

# **The Rhetoric of Death in Central Appalachia from Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century to Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century: a Case Study in Teaching and Researching Rhetorical History**



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# **Part I: Understanding Rhetoric and Its Role in Material Culture**

# What is Rhetoric?

(Stoner & Perkins, 2005)

- Public
- Purposeful
- Includes either verbal or nonverbal symbols (or both)
- Created with the intention of persuading
- Strategic

**Material culture** is the study of the beliefs and values of a particular culture at a given time using artifacts (Prown, 2008, p.1)

**Semiotics** is the study of how semantic and syntactic symbols or codes govern how we move through our lives, as we decode or make meaning.

Using these allied disciplines and modes of investigation, we can see how cultural objects associated with the rituals of death and grief are rhetorical by examining them as messages for the living.



# Rhetorical Messages in Traditional Gravestones

- Codes enable people to understand and process death and grief (the color black, symbols on graves, and rituals of burial and memory (Gordon, 2014.)
- These codes are situated in the time and space they are created, but interpreted in differing contexts of time and space.
- The cemetery is a cultural landscape where social trends are illustrated in a timeline of messaging decade after decade, century after century



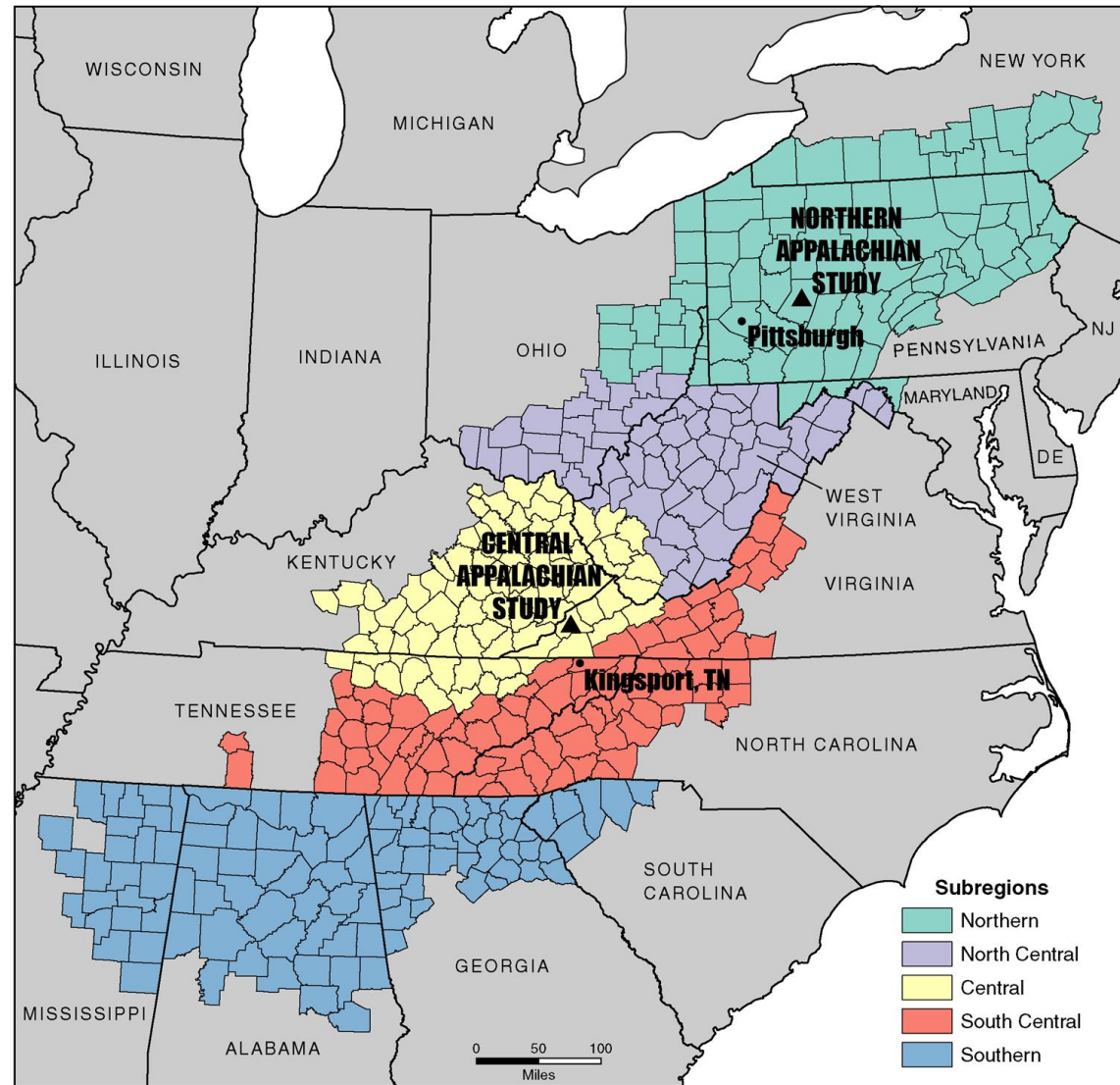
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Sites of studies in Northern and Central Appalachia

Two studies will be discussed in this seminar



Appalachian Regional Commission, 2019

# Context

- Appalachian Region is 900 miles long, following the topography of the mountain chain along the eastern U.S.
- Southernmost, central, and northern regions
- Wood and fieldstone mark the oldest graves
- Industrialization brought stonemasons who worked with limestone, siltstone, sandstone, granite, marble
- Wars and illness populated and expanded Appalachia's cemeteries
- Shift to granite mausoleums and obelisks among the wealthy in the 19th century
- Large Protestant population; religious beliefs reflected in iconography and epitaphs
- Cemeteries reflect the values of those in the community who hold the most power



# References for Part I

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