



project two/spring 2001
reading places critically

Overview: In this project you'll begin a detailed study of a particular place, pursuing some answers and arguments in response to the questions you raised in project one (especially those related to the "Topic" and "Beyond Appearances" sections of the previous assignment description). Building on the more complicated understanding of "landscape" we're gaining from Stilgoe, Wilson, Hayden and Lippard, you'll look at the details of the place you are investigating, ask what larger issues and conflicts are encoded in those landscape features, and how those problems and priorities are part of larger, "Big Picture" questions about politics and culture. Along the way I hope you'll question what multiple meanings or interpretations of this place might be possible; what controversies and conflicts intersect in this site; what values, concepts, or ideas are at stake here; and what possibilities are facilitated or foreclosed as a result.

Writing: The outcome of this project will be a substantial revision and expansion of project one that generates **1000-1500 words** of new text. I suggest you begin this project by returning to the text of project one and rereading it. Ask yourself what, in light of our further discussions and your further consideration, are the most important or urgent issues you raised in that essay? What aspects of the many ideas you generated in your initial thinking now represent the most promising, potentially useful, politically and intellectually relevant lines of inquiry?

Cut and paste those sections that relate to your more focused sense of your topic into a new document and use them as the basic building blocks of this new project. (For example, they might make good material for an introduction, since, as we've seen in the other authors we've read, the introduction frequently use lots of questions to frame the rest of the essay. But even if you don't end up using actual text from project one, answering some of the questions you raised there will be a good way to get started generating new text.) Then your task will be to begin to answer the questions you raised in project one, taking into account the additional, more focused questions listed below: As with the previous assignment, think carefully about how to customize the questions here to your specific project.

- *The “Big Picture”*: Why is this place worth writing about? Why should someone else read your writing? What ethical, political, cultural or historical problems converge on and in this place? What important things—whether or not anyone realizes their importance—are happening in this place?
- *Central questions*: What specific ways do the broader problems of the questions above present themselves in this place? What aspects of the “Big Picture” issues are the particular focus of public scrutiny, public debate, public life? What unique dynamics do conflicts that might also be happening elsewhere have because they are occur in this place? What patterns of How, in other words, does the local landscape reinterpret or redefine the “Big Picture?”
- *Key concepts*: What specialized vocabulary do you need to describe the dynamics of the local landscape? What categories or concepts are most illuminating for your understanding of this place? (See also “Use of other authors,” below.)
- *Details*: What specific sites within the place provide the best examples or illustrations of the impact of the issues and conflicts you are discussing on the local landscape? (How is “best” defined in the previous sentence? Clearest? Most complex? Most unexpected? Most ironic or paradoxical?) What can an alert observer learn from the flora and fauna, the built environment, the public spaces, the transportation and utility infrastructure of your place? How would that knowledge shape the observer’s thinking about the central questions and “Big Picture” issues you are examining?
- *Use of other authors*: What elements of the other authors in our conversation about place can be useful to you in answering any of the questions above, or others you raised in project one? What ideas, concepts or values can you include in your own writing, whether to support or to contrast your own? What specialized terminology can you adapt to your own discussion? What apt phrases can you quote? What approaches to the analysis of the details of the landscape can you emulate? What rhetorical strategies can you deploy? What research resources—statistics, historical insights, bibliography—can you utilize?

Elaborating on your work in project one by answering some of these questions, you’ll produce a critical essay that maps the vital controversies occurring in the place you’re analyzing, and advocates for the positions in those conflicts that you feel are most sound. However, don’t feel like you have to engage just yet with detailed historical research or regional issues—that will be the focus of project three. For now you should concern yourself primarily with looking at the present configuration of the local landscape.

Materials: The most important material for this essay is a detailed knowledge of the specific sites you’ll use as evidence and example in your discussion. You should try wherever possible to document these details—finding photographs or maps, for example. To be a credible commentator about the place your writing about, you’ll also need to find reliable sources of core information about the place you are describing: its population,

racial makeup, economic “vital statistics,” where its water and power come from, and so on. You should also continue gathering relevant historical material (or begin, if you haven’t yet). You need a solid if broad understanding about the place as a whole to help you make good critical decisions; too, research can often yield unexpected new insights about your place.

You should strongly consider using some of these materials as **illustrations**—clearly, our colleagues Wilson, Hayden and Lippard believe it’s important to include visual representations of place alongside written discussions. Think about how and why they use images in their texts, and whether or not your work might be enhanced by adding a visual component.