Which of these two images most closely matches your own experiences and associations with swimming pools? Why? Which specific details in the image seem familiar?

Do you have associations or experiences with pools that aren’t represented here? If so, what are they?
It’s hard to imagine a space more symbolic of the American dream than the swimming pool. For many of us, pools are part of the landscape of growing up: As toddlers, we splash in backyard wading pools; as children, we brave the high diving board at summer camp; in high school, we rent movies like *Spring Break Beach Party* and spend vacations working on the perfect tan. Pools are part of our cultural landscape, too. Owning a private pool is a universally recognized sign of financial success, and glamorous poolside shots are staples of the celebrity profiles that appear in popular magazines.

It’s not surprising, then, that swimming pools have been pictured in many different ways. Consider the two images that open this chapter. Both depict suburban swimming pools built during the 1960s and 1970s in California—but there the similarities end.

The pool in David Hockney’s painting *A Bigger Splash* evokes an affluent, leisure-oriented lifestyle often associated with California. Rendered in sunny blues, yellows, and pinks, the scene is composed of even surfaces and straight lines. There are no human figures to disturb the peaceful scene—only the white trace of the swimmer’s splash. We can almost imagine ourselves stepping through the frame and jumping into the water.

In contrast, the pool in the still from director Stacy Peralta’s skateboarding documentary *Dogtown and Z-Boys* is neither restful nor inviting. Here the elegant image of the suburban pool is turned literally upside down. The pool itself is no longer the focal point; instead, it serves as a backdrop for the acrobatic maneuvers of 1970s skateboarding icon Tony Alva. Nor is this pool a well-tended paradise: It has been drained of water, the diving board is pockmarked with rust, and the surrounding lawn is overgrown. Alva, too, uses the pool in a radically different way. Rather than slipping smoothly into the space, as Hockney’s imagined swimmer does, Alva defies gravity, hovering above the rim at a 90-degree angle to the ground, poised in the split second before hurtling downward. We’re tempted to step backwards to avoid what seems like an inevitable crash.

What should we make of these two very different swimming pools? Why pay so much attention to describing two scenes that, if we walked past them tomorrow, we might not even notice? It’s because everyday places—shopping malls, fast-food restaurants, classrooms, parks, and yes, even swimming pools—shape our lives. They define where and how we work, play, eat, do business, express ourselves, and communicate. When artists create images of places, they capture something of these identities. And so do you when you make sense of the places you encounter in your reading, your composing, and your daily life.
Reading Landscapes and Environments

It’s easy to ignore places or to regard them simply as neutral backdrops for what we do. Certainly many of the surroundings we experience seem so ordinary that it’s difficult to imagine them as meaningful: How does one analyze a barren stretch of interstate? Or a convenience store that looks exactly like every other 7-Eleven in town?

Cultural meanings and patterns are easier to spot when they appear in spectacular landscapes—Las Vegas’s neon skyline clearly says something about American attitudes toward money, and the 1,776-foot-high Freedom Tower in New York City will dramatically embody patriotic ideals. Yet the same habits of observation that enable you to spot these patterns can also help you find meanings in less obvious places. When you see a landscape image or examine a particular space, ask yourself the following questions:

- **What do you see?**
- **What is it about?**
- **To what does it relate?**
- **How is it composed?**
- **What details matter?**

What do you see?

When you encounter a place or an image of one, first ask, “Where am I?” and “What sort of place is this?” Knowing some terminology that artists, urban planners, and other professionals use to talk about spaces will help you draw some useful distinctions.

Natural environments exist apart from human civilization. In their purest form, they incorporate nothing man-made—composed of the terrain, climate, geological formations, and animal and plant life. Artistic depictions of the natural world, such as landscapes and seascapes, have long encouraged viewers to reflect on the power and beauty of untouched nature and to consider the place of human beings in the larger world.

Consider, for example, two landscape photographs. The Grand Canyon landscape, photographed by David Muench, with its delicate colors and dramatic patterns of sunlight and shadow, creates a breathtaking scene. Muench says his photo celebrates the “mystical forces of nature that shape all our destinies” and expresses his “commitment to preserve our wild lands . . . to improve and maintain a balance between economy and ecology.”

Now consider a photograph showing a human presence in the landscape. The photograph of the Airstream trailer, for instance, features majestic rock forma-
tions similar to those in Muench’s image, but the adjoining highway, complete with travel trailer and gawking tourists, is just as prominent. What sort of landscape is this? you might ask. A nature scene, a highway scene, or something in between? And in fact, even natural landmarks as seemingly untouched as the Grand Canyon are continually influenced by the park administrators who monitor the placement of roads and trails, manage tourist activities and trash pickup, and implement conservation plans.

So when you encounter either a natural environment or an image depicting one, pay attention: What natural features are present? What makes the place unique, powerful, beautiful, or worth noticing? What relationship does this place have to human activities and structures? And from what vantage point are you looking at this place?

In contrast to natural environments, built environments and spaces are partly or wholly made by human beings. Whether these spaces have been casually crafted (such as a children’s treehouse or a small roadside produce stand) or formally designed by a professional city planner, architect, or landscape engineer (such as a museum or park), all serve specific functions and reflect the choices of the people who imagined them. Consider the Milwaukee Museum of Art, shown on the previous page. Its design, which incorporates large indoor galleries, clearly serves the practical function of housing the city’s art collections. Yet its unusual shape and construction suggest additional purposes. The much-photographed “wings” on the roof, designed to move continually with the breezes in one of the nation’s windiest cities, express both the architect’s aesthetic vision and the city’s commitment to the arts. Not incidentally, the spectacular roof makes the museum a splendid tourist attraction.

Large, impressive public buildings aren’t the only built spaces worth analyzing, though. Smaller, more ordinary places like laundromats and barbershops also serve important functions and influence the people who use them every day. Melissa Ann Pinney draws our attention to one such space in her photo of a diaper-changing room at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida.

Pinney’s photo might lead us to ask several questions: Where are the children’s fathers? Why aren’t they helping? Why aren’t these spaces larger and designed to make this sort of work physically less awkward? Why is the space

“Although I have always been drawn to what is hidden, especially concerning women’s experiences, I couldn’t say for certain that I would have recognized the secluded diaper-changing scene at Disney World as a possible subject until my daughter, Emma, was born. . . . These photographs . . . are an expression of my interests in feminine identity and the specific qualities of light and place.”

—MELISSA ANN PINNEY
so dark and institutional-looking (and at the Magic Kingdom, no less)? What do these features say about parenting and gender in our culture? Finally, does Pinney’s point of view affect how we react to this scene? Might another photographer’s rendition show us a different changing room?

When you analyze a built space or an image of one, then, keep a few key questions in mind: What function does the space serve? Of what materials is it constructed, and how is it arranged? How does its design affect the way in which people use it? And from what vantage point are you looking at the space?

What is it about?

We don’t often think about it, but places and representations of them are usually constructed with a purpose. A travel writer, for instance, may describe a locale in order to encourage tourists to visit. A university might locate parking on its outskirts and incorporate walking paths in order to foster a pedestrian-friendly atmosphere.

You can find clues to the purpose of a place by identifying its focal points: What do you notice first? What takes center stage? Where are the most important objects and activities? Consider artist-writer Alice Attie’s documentary photo series Harlem in Transition. In this series, Attie directs viewers’ attention to Harlem storefronts, highlighting the contrast between small, locally owned businesses—often boarded up or on the verge of going under—and the gleaming corporate chain stores now moving into this New York City area. The stark differences suggest Attie’s purpose: to document this older neighborhood culture before it vanishes entirely.
To what does it relate?

Images of places (and places themselves) never exist in isolation. Knowing something about an artist’s experiences and his or her thoughts about a particular place—the biographical context—can help you better understand its meanings. For example, if you glance at the painting shown here, you might simply see a field lush with nearly ripe wheat and populated by a flock of birds. The scene might suggest any number of associations.

Now consider that many scholars believe that this was the last canvas Postimpressionist painter Vincent van Gogh completed before committing suicide, shooting himself in a field similar to the one pictured here. As theorist John Berger observes in his book *Ways of Seeing*, this fact irrevocably changes what you see: Perhaps the vivid colors and rough brushwork begin to take on an ominous quality. Perhaps the crows—carrion-eating birds—now look predatory or foreboding. The landscape may seem less peaceful and more desolate. The scene is no longer quite the same.

Of course, no single biographical detail, even such a dramatic one, can fully determine the meaning of this or any image. Your response might change again upon learning that Van Gogh included crows in several other paintings and that in at least one of his letters he referred to the birds as friendly presences. The contexts within which we interpret places and images of them are complicated and constantly evolving.

**CONSIDER**

1. Take another look at Attie’s photographs (see previous page). What specific details of architecture, signage, décor, or other elements seem to characterize the chain storefronts versus the locally owned businesses? What social, cultural, or economic factors do you think might contribute to these different styles?

2. Why do you think Attie includes a human figure in the photos of the Starbucks and Disney Store franchises? Write a few sentences explaining what you think the man in the suit and the girl on the bicycle add to the images.

**COMPOSE**

3. Harlem is a neighborhood with a rich heritage. Do some research in the library or on the Internet to learn about the history and culture of the area, and then look again at Attie’s photographs. Write a paragraph discussing how these images fit into your overall impression of the place.

4. If you were asked to create a documentary to preserve a place you know well, what place would you choose? Why? Write a paragraph or two explaining what you would include in your documentary and why.

**CHALLENGE**

5. In her introduction to *Harlem in Transition*, Attie writes, “This transitional moment in Harlem has larger implications for a world in which small communities are being increasingly forced to confront global economic power.” What do you think she means by this statement? Can you think of other communities and areas in the world that are facing similar transitions?
Finally, place images can take on different meanings depending on the physical context in which they appear. Look at the mural in the photograph below, a rendition of Van Gogh’s famous painting Starry Night, painted by middle-school art students on the back wall of a neighborhood grocery store in South Carolina. How does the irregular brick surface, punctuated with plumbing pipes, affect what you see? What about the surrounding landscape, complete with trash cans, telephone wires, and traffic? Or the fact that children created the image as a community project and as part of their education in the arts? Your response to the mural is likely quite different from the reaction you would have to seeing Van Gogh’s original painting, specially lit and positioned on a museum wall.

How is it composed?

How we experience a place depends a great deal on how it is structured and arranged, either by artists representing places or by designers giving shape to built environments. In traditional landscape painting and photography, artists frequently use one-point perspective—a way of representing space in which everything recedes to a single horizon point. Images structured in this way emphasize what’s placed in the foreground of the image, the area nearest to the viewer and farthest from the horizon line. Items located in the background, near or at the horizon, are deemphasized. The scene depicting Ulysses Grant’s Tomb in New York City exemplifies this pattern. In the foreground, we see the well-populated and carefully manicured grounds surrounding the landmark, which is located in the center of the image, set back but still in the foreground. The area behind the tomb recedes into the distance, obscuring all that might distract from the artist’s subject.
CONSIDER

1. In your opinion, how effective is the point of view Meiselas adopts in her photo of the bus passengers (see previous page)? Think of two or three alternative points of view she might have chosen, and write a few sentences discussing how each might suggest a different interpretation of the scene.

2. Imagine what Riboud’s photo (see above) would look like without the window frames. How might you experience the place differently? Might you be inclined to group the people in different ways? If so, how?

3. Find and examine several picture postcards of tourist sites in your city or state, paying special attention to what’s in the background and foreground of each image. Do you see any patterns? What tends to be emphasized and deemphasized?

COMPOSE

4. Take photographs of your bedroom or another familiar place from five or six different angles. Write a paragraph discussing how each angle creates a different impression. Which image is your favorite? Why?

5. Find a snapshot from a family vacation, school field trip, or other excursion, and use photo editing software (for a digital photo), scissors, or a black marker to frame the image differently. Then write a paragraph analyzing how the changes affect the way viewers would interpret the scene.
What details matter?

Sometimes the smallest details make a big difference in the impact of an image or the design of a space. Would a Coca-Cola taste the same, if we drank it out of a yellow can? Would you patronize a fancy restaurant lit by fluorescent lights and staffed by waiters in polyester smocks and hairnets? Look for key details when you consider places, whether they are rendered in environments, images, or words.

For instance, if you glance quickly at Stephen Shore’s streetscape of El Paso, two details will likely catch your eye: the human figure and the colors. That lone person staring at the scene from the foreground of the image establishes the point of view and reminds us that we’re looking at a constructed image, not a “real” place. At the same time, the sunny pastels of the buildings give a nostalgic, fifties-style feel to the shot, despite the fact that the photo was taken in the mid-1970s. Imagine the same scene photographed in plain black and white, without the human figure, and you’ll get a sense of how important these two details are.

The first thing you might notice about Gueorgui Pinkhassov’s “Tokyo,” on the other hand, is the unusual pattern of the light, which filters through window blinds and covers the space and its inhabitants with a dappled pattern. But there are other details in the image as well. What can be said about the layout of the central hallway or the human figures in the image? The figures seem confined by the space and unlikely to encounter each other.

Of course, artists and designers use many other kinds of details—for example, the presence or location of objects or the facial expressions of human figures in an image—to create particular impressions of a place. And thus you’ll need to look closely at each space you encounter to discern the little things that create a specific atmosphere. Does the effect come from color? Lighting? The placement of key objects or human figures? Lines? Or you might discover entirely different patterns. The important thing is to read critically—to pay attention.
Suburbia: American Dream or “Geography of Nowhere”?

If you ask a dozen people to name the place that holds the most memories and emotional associations, you’ll likely get a single response: “Home.” For many Americans, “home” means a single-family house with a lawn and a garage in a residential neighborhood filled with similar houses—in other words, a suburb.

But what you may not know is that the suburban house became the typical home in this country only within the past fifty years—and that in much of the rest of the world, “home” more commonly refers to urban apartments, single-family farms, or small villages. As Robert Fishman explains in his book Bourgeois Utopias, in the years immediately following World War II, economic, industrial, and governmental initiatives converged so that “for the first time in any society, the single-family detached house was brought within the economic grasp of the majority of households”—working-class and middle-class alike.

But fifty years into this transformation, scholars are calling attention to effects that developers and the homeowners who flocked to their developments didn’t anticipate. James Kunstler, for example, complains that the suburbanization of American cities has decentralized jobs and housing, weakened community identity and civic involvement, and increased both pollution and consumption—a state of affairs he calls a “geography of nowhere.”

No matter where you grew up, you should be able to see, in the images and readings that follow, evidence of this complicated legacy of suburbanization. As you read and study this material, think about how you visualize “home” and what you—and others—do with the space in which you live.

---

**Consider**

1. Examine the floor plan for “The Dover,” a prefabricated home advertised to first-time buyers by Sears, Roebuck during the early 1950s, and speculate: What sort of buyer would have considered this a “dream house”? How does this house’s size and layout compare to the places you’ve lived? Is this a house you’d aspire to buy? Why or why not?

2. Think about the focal points and the point of view in the photo of the home buyers. What draws your attention: The couple? The car? The houses? What do you think the photographer wants you to focus on? Why?
Artists and photographers over the years have been fascinated by images of suburban life. Here are some scenes that depict suburban scenes and mores, including a still from the 1998 film *Pleasantville*, which portrayed a black-and-white suburb sitcom world that gradually blossomed into a richer and more colorful version of life.

“*We’re really happy. Our kids are healthy, we eat good food, and we have a nice home.*” From Bill Owens, *Suburbia* (1973)

---

**COMPOSE**

3. Drawing on your experience and on the text and images shown on the preceding page, put together an ad—including a floor plan—for the kind of single-family living space you think would appeal to a wide range of today’s consumers. Focus on the space itself and on the neighborhood or development where it will be located.

4. On the Web or in a newspaper, browse through some advertisements for new housing developments and compare them to the ad for “The Dover.” What differences and similarities do you see? Write a paragraph or two summarizing your findings.

5. Without consulting a dictionary, write a one-paragraph definition of suburbanite.

---

**CHALLENGE**

6. Do an informal survey of students on your campus, asking this question: “Does your family live in the suburbs?” As people respond, pay attention to any positive or negative implications in their answers. After completing your survey and considering the results, revisit your definition of suburbanite, and revise it as necessary.

---

We’re really happy. Our kids are healthy, we eat good food, and we have a nice home.” From Bill Owens, Suburbia (1973)
The McMansion Next Door: Why the American House Needs a Makeover

Cathleen McGuigan
(2003)

Design is everywhere, right? Your toothbrush, your running shoes, your cool-looking couch, your latte machine, your laptop. OK, no one would mistake Indiana for Italy, but you can finally buy good design almost anywhere, from the mall to the Internet. But there’s one big-ticket item in this country that is virtually untouched by the hand of a good designer: your house.

Most new off-the-rack houses aren’t so much designed as themed: Mediterranean, French country, faux Tudor, neo-Colonial. These houses may offer—on the high end—every option money can buy, from a media room to a separate shower for the dog. But the market actually gives consumers little true choice: the developer house, in most price ranges, is amazingly similar from coast to coast, across different climate zones and topographies.

If you ripped off the roofs—and the turrets and gables and fake widow’s walks—or peered into the windows—double-hung, round, Palladian, picture (often in the same house)—you’d find essentially the same thing: a vast foyer with chandelier; formal living and dining rooms (rarely used); open-plan kitchen/family room; master suite and bedrooms; many bathrooms; at least a three-car garage. It makes me wonder whatever happened to the

Exurbia: The New Suburban Frontier

If you live in a suburban neighborhood today, chances are that it doesn’t much resemble the original tract home developments of the fifties, with row after row of nearly identical homes. As economic and technological developments drive new-home construction ever farther away from urban centers, the character of new suburban communities is rapidly changing. The texts and images here explore some of these newest developments, areas often referred to as “edge cities” or “exurbia.”
modern house, and why the core idea of modernism—that through mass production, ordinary people could afford the best design—never caught on when it came to houses.

Le Corbusier called the house "a machine for living in"—which meant, notes New York architect Deborah Berke, that the house is a tool people control, not the other way round.

The brilliance of the modern house was in the flexible spaces that flowed one to the next, and in the simplicity and toughness of the materials. Postwar America saw a few great experiments, most famously in L.A.'s Case Study Houses in the late 1940s and '50s. Occasionally, a visionary developer, such as Joseph Eichler in California, used good modern architects to design his subdivisions. Today they're high-priced collectibles.

Modernist houses, custom-designed for an elite clientele, are still built, of course. But when I recently asked Barbara Neski, who, with her husband, Julian, designed such houses in the 1960s and beyond, why modern never went mainstream, she replied, "What happens when you ask a child to draw a house?" You get a box with a triangle on top. A little gabled house still says "home."

Yet the cozy warmth of that iconic image doesn't explain the market for neotraditional houses today. Not all these houses are ugly and shoddy: though most are badly proportioned pastiches of different styles, some are built with attention to detail and materials. But, as the epithet McMansion suggests, they're just too big—for their lots, for their neighborhoods and for the number of people who actually live in them. And why do they keep getting bigger, when families are getting smaller? In 1970, the average new single-family house was 1,400 square feet; today it's 2,300.

The housing industry says that we want bigger and bigger houses. But I think they're not taking credit for their marketing skills. Last year's annual report for Pulte Homes, one of the nation's biggest builders, contains an astonishing fact: if you adjust for inflation, houses of the same size and comparable features are the same price today as they were in the 1970s. That means that if business is going to grow, the industry has to sell more product—not just more houses but more square footage. It's like the junk-food-marketing genius who figured out that people wouldn't go back for seconds but they'd pay more upfront to get, say, the 32-ounce Big Gulp.

This year, Pulte predicts, the number of houses built will be only slightly higher than last year. "More and more of the same might not sound particularly exciting, but it is," the report says. "That's because houses . . . will continue to get bigger and better, ensuring that real inflation-adjusted spending on residential construction will continue to rise." Bully for them—and for the folks in the real-estate and financing industries who base value on size not quality.

But finally some people are saying "Enough already." Sarah Susanka, a Minnesota architect, started a mini-movement with her best-selling 1998 book, The Not So Big House. Susanka argues that a good architect understands the importance of human scale. Under the dome of St. Peter's, you're meant to feel awe. But if your bedroom's the size of a barn, how cozy can you get?

The eco-conscious hate big houses, too, with the energy cost of heating and cooling all those big empty rooms. And now that McMansions not only are the staple of new suburbs but are invading older, leafy neighborhoods, built in place of tear-downs and overpowering the smaller vintage houses nearby, communities from Greenwich, Conn., to Miami Beach are beginning to take action.

Some middle-class people who care about design have opted out of the new-house market. They'll remodel an old house, one with an honest patina of history that all the money in the world can't reproduce. And some architects are hatching low-cost plans for the mainstream market. Prefab is hot right now: designs that use factory-built modules are assembled on-site. It's much cheaper than conventional construction, and if it's done well, it can look great—and modern.

"We have this concept about design and mass culture in America, with Target, Banana Republic, Design Within Reach," says Joseph Tanney of Resolution: 4 Architecture, which won a Dwell magazine competition to design a cool house in North Carolina for only $80 a square foot (a custom house would be $200 to $400 per). The house is prefab, and the firm has half a dozen more in the works. Seattle architect James Cutler (who designed Bill Gates's Xanadu) is working with Lindal Cedar Homes, a national builder, to adapt a wood-and-glass modernist house for modular construction.

"I think there's a return to an interest in modernism," says New York architect Deborah Berke, "and I would call it warm modernism, not sleek minimalism." She argues that a younger generation, steeped in a love of cool design and loft living and ready for a first house, isn't going to buy a mini-McMansion. "That's where the industry is not reading the social signs yet."

As more people get into design—even starting with a toothbrush—the more they'll want their houses to reflect what they value. Flat roof? Peaked roof? It doesn't really matter: the best design reflects who we are and the time in which we live. Who knows what our grandchildren might come up with if someone hands them a crayon and says "Draw a house?"
We’re living in the age of the great dispersal. Americans continue to move from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and West. But the truly historic migration is from the inner suburbs to the outer suburbs, to the suburbs of suburbia. From New Hampshire down to Georgia, across Texas to Arizona and up through California, you now have the booming exurban sprawls that have broken free of the gravitational pull of the cities and now float in a new space far beyond them. For example, the population of metropolitan Pittsburgh has declined by 8 percent since 1980, but as people spread out, the amount of developed land in the Pittsburgh area increased by nearly 41 percent. The population of Atlanta increased by 22,000 during the 90’s, but the expanding suburbs grew by 2.1 million.

The geography of work has been turned upside down. Jobs used to be concentrated in downtowns. But the suburbs now account for more rental office space than the cities in most of the major metro areas of the country except Chicago and New York. In the Bay Area in California, suburban Santa Clara County alone has five times as many of the region’s larger public companies as San Francisco. Ninety percent of the office space built in America by the end of the 1990’s was built in suburbia, much of it in far-flung office parks stretched along the interstates.

These new spaces are huge and hugely attractive to millions of people. Mesa, Ariz., a suburb of Phoenix, now has a larger population than Minneapolis, St. Louis, or Cincinnati. It’s as if Zeus came down and started plopping vast developments in the middle of farmland and the desert overnight. Boom! A master planned community. Boom! A big-box mall. Boom! A rec center and 4,000 soccer fields. The food courts come and the people follow. How many times in American history have 300,000-person communities materialized practically out of nothing?
In these new, exploding suburbs, the geography, the very landscape of life, is new and unparalleled. In the first place, there are no centers, no recognizable borders to shape a sense of geographic identity. Throughout human history, most people have lived around some definable place—a tribal ring, an oasis, a river junction, a port, a town square. But in exurbia, each individual has his or her own polycentric nodes—the school, the church, and the office park. Life is different in ways big and small. When the New Jersey Devils won the Stanley Cup, they had their victory parade in a parking lot; no downtown street is central to the team’s fans. Robert Lang, a demographer at Virginia Tech, compares these new sprawling exurbs to the dark matter in the universe: stuff that is very hard to define but somehow accounts for more mass than all the planets, stars, and moons put together.

We are having a hard time understanding the cultural implications of this new landscape because when it comes to suburbia, our imaginations are motionless. Many of us still live with the suburban stereotypes laid down by the first wave of suburban critics—that the suburbs are dull, white-bread kind of places where Ozzie and Harriet families go to raise their kids. But there are no people so conformist as those who fault the supposed conformity of the suburbs. They regurgitate the same critiques decade after decade, regardless of the suburban reality flowering around them.

The reality is that modern suburbia is merely the latest iteration of the American dream. Far from being dull, artificial, and spiritually vacuous, today’s suburbs are the products of the same religious longings and the same deep tensions that produced the American identity from the start. The complex faith of Jonathan Edwards, the propelling ambition of Benjamin Franklin, the dark, meritocratic fatalism of Lincoln—all these inheritances have shaped the outer suburbs.

At the same time the suburbs were sprawling, they were getting more complicated and more interesting, and they were going quietly berserk. When you move through suburbia—from the old inner-ring suburbs out through the most distant exurbs—you see the most unexpected things: lesbian dentists, Iranian McMansions, Korean megachurches, outlaw-biker subdevelopments, Orthodox shetels with Hasidic families walking past strip malls on their way to shul. When you actually live in suburbia, you see that radically different cultural zones are emerging, usually within a few miles of one another and in places that are as architecturally interesting as a piece of aluminum siding. That’s because in the age of the great dispersal, it becomes much easier to search out and congregate with people who are basically like yourself. People are less tied down to a factory, a mine or a harbor. They have more choice over which sort of neighborhood to live in. Society becomes more segmented, and everything that was once hierarchical turns granular.

You don’t have to travel very far in America to see radically different sorts of people, most of whom know very little about the communities and subcultures just down the highway. For example, if you are driving across the northern band of the country—especially in Vermont, Massachusetts, Wisconsin or Oregon—you are likely to stumble across a crunchy suburb. These are places with meat-free food co-ops, pottery galleries, sandal shops (because people with progressive politics have a strange penchant for toe exhibitionism). Not many people in these places know much about the for-profit sector of the economy, but they do build wonderful all-wood playgrounds for their kids, who tend to have names like Milo and Mandela. You know you’re in a crunchy suburb because you see the anti-lawns, which declare just how fervently crunchy suburbanites reject the soul-destroying standards of conventional success. Anti-lawns look like regular lawns with eating disorders. Some are bare patches of dirt, others are scrappy sprawls of ragged, weedlike vegetation, the horticultural version of a grunge rocker’s face.

Then a few miles away, you might find yourself in an entirely different cultural zone, in an upscale suburban town center packed with restaurants—one of those communities that perform the neat trick of being clearly suburban while still making it nearly impossible to park. The people here tend to be lawyers, doctors, and professors, and they drive around in Volvos, Audis and Saabs because it is socially acceptable to buy a luxury car as long as it comes from a country hostile to U.S. foreign policy.

Here you can find your Trader Joe’s grocery stores, where all the cashiers look as if they are on loan from Amnesty International and all the snack food is especially designed for kids who come home from school screaming, “Mom, I want a snack that will prevent colorectal cancer!” Here you’ve got newly renovated Arts and Crafts seven-bedroom homes whose owners have developed views on beveled granite; no dinner party in this clique has gone all the way to dessert without a conversational phase on the merits and demerits of Corian views on beveled granite; no dinner party in this clique has gone all the way to dessert without a conversational phase on the merits and demerits of Corian countertops. Bathroom tile is its cocaine: instead of white powder, they blow their life savings on handcrafted Italian wall covering from Waterworks.

You travel a few miles from these upscale enclaves, and suddenly you’re in yet another cultural milieu. You’re in one of the suburban light-industry zones, and you start noting small Asian groceries offering live tilapia fish and premade bibimbap dishes. You see Indian video rental outlets with progressive politics have a strange penchant for toe exhibitionism). Not
One out of every nine people in America was born in a foreign country. Immigrants used to settle in cities and then migrate out, but now many head straight for suburbia, so today you see little Taiwanese girls in the figure skating clinics, Ukrainian boys learning to pick and hints of cholo culture spreading across Nevada. People here develop their own customs and patterns that grow up largely unnoticed by the general culture. You go to a scraggly playing field on a Saturday morning, and there is a crowd of Nigerians playing soccer. You show up the next day, and it is all Mexicans kicking a ball around. No lifestyle magazine is geared to the people who live in these immigrant-heavy wholesale warehouse zones.

You drive farther out, and suddenly you’re lost in the shapeless, mostly middle-class expanse of exurbia. (The inner-ring suburbs tend to have tremendous income inequality.) Those who live out here are very likely living in the cultural shadow of golf. It’s not so much the game of golf that influences manners and morals; it’s the Zenlike golf ideal. The perfect human, defined by golf, is competitive and success-oriented, yet calm and neat while casually dressed. Everything he owns looks as if it is made of titanium, from his driver to his Blackberry to his wife’s Wonderbra. He has achieved mastery over the great dragons: hurry, anxiety and disorder.

His DVD collection is organized, as is his walk-in closet. His car is clean and vacuumed. His frequently dialed numbers are programmed into his phone, and his rate plan is well tailored to his needs. His casual slacks are neat while casually dressed. Everything he owns looks as if it is made of titanium, from his driver to his Blackberry to his wife’s Wonderbra. He has achieved mastery over the great dragons: hurry, anxiety and disorder.

His DVD collection is organized, as is his walk-in closet. His car is clean and vacuumed. His frequently dialed numbers are programmed into his phone, and his rate plan is well tailored to his needs. His casual slacks are neat while casually dressed. Everything he owns looks as if it is made of titanium, from his driver to his Blackberry to his wife’s Wonderbra. He has achieved mastery over the great dragons: hurry, anxiety and disorder.

Exurban places have one ideal that soars above all others: ample parking. This is the cultural shadow of golf. If you drive across the exurban landscape that is the essence of modern America, and you see the culture of Slurp & Gulp, McDonald’s, Disney, breast enlargements and “The Bachelor.” You see a country that gave us Prozac and Viagra, paper party hats, pinball machines, commercial jingles, expensive orthodontia, and Monster Truck rallies. You see a trashy consumer culture that has perfected parade floats, corporate-sponsorship deals, low-slung jeans, and frosted Coca Puff; a culture that finds its quintessential means of self-expression through bumper stickers (“Rehab is for Quitters.”)

Indeed, over the past half century, there has been an endless flow of novels, movies, anti-sprawl tracts, essays and pop songs all lamenting the shallow conformity of suburban life. If you scan these documents all at once, or even if, like the average person, you absorb them over the course of a lifetime, you find their depictions congeal into the same sorry scene. Suburban America as a comfortable but somewhat vacuous realm of unreality: consumerist, wasteful, complacent, materialistic, and self-absorbed. Disneyfied Americans, in this view, have become too concerned with small and vulgar pleasures, pointless one-upmanship. Their lives are distracted by a buzz of trivial images, by relentless hurry instead of contemplation, information rather than wisdom and a profusion of unsatisfying lifestyle choices. Modern suburban Americans, it is argued, rarely sink to the level of depravity—they are too tepid for that—but they don’t achieve the highest virtues or the most demanding excellences.

These criticisms don’t get suburbia right. They don’t get America right. The criticisms tend to come enshrined in predictions of decline or cultural catastrophe. Yet somehow imperial decline never comes, and the social catastrophe never materializes. American standards of living surpassed those in Europe around 1740. For more than 200 years, in other words, Americans have been rich, money-mad, vulgar, materialistic and complacent people. And yet somehow America became one of the most powerful nations on earth and the most productive. Religion flourishes. Universities flourish. Crime rates drop, teen pregnancy declines, teen-suicide rates fall, along with divorce rates. Despite all the problems that plague this country, social healing takes place. If we’re so great, can we really be that shallow?
Americans switch jobs more frequently than people from other nations. The average job tenure in the U.S. is 6.8 years, compared with more than a decade in France, Germany and Japan. What propels Americans to live so feverishly, even against their own self-interest? What energy source accounts for all this?

Finally, the critiques don’t explain the dispersion. They don’t explain why so many millions of Americans throw themselves into the unknown every year. In 2002, about 14.2 percent of Americans relocated. Compare that with the 4 percent of Dutch and Germans and the 8 percent of Britons who move in a typical year. According to one survey, only slightly more than a quarter of American teenagers expect to live in their hometowns as adults.

What sort of longing causes people to pick up and head out for the horizon? Why do people uproot their families from California, New York, Ohio and elsewhere and move into new developments in Arizona or Nevada or North Carolina, imagining their kids at high schools that haven’t even been built yet, picturing themselves with new friends they haven’t yet met, fantasizing about touch-football games on lawns that haven’t been seeded? Millions of people every year leap out into the void, heading out to communities that don’t exist, to office parks that are not yet finished, to places where everything is new. This mysterious longing is the root of the great dispersal.

To grasp that longing, you have to take seriously the central cliché of American life: the American dream. Albert Einstein once said that imagination is more important than knowledge, and when you actually look at modern mainstream America, you see what a huge role fantasy plays even in the seemingly dullest areas of life. The suburbs themselves are conservative utopias, where people go because they imagine orderly and perfect lives can be led there. This is the nation of Hollywood, Las Vegas, professional wrestling, Elvis impersonators, Penhouse letters, computer gamers, grown men in LeBron James basketball jerseys, faith healers, and the whole range of ampersand magazines (“Town & Country, Food & Wine”) that display perfect parties, perfect homes, perfect vacations, and perfect lives. This is the land of Rainforest Cafe theme restaurants, Ralph Lauren WASP-fantasy fashions, Civil War re-enactors, gated communities with names like Sherwood Forest and vehicles with names like Yukon, Durango, Expedition and Mustang, as if their accountant-owners were going to chase down some cattle rustlers on the way to the Piggly Wiggly. This is the land in which people dream of the most Walter Mitty-esque personal transformations as a result of the low-carb diet, cosmetic surgery, or their move to the Sun Belt.

Americans—seemingly bland, ordinary Americans—often have a remarkably tenuous grip on reality. Under the seeming superficiality of suburban American life, there is an imaginative fire that animates Americans and propels us to work so hard, move so much and leap so wantonly.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote that those who “complain of the flatness of American life have no perception of its destiny. They are not Americans.” They don’t see that “there is man in the garden of Eden; here, the Genesis and the Exodus.” And here, he concluded fervently, will come the final Revelation. Emerson was expressing the eschatological longing that is the essence of the American identity: the assumption that some culminating happiness is possible here, that history can be brought to a close here.

The historian Sacvan Bercovitch has observed that the United States is the example par excellence of a nation formed by collective fantasy. Despite all the claims that American culture is materialist and pragmatic, what is striking about this country is how material things are shot through with enchantment. America, after all, was born in a frenzy of imagination. For the first European settlers and for all the subsequent immigrants, the new continent begs to be fantasized about. The early settlers were aware of and almost oppressed by the obvious potential of the land. They saw the possibility of plenty everywhere, yet at the start they lived in harsh conditions. Their lives took on a slingshot shape—they had to pull back in order to someday shoot forward. Through the temporary hardships they dwelt imaginatively in the grandeur that would inevitably mark their future.

This future-minded mentality deepened decade after decade, century after century. Each time the early settlers pushed West, they found what was to them virgin land, and they perceived it as paradise. Fantasy about the future lured them. Guides who led and sometimes exploited the 19th-century pioneers were shocked by how little the trekkers often knew about the surroundings they had thrown themselves into, or what would be involved in their new lives. As so often happens in American history, as happens every day in the newly sprawling areas, people leapt before they really looked.

“Suburbia is becoming the most important single market in the country. It is the suburbanite who starts the mass fashions—for children, . . . dungarees, vodka martinis, outdoor barbecues, functional furniture, [and] picture windows. . . . All suburbs are not alike, but they are more alike than they are different.”

—William H. Whyte
The Organization Man (1956)
Americans found themselves drawn to places where the possibilities seemed boundless and where there was no history. Francis Parkman, the great 19th-century historian, wrote of his youthful self, “His thoughts were always in the forest, whose features possessed his waking and sleeping dreams, filling him with vague cravings impossible to satisfy.”

Our minds are still with Parkman’s in the forest. Our imagination still tricks us into undertaking grand projects—starting a business, writing a book, raising a family, moving to a new place—by enchanting us with visions of future joys. When these tasks turn out to be more difficult than we dreamed, the necessary exertions bring out new skills and abilities and make us better than we planned on being.

And so we see the distinctive American mentality, which explains the westward crossing as much as the suburban sprawl and the frenzied dot-com-style enthusiasms. It is the Paradise Spell: the tendency to see the present from the vantage point of the future. It starts with imagination—the ability to fantasize about what some imminent happiness will look like. Then the future-minded person leaps rashly toward that gauzy image. He or she is subtly more attached to the glorious future than to the temporary and unsatisfactory present. Time isn’t pushed from the remembered past to the felt present to the mysterious future. It is pulled by the golden future from the unsatisfactory present and away from the dim past.

Born in abundance, inspired by opportunity, nurtured in imagination, spiritualized by a sense of God’s blessing and call and realized in ordinary life day by day, this Paradise Spell is the controlling ideology of national life. Just out of reach, just beyond the next ridge, just in the farther-out suburb or with the next entrepreneurial scheme, just with the next diet plan or credit card purchase, the next true love or political hero, the next summer home or all-terrain vehicle, the next meditation schools, the right moral revival, the right beer and the right set of buddies; just with the next technology or after the next shopping spree—there is this spot you can get to where all tensions will melt, all time pressures will be relieved and happiness can be realized.

This Paradise Spell is at the root of our tendency to work so hard, consume so feverishly, to move so much. It inspires our illimitable faith in education, our frequent born-again experiences. It explains why, alone among developed nations, we have shaped our welfare system to encourage opportunity at the expense of support and security; and why, more than people in comparable nations, we wreck our families and move on. The radical and sometimes dangerous or illegal use they made of empty swimming pools, drainage ditches, and parking lots sparked a renaissance in skateboarding—and paved the way for new thinking about how city parks and sports facilities should be designed.
CONSIDER

1. Examine the places depicted in the three photos—two empty swimming pools and a drainage pipe. What do you think Stecyk means when he says that skaters “make everyday use of the useless artifacts of the technological burden”? Where do you see evidence of this phenomenon in the photos?

2. Which photo do you find most interesting, surprising, or powerful? What elements of structure, arrangement, or design do you think contribute to this effect?

3. All of these photos appeared in skateboarding magazines. What purposes do you think “action” photos serve in such publications?

“Skaters by their very nature are urban guerrillas. The skater makes everyday use of the useless artifacts of the technological burden. The skating urban anarchist employs [structures] in a thousand ways that the original architects could never dream of.”

—Craig Stecyk
Skateboarder magazine

“Two hundred years of American technology has unwittingly created a massive cement playground of unlimited potential. But it was the minds of 11-year-olds that could see that potential.”

—Craig Stecyk
Skateboarder magazine

“Still from Dogtown and Z-Boys (2001)”
The film raises this question of “authenticity,” about what it means to sell out, while getting the word out.

I can tell you this much. There’s no selling out in this film. I hardly made any money on it. I don’t own the film, and in order to support myself to be able to make it, I had to take two directing jobs, one for a series on Bravo, Influences, which is basically not a creative thing. We made the film in 6 months, and for those 6 months, I was probably paid for 2 months of work. But hey, this was a cause, had to do it. Since I was one of the guys, I knew many of the people who had footage, and was able to bargain for poverty wages. We spent probably $40,000 on footage that could have cost over $100,000.

But you can see how young people, perhaps especially, are anxious about the future.

Absolutely. I heard this when I was growing up, becoming what I’m trying to become: “You’ve gotta be confident. You’ve gotta go in the room and fill the room with your energy.” I’m sorry, but I’ll never be able to do that. What I’ve learned is, you don’t need confidence. What you need is ideas and the ability to get up and move forward. You need drive. You only get confidence by doing what you do. You don’t get it before. You get it by having the experiences of falling down and getting back up. I’m sure there are people that do wake up bursting with confidence, but that person’s not me.

Skating is literal about that.

People ask me, “You didn’t wear pads back then. How did you survive?” We survived because we learned how to fall. We grew up in the age of clay wheels, which were like rocks, and if you didn’t learn to fall properly, you couldn’t proceed. We wanted the film to be a reflection of that, the imperfect and subversive nature of skateboarding. So we broke it up and put the burn marks and the leader. And if someone would get too longwinded, we’d just speed up to the next part of the film. We didn’t want to hide it, to make it pretty.

It’s refreshing, since the popular standard for documentaries now, at least those using still photos, is to zoom in slowly, with fiddle music in the background.
SP: [laughs] We went into the matte camera stage, where there's lights and a table and the camera, and off to the side, a guy who programs the computer to smooth out all those moves. I said, "I don't want you to program anything, just use the joysticks and do it freehand." And we wanted to shoot as many different angles as possible and as many speed-ups as possible, so Paul could have as many opportunities as possible when he edited. It made it fun. We didn't make this film for anyone in particular, as long as we liked it.

CF: And now that you're traveling with it, what are you seeing in audiences?

SP: When you make a film like this, you always have in mind that you can't lose the core audience, or your film gets bad-mouthed. That's the one thing we tried to keep our ears attuned to. What's been a surprise is how many non-skating people have looked at this as a cultural phenomenon, like, "Wow, we knew this was in America, we've seen Tony Hawk, but we didn't know why."

CF: So it's recovering a history.

SP: Yes. And really, it's the kids who really have no idea. When Tony Hawk saw this, he goes, "I've been involved in skateboarding my whole life, and while I knew about this, I didn't really know the depth, or why it happened." This is a distinct American phenomenon, with no European influences. You can trace it back to Hawaii and surfing. It's so American.

CF: To that end, your crew was fairly diverse, even given that you were mostly "latchkey" kids of a certain class, and that Jay and you and others were so blond.

SP: Right. There was Jeff [Ho], Peggy Oki, Shogo Kubo, Tony [Alva], who's Mexican American. We had a black surfer on our team. Now this is very normal; back then it was very abnormal. When we would leave our area and go skateboarding anywhere else, it was all blond, blue-eyed kids. Today when you look at skateboarding, it has become very multicultural and very "urban." The kids that are doing it today would have been kids 20 years ago, who were in gangs and didn't like skateboarders. It's left its surfing roots completely and become inner city. Which I think is fantastic: skateboarding's one of the few sports you can do where you can leave the designated areas and do it anywhere. Every skateboarding kid wants to taste that illicit thrill of doing it where he's not supposed to do it, to try different aspects of his talent on terrain that wasn't built for him. And he can potentially make a name for himself by doing it anywhere he goes. Everywhere. Skateboarding: doing it is almost like being part of a virus. Viruses come in, occupy the body as if it's their own, use the resources of the body to replenish and remake themselves, and then leave. Skateboarding's the same way. You see an empty pool: this belongs to you. You use it as long as you can and then you leave. We never thought we were doing anything that was interesting, except to ourselves. It's hard to think it's going to turn into something else when everyone is telling you that what you're doing is wrong—"This is wrong. Leave." Our parents didn't understand it because there was no context to understand it. They looked at us and thought, "You'll outgrow this." It had the receptability of a yo-yo. Or a hula-hoop. They didn't realize that what we were doing was physically demanding, took a lot of pre-thought. And they didn't see the beauty in it. It was developed very clandestinely.

CF: Can you talk about how Dogtown, the place, affected the art and culture of skateboarding?

SP: Dogtown is basically West Los Angeles, where all of Los Angeles points at the beach. Like we say in the film, the end of Route 66. It's very rare for a coastal area to be low-income. Now if you look at it, it's Beverly Hills at the Beach, it's all money. At the time, Hughes Aircraft and Douglas had aircraft factories near there, so there were a lot of assembly line workers and rent-controlled apartments. It's just a beautiful slice of rundown coastline. And right where we surfed on the beach, there's a building that today is now a five-star hotel and in the '40s was a hotel and beach club where movie stars would go. But when we were there, it was a place called Synanon, a place for very serious drug rehab. But the low-income surroundings allowed people to grow, [and] there were a lot of artists there, like Jeff.

And because of the layout of Los Angeles—it's a very hilly area—you had this concentration of schoolyards that had these asphalt waves that you couldn't find anywhere else, in that abundance. Plus, Los Angeles is the swimming pool capital of the world. And not just swimming pools, but movie star pools, with the big sensuous bowls. So we had so many things going for us. People ask, would the X Games be where they are today if it wasn't for you guys? My answer is yes, because it would have happened eventually, somewhere else.
But we had everything going for us at the start. We had the terrain, the urethane wheel, and the weather—the drought. As we call it in the film, it was a “disharmonic convergence,” because no one else wanted it to happen. But even that favored us.

---

**Cf:** How does “style”—anti-establishment but also welcoming such mainstream elements as this premiere gauntlet—shape the culture?

**Sp:** Today, we live in an age of extremism. Kids today are like stuntmen, going as big as you possibly can. But back then, your body form, the carriage of your body, was an identification marker for who you were. It was like an anatomical hangtag. If you looked good, everyone wanted to watch you. It was that as well as being aggressive. How to look the best you could, at the most critical moment. And that took years to get there. The guys who faked it, you could see right through them. It was beautiful to watch. I’d see Tony Alva or Jay Adams and be inspired. I’d go my next run and tuck down more, and feel it. When you get into a critical moment, you can feel it. We were all pushing each other, in that regard. If you could carve a pool, and in a critical moment, just kind of tilt your back a little, wow! It’s like a matador. The audience goes insane. They might not be able to do it, but they can feel it. I don’t want to get too crazy with the metaphors here, but if you have a room full of pianos and hit the E key on one, the E keys on all those pianos will hum. It’s the same thing. When you hit something true in one human being, it hums through everyone. We would do that to each other. Some guy would do it, and boom, we were all vibrating to it, thinking, I’ve got to keep the session going.

**Cf:** Did you talk a lot about it, at the time?

---

**Sp:** We did talk about what was possible, and we argued about it a lot. For instance, we would do what was called backside kick-turns, where your back is to the wall. We didn’t think it was physically possible to do a frontside kick-turn. And I told Bob Biniak, “I know it’s possible, and I know you can do it.” I stood on the top of the pool and I egged him on until he did it. That was a huge turning point for us.

**Cf:** You knew Bob could do that kick-turn. How aware were you of each other’s differences and abilities?

**Sp:** That was something that I think was specific to me. This is one of the reasons I think I succeeded with my own team. I had an ability to look at other people and see they could do things, without an ego attachment to it, like, if he does that, he’ll be better than me. For me, I found the whole process fascinating. I found myself at contests, coaching the other guys. I don’t know where that came from. It was an innate thing that I just did, and it came in handy later, as a coach and a filmmaker too. Especially for a documentary: you have to be able to walk in and say, “What’s the story here?”

---

**Consider**

1. According to Peralta, why did he decide not to make a traditional documentary film about the history of skateboarding, one featuring “still photos with fiddle music in the background” (a veiled reference to filmmaker Ken Burns’s *Civil War* series developed for PBS)?

2. Peralta uses several metaphors—a virus, a room full of pianos humming—to describe skateboarding. If you’ve done a lot of skateboarding, discuss whether or not you think these images capture the flavor of the sport. If you haven’t, which of the metaphors do you find most suggestive or interesting?

3. Peralta argues that the “disharmonic convergence” of geographic and cultural realities in 1970s Dogtown (“basically West Los Angeles”) made possible the skateboarding renaissance that *Dogtown and Z-Boys* chronicles. Do you think that the sport would have evolved differently if this renaissance had happened somewhere else—Miami, for example, or Iowa City? Boston, El Paso, East Saint Louis, or Tupelo? Explain.

**Compose**

4. Skateboarders aren’t the only ones who make creative use of traditional spaces. For example, maybe you’ve transformed your parents’ garage into a rehearsal studio for your blues band or used the roof of your apartment building as an ice rink after a winter storm. Think of a situation in which you’ve used a place in an unexpected or oppositional way, and write a few paragraphs describing the experience. What features of the place inspired you to use it in a new way? What did you hope to accomplish? How did others react?
Here are some portraits of the island created by the tourist industry.

“Greetings from Jamaica.” This vintage postcard presenting 1950s tourists with an image of a lush, tropical paradise populated by picturesque local inhabitants.

“Greetings from Jamaica” — Vintage postcard of Jamaica

“The true Garden of Eden.” From www.sandals.com: “Sandals is a collection of 11 of the most romantic beachfront resorts on earth, created exclusively for couples in love, in Jamaica, St. Lucia, Antigua and The Bahamas. Discover the Caribbean’s most luxurious beachfront rooms and oceanview suites. Enjoy an astounding array of land and watersports, including unlimited golf and scuba diving.”

“Create your own paradise each day.” From www.halfmoon-resort.com: “Welcome to Half Moon, Montego Bay. A transformation begins when guests enter through the ornately carved wrought iron gates that frame the exclusive Half Moon resort community. A warm island greeting bids you into the sprawling open-air lobby filled with colorful artwork, tropical plants, gracious furnishings and expansive views of the Caribbean Sea and inspires a sense of calm and relaxation. . . . Time is yours while staying at Half Moon. Do nothing or take advantage of all that the resort has to offer. Let each sunrise dictate what the day will bring.”

“Greetings from Jamaica” — Resort hotel in Jamaica

Places We Go

The preceding images and readings looked at how the spaces we call “home” shape our identities. But places that are “not home” often occupy an equally important space in our imaginations. When we travel, we become the outsider in various locales, and images of these unfamiliar spaces play to our hopes, our desires—and sometimes our fears.

Images of places we visit typically fall into two categories: representations that draw us to these places (through travel brochures, advertisements, and the like) and representations that help us remember them (such as postcards, snapshots, or home videos). Though the images in the first category are usually more generic and those in the second more personal, both kinds share an important feature: Their purpose is to show the places we visit in the best possible light.

But we don’t live in a picture postcard world. Because portraits of places—visual and written—are created from particular perspectives, in particular contexts, and with particular purposes in mind, they are always incomplete.

The text and images that follow offer varied glimpses of Jamaica, an archetypal tourist destination. As you study the words and pictures, think about the purpose of each text, what message it sends, and what it leaves out.

Greetings from Jamaica

Search for “Jamaica” on the Internet, and you’ll be inundated with Web sites, most of them selling the Caribbean island as a breathtaking tourist destination. “In Jamaica,” the Jamaican Tourism Board says, “you’ll discover new worlds, and familiar ones too, lots to learn about, and even more to love.” Commercial travel sites call the island a “vacation paradise,” “a kaleidoscope of beauty,” and “the most precious jewel in the Caribbean.” If you sort your search results carefully, however, you’ll find other representations. According to the Christian aid organization Food for the Poor, for example: “The colorful images of Jamaica presented in travel brochures don’t tell the whole story. As in most countries, beautiful, affluent places do exist. But in many other areas of Jamaica, poverty is the norm.” Which of the words and images that follow captures the “real” Jamaica? None of them, perhaps. Or maybe all of them taken together.
CONSIDER

1. What kinds of places are depicted in these tourist-oriented portraits of Jamaica? How do design elements in the photographs—such as lighting, color, framing, and point of view—shape your impression of the landscape?

2. What do you notice about the people and activities depicted in these portraits? What do these patterns tell you about prospective vacationers’ expectations and associations with this region?

3. Have you ever visited or worked at a tourist resort? How did your experience of the place match or differ from advertisements for the resort?

4. How does viewing the tourism images with those from Food for the Poor affect your thinking about Jamaica? Which images seem more powerful to you? Why?

5. Why do you think Food for the Poor chose to use black-and-white photographs on its Web site? What other differences do you see in the two groups of images? How do these design differences create different impressions of the place?

COMPOSE

6. Imagine that you’ve been hired to create a tourism brochure for your hometown or campus. Take several photographs that capture places, activities, and associations you think would appeal to prospective visitors, and compose an appropriate caption for each photo.

7. Now take some photographs of the same locale that you would not include in a tourism brochure, and caption them as well. If you are working with a group, set up an exhibit of the contrasting or at least quite different photographs of the same locales.

FYI

A native of Jamaica, Margaret Cezair-Thompson writes and teaches English at Wellesley College near Boston. In the essay that follows, she alludes to “the violence in Jamaica in the ’70s,” a theme that pervades her widely acclaimed debut novel, The True History of Paradise (1999). According to the Sunday Business Post of Ireland, the novel “is based partly on her own experiences: the daughter of the Jamaican security minister, Cezair-Thompson left her home country in her twenties to study in New York. While there, she heard on the radio that her father had been assassinated. It wasn’t actually him—’it was one of his deputy ministers, but for 24 hours I thought he had been killed.’” “Geography Lessons” appeared in the Washington Post Magazine in December 1999.

Geography Lessons

Margaret Cezair-Thompson
(1999)

Aunt Justine was nobody’s favorite aunt. She had a quick temper and a harsh voice. Her husband, Uncle Nev, took her bad moods in stride, but her daughter used to come to our house to get away from her. Strangely enough, whenever my mother had to leave me somewhere for the day, I would ask to go to Aunt Justine’s.

Like most houses in Jamaica, hers had a large, cool tile veranda. Several tiles were broken and they formed little ridges and valleys; it was a terrain I knew well. I would play on the veranda while Aunt Justine chain-smoked and worked at her easel, painting landscapes from memory. There were a lot of books in her house. Uncle Nev was a geography teacher, so along with
my aunt’s mystery and romance novels, there were atlases and geography textbooks, and these in particular enthralled me. Words like tundra appealed to me, and I would imagine myself living in extreme climates, in an igloo or a nomad’s tent. When Uncle Nev was there, he quizzed me on things like the largest river in the world. He would sit on the veranda in khaki shorts and draw continents on a grapefruit. Then he would slice the grapefruit in half and offer me a hemisphere.

Every Christmas the whole family gathered at Aunt Justine’s. What I remember most is playing outside in the warm sun and hearing the grown-ups’ veranda talk and veranda laughter. There were three Christmas drinks: sorrel, made from the acidic red petals of a kind of hibiscus and spiced with ginger; Aunt Justine’s famous egg punch, made with rum; and pimento dram, a chilled brandy made from pimento (allspice) berries. There were a lot of us, so we ate buffet-style on the veranda: roast suckling pig, ham, “rice-an’-peas,” baked plantain, pureed boiled green bananas. Dessert was Jamaican Christmas pudding, a dark, moist fruitcake that had been soaking in rum and brandy for months.

When air conditioners first came to the island, Uncle Leo, whose company installed them in the big hotels, conspired with Uncle Nev to air-condition Aunt Justine’s living room in time for Christmas. It was to be a surprise. Everybody except Aunt Justine knew and had an opinion: Some looked forward to the novelty of a cool Christmas, others said they didn’t want to spend Christmas shut up inside the house shivering. Uncle Nev reasoned: “Those who want a white Christmas can sit in the living room, and those who want a red Christmas can sit on the veranda.” By “red Christmas” he meant the poinsettias that grew in people’s gardens and turned blood-red in December.

Christmas Day was burning hot, but I put on my sweater even before I reached Aunt Justine’s. My sister asked if it was going to snow. I said no, but it would be cold, like real Christmas. As I was driving from the airport, familiar sights reassured me: the noisy commerce of cart men, roadside higglers and crowded buses. The island seemed more lush and beautiful than ever; the violence of men had not denuded the landscape.

My parents and siblings were abroad. There was no family home to return to. I went to Aunt Justine’s house even though I knew it had been sold. No one had prepared me for the hotel parking lot that had replaced it. It had been the most stable feature of my childhood.

Uncle Nev had died, and Aunt Justine lived in a tiny apartment without even a balcony. She had given most of her furniture and books to her daughter, Phyllis, but the walls were crowded with her unframed landscapes. Arthritic fingers now prevented her from painting, and she was almost blind. She spent her days “listening” to the TV, mostly American talk shows.

Phyllis continued her mother’s Christmas Day tradition. Her veranda, like most in Kingston, had been enclosed, barricaded in iron grillwork. We sat in the living room, about a dozen of us. The country relatives no longer came to Kingston because of carjackings. There was no egg punch or pimento dram, but my cousin made sorrel spiked with rum. Her teenage sons sat in the TV room watching American football, and that seemed a sacrilege; soccer is football. Looking around, I thought we could have been a group of Jamaicans celebrating a Christmas anywhere.

I went back for Christmas 1997. I had lived most of my adult life in the United States, and the violence in Jamaica in the ‘70s had alienated me. As I was driving from the airport, familiar sights reassured me: the noisy commerce of cart men, roadside higglers and crowded buses. The island seemed more lush and beautiful than ever; the violence of men had not denuded the landscape.

My parents and siblings were abroad. There was no family home to return to. I went to Aunt Justine’s house even though I knew it had been sold. No one had prepared me for the hotel parking lot that had replaced it. It had been the most stable feature of my childhood.

Uncle Nev had died, and Aunt Justine lived in a tiny apartment without even a balcony. She had given most of her furniture and books to her daughter, Phyllis, but the walls were crowded with her unframed landscapes. Arthritic fingers now prevented her from painting, and she was almost blind. She spent her days “listening” to the TV, mostly American talk shows.

Phyllis continued her mother’s Christmas Day tradition. Her veranda, like most in Kingston, had been enclosed, barricaded in iron grillwork. We sat in the living room, about a dozen of us. The country relatives no longer came to Kingston because of carjackings. There was no egg punch or pimento dram, but my cousin made sorrel spiked with rum. Her teenage sons sat in the TV room watching American football, and that seemed a sacrilege; soccer is football. Looking around, I thought we could have been a group of Jamaicans celebrating a Christmas anywhere.
There had been a number of particularly gruesome killings, and everyone was agreeing that the “dons,” drug lords, were now running the country. Someone said, “Is de politicians’ fault, man, dem sell off de country.”

Things had not gotten much better; I wished I had not come “home.” I got up and wandered around the house like a ghost looking for old things among the new.

I found what I was looking for, its cover worn but intact: World Geography for Primary Schools, Vol. I. I asked Phyllis if I could have it. She said yes, it had outlived its usefulness; geography was now an optional subject in the schools. I realized that this was true not only in Jamaica but most places. Like Latin, the language of geography was dead. Words that had captivated me as a child—*steppe, antipodes*—seemed anachronistic, at best poetic. Uncle Nev and his lessons, Aunt Justine’s house, the changes in Jamaica, and in myself. I went out to the veranda carrying the book as if it alone contained my many-sided grief.

Aunt Justine was by herself out there, smoking. Before I had the chance to sit and talk with her, other guests began trickling out, bringing rum and their animated discussion of politics and crime. Phyllis brought out dessert. There was praise for the pudding, and then there was talk about whether Jamaica was becoming a less religious country.

“No, man, Jamaicans still love to go to church.”

“Which church? Ganja church?”

Everyone laughed, then someone told a preacher joke, then someone else told another. The jokes became more raunchy, the laughter more raucous. They were not mourners, but revelers. The book on my lap made me feel like a moody schoolgirl. My cousin had specially prepared some of my favorite Jamaican foods. And there was Aunt Justine, arthritic, blind and all! On the stereo Nat King Cole was singing, “Chestnuts roasting on an open fire . . .” and through the grillwork I could see my cousin’s garden full of red poinsettias. I was 18 degrees north of the equator, and it was really Christmas.

---

**SHOWING AND TELLING IN DESCRIPTIVE WRITING**

No matter what you write, it will be more appealing to your audience if you include specific details rather than page after page of generalities. This is especially true when you write about places: When you take readers to a specific locale, you become their guide. They can see, hear, taste, smell, and feel only what you set before them. And if you omit these kinds of details, their trip to the place will be flat and less than memorable.

If you haven’t already, you’ll probably soon hear a teacher talk about the difference, in writing, between showing and telling. The most common scenario goes something like this: Telling—simply writing about something (“it was 95 degrees in the shade”)—is not as effective as showing—letting readers share an experience with you (“I felt my skin melting as I stood in the afternoon heat”). Telling isn’t always a bad technique, however. Often, for reasons of pacing, priority, and space, telling works well—readers can’t experience everything. Consider this example from Margaret Cezair-Thompson’s essay “Geography Lessons” (pages XXX–XXX):

> I went back for Christmas 1997. I had lived most of my adult life in the United States, and the violence in Jamaica in the ‘70s had alienated me. As I was driving from the airport, familiar sights reassured me: the noisy commerce of cart men, roadside higglers and crowded buses. The island seemed more lush and beautiful than ever; the violence of men had not denuded the landscape.

Although her trip from the airport is important, it isn’t the central point of her essay, so Cezair-Thompson tells readers what she wants them to know in a few sentences. Showing all of this might have taken a few pages. Notice, however, that even in her telling, Cezair-Thompson appeals to readers’ senses by using such words as *noisy* and *lush*.

And that’s the point: The best descriptive writing combines showing and telling, using strong verbs, evocative adjectives and adverbs (in small doses), and lots of sensory details.

As you undertake your writing assignments, keep the following in mind to bring people and places to life:

- **Think about the details.** If you’re writing about a place, list the critical details that make that place what it is, that set it off from other places.
- **Group your list by sense (sight, sound, taste, smell, touch).** How many of the details are visual? Probably most of them, since we rely most heavily on what we can see when describing places. Try to think of details that appeal to the other senses as well.
- **Decide which of those details you want to show and which you want to tell.** These choices will depend on your purpose the amount of space you have, and in some cases your audience.
- **Incorporate details into your draft.**

---

Explore “Geography Lessons” in depth
www.ablongman.com/beyondwords11
"The real, 100 percent positive changes is gonna take time, in any country, or any island. But I think we're moving along in the right direction. It might be slow, but we're still getting there."

— Burning Spear

The Pulse of Jamaica

Reggae is just one of many kinds of folk music popular in Jamaica, but it is certainly the best known in the rest of the world. Like blues in the southern United States, reggae has its roots in Africa and was developed and popularized by black artists. The appeal of reggae, however, crosses racial, national, and class lines.

Although reggae's popularity is in large part based in its pulsating, infectious rhythms, the lyrics, too, have a broad appeal. Reggae songs—whether about love and peace, violence and suffering, anger and rebellion, or spiritual uplift and overcoming—are often songs rooted in Jamaica itself and thus present a strong sense of place. Consider, for example, the lyrics to “My Island,” by Burning Spear.

My Island

Burning Spear
(1997)

You live on my island
And you own all my rights
I want you to know
Give me what is mine
You live on my island
And you own all my rights
I want you to know
Give me what is mine

Is this another Christopher Columbus
Is this another old pirate game
Is this another Christopher Columbus
Is this another old pirate game

If this is a war, a musical war
I want you to know, I decided to fight
Come in my soldiers
Come and let us fight
Come and let us fight
Fight for our right
Come in my soldiers
Come and let us fight
Come and let us fight
Fight for our right

I and I yading in the footstep, the footstep of the Kings Highway
I and I yading in the footstep, the footstep of the Kings Highway
I want you to know
Give me what is mine
You live on my island
And you own all my rights
I want you to know
Give me what is mine

So you think you come again to trick us
So you think you come again to fool us
So you think you come again to trick us
1. Notice the structure of Cezair-Thompson’s essay. Why do you think she uses Christmas as a focal point for her remembrances? How does this choice affect the portrait she creates, in your opinion?

2. Compare the language used in “Geography Lesson” and “My Island.” Notice the moments when the authors incorporate vocabulary and phrases from Jamaican dialect—such as “I and I,” “Jah,” “yading” and “ganja”—into their work. How do these words and phrases affect your response to the texts? How do they affect your impression of Jamaica? How might the portraits be different if they had been written solely in academic English or only in dialect?

3. Based on their words, what do you think Cezair-Thompson and Burning Spear would say about the Web site depictions that open the discussion of Jamaica? Which, if any, do you think they would see as the most “complete” or “accurate”? Point to specific passages in the essays and the song lyrics to support your opinion.

4. Each element discussed here—the Web sites, the essays, and the song lyrics—has a purpose. Write a paragraph or two in which you describe what you see as the purpose of each and assess whether the words and images are effective in that context.

5. Conduct research in the library or on the Internet to learn something about the history, cultures, and politics of Jamaica. Write a few paragraphs reporting your findings; then comment on whether and how this information changes your response to the images and readings in this chapter.

6. Reexamine the materials in this section. Given all the facets of Jamaica you’ve seen, can you imagine any possible consequences for a place where extreme affluence and poverty exist so close?

7. Where in your state—or in another state or country you’ve visited—might these kinds of extremes be found in the same proximity? Using that more familiar location from which to draw your examples, write a paper in which you explore the ways affluence and poverty intersect and what may follow, politically and socially, from such contact.

Learn more about Burning Spear and Reggae music.
www.ablongman.com/beyondwords12
We often use stories to make sense of the world, and we use them to remember. Many of the stories we tell, in fact, are born of nostalgia: Because we miss something (or someone), we talk about it and tell a story to try to bring some part of it back, if for only a moment.

These nostalgic stories—and the ways they are told—vary as much as the tellers themselves. But what many have in common is a strong sense of place (the root of nostalgia is the Greek nostos, “return home”). In a recent online discussion thread, under the title “Disappearing Places” (www.photo.net/) photographer Marc Williams laments the passing of many of the places that made his childhood neighborhood unique. He concludes by asking, “Do you have something that you could post here on this subject? No critiques please, but a few remembrances, or even current things on the endangered list.”

This section begins with Williams’s initial Internet posting and some responses, as well as an essay in which another writer mourns the loss of a special childhood place. It concludes with two views of a legendary U.S. roadway, Route 66, which has faded in the years since the development of the interstate highway system.

Williams writes:

I just discovered [an] Allied Moving box with hundreds of neg[atives]s that had been missing for years. In it was part of a project I had undertaken to record the things of my life that were disappearing (ironic, that the negs disappeared also).

In the neighborhood where I grew up, before mega-malls, multiplex grocery stores and “bedroom only” zoning laws, there were neighborhood candy stores, barber shops, tiny markets, women’s salons and soda fountains. Often the owners lived up above the store. In some places, these still exist, but in many others they are fast disappearing. In their place are the ubiquitous Condo, Colonial and other assorted Characterless Crap.

It really promoted a sense of neighborhood. [In my opinion], it is a good thing to chronicle the disappearing aspects of our lives. Like I wish I had a picture of all my brothers and sisters in our PJs on top of my father’s Pontiac station wagon at the now rare Drive-in Theater.

In his posting on the same Internet site, Ralph Barker writes that “small towns in the Southwest . . . boomed during the heyday of the fabled Route 66 in the 1950s—a time when family auto touring and ‘road trips’ were ‘the’ vacation. The bright paint that once attracted customers has long since faded, and now just peels.” Morgan Foehl, in response, writes, “Ralph’s shot reminded me of this image of another Route 66 casualty I snapped in New Mexico. It makes me wish there were still a way to drive across the U.S. and be able to pull right off the highway into little places like this owned by locals. Here’s to the Interstates . . .”
CONSIDER


2. What is the effect of leaving people out of the photographs on pages 59 and 60? How is the decision to focus solely on the place tied to the photographers’ purpose? Can you think of contexts in which a photographer might effectively include people to tell the story of a “disappearing place”?

COMPOSE

3. Over the past several years, numerous “urban exploration” sites have sprung up on the Internet. As a group called Infiltration (www.infiltration.org) puts it, these sites are about “going places you’re not supposed to go”—abandoned malls, shopping centers, factories, mills, even disaster sites. Visit one of these sites, and analyze the portraits of the vanishing places that are presented. For example, you might think about what it is that “urban explorers” see in these places that is worthy of their attention and documentation.

RAFTON, Utah—My grandfather liked to dare me to walk to the cemetery at night, up the mud road from our house, past the orchards, the looming cows, past the tumbledown barn into the open, empty fields. From there I could almost see the mounds rising against the bluff. Grampa urged me on. Early settlers were buried here in unmarked graves, and nearby lay the headstone of a young boy, killed by Indians. As I turned and headed rapidly for home, I could hear Grampa chuckling in the dark.

It was Grampa who had brought us to Grafton, this ghost town on the edge of Zion National Park. He was born and raised in Utah, and wanted us to take part, to learn to love it as he did. So we camped out in an old adobe brick house, without running water or electricity, on a few acres of land my parents had bought. I was a little girl in diapers when we first came here for long holidays, driving from Los Angeles in a tattered VW Bug. The town—a handful of abandoned buildings, apple trees, lizards and the Virgin River, carving too close to the bank—became mine.

Happiness for me was waking up from a nap to eat watermelon by the irrigation ditch that ran in front of our house. At least that’s how it seems when I look at the photograph—my eyes are still sleepy, my white shirt a makeshift napkin, fingerprinted with a mixture of juice and red Utah dust. At night we slept on cots, with an applewood fire spitting out cinders onto our canvas sleeping bags. In the mornings, frost lined the windows, and it was so cold I was afraid to get out of bed.

But that was 30 years ago. Today, Grafton as I knew it is dying. There are no windows left in the old brick house, and the walls are scarred with graffiti. On the mantelpiece it reads, “Albert Loves Rhonda for Eternity and Mike.” Deep cracks in the walls have encouraged passers-by to help themselves to the fired bricks. And down by the river, another empty house gapes, its front porch torn off by vandals. With its supports removed, the second story wall collapsed soon after, exposing adobe bricks to the melting rain.

We’d heard the rumors, of course. Grafton was falling apart, but we were far away. Now, we’ve finally come back to see what’s left of our land.
I had no idea it was so beautiful. As a child, I had taken the place for granted—the still warmth of the afternoons, the slow brown river, the red sandstone cliffs poking into the sky. Down the road, I looked for the Indian chief my grandfather had drawn on the blackboard of the schoolhouse, but he was long gone.

As I stood and watched, a dozen teenagers climbed into the open face of a deserted house nearby, up the broken staircase to the second floor. They were laughing and shoving each other—giggling at the poetry sprayed on the plaster walls. I felt like a tight-faced schoolmarm, injured and entitled, and I told them to get down. “Can’t you guys read the sign?” They did not answer, and moved off.

It became clear to me that I really didn’t want to share this town with anyone—I just wanted to be left alone, to piece together the past. But my claims on Grafton were as nothing compared to those who came before me. Built by Mormons in 1859, the settlement was doomed from the start. Frequent flooding of the Virgin River washed away the crops and destroyed irrigation ditches, making life close to impossible. At one point, the entire town was relocated upstream, but to no avail. By the 1930s, Grafton had turned into a ghost town, gathering beer bottles and tumbleweeds.

I realize now that I, too, have abandoned Grafton—to the trash, the vandals, the deterioration. Perhaps I can make amends. Sheepishly, I begin to clean up. My father and I pick up loose boards from a collapsed shed and put them in a pile. A rusty nail grazes my palm. We make slow progress, but as the debris grows higher, I feel vaguely comforted.

Soon, the town will be busy with the sounds of restoration. In the past few years, a group of local townspeople and grassroots environmentalists has banded together to preserve what’s left of Grafton. They plan to stabilize the old buildings and keep a close watch on the place to cut down on vandalism. There’s already a shiny red gate blocking access to the adobe church, and a spanking-new sign explaining what is to come.

Grafton is soon to become a place of public purpose. But when I consider the pamphlets to be distributed at the information booth, I am sick at the thought—for Grafton is no longer mine. It has been appropriated.

For my part, I like Grafton best the way it used to be, but it is too late for that now. Already, too many tourists, drawn by the guidebooks, come to gawk at the town, leaving behind their lunch wrappers. I want the Grafton of my childhood, serene and apart. A place where I could commune with cows and watch the stinging red ants build their hills in the dirt. I would have liked my own daughter to play here someday, lost in daydreams.

It is almost dusk now, and the crickets buzz softly in the grass. As I stretch out on the front porch, I hear my parents’ voices inside, low and reassuring. The red mountains fade to brown in the dying light. Gawkers pass by, making tracks in the dirt road. They call out, “No Trespassing!” and drive on by.

“We own the place,” I tell them. But they probably don’t believe me. And, in some way, it really isn’t true. Slowly the dust resettles, and the crickets start up again. Slightly panicked, I look around at my old haunts. I’d like the sun to set quietly on Grafton, and its ghosts. At the cemetery up the road, there is no more room.
CHAPTER 12

Highway 66 is the main migrant road. 66—the long concrete path across the country, waving gently up and down on the map, from the Mississippi to Bakersfield—over the red lands and the gray lands, twisting up into the mountains, crossing the divide and down into the bright and terrible desert, and across the desert to the mountains again, and into the rich California valleys.

66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership, from the desert’s slow northward invasion, from the twisting winds that howl up out of Texas, from the floods that bring no richness to the land and steal what little richness is there. From all of these the people are in flight, and they come into 66 from the tributary side roads, from the wagon tracks and the rutted country roads. 66 is the mother road, the road of flight.

Clarksville and Ozark and Van Buren and Fort Smith on 64, and there’s an end of Arkansas. And all the roads into Oklahoma City, 66 down from Tulsa, 270 up from Wichita Falls south, from Enid north. Edmond, McLoud, Purcell. 66 out of Oklahoma City; El Reno and Clinton, going west on 66. Hydro, Elk City, and Texola; and there’s an end to Oklahoma. 66 across the Panhandle of Texas. Shamrock and McLean, Conway and Amarillo, the yellow. Wildorado and Vega and Boise, and there’s an end of Texas. Tucumcari and Santa Rosa and into the New Mexican mountains to Albuquerque, where the road comes down from Santa Fe. Then down the gorged Rio Grande to Las Lunas and west again on 66 to Gallup, and there’s the border of New Mexico.

And now the high mountains. Holbrook and Winslow and Flagstaff in the high mountains of Arizona. Then the great plateau rolling like a ground swell. Ashfork and Kingman and stone mountains again, where water must be hauled and sold. Then out of the broken sun-rotted mountains of Arizona to the Colorado, with green reeds on its banks, and that’s the end of Arizona. There’s California just over the river, and a pretty town to start it. Needles, on the river. But the river is a stranger in this place. Up from Needles and over a burned range, and there’s the desert. And 66 goes on over the terrible desert, where the distance shimmers and the black center mountains hang unbearably in the distance. At last there’s Barstow, and more desert until at last the mountains rise up again, the good mountains, and 66 winds through them. Then suddenly a pass, and below the beautiful valley, below orchards and vineyards and little houses, and in the distance a city. And, oh, my God, it’s over.

The people in flight streamed out on 66, sometimes a single car, sometimes a little caravan. All day they rolled slowly along the road, and at night they stopped near water. In the day ancient leaky radiators sent up columns of steam, loose connecting rods hammered and pounded. And the men driving the trucks and the overloaded cars listened apprehensively. How far between towns? It is a terror between towns. If something breaks—well, if something breaks we camp right here while Jim walks to town and gets a part and walks back and—how much food we got?

Listen to the motor. Listen to the wheels. Listen with your ears and with your hands on the steering wheel; listen with the palm of your hand on the gearshift lever; listen with your feet on the floor boards. Listen to the pounding old jalopy with all your senses, for a change of tone, a variation of rhythm may mean—a week here? That rattle—that’s tappets. Don’t hurt a bit. Tappets can rattle till Jesus comes again without no harm. But that thudding as the car moves along—can’t hear that—just kind of feel it. Maybe oil isn’t gettin’ someplace. Maybe a bearing’s startin’ to go. Jesus, if it’s a bearing, what’ll we do? Money’s goin’ fast. And why’s the son-of-a-bitch heat up so hot today? This ain’t no climb. Let’s look. God Almighty, the fan belt’s gone! Here, make a belt outa this little piece a rope. Let’s see how long—there. I’ll splice the ends. Now take her slow—slow, till we can get to a town. That rope belt won’t last long.

‘F we can only get to California where the oranges grow before this here ol’ jug blows up. ‘F we on’y can.
And the tires—two layers of fabric worn through. On'y a four-ply tire. Might get a hundred miles more outa her if we don't hit a rock an' blow her. Which'll we take—a hunderd, maybe, miles, or maybe spoil the tubes? Which? A hunderd miles. Well, that's somepin you got to think about. We got tube patches. Maybe when she goes she'll only spring a leak. How about makin' a boot? Might get five hundred more miles. Le's go on till she blows.

We got to get a tire, but, Jesus, they want a lot for a ol' tire. They look a fella over. They know he got to go on. They know he can't wait. And the price goes up.

Take it or leave it. I ain't in business for my health. I'm here a-sellin' tires. I ain't givin' 'em away. I can't help what happens to you. I got to think what hap-pens to me.

How far's the nex' town?

I seen forty-two cars a you fellas go by yesterday. Where you all come from? Where all of you goin'? Well, California's a big state. It ain't that big. The whole United States ain't that big. It ain't big enough. There ain't room enough for you an' me, for your kind an' my kind, for rich and poor together all in one country, for thieves and honest men. For hunger and fat. Whyn't you go back where you come from?

This is a free country. Fella can go where he wants. That's what you think! Ever hear of the border patrol on the California line? Police from Los Angeles—stopped you bastards, turned you back. Says, if you can't buy no real estate we don't want you. Says, got a driver's license? Le's see it. Tore it up. Says you can't come in without no driver's license. It's a free country.

Well, try to get some freedom to do. Fella says you're jus' as free as you got jack to pay for it.

In California they got high wages. I got a han'bill here tells about it. Baloney! I seen folks comin' back. Somebody's kiddin' you. You want that tire or don't ya?'
Cars pulled up beside the road, engine heads off, tires mended. Cars limping along 66 like wounded things, panting and struggling. Too hot, loose connections, loose bearings, rattling bodies.

Danny wants a cup of water.

People in flight along 66. And the concrete road shone like a mirror under the sun, and in the distance the heat made it seem that there were pools of water in the road.

Danny wants a cup of water.

He’ll have to wait, poor little fella. He’s hot. Nex’ service station. Service station, like the fella says.

Two hundred and fifty thousand people over the road. Fifty thousand old cars—wounded, steaming. Wrecks along the road, abandoned. Well, what happened to them? What happened to the folks in that car? Did they walk? Where are they? Where does the courage come from? Where does the terrible faith come from?

And here’s a story you can hardly believe, but it’s true, and it’s funny and it’s beautiful. There was a family of twelve and they were forced off the land. They had no car. They built a trailer out of junk and loaded it with their possessions. They pulled it to the side of 66 and waited. And pretty soon a sedan picked them up. Five of them rode in the sedan and seven on the trailer, and a dog on the trailer. They got to California in two jumps. The man who pulled them fed them. And that’s true. But how can such courage be, and such faith in their own species? Very few things would teach such faith.

The people in flight from the terror behind—strange things happen to them, some bitterly cruel and some so beautiful that the faith is refired forever.
Analyzing a Representation of a Place

The images of Jamaica you’ve encountered in this chapter illustrate that describing a place, whether in words or in images, is always a rhetorical process: What a writer or artist “sees” in a place reflects his or her particular context and point of view. For this project, find a textual or visual representation of a place you know well, and then compose a three- to five-page essay analyzing this representation. Think about the kind of portrait the text or image creates; how it uses words, images, or design elements to convey an impression; and how well it reflects your own sense of what the place is like. For example, you might compare a brochure advertising dormitories at your campus to your own experience living there or evaluate a Web site advertising the restaurant where you waited tables last summer. Or perhaps you recently visited the city where your favorite television show is set. Whatever place you choose, your task is to examine the representation in light of your own experience there.

Before you begin, take a look at “‘Still More Monkeys than People’: Costa Verde’s Rhetorical Paradise” on page 73 to see how student writer Beth Morff approached this task. Consider also the questions for composition first presented in Chapter 2, which can help you choose a topic and develop your draft:

WHAT’S IT TO YOU?
■ Choose as your subject a place that you have strong feelings about, either positive or negative. If you don’t care about a place, you probably won’t be sufficiently motivated to sift through various representations of that locale to produce an interesting rhetorical analysis.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SAY ABOUT IT?
■ The purpose of your essay will be to help readers understand the representation of a place. You’ll need to critically examine the depiction(s) you’ve selected and bring your own experiences into the discussion to explore the rhetorical dimensions of the representation.

WHO WILL LISTEN?
■ Readers will find your analysis most engaging if they learn something new or unexpected from it. Look for a text that reveals an unusual point of view or that conflicts in interesting ways with your own experiences and might generate a response from your readers. An essay explaining that “this postcard view of the Springlake Amusement Park is completely accurate” doesn’t give your audience much to think about. But an analysis that helps readers think about the role of amusement parks in contemporary culture will have a broader appeal.

WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?
■ Once you’ve chosen the text or image you’ll analyze, look closely to determine what qualities of the place it emphasizes. Begin by identifying the qualities of the representation that will become part of the content of your essay: What objects or structures are foregrounded in the text or image? What is de-emphasized or left out? What point of view does the text or image invite you to adopt? If people are part of the text or image, who are they and what are they doing? What emotional associations does the text or image evoke?

As you begin to identify patterns in the text or image, look for specific examples—key words, phrases, images, design elements, or other items—that illustrate those patterns.

Finally, you’ll need to inventory your personal experiences and memories. Start by freewriting your own description of the place—writing nonstop for five minutes or so on your subject to generate ideas. Then compare your description, point by point, to the patterns you see in the text or image you’ve analyzed.

HOW WILL YOU DO IT?
■ When you think about the purpose of your project, keep in mind that a rhetorical analysis of any text—whether it’s visual, print, or multimedia—has two main components: First you describe what the text does; then you explain how it does it. Suppose you’re analyzing an informational booklet about the retirement facility where your grandparents live. You will need to describe for your readers the booklet’s depiction of the facility (“The booklet emphasizes the homelike atmosphere of Forest Hills Village”); then you will need to show how the booklet creates this depiction, pointing to specific words, phrases, or images (“The photos of individual rooms and apartments...”)
feature upholstered couches, bookcases, and other typical home furnishings. Although hospital beds, wheelchairs, and other medical equipment are part of the services offered, these institutional items are never pictured.

Once you've developed your description and analysis, decide how this material will fit into a larger **structure or arrangement**. Since the assignment for your project asks you to analyze and compare, consider a **comparison-and-contrast pattern** (see the Writing Tip on page 81).

Because this is an essay assignment, your primary **medium** will be words. However, if you're analyzing a visual representation of a place, you may decide to include that image or portions of the image to support your analysis, as Beth Murff does in “Still More Monkeys than People.” Remember to discuss, cite, and document appropriately any outside text or images that appear in your paper.

**HOW WELL DOES IT WORK?**

- Even skilled writers often make **revisions** to an analytical essay after doing a first draft. Review your draft carefully, and if possible, have a classmate or friend review it and offer feedback. Don’t hesitate to return to the text or image you’re analyzing to check your arguments or to find additional supporting examples. Before you turn in the paper, proofread the text and check the formatting.

**COMPARING AND CONTRASTING**

Throughout college and your professional career, you’ll likely be asked to make comparisons between two (or more) items and to compose a report, evaluation, or analysis. Here’s one effective way to structure a comparison-and-contrast analysis, based on the assignment in Project 1. This model can be adapted for other types of projects as well.

1. Introduce readers to the place and to the image you’ll analyze; provide a purpose statement or thesis forecasting your major points
2. Describe of the representation you’re examining (What does it say about the place?)
3. Analyze of the representation you’re examining (How does it create that impression?), with supporting examples
4. Compare ways in which the representation is similar to your own experience in the place
5. Contrast ways in which the representation differs from your experiences in the place
6. Summarize your key points and help readers to see their significance.

Of course, this model is only one possibility—arrange your essay to best suit the points you want to make, and consult your instructor or a writing handbook for additional options.

---

**STUDENT PROJECT**

Beth Murff, “Still More Monkeys than People”

Beth Murff
Professor Gordon
Composition 103
29 May 2004

“Still More Monkeys than People”:
Costa Verde’s Rhetorical Paradise

You’re going to Costa Rica. What do you want to see while you’re there? White sand beaches. The ocean. Palm trees. You want to lounge by the pool with a refreshing drink in hand. You want to see the sights—you know, all that rain forest stuff. The first thing is to find a place to stay. You surf onto the Web site for the Costa Verde Hotel. “Still More Monkeys than People,” it says. Monkeys? There are monkeys in Costa Rica! You definitely must see the monkeys. You scroll down to a panoramic ocean view above jungle treetops from a swimming pool sundeck. . . . How do you make reservations?

The Costa Verde is just one of an increasing number of resorts catering to eco-tourists. In this paper, I investigate how the alluring advertisement of this hotel appears to the viewer and how it differs from the reality of the tourists’ experience, drawing on materials from the hotel’s Web site and experiences from my own one-week stay at the hotel. Do luxury and sensitivity to the local environment really go hand in hand?

It is important to understand why Costa Rica is such an optimal eco-tourist destination. Although the country is made up of only 19,730 square miles and represents a mere 0.03 percent of the landmass of the...
earth, it is considered “one of the most biologically diverse countries of
the world.” In fact, about 4 percent of the world’s flora and fauna can be
found in Costa Rica. Twenty-five percent of the country is protected by
national parks, and there are over one hundred private reserves (Dunlop
83). This richness of wildlife lured over one million visitors in 1999 alone,
to “visit the birthplace of the term eco-tourism,” according to the Costa
Rican Tourism Institute (Dunlop 10).

Costa Rica also has its share of environmental problems. Forest
cover has decreased from 70 percent to only 23 percent since the 1950s.
Even national parks are not free from the dangers of deforestation, be-
cause 20 percent of nationally protected areas are still privately owned.
The Costa Verde Hotel, in fact, is one of the owners of the Manuel Antonio
National Park, in which it is located. Manuel Antonio Park covers 1,687
acres of the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, a humid tropical forest zone
known for its wildlife and beaches—especially the Central American
squirrel monkey, or *mono titi* (Dunlop 102). Since the monkeys “do not
recognize [the] man-made boundaries of the park, they roam freely
through the forest, into areas developed for tourism, even onto hotel
grounds” (Sheck 168). The Costa Verde is one such hotel whose grounds
are traversed daily and nightly by troops of monkeys and other animals.
The small hotel is American-owned but locally run, and tourists travel
here mostly during Costa Rica’s dry season, from December to April.

The first thing one sees on the Costa Verde Web site is the hotel’s
logo and slogan. The logo is in big green letters, with squirrel monkeys
perched on various letters. Underneath it is the slogan “Still More
Monkeys than People.” There is a site map directly to the left, and

beneath it is a panoramic view of the ocean, seen over lush green tree-
tops from a deck beside a blue swimming pool. A brief description of
the hotel’s amenities is just to the left of an indoor shot of one of the hotel’s
rooms. Below this are more pool shots and an aerial view pointing to a
dense forest, indicating where the hotel is apparently located. Subpages
include “Rates,” “Rooms,” “Houses/Bungalows,” “Testimonials,” “Our
Monkeys,” “National Park,” “Map,” “Q&A,” “Weddings,” “Restaurants,”
“Attractions,” and “Photo Gallery.”

All of these pages feature several photographs of beaches, pools,
and hotel rooms; there are also recurring mentions of monkeys and other
wildlife. But there is little actual wildlife pictured other than plants. Only
the “Our Monkeys” subpage has several copyrighted photos of squirrel
monkeys and an accompanying article from *Smithsonian* magazine. The
remainder of the photos on the site consists mainly of deserted beaches
and amiable-looking people in bars and restaurants.

The key words used in the Costa Verde Web site are monkeys, view,
and observe. The absence of animals in the photos is a recurring visual
element. All of these patterns are significant in terms of frequency. Words
frequently used in conjunction with monkeys are foliage, trees, and birds.
These words suggest that the author of the site views monkeys very much as
part of the local environment. The frequent use of the word monkey creates
an expectation that there will be many monkeys readily visible but presents
them as something to be viewed from a distance, as one might view a tree.

The focus on the view is seen even more in the frequent uses of the
word observe, which is used repeatedly to describe what the visitor will
do at Costa Verde, such as observing monkeys, iguanas, sloths, birds, dolphins, animals, plants, and stones. In the case of the park, the visitor is invited to “observe” rather than remove anything from the grounds. The visitor will be able to sit back and observe nature from a comfortable distance.

Most of the monkeys and sloths that do appear on the Web site are cartoon images rather than actual photos. Perhaps a reason for this is to maintain the professional and civilized demeanor of the hotel. Tourists value comfort, convenience, and luxury, and these are the aspects of the hotel that the Web site portrays.

In summary, the reader is led to believe that a vacation at the Costa Verde Hotel will be full of exotic natural beauty—observed as the “good view” from the window and balcony. The visitor will be able to “see the sights,” to experience the wilderness right from his or her air-conditioned hotel room, and feel warm and fuzzy for appreciating nature.

This, however, is not what the visitor experiences at the Costa Verde. The first room we were given had no view at all of the jungle or the ocean. We decided to accept it until we were awakened the next day by children’s squeals heard through the wall. After complaining, we moved to a different building closer to the beach. The view was spectacular. The staff at the hotel was friendly—yet there was something unprofessional about the place.

The free-roaming monkeys, sloths, and iguanas also gave Costa Verde a much more wild feeling than we expected from the Web site. Walking down a road or sidewalk, I would frequently encounter an iguana in my path. Sitting on my balcony in the evening, I would be startled as a monkey jumped off the roof into the tree not ten feet away. Chatting, we would find a sloth hanging in a shrub behind the pool bar. I did not just “observe” wildlife at Costa Verde—I encountered it at every turn. These experiences did not take place on organized tours and outings; they took place at unpredictable moments.

The culture of Manuel Antonio was also inseparable from the vacation experience. The beach was public, and because of this interaction, the native residents are very present to the visitors. The pristine view of the rain forest is not lessened by the presence of locals, but rather it is the presence of tourists that intrudes on the local culture and ecosystem. For example, one of the biggest dangers to the animals is the power lines that run the length of the tourist beach strip. Electrocution is a common cause of death among the monkeys (“Our Monkeys”).

Is eco-tourism really as eco-friendly as the tourism industry would have you believe? Is the average tourist aware that there may be environmental implications to his or her visit? We have observed how the Costa Verde uses rhetoric on its Web site to convey a certain idea of the place to the viewer. Visitors who have viewed this page may come to Costa Verde with the idea that they will simply be observing nature from a comfortable distance, not interacting with it and thus not disrupting or harming it. They may assume that tourist luxuries and unspoiled wilderness can exist in the same space, without one affecting the other. However, the reality is that man and nature are not separate entities—we must learn to coexist not only in our own backyards and cities but also all over the world.
Project 2
Field Observation and Analysis of a Public Space

Many of the writers and artists featured in this chapter are fascinated with documenting how the physical characteristics of places influence (and are influenced by) the people who inhabit them. For this project, you’ll engage in a similar process of observation. You’ll visit a public place, then write a three- to five-page paper that carefully describes and analyzes it in order to identify the connections among the physical space, the people in it, and the activities that go on there. The questions for composing can help you begin developing ideas, collecting material, and writing your draft:

**WHAT’S IT TO YOU?**
- Begin by selecting your subject—the place you’ll visit and describe. Your site can be a building; a small cluster of related buildings, like a strip mall; a portion of a building, such as the lobby of your apartment complex; or an open area such as a park, graffiti wall, or cemetery. Whatever your focus, keep the following points in mind:
  - Choose a space that interests you and that’s not too familiar. If you know a place well, it can be difficult to achieve the critical distance that you’ll need to observe it with an analytical eye.
  - Check the accessibility of your site. Is it nearby and open to the public? A state prison, hard-hat construction site, or a monastery, no matter how intriguing, probably won’t allow easy access, for example.
  - Reflect on ethical considerations. Will the presence of an observer alarm or embarrass people using the space? A lone male observer sitting in a parking garage after dark would almost certainly startle women en route to their cars. Also avoid sites where you’re likely to intrude on private conversations or activities—as you might in the locker room at a fitness center.

**WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SAY ABOUT IT?**
- While it’s important that you provide detailed, descriptions of the place you’ve selected, details alone aren’t enough. A key part of your purpose is to analyze what these details say about the relationship between the physical features of the space and the people and activities you observe there. You’ll need to look for interesting patterns and connections in the information you’ve collected and use these to focus your discussion:
  - What catches your eye? Does this space look similar to or different from places that serve similar functions?
  - Who is here? What are they wearing, doing, and saying? Do they appear comfortable, excited, impatient, tired? Who is not here, and why? Is the space designed to interest particular groups?
  - How do people use this space? Where do they sit, stand, or gather? What is a “normal” activity here? How can you tell?
  - How do people interact in this space? Who talks to whom? Who seems to be in charge? How can you tell?
  - Do you see anything that surprises you? Does anyone use the space in an unexpected way?

**WHO WILL LISTEN?**
- It’s likely that the audience for your paper won’t have visited your site, so you’ll need to describe it thoroughly and vividly (see the Writing Tip on page 53) and to provide specific examples to illustrate the patterns you see. Strive to engage your readers by bringing the sights, sounds, and activities of the place to life, and then by helping your audience see the significance of these details.

**WHAT DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?**
- Although you’ll gather most of the content for this project through direct observation, you may first need to do some background research: Who owns this space? When was it built, and has it been renovated or changed since that time? Has the space ever been used for something other than its current purpose? Find the answers to these questions by asking owners or employees, consulting local historical societies, checking the archives of local newspapers, or conducting research in the library or online. You’ll need to spend plenty of time, systematically recording what you see. Social scientists use the term field observation to refer to this process of collecting information. You’ll find guidelines to get you started in the Writing Tip on page 90.

**HOW WILL YOU DO IT?**
- Think about the structure or arrangement of your paper in two parts. First you’ll introduce readers to your site, providing relevant background information and a thorough description of it based on your field observation. Then you’ll conclude with analysis, drawing readers’ attention to one or more ways in which the physical layout of the place seems to influence the ways in which people use or inhabit it. As with all analytical writing, you’ll need to provide supporting examples and details to illustrate the major points you make in your analysis.
Considerations of **style**—the choices you make about word selection and tone—are especially important in descriptive writing. Concrete details and precise, vivid language will give readers a clear sense of the place and enhance your credibility by showing that you know your subject well. See the Writing Tip on page 53 for more details.

Finally, although the primary **medium** for this project is words, keep in mind that drawings, maps, diagrams, or photographs can introduce readers to your site and provide powerful evidence to support your analysis. Remember that any visual materials you didn’t create yourself must be appropriately cited and documented.

**HOW WELL DOES IT WORK?**

- **Start your paper early enough** so that you’ll have time to return to the site if needed to check facts or fill gaps in your observations. Once you’ve completed a draft, review it or have a classmate or friend do so, suggesting areas for **revision** and **editing**.

**FIELD OBSERVATION**

For anthropologists and other social scientists, field observation is a research technique conducted according to well-established, formal methods. As a non-specialist, you won’t adhere to such strict conventions in this project. But by following a series of steps similar to those used by social scientists, you can build a detailed and thorough description of a place.

- **Preview your site and make a plan.** Plan at least two visits when you can observe without distractions for at least one hour. Decide in advance what times you’ll go, where you’ll sit, and how you’ll record your observations. Try observing at different times of day and on different days of the week to get a sense of whether activities vary.

- **Draw a map of the space,** showing the location of key structures, surfaces, paths, objects, and other permanent features.

- **Take careful field notes.** Buy a notebook expressly for this purpose, and begin your notes describing each visit on a separate page marked with the date and time. Look carefully at the space and what goes on there, and take as many notes as possible. Decide in advance how you’ll organize your field notes. Many researchers use a two-column format, writing factual observations in the left-hand column and personal interpretations and comments in the right-hand column.

- **Review your notes as soon as possible** after the observation session, filling in details, words, or other items that you’ve left out.

- **Analyze your notes after** a few hours or days have passed, looking for interesting patterns or unexpected findings. Repeat your field observation process each time you visit the site. And as you analyze each set of notes, look for commonalities and differences from one session to the next.

**STUDENT PROJECT**

Jeni Byars, “The Rhetoric of Animals in Captivity in South Carolina: The Riverbanks Zoo”

In this excerpt from the paper she composed in response to the assignment for Project 2, writer Jeni Byars used details from several field observation sessions to create a rich portrait of the penguin exhibit at the Riverbanks Zoo:

The penguin exhibit is indoors, with wooden floors and rocks to sit on. Older children and adults mostly sat on the rocks, and the younger kids ran around, walked, and climbed on the exhibit. There is a nook within the wall of the exhibit, a concave glass window that is perfectly child-sized, and well-occupied. Sounds of splashing water and seagulls and the smell of fish pervade the atmosphere. A dark brown net draped on a dark purple wall frames an information poster. There is a feeding show in this exhibit as well, but the animals are not trained or asked to perform. They provide an interesting, natural show. One stood with his wings puffed up and seemed to be airing himself out. Another penguin rested on his belly and perked upright when humans with food came into the exhibit. The Rock Hopper variety are the only ones that enter the water feet first (the rest dive, head first).

The penguins are first fed in the water and then hand fed, especially the ones in nesting holes (in the wall). Each is given a multivitamin every day, and each has a foot identification band. The floor in the exhibit is made of intercore, in order to protect the birds from “bumblefoot,” or callous-like abrasions. The air and water temperature behind the glass is 50 degrees (F), and a painted cloudy and blue sky tapers into the distance on the walls behind the birds. This exhibit illustrates some advantages for animals living in captivity. Their life expectancy rises from 20-25 years (in the wild) to 40 years. They also receive aid when sick, even as much as surgery, if necessary (one was going to have surgery soon for cataracts).