project four/spring 2001
place and representation

Overview: This project calls on you to consider the reciprocal relationship between places and the ways they are represented. I have placed this project at the end of the course because it mobilizes in some form all of the various approaches you have taken to analyzing place previously in the term. To inquire into how a place can and should be represented demands asking not only about its salient features (as you did in projects one and two), but also its relationship to the rest of the world and how all of this has changed over time (project three).

This project is also an appropriate conclusion to your work in this course in that it gives you the opportunity to reflect on your own representational practices as well. Whether or not you make such a reflection a formal part of your essay in this project, I hope you'll use the questions that define project four to consider the implications and consequences—practical, political, ethical—of the representational strategies you have used this semester, for yourself, your readers, and the people of the place you have represented.

Writing: The outcome of this project will be the final expansion of your work to date, **750-1000 words of new text** in response to the questions below. I have reduced the overall word count in order to make time and space for you to **revise earlier text as well**, while this project is going forward. So in addition to the questions I am asking you below, you should also be responding to the questions and comments you have received on earlier versions of the essay from your peer reviewers and from me, and pursuing the challenges that you think are most important for you as a writer.

• *Who makes and uses texts and images about this place?* What kinds of texts (murals, newsletters, fliers, etc.) are "native" to this place—made by and/or for the people of this place? What kinds of texts are made by folks from elsewhere? Are read by people outside of the place? What purpose do these texts serve for their makers and users? What qualities and features of the text denote the relationship between the text and the place?

- *How do these texts and images portray the place?* What details are emphasized? What details are excluded? How are people presented? What things about their lives are emphasized? What aspects are downplayed or edited out? Why do you suppose these decisions have been made? (What, for example, is the relationship between who makes these texts, who consumes them, and their content? How does the text reflect the values and perspectives of its authors and its audience?) What larger implications or connotations about the place result from them?

- *What is at stake in these representations for the present and the future of this place?* What attitudes or actions are encouraged or discouraged by these representations? What might the implications of these attitudes and actions be for life in this place? How might conditions in this place change as a result? Whose interests do these texts serve?

- *How* else *could or should this place be represented?* What sort of texts, what sort of culture, would help this place achieve its best possible potential? Who else could or should be involved in creating texts? Who should have better access to reading them? What would it take for these conditions to become a reality?

As you probably know by now, the first step in this project should be to revisit earlier drafts and ask yourself where the most appropriate place for the inclusion of these concerns. Even though this is the last major project, for example, the introduction seems a logical place to raise the issues about how the place is perceived by its residents and by the larger world, about how people <u>feel</u> about the place (since so often texts and images appeal to emotions rather than reason—something rhetoricians call "pathetic claims"). The essay's early phases also seem like an appropriate place to ask some of the questions above about your own writing, too, since they have to do with some extent with your ethos, the identity you construct for yourself in your own essay. On the other hand, the questions also point towards the issue of what the point or the impact of undertaking a project like yours might have, what the larger implications of representing places are (the relevant rhetorical term is telos, the ends as opposed to the means). Maybe the end of the essay is where issues about the ends of the essay are most appropriate. The point is to give the existing version of the essay deliberate scrutiny and make very careful decisions about how to integrate this final expansion into the larger structure of your essay.

Materials: In previous assignments, I have insisted that your analyses of the places you've studied be rooted in specific details about the physical landscape. In some respects I've asked you to use the landscape much like you'd use a literary text to support an explication. Here I am asking you to find an actual specific text that represents the place you are studying, to anchor your broader assertions in a detailed, analytical example. (As I suggest above, the text <u>could</u> be your own essay, though this kind of meta-analysis is tricky to execute without seeming elliptical or self-indulgent.) We'll look at one particular example together in (and out of) class when we watch *The Blair Witch Project* and *Stranger with a Camera* and talk about what's a stake in film representations of the Appalachian mountains. I hope this example will indicate as well how similar kinds of content can carry very different meanings depending on the representational

tactics that are deployed. We'll explore further the assertion that decisions filmmakers, writers, artists, and others make about how to depict a place have consequences, in the work of Lucy Lippard and Jo Carson.

One idea that almost all of our readings and your projects underscore is that place is a variable, not a constant, emerging from the multiple perspectives and competing versions of the landscape. The implications of this idea for this project are very important: what it suggests is that you cannot deal with representations of a place by asking whether they are "true" or "false," "right" or "wrong," "accurate" or "inaccurate." As many of you discovered through your historical research, for example, versions of a place's past that are factually incorrect nonetheless can have a tremendous impact on how people inhabit and define places. Therefore you must ask instead why this text says the things it does (whether true, false, or otherwise) and what the impact of those statements is.