000, 2006, 2011, and 2016 (New England Ski History 2019). In 2016, the owners ran into legal difficulties, and as a result the resort is currently operating under a receivership while it awaits the next ownership change. Despite the resort's struggles, the internationally-renowned Burke Mountain Academy, which provides secondary education and training for aspiring ski racers, has maintained its affiliation with the Mountain since 1970.

Burke has experienced similar growth in population and age structure as Vermont as a whole, yet between 1980 and 2010, its median income was lower, and unemployment and poverty rates higher, than the rest of the state (Tables 1 and 2).

The 2008 Burke Community Character Inventory was prepared for the Town of Burke by Smart Growth Vermont and the Northeastern Vermont Development Association. It was based on responses from focus groups, surveys, and geographic data analysis. Results showed that scenic views and open agricultural land were a top priority for focus group participants, and concerns about urban encroachment were often raised. In surveys, "scenic vistas" were ranked as the most important aspect of rural character. The report concluded that "Burke residents have a strong shared understanding of what constitutes the community's rural character. They also clearly understand the degree to which rural character in Burke is threatened by rapid development as well as the importance of working collaboratively to develop sensible

strategies for preserving rural character” (Burke Community Character Inventory 2008, 15).

Table 1. Socio-demographic trends of Burke Town, Caledonia County, Vermont

	Population	Median Age	% Age 65 or Older	Vacant housing for seasonal/recreational/occasional use	Median family income	Median family income in 2019 dollars	% Un-employment rate. (2.1% in 2018)	% Poverty	% w/Post-Secondary Education
1980	1,385	28.9	10.0	77	15,671	46,706	n/a	12.2	31.1
1990	1,406	33.4	10.2	81	30,444	58,523	9.6	11.8	41.6
2000	1,571	39.1	11.4	203	41,563	61,438	3.9	13.9	51.2
2010	1,753	40.1	14.8	300	53,393	62,657	10.0	7.5	53.1

Table 2. Socio-demographic trends of Vermont, USA

	Population	Median Age	% Age 65 or Older	Vacant housing for seasonal/recreational/occasional use	Median family income	Median family income in 2019 dollars	% Un-employment rate. (2.7% in 2018)	% Poverty	% w/Post-Secondary Education
1980	511,466	29.4	11.4	7,024	17,205	51,278	6.2	12.1	34.7
1990	562,758	33	11.8	45,405	34,780	66,859	5.0	9.9	46.2
2000	608,827	38	12.7	43,060	48,625	71,878	2.8	9.4	54.1
2010	625,741	41.5	14.6	50,198	64,135	75,263	6.1	7.1	58.3

Source:

<https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF>

#### 4.3.1. Data Collection

The study described here was part of a larger project concerned with the social, economic and ecological effects of second home development in four New England states. For the Vermont component of the study, a doctoral student conducted 20 semi-structured telephone interviews with town leaders, local residents, and second homeowners living in Burke. Interviews were conducted between January and March 2012. The interviews lasted, on average, 45 minutes to an hour. Of those interviewed, seven were community leaders who were Burke residents, six were local residents, and seven were second homeowners. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed;

while each person was given the option to review their transcript, only one chose to do so and did not make any changes.

Interview questions addressed a variety of topics, including: length of time living in Burke; position as permanent or seasonal resident, or second home owner; descriptions of Burke, and what interviewees liked/disliked of the area; perceived similarities/differences across groups of residents; perceived community challenges; interviewees' opinions about local policies and plans; whether interviewees felt optimistic about the future.

#### **4.3.2. Data Analysis**

The 20 completed interviews generated 97 typed, single-spaced pages of transcriptions. To examine the content and meanings within textual data, we independently read and discussed interview transcripts, then used collaborative, iterative processes of data reduction, interpretation and analysis. Throughout, we worked to achieve qualitative research standards of credibility, transferability and confirmability of results (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Riessman 1993). The authors continuously used techniques of reflexivity and peer-debriefing. To understand the social and cultural contexts of reported experiences, we developed thick descriptions of discursive processes, and of place meanings embedded in discursive form and style (transferability). We worked collaboratively towards confirmability, using multiple analysts throughout the project, and by maintaining regular notes supporting an audit trail.

Following Stokowski (2016), interview transcripts were read multiple times by two researchers, with interpretations checked with the other two researchers. All 20

interviewees incorporated imaginaries about community change in their comments. A total of 198 sections of text incorporating imaginaries were identified and compared by topic and by interviewee groups (seven community leaders, six local residents, and seven second homeowners). Texts that included imaginaries centered primarily around five questions in the interview: Have you seen the community change? Are you concerned? How would you describe local residents or second homeowners? Does the future of second home development concern you personally? Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future?

In their study of the eroticization of tourist destinations, Gravari-Barbas et al. (2017) identified imaginaries using a variety of literary devices, including fantasies, personification, metaphors, stereotypes, and narratives. We initially followed this practice by looking first at the interview texts to identify short segments of texts that used figurative language (texts marked by denotations and connotations; attributions about the character of place; imagery; visual descriptions; adjectives; and rhetorical claims based on emotion).

Next, researchers sorted the contextualized imaginaries texts into categories using a reflexive hand-sorting method to identify topics and patterns in the data. Eighteen topics were initially identified, then these were grouped thematically relative to three types of imaginaries – two suggested by literature (social and spatial imaginaries) and one (social change) emerging from the analysis. Given three types of interviewees, results were compared across those groups.

We then conducted a detailed review of transcripts to identify and record the specific symbols used by interviewees to construct their imaginaries. Then, having

examined the linguistic and textual qualities of interview data, we attempted to interpret the discursive patterns used by interviewees to construct imaginaries related to place, landscape, other people, the community itself, and processes of social change in Burke. Our goal was to develop overall propositions about the nature of imaginaries in the context of community change.

Throughout the analytic process, the interpretive research work involved two researchers reading the transcripts multiple times, comparing and discussing texts, developing categories, taking notes, and examining and interpreting the symbolic, linguistic and discursive patterns that were derived. Though we did not formally measure inter-rater reliability, our collaborative practices throughout led to strong agreement about the identification of imaginaries.

#### **4.4. Results**

Interview transcripts were evaluated for evidence of imaginaries at three levels: at the sentence level (evaluating symbols and other figurative language), at the text level (identifying forms, styles and themes within interview texts), and at the discourse level (interpreting patterns in the presentation of imaginaries within and across interviewee groups). Three groups of interviewees were considered: community leaders, local residents, and second homeowners. Throughout the analytic processes, we focused on three primary issues that scholars of imaginaries tend to emphasize: how people use imaginaries to enter into the worlds of others; how people imaginatively orient to the spaces around them; and how people use imaginaries to make sense of their own experiences in places and anticipate future events and experiences.

Looking across the groups and the topics they discussed, community change imaginaries were often anchored to statements that were at least partly factual. For example, in speaking about a developer’s plans to build “quite a few” new housing units close to Burke Mountain, Interviewee #19, a resident of Burke for seven years, said, “That’s the only concern I have, that it will increase traffic, *but that’s progress*” (italics added). An increase in traffic is an anticipated outcome of new development (fact), while the imaginary is revealed in the cliché, “but that’s progress.” Not just a personal imaginary, this claim connotes broad social discourses about the values and meanings of “progress.”

The analysis below evaluates the ways interviewees imagined community change at the sentence level, text level, and discourse level, and makes comparisons across the groups of interviewees. Both personal imaginaries (those expressing an individual’s own experiences and interpretations) and social imaginaries (those drawing upon broad cultural frames of reference) were evident in the interview texts.

#### **4.4.1. Community Leaders: Imaginaries within Discourses of Growth**

Community leaders, all of whom were also permanent residents, had lived in Burke for anywhere between 8 years and “all my life” (a comment from an older employed person). In general, they tended to focus on what they would *not* like to see Burke become in the future. They were against Burke becoming “different,” having “bad unchecked growth,” or becoming overrun with “in-your-face types of architecture.” One government leader (Interview #4) commented, “We don’t want to build trash around here.” These leaders drew upon symbols of other communities and businesses that were seen as examples of negative change – Boston, Stowe (an historic,

well-to-do Vermont town with an adjacent ski area), and Sugarbush (a large Vermont ski area). A few speakers specifically mentioned Stowe as a symbol of an undesirable place – attracting “presumptuous” people “looking for glitz.” One interviewee (#3) commented, “Well it won’t [become Stowe]... because everyone here hates Stowe.” Similarly, Starbucks was used as a symbol of things gone wrong: “We don’t have a Starbucks and that’s a good thing” (Interview #7). At the same time, community leaders often mentioned struggles within the “bad economy” and the need for development in order to provide more jobs for local people and help improve the tax base. Thus, while they spoke about what they did not want the community to become – using wide-ranging symbols oriented to places and businesses outside the community – they failed to provide a vision for how the community should grow.

Many community leaders invoked imaginaries when speaking of perceived differences between long-time residents and second homeowners. These ideas were asserted with the authority of their community position: “I know the local people are very concerned about [changes in Burke]. They need to be managed. You have different attitudes now, with people coming here, how things should be, and people who live here, how things should be...they don’t always match” (Interview #3).

Yet, community leaders also expressed opinions that seemed to discount other people’s viewpoints, acknowledging that local residents don’t want to see change or development, but that the growth is necessary or that it’s not a big concern at the moment. These leaders dismissed concerns about over-development: “Obviously, no one wants to see their place overdeveloped. Um, but you know, we’re not anywhere near that yet” (Interview #7). Later, they commented, “...the ski mountain is only a B+

ski mountain at best, and it will never be better than that. And the town is pretty dinky, and I don't think it can ever turn into Stowe. So I don't see things getting crazy” (Interview #7).

These comments illustrate the power local leaders hold to construct and communicate imaginaries about a community, its people and its landscape. By phrasing imaginaries so confidently, so matter-of-factly, and so often without evidence, local leaders use their position to shape social and community change processes and meanings in this rural community.

#### **4.4.2. Local Residents: Imaginaries within Discourses of History**

The local residents interviewed for this study had lived in Burke for a range of 1 to 86 years. The symbols they used in constructing imaginaries represented the community and its landscape primarily through recall of its history. These included “farm,” “rural values,” and “the landscape.” Their frame of reference in discussing community change was with respect to second homeowners and tourists bringing different or new ideas to Burke. One interviewee (#11) commented, “Well they bring their ideas from wherever it might be, whatever state or area they come from, they bring different ideas, they do.” Unlike the community leaders and second homeowners, those who considered themselves to be permanent residents spoke of the three villages of the town of Burke (East Burke, Burke Hollow, and West Burke) as individual entities; they had more nuanced views of the local area.

In their interviews, many local residents used comparisons to discuss imaginaries about how Burke used to be versus how it is now. They told stories about growing up in Burke: “Well, Burke when I grew up was primarily farming. In fact,

there wasn't anything that would be classed as recreational, the way it is now..."

(Interview #13). The same interviewee commented on physical changes in the landscape as a result of second homes: "You used to be able to drive for two or three miles and that would be the only thing, the road. And now you drive along and ...there's a road going up in this direction, and there's a house at the end of it, and a road going off of it another direction every little ways with a house at the end of it...it's changing the landscape" (Interview #13).

A central idea in their imaginaries was a collective desire to keep Burke the way it is or was in the past. For example, one interviewee (#14) discussed a time when more grandiose plans were proposed for developing the ski mountain: "Everyone was like do they have a clue where the Northeast Kingdom is? 'Are they joking?' kind of stuff. We're not going to do that here. So, we're not going to pay five dollars for a cup of coffee and twelve dollars for a hamburger. It isn't going to happen." Many local residents were sentimental when expressing their desire to keep Burke the same: "It's just... rural and it's part of Vermont...what Vermont was 150 years ago, it's still basically the same... It's a great place to live. Bring up your children... Because it's friendly and safe" (Interview #20).

Thus, for interviewees who were permanent residents, imaginaries were oriented to the history of the community and to evaluating the ideas of second homeowners who they felt to be different from locals. They imagined the newcomers as a source of community change impacting both physical and social life, but also acknowledged that second homeowners are most highly valued because they contributed financially to the community.

#### **4.4.3. Second Homeowners: Imaginaries within Discourses of Utopia**

The second homeowners interviewed for this study had lived in Burke between 4-22 years, with an average of 10.3 years; one second homeowner had moved back to Burke to renovate the family house that was over 200 years old. These interviewees used symbols describing Burke in a positive light: they saw it as a “wonderful town,” “a small, rural community,” and a “well-kept secret.” Among this group of interviewees, McDonalds was mentioned as a symbol of undesirable development that would move the landscape away from being “quaint and Vermont-like” (Interview #17). Their discourses were characterized by very positive sentiments about the town, the landscape, and the idea of Vermont. The symbols and personal imaginaries expressed by second homeowners, however, differed in form and content from those of local leaders and residents. These interviewees were sometimes critical about what they saw as “a lot of small town politics” (Interview #16) – but that was tempered by how much they “love” the area. In general, second homeowners expressed wider geographical imaginaries than the other two groups, extending their appreciation for rurality, nature, and their experiences across Burke, the “beautiful state of Vermont,” and New England.

In general, second homeowners seemed to have made the decision to purchase a residence in Vermont because they liked the town as it is. Even if the development of second homes changed the ambience a bit, they felt the impact was positive: “I didn’t rape the land to build a fancy new house or anything. I mean, I keep mine up. I think it lends to the landscape rather than detracting from it. I think that people that can own a second home generally can afford the upkeep, so their homes look good and are well-maintained” (Interview #6). Another second homeowner commented, “I guess I don’t

have any concerns, other than that they would build up the [ski] mountain and that it would be...horrible, because we are tourists. But there would be more tourists!”

(Interview #8).

Second homeowners spoke positively of local residents, and although some complained about the high property taxes imposed on second homeowners, they were generally accepting of the cost: “It’s a beautiful state, it’s a clean state, and that’s just the price you pay for living there” (Interview #8). Many were opposed to development, but also acknowledged that it provided necessary jobs for the local residents: “I still, overall, think that [developments] would be good if they’re done right. Whether I like building things or not, I think people need a way of having an income. And there’s not a lot for them to do there” (Interview #12). On the surface, sentiments like these appear to be benevolent concerns for one’s adopted place – but these imaginaries can also be interpreted as paternalistic: newcomers are often more highly educated, wealthier and more well-traveled than others living in the community. While initially sounding like an objective assessment, the phrase “there’s not a lot for *them* to do *there*” is an imagined perspective by others about what local people should aspire to, and whether Burke is a place where aspirations can be fulfilled.

#### **4.4.4. Discursive Patterns: Imaginaries and Rural Change**

Comparisons across three groups of Burke residents ultimately revealed discursive patterns that illustrate processes of constructing community change via use of imaginaries. These patterns included: (1) use of stereotypes that maintain social distance across groups; (2) fear of nameless “others,” in and outside the community; (3) metaphorical use of landscape fragmentation practices; (4) an iconic symbol – “the

mountain” – that was both unifying and divisive; and (5) social change as a threat to landscape, self and community.

#### 4.4.4.1. Stereotypes and Social Distance

Community leaders, local residents and second homeowners all constructed social imaginaries that stereotyped others and reinforced social distance between groups. Community leaders, for example, sometimes referred to second homeowners as “flatlanders,” characterizing them as wearing more sophisticated clothing but being “less presumptuous than [second homeowners at] places... like Stowe, because our amenities are the outdoors” (Interview #5, community leader). Such commentary is hardly verifiable, but it does create an imagined narrative about “who we are” as a community. Local residents were described as laid back and having “rural values.” Second homeowners stereotyped them as “a little more casual” (Interview #18), and a community leader noted that they’re “less involved [in local politics] until the point where they may be restricted in something they want to do” (Interview #3). These attributions affirm the power of local leaders (who present themselves as well-informed) while also dividing groups of local people into those who see themselves as having have “rural values” and those who are assumed to not have those (new homeowners and other seasonal residents).

#### 4.4.4.2. Fear of Others

Using group-specific stereotypes to connote social distinctions in the community, imaginaries also expressed fear of “others” located both inside and outside Burke. Community leaders spoke about wealthy, unknown outsiders as “they” who propose change in Burke: “You know, when they [a real estate development company]

wanted to fly in here and make it feel like Florida, everybody had a real issue with that” (Interview #7). Leaders also referred to local residents as “these people,” for example: “...maybe the best way to sell to these people what they have grown to like about that area is to cluster the houses fairly close on, say, 50 acres...” (Interview #5). Referring to locals as “these people” is a rhetorical strategy supporting an imaginary that elevates leaders above permanent residents, and assumes that everyone in the group wants the same thing. The same strategy was used with reference to second homeowners: one local official (Interview #10) said, “Burke is a very welcoming town, and *we try to make outsiders feel welcome*” (italics added). In these examples, social imaginaries are invoked for purposes of exclusion, serving as a code for taken-for-granted local social relationships.

The use of both in-group (“we”) and other (“they”) references are shown together in a complex social imaginaries text narrated by another community leader (Interview #1).

...every time they come up here, they’re shopping at local stores, they’re buying our gasoline, they’re eating at our local restaurants, they’re renting out their homes ... or their second homes or camps, bringing in new people who come up to experience our area and [those people] do the same thing, they’re purchasing in our stores and our shops and eating in our restaurants, using our recreational facilities. ... it creates economy.

On the surface, this text overtly discusses local business activities observed by the narrator, and it can be read objectively as a factual account of community impacts from tourism. Yet, in its repetition (they/our) and its summary point (“it creates economy”), the text also constructs social imaginaries of inclusion and exclusion. Notably, to this interviewee, these imaginaries result in a positive outcome (supporting

a local economy), pointing out the power of imaginaries discourses to influence belief and potentially public policy decisions.

Local leaders were not the only ones to use divisive language. Permanent resident interviewees also described local leaders as a generalized “they” who were assumed to be looking out for the community: “I don’t know. I just hope they can keep it organized and continue to keep it looking...not lose its character too much. ... they haven’t hurt anything yet, and I don’t believe they ever will in my lifetime” (Interview #11). Another local resident noted “My biggest concerns about the area would be that it might get overbuilt and commercialized a little... I don’t know that that’s what’s going to happen. But you never know. What they say and what they do could be two different things” (Interview #15). Second homeowners also spoke about a “they” in terms of development: “I guess I don’t have any concerns, other than that they would build up the mountain” (Interview #8). These quotes all reflect the uncertainties of both permanent residents and second homeowners, but interpreted literally, these sentences could be read as a cautious acceptance of local leadership. Notably, however, who “they” refers to is never specified – so it is never clear who is perceived to have power, or who actually has power.

#### 4.4.4.3. Metaphors of Landscape Fragmentation

Within these issues of community relationships and trust, one topic was notable as a metaphor for community change: the pressures of landscape fragmentation. All three community groups framed rural change imaginaries in terms of changes to local scenery and spatial aspects of the physical landscape. Community leaders lamented the lack of proper zoning and the fragmentation of the land. One interviewee

(#5) commented, “I hate to see a driveway every two hundred feet up a road because that’s the way the property’s been divided. I’d prefer see a drive and a cul-de-sac with houses scattered around it... but that’s hard to write into the bylaws.” Another local resident (#15) also expressed concerns about development and fragmentation: “I think their concerns were going to be that it was overly built and it was going to change everything drastically.” A second homeowner (Interview #9) considered the impacts on local residents: “The scenery, [development] kind of messes up a little bit... scenery and whatnot... I think it’s more the change than the impact, for the locals.”

These comments about landscape fragmentation can be viewed as a metaphor for overall change in Burke. New people, new ideas, and new development proposals have all introduced uncertainty to the community – and the discourse of imaginaries used to convey visual fragmentation has a parallel in how community social divisions are reinforced.

#### 4.4.4.4. “The Mountain” – An Iconic Symbol

One iconic community symbol reinforces this point. Many interviewees spoke about Burke Mountain as simply “the mountain,” personifying a local landmark in a manner that called upon people to imagine it as a social actor in the community. Community leaders spoke of the mountain as tied to growth and sustainability of the town. One interviewee (#7) suggested they should “at least increase [development] to a point so the mountain is sustainable” and referred to the mountain as mediocre. In its role as a primary local business, “the mountain” was also called upon when local leaders spoke about the imagined needs of second homeowners. A community leader (Interview #10) spoke about how, “The mountain does do shows, comedy shows, and

um things like that occasionally, but that's about it. They don't have a regular nightclub." No second homeowners indicated that they were at all interested in nightlife in Burke. Rather, second homeowners used the term "the mountain" to refer to the small-scale ski area that was operating at that time, generally viewing it as a small local attraction. One second homeowner (Interviewee #8) commented,

I don't know what they're doing with the mountain. I know right now it's ... still a family thing. So it's not...it didn't raise our property values ... when we purchased [our second home], the story was the mountain was going to be built up, and that the property value was going to go sky high, and it didn't. But that's still a good thing.

Permanent residents referenced "the mountain" as a proud symbol of Burke's history and heritage. They referred to "the mountain" to describe the overall economy of Burke and the area, referencing not only skiing but also Kingdom Trails (a mountain biking and trails operation) and broader community improvements expected to emerge if the ski area was further developed. One interviewee (#14) noted, "if the ski mountain continues to do what it's supposed to do, or what it plans to, it will build more structures because they will build more condominiums along the ski trails, that kind of thing. That might provide more jobs in the community, if they can do that."

Thus, across interviewees, "the mountain" was a symbol laden with meaning. Various described as a resource to be used, a potential economic driver, a lasting symbol of Burke's history and a small local attraction, it has potential to be deployed for a variety of purposes, by a range of people. Mostly, this modest small mountain (elevation 3,271 ft.) was the focus of social imaginaries that looked with a sense of uncertainty toward the future.

#### 4.4.4.5. Social Change as a Threat

All groups of residents were similar in presenting social imaginaries that saw social change as a threat to landscape, self and community. For example, one local leader (Interview #1) described Burke as a “tight knit” community – but then stated that, “homeowners are part of the community; the second homeowners ... they know they are a vital part of the economy.” The subtle discursive maneuvering needed to replace community with economy and assign a specific group of local people to the realm of economy is an imaginary that raises questions about how “tight knit” the community actually is, about who actually “is” the community, and about whether all groups of community members can collectively envision a shared future. To this point, three common imaginaries discourses were apparent across the sets of interviews. A local resident commented, “I hope they don’t destroy the community that I grew up in” (Interview #11). A community leader said, “I mean, yeah. That’s the fear, you know. That they come from Boston, and they want to be able to buy everything they’re able to buy in Boston in Burke. You know what I mean?” (Interview #7). A second homeowner expressed optimism about Burke because of permanent residents’ commitment to it: “Well I’m optimistic because the local people are very concerned about the environment, very concerned about keeping Burke as it is now, not overly populated, which I don’t think it would ever be...” (Interview #8).

Finally, community leaders, permanent residents, and second homeowners introduced imaginaries in speaking about social change as a threat to local natural and cultural landscapes. Permanent residents were the most vocal about spatial aspects of the community, specifically mentioning the town (small shops, old farmhouses, dirt

roads, the “nice” community) and local landscapes (farmland, lakes, scenery, “the mountain”) in talking about their hopes for the future. Most of these interviewees also expressed nostalgia for the old days in Burke. Second homeowners referred to Burke as a “tourist area” centered on “the mountain,” its recreational amenities (trails and ski area), “beautiful scenery,” “very small town,” and mountainside condominium developments. Many of these individuals comfortably described themselves as “outsiders” who liked the slow-paced lifestyle of the area and imagined it staying this way. Local leaders directly spoke about natural and cultural landscapes in terms of community change. For example, one leader (Interview #3) said, “rather than having large open agricultural fields or very large tracts of wooded areas ... new homeowners will put up “No Trespassing” signs. So that impacts hikers, and hunters, and all sorts.” Most of these interviewees discussed the need for “proper planning,” “well thought out planning,” “the right community participation,” “appropriate use” and “educating people” to address landscape-level issues. For all three groups, landscape imaginaries were expressed in general terms, referencing personal values and dreams.

#### **4.5. Discussion**

Personal imaginaries can replicate, support, or oppose ideas and images across networks of social imaginaries tied to a place. This study examines comparative data from people holding different positions in Burke, VT: community leaders, local residents, and second homeowners to the community. In initial readings of the interview transcripts, researchers observed that interviewees were speaking not only about factual events associated with changes in the region and community, but also about what they

*imagined* about these events and their consequences. Thus, we began to look systematically at imaginaries, asking: What domains of community life (people, landscape, family history, economy, personal memory, other) were addressed in the interview texts, and what forms, styles and discursive mechanisms of imagining were presented in interviews? We examined the extent to which individuals' personal imaginaries were consistent within each group, and how imaginaries compared across the three resident groups. Though some researchers (Sovacool and Hess 2017) emphasize material or performative aspects of imaginaries, our interview data led us to study imaginaries from the perspective of cultural analysis and discourse theory (after Lehtonen 2000).

Imaginaries become visible in the language of individuals, as well as in the over-arching social and cultural discourses of society. As Gaonkar (2002, 7) explained, "Each society derives its unity and identity by representing itself in symbols, myths, legends, and other collectively shared significations. Language is the medium par excellence in which these social imaginary significations become manifest and do their constitutive work." Language is one of the most important resources for communities in transition, and the analysis presented in this paper shows how personal and social imaginaries can exist, overlap, and compete even within a single small, rural town. During periods of community transition, analysis of imaginaries offers a new approach to understanding people's individual and collective meanings of place, others and self.

The interpretive analysis presented here suggests that in Burke, members of the three social groups studied often spoke different "languages" in their personal imaginaries. Each group brings different perspective and power to their community

experiences. Local leaders deployed imaginaries to reinforce their positions of authority and control. They tended to favor growth more than did permanent residents or second homeowners, and seemed to believe that they could control the scope and rate of growth by “good planning.” Permanent residents constructed emotional imaginaries that spoke of personal history in place, revealing a sense of self linked to affection for the place and acceptance of one’s own life circumstances. They desired slow growth, and imagined that their leaders had the same goals. They felt (often without tangible evidence) that leaders would take care of the town and guide development in alignment with local residents’ values. Second homeowners expressed imaginaries that seemed related to notions of personal achievement based on their second home ownership and on the amenity values they found in Burke. They sought to protect the “quaint and Vermont-like” features of Burke.

Because imaginaries evoke social and cultural knowledge, community discourses that align current sentiments with shared future goals may help to create meaningful places, elevating the hopes of people and defining a geographical locale uniquely. In circumstances of community change, though, imaginaries can reveal cleavages in community members’ perspectives about people and place in the present and into the future. For this reason, imaginaries should not be seen as neutral: they rhetorically “carry” and reproduce existing social meanings while also facilitating creation of new meanings within processes of interpersonal and mediated interaction.

Though this paper has focused specifically on personal and social imaginaries within a community experiencing only small to moderate levels of tourism development, it is important to note that imaginaries are also grounded in social

practices, influencing interactions, relationships and choices. Future research on the topic of personal imaginaries specifically should also attend to the ways that these are reinforced in everyday life and community processes, and the practical implications of their use.

As shown in the Burke research, imaginaries can provide symbols of unification (e.g., “the mountain”), though as Cohen (1985, 21) notes, “Symbols are effective because they are imprecise.” When symbols like “the mountain,” “rurality” and “community” are imagined differently by local people, they may have consequences for places. In Burke, permanent residents believed that their leaders were looking out for their interests and had good oversight of future rural development concerns. At the same time, second homeowners imagined that Burke was a bucolic small town, unlikely to change much. Yet, community leaders imagined that growth was inevitable even in this rural place; they felt they could control it, however, and were somewhat dismissive of local resident and second homeowner opinions.

These kinds of imaginaries about the future are not unique to Burke. For example, in a study of the transition of two rural Colorado towns from seasonal tourism to casino gaming, Stokowski (2016) found that local residents were more factually and historically precise in their discourses, while government and business leaders framed gaming differently, as a way to renew their particular versions of local history. As she explained (p. 263), “there is no single discursive viewpoint elaborating community collective memory ... memories expressed as local myths are elaborated informally in public discourses that circulate widely in daily social life.” Social imaginaries can even be politicized by leaders and groups because they are intangible, ideological and

rhetorical (Graburn and Gravari-Barbas 2011). At the same time, by creatively linking experiences and ideas to established systems of social and cultural knowledge, imaginaries provide meaning for people in their everyday lives (Castoriadis 1975) as they individually and collectively compare the past and the present with the future.

The study of imaginaries in the scholarly literature has been approached from a variety of perspectives. Some authors are concerned with scale (personal vs. social imaginaries), while others are attentive to discipline (geographic, political, historic, industrial, and other forms of imaginaries). In tourism, authors have frequently studied social imaginaries from the perspective of the institutional production and dissemination of imaginaries (Graburn and Gravari-Barbas 2011; Salazar 2010; Gutberlet 2019). We encourage integrated approaches, because imaginaries – while not material artifacts – “are irreducible to meaning alone” (Adams et al. 2015, 19). That is, imaginaries are consequential: they are situated within all the social practices, patterns and performances of how people live, their relationships with other people and objects, and the ways they structure social life and interact with the surrounding world. This also suggests both a need to study imaginaries over time, as well as attention to interlinked networks of personal, social and spatial imaginaries. Moreover, because imaginaries are fundamentally rhetorical claims, aiming to persuade others towards particular viewpoints, future research should address questions of rhetoric within the production and dissemination of personal and social imaginaries.

One area that is rich for further study in tourism and outdoor recreation is that of the intersections among community, landscape and planning as socio-cultural processes energized by imagining. Local residents, community officials, businesses,

realtors, tourism authorities, neighborhood associations, environmental organizations, and others who speak on behalf of a place all contribute to the imaginaries of place and the quality of community life. With respect to community social change, Cohen (1985, 109) observed that, “one often finds... the prospect of change being regarded ominously, as if change inevitably means loss. A frequent and glib description of what is feared may be lost is ‘way of life’; part of what is meant is the sense of self.” The study of Burke imaginaries suggests that future research should aim to study more closely the interactions across sense of self, sense of place, and sense of community within the study of imaginaries.

Among these topics, studies about the meanings of landscapes and amenity resources as expressed in imaginaries should receive closer attention. Graburn and Gravari-Barbas (2011, 160) assert that, “Landscape is the prototypical imaginary: it is culturally specific, shared by the social community, yet is it dynamic and reflective of sociocultural change.” Landscapes and their aesthetics are not simply objects; they are spatial relationships produced and enacted by people, dependent on visual and performative interactions in work and leisure, and changeable. In the Burke research, residents’ emphases on the imaginaries of idyllic rurality (in the form of historic rural villages, agriculture, and bucolic Vermont scenery) stood in counterpoint to second homeowners focus on imaginaries related to the beauty of scenery, and community leaders’ insistence on new imaginaries of place characterized by carefully-planned development of sports, recreation and wellness amenities. The process and transformation of landscape imaginaries discourses over time deserves further attention in scholarly research.

## 4.6. Conclusions

Social imaginaries matter because they are shared conceptions of reality, and even if not objectively “true” or “false,” they have potential to help shape local public life and social relationships (Heikkilä 2007). Imaginaries may expand thinking about future individual and community choices – or they may constrain innovation, mislead, or drive wedges between people. For example, Bridger (1997) argues that the way issues and problems are represented and communicated symbolically can seriously affect planning processes and outcomes.

With respect to second homeowners and other amenity migrants, utopian ideals often center on visual and sensory appreciation of landscape – not on the people who live in a place (Shucksmith 2018). This contrasts with the orientation of people who have lived for a long time in a place, who develop functional as well as sentimental ties to landscapes, and personal ties to other local people. Both kinds of imaginaries were present in our data, with second homeowners expressing imaginaries within discourses about Burke as a utopia and local residents expressing imaginaries within discourses about Burke’s history.

While this study focused on individual interviews, both personal and social “imaginings” could be identified in the interview texts. That is, interviewees drew upon existing social and cultural systems of understanding to individually construct the imaginaries they presented. These imaginaries, expressed in our 2012 interviews, can be considered in the context of other social and institutional discourses, including the Town of Burke’s government pronouncements and the Burke Mountain Ski Area’s

marketing practices. Both of these organizations also produced imaginaries about community change.

In 2013, the Burke Mountain Ski Area posted on their website a text describing their local imaginaries related to town/ski area relationships (the text was later removed).

The text, entitled “The Mountain: Our Town” read, in part:

A quintessential Vermont village – not the now common “Vermont-inspired” village – complete with white steeples and a country store. The kind of place where logging trucks still share the road with SUVs filled with ski families up for the week. The kind you don’t find too often anymore. Especially around a mountain with over 2000’ of vertical. This isn’t a small mountain for locals, it’s a big mountain where everyone feels like [a local].

The text goes on for another 15 lines, contrasting Burke (without ever naming the town) and its charming small-town qualities (local bakery, “real” Vermont souvenirs, “picture-perfect inns and B&Bs,” combined with quality chef-owned restaurants, craft brewpubs, and artist studios located in refurbished barns). The imaginaries presented in this text reflect highly romanticized, fantasy-based imaginaries of place and people. Though this is a highly massaged marketing text, it does have something in common with the social change imaginaries presented by interviewees: both look to the aspects of the past to imagine the future. This suggests that imaginaries produced by very different sources may draw from similar cultural scripts.

Another institutional source of imaginaries in rural communities is local government, which produces town plans and other documents that outline visions and actions for the future of a community. The Town of Burke published town plans in 2006 and 2018, with both documents containing nearly exact introductory texts that seem more aspirational than objective:

Our resource-based economy, founded on agriculture and forestry, is now built on recreation and an enviable quality of life. The town has been transformed from a quiet farming town to a resort destination, and increasingly, a center for innovation and commerce. ... Burke has managed, however, to retain many of the best elements of its past and merge them with a modern economy.... (Burke Town Plan 2018, 4).

By 2018, the town plan had also become more precise about planning for the future, stating that, “Burke must ... continue to refine standards to maintain and enhance its charm and rural character,” and pointing out that multiple zoning districts had been established to aid in that process. Burke’s “rural character” had become the dominant imaginary in local planning documents. In fact, the nature of rural character had already been a local discussion topic, as seen in Burke’s Community Character Inventory (2008):

Burke residents have a strong shared understanding of what constitutes the community’s rural character. They also clearly understand the degree to which rural character in Burke is threatened by rapid development as well as the importance of working collaboratively to develop sensible strategies for preserving rural character (Community Character Inventory 2008, 15).

In the context of the 2012 research interviews presented in this paper, what these formal town documents show is a potential crystallization of Burke’s social imaginaries. If this is so, then we might expect to see in the future that these institutionally-defined imaginaries have become central to new planning practices. In this process, though, there is a caution: planning is not only about tangible objects (the objects of planning, and also the documents that guide planning processes), but about people (Healey 2010). As Greider and Garkovich (1994, 264) explained, “Community tourism development cannot be seen as merely a process of planning and managing tangible objects (plans, sites, events), but as a process whereby spokespersons negotiate

meaning across both material and symbolic landscapes of memory, place and identity.” Repeating our interview study again in the near future would provide new insight about the extent to which the expression of imaginaries by local leaders, permanent residents and second homeowners might align with the powerful voices of local institutions.

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