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Authors
Hoppe, Alexander D
Nedzhvetskaya, Nataliya

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Americana without America:
Rhetorical Geography as a Source of Competitive Advantage

Alexander D. Hoppe
Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies
Paulstr. 3
50935 Cologne
Germany
Alexander.Hoppe@mpifg.de
Corresponding author
ORCiD ID: 0000-0001-9215-1524

Nataliya Nedzhvetskaya
University of California, Berkeley
410 Social Sciences Building
Berkeley, CA 94720
USA
ORCiD ID: 0000-0003-1576-7346

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ABSTRACT: Offshoring, outsourcing, mergers, and acquisitions can rapidly change the spatial organization of a firm and the reputation of its products. Preserving symbolic resources requires the intentional integration of a firm's physical geography with its *rhetorical geography*—a strategy that leverages associations of place to create value for shareholders and stakeholders. We demonstrate how Woolrich, an apparel firm that was once America's second-oldest clothing manufacturer, was able to capitalize on local geographic claims even as it shuttered its last remaining U.S. manufacturing operations. Pivoting toward rhetorical geography allowed Woolrich to preserve the brand equity of its American origins.

Keywords: rhetorical geography; brand narrative; provenance; place-image; heritage; country-of-origin

JEL: L24, L67, R32, M37

1. Introduction

In history and anthropology, geography often has a functionalist "symbolic" or cultural underpinning (Glass 1988, Kontler 1999). At the same time, this cultural foundation can be exploited as a resource. Firms can leverage the branding of places through corporate strategy and brand narratives. This is most notable in consumer industries like tourism, apparel, and alcoholic beverages (Bandelj and Wherry 2011, Ody-Brasier and Vermeulen 2014, Tokatli 2012a). More generally, symbolic resources including authenticity, legitimacy, and heritage are part of the growing share of intangibles across the economy (Mudambi 2008). These resources are unevenly distributed across firms, countries, and regions (Boltanski and Esquerre 2020, Hatch 2008, Urde, Greyser and Balmer 2007, Wherry 2006). Those with large amounts of resources can extract premiums for products and services with cumulative advantages (Godey, Pederzoli, Aiello et al. 2012, Keller 1993, Mohd Yasin, Nasser Noor and Mohamad 2007). What other possibilities emerge when we consider geography as a resource of representation, and one that is subject to strategic manipulation?

In asking this question we do not want to ignore *physical geography*, which we define simply as the location of work operations. There is of course no shortage of approaches which seek to explain changes or constancy in the relationship among representations, markets, and physical geography. Global and regional analyses have long been motivated by macro-historical phenomena including deindustrialization, disintermediation, or supply chain consolidation (Buckley and Strange 2015, Coe and Yeung 2019, Dicken 2015, Gereffi 2014, Sassen 2016). Recent global value chain analyses also focus on the impact of financialization (Gibbon 2002, Milberg 2013, Soener 2015). They examine the growing weight of finance in the economy, the growing share of intangibles, and the accumulation of profits beyond trade and commodity production. We feel this point of departure with intangibles is particularly "profitable" for analyzing the relationship between physical and what we call rhetorical geography.

We define *rhetorical geography* as a strategy that leverages temporally ambiguous associations of place to create value. By "temporal fluidity" we refer to a time scale of "trajectories" that includes strategies, narratives, and projects (Tavory and Eliasoph 2013:913-16). We will review its contrast to strategies that are temporally rigid below. We think the concept of rhetorical geography is particularly helpful for identifying the "moving parts" of geography as a resource: outsourcing, offshoring, or mergers and acquisitions can rapidly change the spatial organization of a single company. What complicates these moves from an analytical perspective is the dynamics of their impact. Spatial changes, for instance, can diffuse into consumer perceptions of products and services. These, in turn, can threaten valuable symbolic premiums (Pike 2013, Whitford and Zirpoli 2016). Preserving symbolic resources requires intentionally integrating a firm's physical geography with its rhetorical geography, or how these operations are conveyed to a wider audience.

While there is substantial work on concepts related to rhetorical geography—we will distinguish among heritage, provenance, place-image, and country-of-origin below—not enough work has been done to locate these concepts in relation to one another. Our solution is to advance a typology of brand narratives that brings conceptual clarity to existing work. In line with the goals of the special issue, we will also show how analytical value can be added from conversations with strategy and institutional theory, particularly on the topic of rhetoric (Suddaby and Greenwood 2005, Suddaby, Foster and Trank 2010). The concept of rhetorical geography will guide us through a case study of a firm which lost its physical geography even as it expanded its valuation by relying on associations with place.

Woolrich was—until recently—America's second-oldest clothing manufacturer. Founder John Rich started the company in 1830 to sell woolen apparel to lumberjacks and hunters in rural Pennsylvania. Woolrich became known regionally, then nationally, for its high-quality woolen clothing and signature red-and-black Buffalo check print. Largely as a result of international licensing deals, the company was able to expand global retail operations in the 1990s. In 2017, it was a 180-million-Euro enterprise with dozens of retail stores across North America, Europe, and Asia (Pavarini 2018). For nearly two hundred years, Woolrich was family-owned and controlled by the descendants of its founder. Since 2016, however, Woolrich has changed ownership twice, first merging with former Italian licensee W.P. Lavori in Corso and then selling to L-GAM Advisors, a private equity firm based in Liechtenstein (Turra 2020). During this time, the company closed its last remaining U.S. manufacturing operations, the Woolrich Woolen Mills, which had been in continuous operation since 1845 (Simon 2018).

As Woolrich broke the physical link to its century-old American heritage, the firm was forced to re-imagine its historical claims in order to move into the future. So how can a heritage brand continue to signal geographic authenticity when it divests of physical assets and local production? We argue that one possibility is to move geography into the rhetorical realm. Woolrich has made the transition from local to global production while maintaining its valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable status as a heritage brand (see generally Barney 1991). As we document, executives and employees alike came to recognize that the mill's greatest asset—claims to American heritage that secure market niches and command a price premium—no longer require investment commitments to physical geography. Instead, they can be maintained through a combination of rhetorical history (see below) and rhetorical geography.

In what follows we map time and space onto brand narratives, distinguishing rhetorical geography from rhetorical history and clarifying the theoretical usage of concepts including provenance, heritage, place-image, and country-of-origin. We then introduce details of the historic Woolrich brand and present our methodological mix of interviews and archival research. The body of the paper shows how Woolrich transformed its physical geography into rhetorical geography over three phases from 1830-present: outsourcing/offshoring, licensing, and the end of U.S. manufacturing. We conclude with a discussion of the value of strategic ambiguity for other political and geographic collectives.

2. Time, Space, and Brand Narratives

Brands function as "symbolic extensions" of products and carriers of a product's qualities, history, and reputation—not to mention financial value (Arvidsson 2005:95, Hatch 2008, Levitt 1981). Indeed, some economists have offered a "guesstimate" of the work of persuasion—marketing, legal services, etc.—as 25-30% of GDP (Antioch 2013, McCloskey and Klamer 1995). The broadest discussion of the work that actors do to build and mediate the associations of geography, time, and meaning is provided in Pike's work on origination (2015). Origination takes us away from the literal meanings of provenance to focus on the associations and social representations of place, quality, and other brand or product attributes. We will build on this framework below to show how origination—which is primarily symbolic—can evolve from a physical basis.

Possibilities for brand narratives can be analyzed across time and space, which in turn can be either strict (i.e., a realist epistemology of correspondence) or flexible (i.e., the coherence of social representations). To understand the exact mechanisms by which time-space associations can build market premiums, we offer a discussion of Figure 1 that begins with time and materiality before locating four existing concepts along these dimensions. Quadrants II and III can be summarized with rhetorical history, while quadrants I and IV illustrate rhetorical geography.

—Insert Figure 1 here—

The X-axis of time can be measured across a spectrum of temporal rigidity versus fluidity. Rigidity is most closely tied to history—that is, using associations with past events to lay objective claims to geographic association. The existing concept of "rhetorical history" is defined as the "strategic use of the past as a persuasive strategy to manage key stakeholders of the firm" (Suddaby et al. 2010:167).[1] Rhetorical history can mobilize either a product's provenance or heritage and construct a narrative with either physical realities, symbolic representations, or their combination. It can be relatively accurate or deceptive, as in the case of "remembering to forget" foreign collaborations (Anteby and Molnár 2012).

Temporality is both a grounding and a point of departure for the concept of rhetorical geography. Where rhetorical history relies on an imaginary of the past, the temporal fluidity of rhetorical *geography* does not depend on historic delineations. This may be achieved through disattention, diffusion, an implicit or explicit focus on the present, or even the construction of "imagined futures" (Beckert 2016). Rhetorical geography allows individuals and corporations greater agency in constructing a geographic imaginary, fusing existing perceptions with new narratives to create strategic ambiguity (Cappelen and Pedersen 2020, Kärreman and Rylander 2008). We argue that rhetorical geography can play an important role in maintaining competitive advantage.

The Y-axis handles material versus symbolic evidence in brand narratives. Material evidence may include traces or physical artifacts ranging from factory buildings to company archives. These facilitate objective claims to geographic association. A deed showing that a company was established in Woolrich, PA in 1830 or an archival photograph showing the company producing coats for an Arctic expedition qualify as place-based physical artifacts. Symbolic evidence, on the other hand, consists of narratives, texts, or audiovisual representations. They constitute subjective claims to geographic association. Visual cues from the Renaissance bolster Italy's position as a world leader in fashion, for example, as do omnipresent billboards in Milan (Belfanti 2015, Jansson and Power 2010).[2] In an earlier era U.S. apparel producers could falsely label products as "imported" from Italy to capture these symbolic premiums (Nystrom 1932:220-21).

In our typology we make no a priori assumptions about the epistemological superiority or strategic strength of particular combinations of time and space. They are analytic spectrums with particular examples subject to interpretive context: the same narrative account might be represented as an oral history recorded and tagged in a company archive or as an informal account in a promotional video. Power invariably comes into play in discussions of geographic claims as well. Not all individuals and groups will have the same ability to draw upon physical evidence to the same extent (e.g., with differential access to legal institutions or to the capital required to maintain archives or prove provenance). Our model is useful, however, in sorting existing concepts into four quadrants on the dimensions of temporality and materiality.

2.1. Provenance (Temporal Rigidity, Material Evidence)

Provenance deals with a chronology of ownership. Its restrictions can be coercive or enabling. They often involve a literal connection to land; studies of wine and food have been central to scholarship. At least as far back as the 18th century, Adam Smith noted that French terroir might produce artificially inflated rents ([1776] 1976:68-69). Today wine regions like Bordeaux and Burgundy maintain their "gold standard" status against international competitors (Voronov, De Clercq and Hinings 2013:622). At the same time, the superiority or legal status of provenance can be contested. DeSoucey (2016) devotes her book to the politics of food, documenting struggles and legal geographic protections for champagne (France), kalamata olives (Greece), and mozzarella cheese (Italy). Items with a provenance were not just "made in" a country but have a strong *tradition* of being "made in" that renders them valuable. Other markets for artworks and fashion designs are also intensely concerned with chronologies of ownership. Auction houses and museums, for instance, are institutions that verify provenance and facilitate stable and legitimate markets for exchange and consecration (Crane 2019, Velthuis 2005).

2.2. Country-of-Origin (Temporal Fluidity, Material Evidence)

Country-of-origin, or country-of-origin of brand, is the country most visibly associated with the production of a particular branded or non-branded product (Phau and Prendergast 2000, Schooler 1965). Country-of-origin is distinguished from other product geographies with temporal fluidity but an emphasis on material evidence. National governments and international trade organizations[3] gather data about a product's origins and control how it is designated—rendering it a distinct epistemological category from other product geographies. Because the value chain of many products is complicated, involving numerous manufacturers and suppliers often across different countries, the final "Made in…" label may only capture a small fraction of a product's true origins (Dicken 2015). On this count, relative to other product geographies, country-of-origin is inflexible and provides a thin description of a product's true origins based on legal designations. In contrast with provenance, country-of-origin is only concerned with the "where" of a product's assembly, whereas provenance also answers to "when," "where," and often "how long."

Country-of-origin still shows significant effects on how consumers value goods (Godey et al. 2012, Mohd Yasin et al. 2007). In this vein, some brands have sought greater agency in how their products are labelled. Most famously, though assembled in China, Apple products are labeled as "designed by Apple in California," retaining their association with innovation in Silicon Valley (Malfona 2018). Associations may also be negative. Voronov and his colleagues (2013) show how a peripheral terroir and lack of history work against wine producers in Ontario, prompting marketing innovations like servers giving local wines to customers and only afterward revealing its local geographic connection.

2.3. Heritage (Temporal Rigidity, Symbolic Evidence)

Heritage is a reinterpretation of history for a contemporary context (Lowenthal 1997, Urde et al. 2007). It is differentiated from other brand geographies by temporal rigidity and the use of symbolic evidence. Heritage illustrates how tight coupling to a particular historical time period or set of company events can create value for an organization (Balmer, Greyser and Urde 2006, Pike 2009). These might include claims of longevity, quality standards, or stewardship of a set of core values (Pike 2013, 2015). An example is Burberry's classic trench coat as an adaptation of a design for a WWI officer's coat.

The United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and other organizations are also issuing and standardizing formal criteria for the cultural heritage of intangibles. Tango (Argentina) and acupuncture (China) are surprising examples that are highly dependent on symbolic evidence (DeSoucey, Elliott and Schmutz 2019). In this context we also want to acknowledge colonial impositions and appropriations of heritage—as well as indigenization and imagination—which can be relatively authentic or wholly invented.[4] Jack Daniels, for instance, subscribed to a frontier/gunslinger mythology relatively late in its branding (Holt 2006). The world's first branded beer, Hodgson's India Pale Ale, was exoticized in British advertisements to show or invent popularity in the Indian market (Pryor 2013). In the long run heritage requires continued investment and symbolic maintenance; it can be lost and recovered (Croidieu, Soppe and Powell 2018). The unexpected revival of Swiss watchmaking was built on a selective historic and geographic tradition of craft, precision, and luxury (Raffaelli 2019). In this case there is some overlap with the analytical domain of provenance, but provenance alone was not enough to sustain product premiums.

2.4.Place-image (Temporal Fluidity, Symbolic Evidence)

Place-image is a representation of geography that can be appropriated for brand profits (Scott 2002, Tokatli 2012a, b). Place-image differs from other product geographies in that it is temporally fluid and relies primarily on symbolic evidence. The concept is designed to capture the mood or character of a place through aesthetics, narratives, or cultural associations (cf. Molotch 1996, Said [1978] 1994). This can include time as well as place, like 1980s Los Angeles or 1960s London. Physical connections can be marginal or imaginary: Tokatli (2012a) uses the example of the "Los Angeles-izing" of Gucci (Italian) under creative director Tom Ford to demonstrate how firms are capable of creating associations with place absent of any local history. Superseded by other Italian brands in a highly competitive market, Gucci appropriated the place-image of Los Angeles at a time when its own heritage and provenance were diminishing in value, capitalizing instead on the growing prominence of American culture among global consumers. More broadly, the corporate deployment of place-image has dramatically accelerated since licensing innovations in the 1980s (Crane 1997). Indeed, in the case of Woolrich, we will see that its Italian licensee actually became more powerful than its American shareholders. Now that we have reviewed provenance, country-of-origin, heritage, and place-image, we can now turn our full attention Woolrich. It will demonstrate the value of an asset-light strategy that prioritizes a brand narrative.

3. Research Design and Methods

This project follows a long tradition of interest in the physical geography of the textile and apparel industries (e.g., Magee 1930). In addition to extensive archival research, we sought to understand change and strategic intentions from the perspective of decision-makers. We thus recruited 16 "insider" interview participants through snowball sampling. Prima facie, we acknowledge that this is a relatively small number. We offer several rationales and explanations for how we triangulated evidence across multiple sources below.

First, although we do not claim a representative sample in numerical terms, our interviews cover the broad categories of employment at Woolrich (see Tables A and B) and capture a sizeable subset of the company's total employment in that period. Employment at the Woolrich Mill had fallen to 45 by the end of the interview cycle. Employment in the New York City offices never numbered more than a few dozen workers (primarily engaged in the core competencies of design, product development, marketing, and sales). Although we used snowball sampling, no single respondent contributed more than three additional respondents.

Second, our primary interest is in the sensemaking of brand strategy and brand narratives vis a vis geography. The sensemaking perspective in organization studies combines cognitive and social constructionist theories to engage with organizational change (Porac, Thomas and Baden-Fuller 1989, Weick 1995). Like most qualitative research, it is an interpretive method with the possibility to incorporate empirical details from similar cases (Small 2009). Our timeline of events and analysis of phases below adds rigor with connections to broader economic and strategic changes (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton 2012). Thus our data, collected between 2017 and 2019, locates broader historical themes within a single private company. Woolrich Inc.—soon-to-be Woolrich International—announced their merger with Woolrich Europe, the result of an acquisition by WP Lavori, in November 2016. They completed the merger in November 2018. This time period proved ideal for capturing discussions and situational uncertainties around the company's new geography, including the potential relocation of headquarters from New York to London and the contested status of the company's historic woolen mill in Woolrich, Pennsylvania.

Third, the fact that we name Woolrich as a brand allows for the direct incorporation of public and archival sources. Archival research was conducted in three stages. Early research was carried out in tandem with interview transcription as a means of fact-checking and researching additional lines of questioning. A second stage occurred after the interviews and was used to establish a cohesive, chronological narrative of corporate and marketing strategies at Woolrich from the early 20th century to the present day (see Table 1). The Woolrich interviews were then re-analyzed and triangulated against published archival sources from years dating 1920-2020, drawing extensively from trade press, local newspapers, and advertisements (e.g., social media, print media, billboards, and store displays).

—Insert Table 1 here—

Each of our archival sources provides a historical vantage point and material history that could not be accessed in interviews alone. We summarize the sources of our archival research in Table 2, which fall generally into three categories: news stories, print advertising, and multi-media advertising. National news archives included NexisUni, one of the most comprehensive news databases available in the English language covering over 17,000 news, business, and legal sources. Local news archives included the AccessPA Digital Repository, a digital archive of 55 local Pennsylvania newspapers that we searched from the 1880s to the early 1990s, in addition to a public company archive that included national advertisements and other material artifacts.

—Insert Table 2 here—

To understand Woolrich's multi-media marketing strategy, we further reviewed available website caches on the Internet Archive, from 1996 to present-day, including marketing materials such as catalogs and blogs. Social media also provided a rich repository of over 2,000 posts from 2012 to 2020; below we discuss a starkly illustrative photo from the mill. In Fall 2017 and Spring 2018, we conducted two separate visits to the Pennsylvania mill and local Woolrich store. They contrasted with two site visits to the WP Lavori-owned and operated Woolrich John Rich & Bros. store in New York City and provided an additional opportunity to observe some differences in marketing and the customer base (see generally Jansson and Power 2010). Although Woolrich does not produce public annual reports, we also conducted close readings of two histories commissioned by the company: *A History of the First 100 Years in Woolrich* and *Woolrich: 175 Years of Excellence*.[5]

We finally proceeded to check interview accounts against recent financials in the Orbis database. This included revenues and profits/losses for WP Lavori from 2013–2020 and Woolrich, Inc. from 2018–2020. There are some limitations (see the discussion below), but it supports our thesis that WP Lavori's strategy of rhetorical geography outperformed Woolrich's strategy of rhetorical history. A second round of interview corroboration with sources familiar with the financial details of both companies lead us to express confidence in our findings.

While this study incorporates techniques of grounded theory for coding, it adopts an abductive approach to theorizing (Peirce [1903] 1978, Tavory and Timmermans 2014). The iterative process of comparing data from different sources allowed us to reconstruct three progressive phases of Woolrich's transition from physical to rhetorical geography (see Table C for a company timeline): offshoring and outsourcing, licensing, and the end of U.S. manufacturing. They generally map onto macroeconomic changes, but at Woolrich's own pace and are filtered, as discussed above, through the sensemaking of a once-regionally bounded cognitive community.

4. Results

"We are actually an American brand even if… events transformed us into an Italian company," said Woolrich CEO Stefano Saccone in a recent trade press interview (Pavarini 2020). From its founding in 1830 to the present-day, the company has long used rhetoric to emphasize the heritage of its American outerwear. As its physical geography became increasingly decoupled from the brand image and its audience grew more international, Woolrich as a brand found greater success with strategies of rhetorical geography than rhetorical history. In other words, they learned to prioritize place-image and country-of-origin through their European license rather than the heritage and provenance of the original American manufacturing business. Below we identify three major phases in Woolrich's geographic positioning and marketing strategy: outsourcing and offshoring, international licensing and majority foreign ownership. As seen in Table 1, these phases were not exactly sequential. (They were also sometimes segmented in different divisions of the company.)

4.1. "It opened the world up to us": Outsourcing and offshoring

Woolrich was founded as a manufacturer but survived, and continues to survive, on the basis of brand power. From the 1970s to 2018, the company became increasingly reliant on outsourcing and offshoring. To deal with these changes in its physical geography, the company doubled down on its use of rhetorical history, emphasizing both its rural Pennsylvania heritage and its provenance through its status as a multi-generational, family-owned business.

By the early twentieth century, Woolrich was already trying to build out its brand by capitalizing on its legacy and local reputation. Built in 1830 and relocated in 1834, the Woolrich Mill was already a historical asset at the time company President M.B. Rich wrote *History of the First 100 Years in Woolrich* (1930). It was one of just four or five remaining woolen mills in an area which once hosted at least 21 (Estomin 2021). Consequently, the company capitalized on its rhetorical history through marketing. Catalogs from the 1930s show hunters set against scenic backdrops, in red-and-black checkered plaid outfits that became known as "Pennsylvania tuxedos." Many of these images are accompanied by captions that highlight the company's connection to a local area. "Woolrich Woolen Mills, Woolrich, PA" features prominently in most (see Figure 2). Others convey a sense of continuity: "Backed by A Century of Progress" or "Established 1830." Explicit claims to the company's continuity in space and time, as well as a focus on detail-rich historical narratives, illustrate how the company already deployed rhetorical history to differentiate itself from other American apparel manufacturers at a time when "Made in the USA" was still the norm.[6]

—Insert Figure 2 here—

"Road Tripping" by Shuushuu-by-Lulu was posted to Flickr in 2016 and is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

The industry and trade climate changed dramatically in the decades to follow. As domestic apparel employment peaked in the 1970s, Woolrich began to explore relationships with U.S. contract manufacturers. Manufacturing expanded to include operations in four additional states in the South and West, including a down fill facility in Colorado. In addition to contracting out its own manufacturing, the company increasingly took on manufacturing contracts for other American outdoor retailers, such as Eddie Bauer, L.L. Bean, and Land's End. In an interview with industry press (SNEWS 2005), Roswell Brayton, company president from 1968-1985, described how external sourcing changed strategy at the company:

> When we began to source product other than from our own plant, it opened the world up to us. It allowed us to produce any apparel that was appropriate for us and not be limited to cut and sewn heavier product. And that opened our eyes to the whole world that's out there, first domestically and then internationally.

As Brayton describes, experiments with suppliers expanded the brand's product assortment. It increased the scope of Woolrich's core competence to include sourcing.

Although contracting in other regions of the U.S. initially helped the company grow its domestic manufacturing, Woolrich employees gained experience with long-distance negotiations and eventually came to work predominantly with foreign suppliers. Contractors in Central America, South America, and East Asia offered lower labor costs and more flexibility.[7] After reaching domestic peak employment in 1988 with more than 3,000 U.S. employees, Woolrich closed six facilities in Pennsylvania, Colorado, and Nebraska between 1991 and 1995. By 1999, only 20% of Woolrich products were produced in Woolrich-owned U.S. facilities (Kinney 1999).

The company chose to strategically maintain certain domestic manufacturing facilities, particularly the original Pennsylvania mill. From the 1990s to 2018, the mill produced a limited quantity of textiles and blankets, including a long-running contract with the U.S. Army.[8,9]

Confronted with international market reforms, quality improvements, and lower costs, however, Woolrich designers and product developers were rarely allowed to incorporate their own mill's textiles into brand designs. A former designer in the Woolrich, Pennsylvania office recounted the frustration of working next door to the historic mill but not being able to use its textiles: "A big thing was, 'Why can't we use the fabric from the mill?' It's just ridiculous… We're on this side of the road and they're making fabric on that side of the road, and it's too expensive for us."

As operating costs increased, the mill ceased to be considered as a production facility and instead became seen as a marketing tool, even within the company. Until its closure in 2018 (see below), utilization of the Woolrich mill was restricted to blankets and special capsule collections. A former sales manager remarked on the change in status with a sense of resignation:

> The mill itself is such a great selling tool, but it's really hard to make anything there…we would try to toy with things like, "Oh, we'll make our wool here and then send it to China [to cut and sew]…" but even then you can't say "Made in America." You can say "Wool Made in America…" The whole "Made in America" thing, as far as I was concerned, it was a nice idea. It was never going to work for us. It was good for press, for [public relations].

Our interviews reveal that textile manufacturing became increasingly difficult to justify on a cost basis. In the above case, for example, the sales manager recognizes the value of country-of-origin marketing but admits that it exceeds the likely financial return of such a product. In later years the mill was essentially sustained as a "front" which reinforced the firm's status as a heritage brand. The company featured the historic mill in marketing campaigns. The Fall-Winter 2016 Woolrich John Rich & Bros. collection, for instance, features models photographed against the backdrop of the mill's industrial machinery.

As the mill grew increasingly unprofitable, it changed from an economic resource to a symbolic one, upholding many of the company's claims to authenticity, domestic production, and heritage. "Made in the USA Since 1830" continued to feature prominently in marketing, despite the fact that the only products still produced domestically were blankets, textiles, or the occasional item for a capsule collection.

4.2. "We could just as easily have… not had the mill": The pursuit of licensing

Beginning in the 1980s, Woolrich turned to external licensing deals with both domestic and international firms. The challenge of translating its Pennsylvanian heritage to a broader audience required Woolrich to expand from rhetorical history into a strategy of rhetorical geography. To recognize the value of the company's heritage and provenance, consumers had to have a relatively deep knowledge of American history and geography. Place-image and country-of-origin, by contrast, could utilize less specific, more ambiguous associations that required less context. As an added bonus, this strategic ambiguity complemented the company's shift towards offshoring and outsourcing (Cappelen and Pedersen 2020).[10]

Woolrich had licensing agreements throughout the twentieth century, primarily with home goods producers. In the 1980s, however, Woolrich began what would become its most significant licensing partnership, exporting U.S.-made parkas to Italy for WP Lavori, Woolrich's European licensee and eventual owner (WP Lavori in Corso 2013). According to sources from both companies, WP Lavori began as a distributor of Woolrich products but soon grew to become the company's most valuable licensee, producing millions in royalties for Woolrich, Inc. Eventually WP Lavori acquired the right to start its own high-end label, Woolrich John Rich &

Bros, that was manufactured in Eastern Europe and Asia, not the U.S. (Wenner 2016). The European licensee continued to specialize in high-end parkas, retailing for several hundreds of dollars with a high profit margin and marketing as a "luxury brand," according to a former manager at WP Lavori.

The success of its licensee eventually led Woolrich to emulate WP Lavori's asset-light strategy by offshoring (as discussed in the previous section) and by signing their own licensing deals. "In the 90s…what we pivoted to and what was really important to us for keeping our lights on was our licensing and our residuals from licensing," a current manager and shareholder at Woolrich remarked. As a former designer explained, domestic production became increasingly de-emphasized. "The biggest change that people always, always talked about… was the fact that we changed from a manufacturing company into a sales-based organization… We could just as easily have had a showroom on Seventh Avenue [in Manhattan] and not had the mill." There was a transition from selling physical garments to selling brand rights and place-image. Foreign partners with investment stakes (namely WP Lavori) showed they could earn higher profits from relying on modular governance relationships with suppliers.

Licensing also changed the "marketing mix" of product, place, promotion, and price. While both the U.S. and European brands began with the same toolkit of Woolrich company heritage, they selected different elements of heritage to emphasize (see generally Swidler 1986, Weick 1995). In the U.S., the strategy of rhetorical history is more prominent. For this reason, the company chose to keep their Pennsylvania mill in operation even as they adopted a licensing-first approach. As one of WP Lavori's corporate employees explained it, "here [in the U.S.] Woolrich has another kind of visual [signature]… It's very recognized for the blankets and for the clothing for fishing, hunting, stuff like this." When asked how U.S. marketing teams conveyed the story, the employee described "pushing [the] 1830s as much as they could," including using images of the mill. Store displays in the U.S. also drew upon a "huge catalog of advertisements from the 50s going to the 90s and forward."

By contrast, WP Lavori's European consumers were content with more vague narratives that referenced American place-image, a general sense of ruggedness, and a focus on quality production. A simple nod to geography was sufficient in this case. The same WP Lavori employee described how European stores were dominated by a "minimalistic visual" that emphasized high production-value video campaigns shot in a wilderness that European consumers could identify with the U.S.: "[WP Lavori] always has a huge screen with a video every year… they film it usually in the United States. It can be Alaska. It can be wherever…We never worked like that in Woolrich [U.S.]." Even if these campaigns were filmed in Canada, for a more distant audience they would still convey an effective rugged "American" aesthetic via rhetorical geography.[11]

In the late 2000s executives continued to think about changes in strategic fit. On the one hand, internal estimates showed that there was a subset of American Woolrich customers with brand loyalty and admiration who would support a commitment to domestic manufacturing with a 25% price premium. (We will say more about this in the next section.) On the other hand, decision-makers recognized that heritage can become a liability if narratives are not refreshed (Entwistle 2006, Siggelkow 2001). In the U.S., Woolrich employees battled the perception that Woolrich was an old-fashioned brand limited to heavy wool products. A current designer describes common brand associations:

> I used to do a lot of traveling… [and] you'd always get into a chat… 98 percent of the time they say, "Oh, Woolrich, wow. I've still got my great granddad's hunting

> jacket in the cupboard, you know." I mean, everybody [at the company] had this experience. It was uncanny how it would be scripted almost, and you'd say, "Oh, do you ever wear it yourself?" [And they'd answer] "Oh, God no."

The result of these tensions was that Woolrich began experimenting with segmenting its customer base.

The company created three distinct labels for American markets: Woolrich Woolen Mills, described by current and former employees as "high-end" and "fashion conscious"; Woolrich White Label, described as "urban" and "contemporary heritage" at a "mid-range price point"; and Woolrich Green Label, described as "traditional," "mainstay," and "outdoor," at the "lowest price point." The high-end label was marketed as Made in the USA for a small "capsule" collection and was the only one that included products manufactured at the mill. The two higher-end labels were eventually shut down due to poor sales performance. The lower-end label struggled to compete with economies of scale against larger brands. As a former designer described it, the company "became trapped by those [order] minimums while their sales quantities continued to decline… It was… trying to fight tooth and nail to get back to numbers through any means necessary, which just led to further discounts and further cheapening of the brand."

Doubling down on Woolrich's U.S. manufacturing legacy created pressures to preserve the Pennsylvania mill operations long after they had ceased to be profitable. At the same time—where the U.S. labels faced dated associations, limited price elasticity, and the intensive investments required to sustain heritage—Woolrich in the European market was utilizing an asset-light strategy with the semiotic ease of rhetorical geography (e.g., the American outdoors). Demographics were also more favorable: the European market offered a younger and more affluent clientele. These strains and promises led to the next phase in Woolrich's timeline, including the closure of the historic mill.

4.3. "Being an American brand, or at least perceived as an American brand": The end of U.S. manufacturing

Following a prior acquisition by WP Lavori, in November 2016 Woolrich Inc. announced their merger with Woolrich Europe. WP Lavori had spent the five previous years researching the potential benefits of a merger; they learned that the company was unprofitable in its U.S. operations. As a former employee of WP Lavori remarked, Woolrich "wasn't making money… Back in the day we [Woolrich] had more than a hundred million dollars in sales, but we were not transferring any of that into profits." Between 2013 and 2015 (prior to the merger), annual sales at WP Lavori consistently averaged around 145 million USD. Sales at Woolrich were higher, reaching 190 million USD in 2016.

However, as sources within the company confirmed, Woolrich was unable to turn a consistent profit. Woolrich maintained an expensive commitment to U.S. manufacturing but ultimately failed to capitalize on their potential brand equity with the higher-end consumer. Strategy instead revolved around selling high volumes of low-margin products. As a former designer summarized, "even though we might have gotten a 5,000- to 10,000-unit order… we were selling it for nothing, which was degrading the brand." WP Lavori, by contrast, focused on selling relatively high volumes of high-margin products (e.g., parkas retailing for hundreds of dollars), and staying asset-light with the use of flexible manufacturing contracts. Orbis data shows that in the years leading up to the merger (2013-2017), WP Lavori had a net profit of 40 million USD.

Mergers and takeovers often create emotionally charged opportunities to re-evaluate core competencies, synergies, and brand narratives (Chreim 2005, Hirsch 1986). The newly merged Woolrich took this opportunity to shift entirely to a strategy of rhetorical geography as they ended domestic production—a path that was itself tenuous and fraught. Ultimately, the final push to close the facility came not from WP Lavori but from a private equity fund that purchased the brand soon after the merger. The financial success of WP Lavori's asset-light strategy of rhetorical geography proved to be more convincing than the costly challenge of maintaining rhetorical history.

As Woolrich and WP Lavori were agreeing to merge, both concluded that preserving links to heritage would continue to generate premiums for the company's brand equity. WP Lavori went so far as to hire consultants to estimate the cost of modernizing the Pennsylvania mill ($50 million); they also discussed a strategy for producing bed-size blankets at the facilities. A WP Lavori manager explained the value of "Made in the USA," including the ability to generate higher margins:

> The real true American brands are not many and they're highly followed and regarded as a quality product… they command a higher price point… being an American brand, or at least perceived as an American brand now that the ownership is mostly European, is very important. We all agreed to that.

Woolrich's future owner would indeed conclude that "being… perceived as an American brand" was possible, but *without continuing operating costs and a $50 million renovation of the mill*. In fall of 2018, shortly after completing the merger with Woolrich, WP Lavori sold their majority stake in Woolrich to L-GAM Advisers, a private equity fund. The fund scrapped renovation plans and chose to shut down the Pennsylvania mill in winter of that year, citing the high price of domestic manufacturing (Ratchford 2018). Cost comparisons, according to a former designer, showed it was "four to five times more expensive" to produce a garment in the U.S., "so that is obviously not in parity with a 25 percent upcharge" that consumers might be willing to pay for Made in America. Following the broader rise of discounters in the 1970s and 1980s, low-end pricing at Woolrich—made possible by its own offshoring since the 1990s—had the unintended consequence of training U.S. Woolrich customers to expect a lower price point for its products. Cutting into profit margins in order to preserve provenance proved to be a tough proposition.

After the mill closed, the Woolrich tagline changed from "Made in the USA Since 1830" to "American Soul Since 1830," forsaking any direct claims to U.S. country-of-origin but continuing to build on the more symbolic aspects of the brand. While the historic mill had played an integral role in preserving Woolrich's ties to its American manufacturing past, executives and shareholders ultimately decided that the symbolic resources generated by the mill were not delivering enough value to justify continued operation. As a shareholder in Woolrich, Inc., explained, "it wasn't any single person's decision to sell it. The company was offered a price. WP offered the shareholders of Woolrich a price that was higher than what we were valued at. And there was a vote." The continued success of WP Lavori's licensing and marketing of the Woolrich name in Europe over three decades allowed the company to amass sufficient capital to take over all company operations and branding. Further, building on the series of experiments with outsourcing, offshoring, and international licensing, the new shareholders learned the power of rhetorical geography to preserve and adapt symbolic resources—a strategy they continued to uphold post-merger.

In a recent interview, CEO Stefano Saccone describes Woolrich as a brand built on the geography of tomorrow: "Historically Woolrich has always been a very transversal brand, especially in Europe… We have been historically transversal–that has always been our strength" (Pavarini 2020). Saccone's comments suggest that future strategies at Woolrich will take history as a starting point, not a limiting factor. He believes the boundaries of geography can be rhetorically surmounted through strategic choices. "Being an American brand, or at least perceived as an American brand," is the new *modus operandi* at Woolrich.

5. **Discussion and Conclusion**

Our case follows three phases of Woolrich's geographic positioning and marketing strategy: outsourcing and offshoring, international licensing, and the end of U.S. manufacturing. The shift in the company's physical production coincided with a similar change in their consumer base. While U.S. consumers needed the specificity of rhetorical history to demonstrate the value of the Woolrich brand, international consumers were content with a more ambiguous rhetorical geography that draws on the place-image of North American wilderness. We have analyzed corporate actions and marketing campaigns at Woolrich with the four facets of heritage, provenance, place-image, and country-of-origin. We see how temporally rigid strategies that have close associations to past events (i.e., heritage and provenance) became unsustainable after Woolrich abandoned physical ties to local production. Temporally fluid strategies that utilized purposeful ambiguity, meanwhile (i.e., place-image and country-of-origin), became both more accessible and better suited to a newer European and Asian consumer base.

We acknowledge that our data has limitations imposed by the availability of private financial information. As a reviewer cautioned us, we do not know the exact profit margins of different company operations and how they might have offset losses for the Woolrich brands at different points in time. Without further direct data on the profit margins for Woolrich's American operations versus Woolrich's European licensing, it is fair for readers to question the conclusiveness of our interpretation. While it was not part of the sensemaking process for the decision-makers we interviewed, it remains possible, for instance, that WP Lavori simply faced a less competitive market for certain products compared to Woolrich in the U.S. Our thesis largely hinges around the argument that an asset-light strategy of rhetorical geography succeeded where an asset-dependent strategy of rhetorical history failed.

In addition to conceptual clarity, this article offers two broader contributions for the fields of strategic management and regional studies. First, we show that as geography is lifted from physical infrastructure, we can expect strategic twists and turns. Adaptations are contingent upon an external environment that is changing (e.g., the rise of global value chains), but also upon shifting managerial assessments of feasibility (e.g., sensemaking). Unlike their American competitors of Ralph Lauren or Tommy Hilfiger—asset-light from the start—Woolrich managers had to discover the financial liability of their mills. Today Europeans own an American heritage brand that struggled with the profitability of domestic production for years. And indeed, as we see it, the rhetorical history of Americana at Woolrich was saved by a European consumer base!

Our study further demonstrates how a cost-effective strategy can respond to the pressures of financialization and shareholder value capitalism within global value chains (e.g., Milberg 2013). This suggests that firms with former place-based commitments may be able to leverage their legacies into the intangible asset of brand equity. This may have particular relevance for firms in the U.S. Rust Belt, many of whom have proud but largely forgotten histories of local corporate social responsibility (Broughton 2015, Marquis, Glynn and Davis 2007). It should also apply to other foreign acquisitions of heritage brands (e.g., Porac, Thomas and Baden-Fuller 2011) and strengthen the case for trademarks as an investment in regional development (Castaldi and Mendonça 2022).[12] Given the increasing functional integration of global value chains and the development of a network society, we expect that cleavages between physical and rhetorical geography will continue to expand.

Second, while firms typically opt for coherent brand narratives, rhetorical geography adds the possibility of strategic ambiguity for other geographic collectives, including regional policymakers. The culinary movement known as the "New Anatolian Kitchen," for example, deploys "ambiguity of origin" to claim culinary influence from an array of regional cuisines (Cappelen and Pedersen 2020). Such moves may provoke purity-based legal and rhetorical responses, like Peru's attempts to claim authenticity for pisco, a wine-based spirit (Hamrick, DeSoucey and Bariola 2022). Economies that have been marginalized in the image-oriented "enrichment economy"—e.g., Chile in its contest with Peru—stand to gain from studying organizations that have successfully re-worked their place-image through rhetorical geography. Conflicting cases incorporating the rhetorics of history and geography are also available in geopolitical disputes, for example in Arctic territories (Andersson 2018). Strategic and political phenomenology can have profound implications for regional futures.

For our case, in the end, the fragmentation of global value chains increased the value of Woolrich's uniquely local geographic claims. At the same time, pivoting away from historic specificity toward geographic ambiguity was essential to preserving profit margins and brand equity. Building on existing associations with the U.S. while subtly altering the brand narrative, Woolrich learned to convey Americana without America.

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Table 1: Woolrich Transition from Rhetorical History to Rhetorical Geography

Period	Business Strategy	Marketing Strategy	Organizational Structure and Governance	Vision and Values	Taglines
1970s to 2018	Outsourcing and offshoring	Rhetorical history (heritage and provenance)	Increased relationships with contract manufacturers, offshoring to Asia and Latin America, divestment and financialization, tapered production at historic mill	American culture bound to place and time. Emphasis on authenticity of craftsmanship and origin.	"Made in the USA Since 1830"
1980s to 2018	Pursuit of licensing	Transitional (rhetorical history to rhetorical geography)	International licensing agreements, historic mill becomes tokenized, production increasingly limited to textiles and blankets	Limited association with place and time. Emphasis on American origins but not production.	"Made in the USA Since 1830"
2018 to Present	End of U.S. manufacturing	Rhetorical geography (place-image)	Historic mill shuttered, sale to private equity, retain ties to history through strategic ambiguity in marketing	Temporally unbounded associations with America. Aesthetics and images evoke place, not time.	"American Soul Since 1830"

Table 2: Sources and Contributions of Archival Research

Archival Type	Historical Time Period	Primary Source	Contribution
News Stories	1880s to 2020	AccessPA Digital Repository (Pennsylvania newspapers); NexisUni	Company public relations and news events; historical interviews with managers
Print Advertising	1880s to 2020	AccessPA Digital Repository; company archives and histories	Images of Woolrich depicted for a local and national audience
Multi-Media Advertising	1996 to 2020	Internet Archive; company social media and websites; store visits	Images of Woolrich depicted for a national and global audience

[1] A similar concept of social memory assets "reflect[s] the ability of the firm to appropriate the collective memory of a society or a culture and convert it to firm reputation, identity, or brand" (Foster, Suddaby, Minkus et al. 2011:106).
[2] Sources on Italian expertise range from Shakespeare ([1595] 2008:998) to contemporary claims of an educated buyer market and enhanced cultural recognition for individual designers (Crane and Bovone 2006, Molotch 2003:48-49).
[3] A reviewer points out that certification marks may extend beyond brands to collectives. Harris tweed fabric from Scotland's Outer Hybrides islands, protected by the Harris Tweed Authority, is a legally protected example that has been utilized by UK and global designers (Pike 2015:183-86). Designer Vivienne Westwood is perhaps its most notable champion.
[4] See Davies (1996:635-36) on the example of kilts and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) on the invention of tradition.
[5] Raffaelli (2019:591) reports that many Swiss watchmaking firms in 1990s hired history PhDs to write company histories.
[6] Apparel imports constituted just two percent of U.S. sales in 1963 (Arpan, de la Torre and Toyne 1982:57).
[7] The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) also eased barriers to entry (Gereffi 1996).
[8] The Berry Amendment of 1941 (10 U.S.C. §2533a) requires domestic sourcing for military apparel, though a substantial portion is today supplied by prison labor (Platzer 2020).
[9] At this time, textiles were primarily sold to outside contractors (typically high-end clients able to afford the premium of domestic manufacturing). Blankets were sold to customers at retail locations and through the company's website, where they were prominently advertised as "Made in the USA."

[10] Americana brands like Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein, and Ralph were "born global" with no history of U.S. manufacturing. These brands compete in terms of status, but they have a broader marketing strategy than a heritage brand like Woolrich or Pendleton.

[11] Thanks to a reviewer for this point.

[12] From a legal perspective, trademarks capture consumer goodwill across firm changes and do not implicate lead firms in the responsibility for supplier conduct (Griffiths 2019).