

of a place that

**Critically evaluating representations of places**  
As discussed in section 2.3, we rely on many different images of places to inform and construct the meaning we attach to them. For example, poetry about places can inspire patriotism. Take a look at Figure 1. These meanings affect our decision-making – whether we visit a place, invest in a place or even care about a place. And as we saw in 2.6, place-meanings created by people matter, particularly to the economy. Before examining the case studies that follow, let's first consider how **reliable** the representations of places are. Is there any way we can evaluate this?

**USA**

'O beautiful for spacious skies,  
For amber waves of grain,  
For purple mountain majesties  
Above the fruited plain!  
America! America!  
God shed his grace on thee  
And crown thy good with brotherhood  
From sea to shining sea!

Extract from *America the Beautiful*  
(Katharine Lee Bates, 1895)

**England**

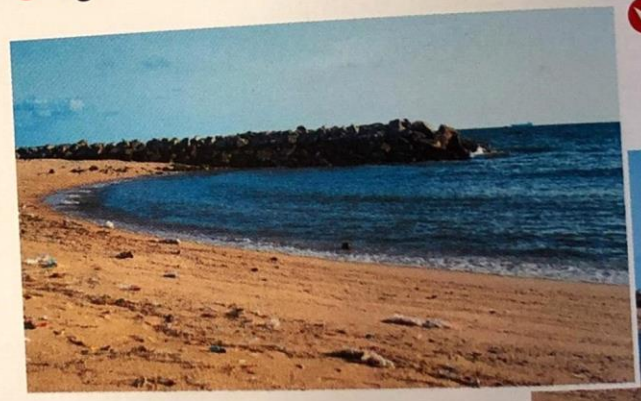
'And did those feet in ancient time  
Walk upon England's mountains green  
And was the holy Lamb of God,  
On England's pleasant pastures seen!'

Extract from *Jerusalem*  
(William Blake, 1808)

**Figure 1** Patriotism and poetry

**Reliability**

Secondary sources supply information via another person's experience, their eye or lens. Each secondary source is an act of interpretation. Sometimes the message gets lost in translation (Figure 2). Even photography, which you might assume is the most straightforward form of representation, has its problems (Figures 3 and 4).



**Figure 2** The telephone

**Figure 3** The photograph frames their subject... or what is just off camera

Be it the work of a film director, artist, composer or novelist, we should always remember that these sources offer us a *subjective* perspective – a personally curated view of a place. All are selective and therefore open to accusations of inaccuracy. What have they left out?

We, in turn, interpret the data we are given and add our own subjectivity. For example, we might like or dislike a piece of art depicting a place. Our feelings about that place or the piece of art may affect our views on how reliable the art is as a source. As was noted in 2.1, our views are shaped by our own experiences, education and background.

When investigating place-meaning, it is always a good policy to use more than one source or **text** (Figure 5).



## Provenance and textual analysis

Unfortunately, you cannot avoid being human or living in a world of representations drawn by mere mortals. All researchers face the same problems of viewing places through the eyes of other people and, furthermore, being themselves subjective. How can we stay alert to these limitations?



**Figure 4** A photograph can be digitally altered to change our perception of a place

- ◆ Consider whether the source gives a positive or negative impression of a place and why that might be. Look for symbols or stereotypes and metaphors in the text. Think about the author/artist's choice of vocabulary, colour or camera angle.
- ◆ Find out about the context in which the source or text was produced and about its creator – this is its **provenance**. When and by whom was it produced? What was its purpose? Does it support or contest the views of dominant groups or powerful ideologies of the time?
- ◆ How does it compare to other available texts about the place? Was it produced earlier or later than them, inspired by them or as a reaction to them?
- ◆ Look for subtexts or hidden texts – what is the source that is being studied *silent* about? This means, what was the author aware of as being relevant, but has chosen to leave out of his or her work, such as men, women, the economy, or the environment?
- ◆ How does the text relate to wider relevant geographies or processes in society, such as industrialisation, deindustrialisation, globalisation or the emancipation of women?

Social scientists suggest that as you uncover more about the context and purpose of a text you should reread the text and reappraise it. Also, try to reflect on your views of it and how they are shaped by your own experience, upbringing, and the time in which you live.



**Figure 5** Texts for qualitative research

## ACTIVITIES

- 1 Write a definition of the following, in your own words:
  - text
  - reliability
  - provenance
- 2 You will be investigating your home or study area in some detail as part of the *Changing places* topic. Start this work by making a list of texts you could analyse in a review of media representations of your home area.
- 3 What are the advantages/disadvantages of different media forms:
  - a for the researcher evaluating data sources or texts?
  - b for the publicist or promoter tasked with changing people's perceptions of a place?
- 4 Choose one of the two texts in Figure 1 and find out about its provenance. You will need to use online resources and read the poem in its entirety. Using the method described above, investigate the image of the country it presents.