

FYS: Nature, Environments, and Place in American Thought

Place Study

Paper due: April 3

Paper critiques due: April 8

Revised paper posted to NeatLine exhibit: April 10

Place Paper Instructions

This paper is intended to give you an opportunity to synthesize what you've learned in the course and apply that knowledge to think deeply about a place. You are to choose some place on or near campus and write a brief essay discussing your interpretation of its history, use, and/or meaning, using materials we've studied in class and resources you identify. Tell a story that will explain to the reader how to understand this place, and how it came to have the shape and qualities it has today. You should think of this paper as an exercise in historical, geographical, intellectual, and environmental interpretation, asking you to read a small patch of landscape as a document of past environmental change and ideology.

Here are some ideas for how to approach this assignment. Think about expanding on the theme in the curated photo essay and how you might use ideas from class discussion and readings on that topic to "read" a place. I understand you will not be able to conduct a full and accurate narrative of environmental changes that have shaped your chosen place. Rather, take a long, careful look at the place and try to see it with unfamiliar eyes, taking nothing for granted but looking at everything you see there as if you'd never seen it before. Then ask how those things you see have come to be there and what it tells you about humans, Americans, North Carolinians, WFU students, etc. (It may be more fun to imagine yourself as a visitor from outer space who's just landed and is trying to make sense of all the strange things you see around you: why do people live this way? What are they trying to accomplish by shaping their surroundings in this way?) The trick here is to ask as many questions as you can about the landscape that you usually take for granted. Use materials from the readings and class discussion to help you think of the kinds of questions you want to ask, and return to some of your thoughts as you put together the photo essay. How is the place constructed to fulfill social, cultural, emotional, or economic needs? How is the place used, and was this the intention of the creator of the place? How might people from another era have approached this place differently? Is the place exerting an influence on people, creating a space of social interaction (or seclusion), or do people create the place to act as a conduit for emotions or as a mirror of expectations? How are the ideas about "wilderness," "civilization," or humans' place in the world represented in your site? How does the campus environment reflect human behavior, social values, and expectations?

If you're having trouble choosing a place on or near campus, consider these suggestions:

- Walk along a road and think about its relationship to the surrounding landscape. How does the road divide space or connect it? Consider the spatial organization and boundaries of a place. What defines a place and what is its relationship to the surroundings?
- Notice “border” areas that seem to separate one kind of land use from another. How do we read signs of appropriate land use? How do the categories of land use shape human behavior as people move through the landscape?
- Compare residential living patterns on and near campus and consider the different times in which the buildings were constructed. Do some have more porches and windows, or more parking or open space nearby? What can the change over time tell you about changing ideas of living, interacting with the environment, and indoor/outdoor modes of socializing?
- Consider what might have been in a space that is now taken up with a structure, road, or landscaping. Perhaps a “place” does not exist anymore, or has dramatically changed in appearance.
- What is the material composition of the place such as a road, building, or memorial? Where did the materials come from and how were they shaped by humans, weather, or other factors in their present place and form?

Although this is not primarily a paper based on written documents – you should really focus on your experience “reading” a landscape – make an effort to track down at least a few documents that can help you to understand the changing landscape of your chosen place.

- Look at old photographs of your place (digitalforsyth.org or the ZSR digital collections)
- Look at a series of maps of your place to see how the relationship between your place and the surroundings have changed over time. Ask the reference librarians in ZSR for help locating physical or digitized maps and other sources about campus. You might need to take your own photograph of a portion of a physical map for use in this assignment.
- Find satellite and birds-eye-view images for historical perspectives. Google Earth has a “history imagery” tab that will show satellite images of a place over the previous 10-20 years. Winston-Salem and Forsyth County histories, atlases, and directories (available in Forsyth County Public Library’s North Carolina Room and in ZSR’s Special Collections) might be useful.

Mechanics

This paper should be 5-6 pages (1250-1500 words). Your goal in this paper is to offer an original interpretation of your chosen place based on your own observations and research on the one hand, and on course readings, discussions, and the group photo essay theme on the other hand. You must use a minimum of three sources; be careful when selecting the most appropriate research sources. Your essay will be assessed according to the following criteria:

- 1) **Structure:** Begin your paper by introducing the reader to your place, and by orienting the reader to the major questions and interpretive approaches you intend to use for understanding it. Be sure to clarify early in the paper the main theme(s) you'll be addressing. Each paragraph following the introduction should have a topic sentence and explain one major idea. Each paragraph should have a clear connection to the next. End with a strong conclusion that tells the reader what they've learned about your place and why they should care about the interpretation you're offering.
- 2) **Analysis:** Why should the reader believe you? What arguments for or against your thesis make sense? How can you disprove counter-arguments, or account for evidence that seems to contradict your thesis? Your analysis should offer new ways to think about the material. All ideas in the paper should flow logically and cohere. Support your thesis with arguments based on evidence from your chosen place and from primary and secondary resources you've consulted. All sources should be clearly and accurately identified in footnotes or endnotes using a consistent format.
- 3) **Research and images:** Your paper should show clear evidence of research and present an original reading of visual imagery. Select three to five images crucial to your analysis of the place. Be sure to include a print-out of all related images (including photos taken by you) and be sure to note the source (book or URL).

Paper critique instructions

Each student will offer a thoughtful 1-page critique of two of your peer's place studies. Evaluate the place papers according to the criteria stated above; for each paper critique, include a brief summary of what the author is trying to argue and constructively evaluate the argument, use of evidence, organization, and depth of analysis. Finally, offer ideas for improving the essay and strengthening the argument.

Posting revised paper instructions

Once each student has received feedback and revised the essay, you must upload the place study to the NeatLine exhibit. Writing for the web is different stylistically; you'll want to break up paragraphs into 2-3 sentence chunks for easier reading.

- Pin location on common digital map
- Add 3-5 images to image column on place study page
- Add essay to text column on place study page
- Be sure to include titles, image captions, and links if the images are drawn from an external site on the web. References should be listed at the end of the essay (i.e. Notes: Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*; Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*; Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*; digitalforysth.org.)
- Adhere to the style guide as presented in Chelcie Rowell's step-by-step instructions

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Place Studies Critique

Please bring 3 copies of your place paper to class on Thursday, April 3. Alternatively, bring 2 copies to class and upload the paper to Sakai's Dropbox for me.

Instructions

Write two 1-page (single or double-spaced) critiques of two of your peer's place studies. Evaluate the place papers according to the criteria stated below.

Each critique should include a brief summary of what you think the author is trying to argue and constructively evaluate this argument. Furthermore, assess the writer's use of evidence, paper organization, and depth of analysis. Finally, offer general ideas for improving the essay and strengthening the argument. You should focus on the ideas in this paper, not sentence-level grammatical issues.

Basic criteria for evaluation

- 1) Is the paper 5–6 pages (1250–1500 words)?
- 2) Does the writer offer an original interpretation of your chosen place rather than a summary or report?
- 3) Does the writer use at least three sources and include an image?

Deeper-level assessment

- 1) **Structure:** Does the writer include an introduction that orients the reader to the place, the main theme(s), and the major argument or interpretive approach? Do the subsequent paragraphs begin with strong topic sentences, present and interpret evidence, and relate the mini-argument to the larger topic? Do the paragraphs flow and progress logically? Does the writer include a compelling conclusion explaining to the reader what they've learned and why they should care about the writer's interpretations?
- 2) **Analysis:** Does the writer's argument make sense? Does the writer acknowledge and attempt to disprove counter-arguments, or account for evidence that seems to contradict the thesis? Does the writer adequately explain their interpretation of evidence? Does the writer convincingly interpret in-class readings?
- 3) **Research and images:** Does the writer include citation information for sources? How would you assess the quality and reliability of the sources?