

## REFLECTIONS ON THE ART OF PLACE WRITING

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During the 1990s we taught, both singly and together, a place-writing class at Humboldt State University (HSU) that focused either on California’s North Coast or on the Trinity Corridor that connects Redding with Arcata and Eureka (Figure 1). Several of our students published revised versions of their papers in the *Humboldt Historian*; scores more participated in the production of *Traveling the Trinity Highway* (2000).<sup>1</sup> That 250-page guidebook is a portrait, in pictures and prose, of a trinity of Trinities—the river, the mountains, and the 140-mile road that ties together a dozen small towns divided among three counties (Shasta, Trinity, and Humboldt). Our decade-long collaboration has convinced us that fieldwork and archival research are equally essential to the perusal and portrayal of place.

This conclusion will leave veteran place writers unsurprised, but many geography departments, including HSU’s, teach the two kinds of methodologies as separate courses, as if they had no common bond. We do not mean to question the validity of such a division, but, based on our experience in preparing a guide to the Trinity National Scenic Byway, we would strongly recommend a place-writing class as a practical medium for integrating the two approaches. The primary purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the utility of combining them. At the same time, we draw from a rich fund of Trinity field reflections to illustrate the kinds of methods used to highlight the places portrayed in the book.

In trying to make topographers, or place biographers, out of budding tophiles, we wanted students not only to probe a specific locale but also learn how to identify and interpret the quintessential qualities of any small area. We sought, in other words, to develop place perusal as a skill integral to the art of place portrayal. From the outset we encouraged class members, not all of whom were geography majors, to employ the methods of other disciplines; we also emphasized geography’s role as a synthesizer of multiple approaches to fathoming the myriad facets of place.

Students developed a close relationship with their chosen place in a variety of ways. We had them visit the site, walk its streets and trails, probe its plant life and watch its wildlife, locate and interview knowledgeable locals, discover pertinent documents and artifacts, and, in general, try to absorb the site’s genius loci and thereby bond with it. We devised no set formula for familiarizing students with a given place, but we did discuss strategies with them and organized at least one ex-

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