Performing Pisgah: Endurance Mountain Bikers Generating the National Forest

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Performing Pisgah

Endurance Mountain Bikers Generating the National Forest

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In western North Carolina’s Pisgah National Forest, the extraordinary performances of endurance athletes imbue public lands with multivocality and sculpt spaces into idealized natures. Endurance mountain bikers generate Pisgah as a meaningful place grounded to specific spaces and particular identities as they perform challenging rides on difficult terrain. For mountain bikers, “Pisgah” means precipitous topography. Maneuvering a bicycle through Pisgah signifies skilful authenticity.

Performing Pisgah defines selves and develops social networks—through praxis and narrative both on and off bicycles—while simultaneously exploring trails and deepening local environmental knowledge. Moving at speeds between one and 40 miles per hour, mountain bikers’ visual scopes broaden and narrow while they traverse slopes and ridges, ascend and descend valleys and summits.

Riders witness deer, bear, boar, bobcats, owls, hawks and other fauna. They observe oak, hickory, pine, fir and other plant communities. Endurance mountain bikers articulate the Pisgah of their imaginations and share their physical, emotional and mental sensations in spoken and written descriptions of trails, routes and personal interactions.

Measuring Up Farlow Gap Trail #106

Mountain bikers weld self to Pisgah through movement and conversation about the three mile, 1300 feet descent down the sensational Farlow Gap Trail. According to many mountain bikers, Farlow Gap is the most technical trail in Pisgah because of its extreme steepness and dangerous obstacles: fallen trees and limbs; loose rocks and large boulders; waterfalls, creeks and rivers. Biking on Farlow is thrilling and frightening, demanding and rewarding. Falling on Farlow is potentially painful; bikers often acquire broken bones, concussions, lacerations and bruises. Completing Farlow is fulfilling because mountain bikers have meaningful encounters with themselves, other people and nature.

Mountain bikers recount their biographies by reflecting on their adventures on Farlow over time. Many remember the first time they attempted to ride Farlow. Veteran mountain bikers condition novices to expect Farlow to be a phenomenal place. When Kip guided his teenage daughter, Sophie, down Farlow for the first time, he staged it as a monumental moment in her young life when she would learn Pisgah’s true character and behold its quintessential trail. After her slightly frustrating (because she, like most people, was not used to having to dismount so frequently) but successful descent, Sophie recognized Farlow as “hard-core” (Sophie, online social network, October 26, 2010). In the interplay of performance to self, Kip, Sophie and similar performers localize their identities in exceptional trails such as Farlow.

Mountain bikers compare their adroitness and finesse to others in terms of how they ride Farlow. In the estimation of FlowForever (online forum, October 13, 2009), a talented mountain biker, trail builder, and race organizer, only 5% of mountain bikers are able to ride Farlow’s biggest obstacles (excepting waterfalls, rivers, and steepest ascents). Even less-skilled riders who are not yet able to ride everything the trail has to offer, such as ImOn (online forum, October 14, 2009), enjoy the challenge: “The rugged nature of Farlow is one of Pisgah’s best features and keeps me coming back. Keep it tough, keep it scary. The name Farlow instills fear amongst many, and in my opinion, that’s just fine.”

In their dialogue about Farlow, riders cast their performances on Farlow as an “uber challenge” (TonyJones, online forum, October 12, 2009), an indicator of competencies that “sets the bar by which [they] are measured” (BikeBuilders, online forum, October 13, 2009). Mountain bikers often reflect on trips down Farlow in terms of riding versus walking, progress or retrogress in skillfulness, mishaps and crashes. OnHisWheels (online forum, September 10, 2009) wrote, “I felt pretty broken and abandoned myself the only time I ever rode Farlow… I think I walked more than I rode… I am in awe of anyone who can ride this trail.”

En route through the forest, riders and racers interweave their own identity as mountain bikers with Farlow’s composition and reputation. Mountain bikers feel akin to the trail. Like a person, Farlow “has a mind of it’s [sic] own,” can emote, “Farlow is love,” and can receive emotions. “I love Farlow” (Passion4Pisgah, online forum, October 15, 2009). Performing on Farlow generates meanings that construct Farlow as place, connect to making places via other trails, and constitute Pisgah’s senses of ownership. A bicycle component manufacturer expressed his attachment to the trail by saying, “I love Squirrel Gap. It is by far my favorite trail in Pisgah… It stands out as the trail I ride most, and I know every meter of its length intimately” (UpsideDown, online forum, June 17, 2010).

In 2010, when the United States Forest Service (USFS) announced the Recovery Trail Maintenance Project targeting nearly 17 miles distributed among Squirrel Gap Trail and four other trails in Pisgah, the mountain biking community was concerned that their own aesthetics for nature and recreation would not match the USFS’s. Mountain bikers worried particularly that the proposed work would change the Squirrel Gap experience because the subcontractor hired to do the work planned to use gas-powered tools. Those earth-moving machines might turn the “raw and natural” Squirrel (PedalnFar, online forum, June 9, 2010) into a smooth, groomed generic trail. This would detract from the trail’s quality because “machines + squirrel gap = paradise lost” (Maida, online forum, June 10, 2010).

The USFS yielded partially to mountain bikers’ concerns, in response to a letter writing campaign, by agreeing to a minimal use of machines. A resolution was achieved through compromise in the wake of the recovery episode that could have caused or exacerbated animosities between the USFS and an active user group. In these politics, mountain bikers and USFS personnel produce a multivocal Pisgah where multiple sub-communities with varying perspectives use overlapping spaces.

Performing Pisgah affects governmental practices in Southern Appalachian when place making equals influencing land management. Mountain bikers’ desire to participate in decision making emerges from deep attachments to the spaces where they have indelible encounters with their human and non-human surroundings. In the interplay of performance to self, community, space and government, mountain bikers locate particular features of their identities in particular trails. In mountain bikers’ place making performances—working, thinking and acting together through riding, racing, talking, writing and trail maintenance—we witness the mutual constitution of self and space.

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Kip, Sophie and Cynthia at the top of Farlow Gap Trail. Photo courtesy Randall Tuttle

Maneuvering through Wolf Ford on Squirrel Gap Trail. Photo courtesy Brad Allen