

**Third Space Writing:
A Potentially Liberatory Pedagogical Practice**

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PART I: *My Why*

Growing up, I had what I now recognize was an atypical relationship with education. At the time, though, I simply viewed school through the only lens I knew: experience. From Kindergarten through eighth grade, I attended a rural, three-room schoolhouse in Montana. Plains sprawled around the school for twenty miles in every direction but West, where the Crazy Mountains hugged us blue and immovable. Melville, our “town,” bore more resemblance to a hamlet than anything urban. Melville Main Street is comprised, to this day, of a dozen houses, half of which sit empty and windblown. The community is both wider and deeper, though. In an area characterized by agriculture since the Homestead Act, ranchers still make up the great part of the Melville community. My classmates were primarily the sons and daughters of families who had ranched on the land for generations. Most years, we also had a few students whose parents were hired on at one ranch or another for a season and gone again by spring. This made the Melville School a place of both deep roots and tumbleweed transiency. When I was in Kindergarten, there were sixteen students in the school, across all grade levels. By the time I was in third grade, that number had dwindled to three. When I graduated and headed to high school in the town of Big Timber, with its whopping population of 2,000, my Melville experience was bookended again with fifteen classmates.

It wasn’t just the diminutive number of peers that made my experience at Melville anomalous, although the correlation was direct. Because there were so few of us students, we were able to learn in environments completely different from traditional classrooms. Of course, we did spend much of our learning time in classrooms, sitting at desks where the wooden chair was bolted to the wooden desk via a curved metal rod that snaked from the chair seat to the belly of the desk. Our classrooms were blended, though. At twelve years old, I sat next to eight year olds. Sometimes, we had one teacher and one aide to serve the whole school. Other times, we had two teachers and two aides. Our student to teacher ratio was always excellent, but the jobs of our teachers were complicated by the fact that they were teaching students across grade and subject levels, often without the necessary resources for any students above or below the proposed grade level standards.

For the most part, my elementary school teachers were incredible. They rose to the challenge of their position with passion and creativity, often molding curriculum specific to a student’s individual interests and abilities. For me, that was especially true in seventh and eighth

grade. Lonely and isolated from other kids my age, I spent most of my time at recess or during free time scratching frantically in the lined pages of my journal. My teacher, aware of my love for reading and writing, had the idea to start a school newspaper as my passion project.

Given that all but one of the students in the school at that time were younger than me, the newspaper staff was primarily me. For two years, most of my classes went by the wayside (a fact that came back to bite me in high school Algebra). I sat at a computer and clicked away on my newsletter. But I also got out of school, into my community. I interviewed old time ranchers and visited businesses and got to learn from real-life journalists and photographers. My teacher arranged all of this, supporting me completely, encouraging me constantly, making it all possible. I didn't realize, at the time, how rare this experience was. Because I was in this tiny school that I both loved and often felt trapped in, I had big, individual opportunities that I would not have had in the same way if I were in a traditional classroom. I had always loved reading and writing, but through this project, my teacher encouraged my writing to become both more personal and more expansive.

My interest in writing continued to flourish after I graduated from Melville. In high school, I attended an arts retreat. My school granted me excused absences, and I went to a ranch nestled along a river for a week. There, we had poetry lessons in the morning and independent work time in the afternoon. I trekked through the crunchy autumn woods, cheeks reddening in the sharp air. I sat on the riverbank and watched my eyelids flush in the afternoon sunshine. And I wrote, scrawling poems in a spiral bound purple notebook. I shared them with peers in the evenings and we etched notes in the margins of each others' work. The following mornings, sitting at long wooden tables, students and mentors intermixed on log benches, we read our pieces aloud.

During my Junior year, I started a newspaper at my high school. For two years, I sat in our computer lab and typed out stories about our sports teams and extracurriculars and accomplishments. I traveled to school competitions and took notes and photos. At state tournaments, I had a "press" pass, and got to walk onto the field, court, floor, all in the name of my writing work. At the same time, I interned at my town's local newspaper. Some of my time was spent in the office, typing up my own stories or copy editing. Most of my time, though, was spent on the move. I visited community members at their homes or businesses. I rattled around in

reporters' trucks and photographed girls in pink boxing gloves and recorded interviews in nursing homes and sat up, late at night, in my childhood bedroom, transcribing.

In college, I took all the writing classes I could. One poetry class met in the basement of a church in our town, not on campus. Another took place during the pandemic and found myself and my classmates zooming in from all over the world. I studied abroad in Bath, England, and completed an Oxford-style Poetry Tutorial. I met with a published poet once a week in a dark and narrow room on the first floor of a house older than the United States. We dipped biscuits in tea and talked about whether or not I should anthropomorphize horses in my writing. All of my poems were inspired by my experiences at home on my family's ranch in Montana, or trekking across the English countryside, marveling at the transcontinental ubiquity of thistles and crows, or riding the train into London as the sky burned the day away.

After graduating from college, I lived alone in my grandparents' cabin on the edge of a lake in Northwestern Montana for two months. Each day, I walked along the crystallizing shore and sketched a novel in my mind and in brief quips in a leather notebook.

Last year, I lived in Ireland for eight months and got a Master's in Creative Writing. My class met in Oscar Wilde's childhood home. I sat at a desk by the window and gazed across the street at pigeons, seasonally-rotating Guinness advertisements, rusty light on red bricks, construction men on cranes smoking roll-your-own cigarettes. For one class, we went to a museum and looked at bog bodies, kings and peasants alike preserved for thousands of years in peat. For another, we went to Trinity's rugby pitch and played soccer for an hour, chests splotted scarlet in spring exertion. One week, we skipped normal class entirely and went, with our professors, to Sligo. There, we swam in the frigid sea as dune grass bent toward bleached golf courses. In the evenings, we squished into steamy pubs and listened to traditional Irish musicians and shared pints with our professors.

All my life, I have loved writing and have sought experiences that enrich and encourage my love of writing. Each of the intensive writing experiences I have had, even those undertaken in the pursuit of an academic degree, has encouraged me to engage with the world in personal, immersive, agential ways. These experiences have been different in many facets, but a commonality in each of the experiences designed to incubate my passion for writing is the morphing of the spaces within and beyond traditional classrooms. Of course, I have spent a lot of time in traditional classrooms. I loved writing even when I sat at my pencil-gratified and gum

laden desks in elementary and high school. But my specialized knowledge of writing, my extended experience of writing, my curiosity for writing – these were all sparked by writing instructors whose pedagogical practices incorporated both the traditional classroom *and* spaces beyond in meaningful and exciting ways. For most students, though, that is not the case.

For students who do not independently decide to pursue writing, their experience of writing instruction is entirely different than mine has been. For most students, writing is something they are taught from Kindergarten through college composition classes. And most of the time, this teaching happens inside traditional classrooms with teachers positioned as the authority figures disseminating information to passive recipients. When someone is passionate enough about writing to seek out new spaces and modes of learning about writing, the world of writing instruction becomes colorful. For most students, though, the world of writing instruction is much more black and white. I can't help but wonder if more students would love writing if that love was inculcated in them in the same immersive ways it has been for me. It has been my experience, and it is my belief, that when students experience writing in spaces other than the traditional classroom, or in ways that disrupt the traditional classroom, a new love for or engagement with writing may flourish.

Writing this culminating project for my Master's degree has been an exercise in vulnerability for me. I have, as I might have mentioned once or twice by now, always been a lover of writing. Normally, though, I love writing that fits neatly into certain boxes. Now, don't get me wrong – I love all genres of box, but I also love to seal the lids with a double layer of packing tape and keep the contents separate. My personal interests and professional goals for writing are currently aligned on the sort of Millennial-zeitgeist personal essay. Or, as history knew it for centuries: memoir. At twenty-seven, though, it feels a bit conceited (not to mention ridiculous) to say that I want to write memoir. So, personal essays it is. Before the last year, however, I would *not* have put myself in that creative camp. My undergraduate degrees are in English and Global Politics. For both of those programs, I was an academic essayist, not a personal one. In 2019, I was cranking out research papers about terrorist groups with one hand and turning in research papers about Mary Wollstonecraft with the other, fueled by three a.m. jitters. At each of these separate forms of essay, personal and research, I feel reasonably competent. I am not a qualitative researcher or a career academic or a celebrated memoirist, by

any stretch of the imagination. But I am a writer. And I like my writing to be neat. Formulaic. Precise. Genre-specific. This paper is not that.

This paper is a medley of many things: memoir, reflecting on my own personal experiences in the classroom as a student and teacher; research paper, pulling in historical underpinnings and scholarly theories with a frequency that borders on frenetic; qualitative analysis, reporting on my survey design and results; and questions about pedagogical practice, many posed and some answered. This paper taps into many different boxes, pulling together disparate threads of my own interests and those things I think are necessary to weave a coherent picture of a current moment in writing pedagogy in the United States. In the coming pages, I walk with you through the annals of history and the bowers of leafy classrooms. We make some quick turns and some unexpected jumps. This paper is neither as neat nor as taped-up as I would like it to be, but some boxes simply are not ready to be shut. Pedagogical design, I have realized, is an ongoing process without a simple answer. Therefore, understanding *why* and *how* I want to design my own pedagogical practice is attendantly ongoing. This paper is uncomfortable for me, even at its final stages, because it does not feel finalized. It cannot feel finalized. The questions posed in this paper are questions without clear-cut answers. They require continued analysis, continued study, continued work. They are questions that generate discomfort, for me and anyone doing this work. They require us to submit to trial and error, to the possibility of being wrong in an effort to determine what is right. Readers should approach this paper understanding that, together, we will move through writing that feels uncomfortable and unanswered questions that leave us dissatisfied. Yet, as my quoted theorists elucidate soon, discomfort is an integral part of third spaces. And this paper, hybrid and fluid and even messy as it is, functions as its own type of third space: not something traditional or formal, but something that, hopefully, engages you and engenders conversation about third space writing.

In this paper, the term “third space writing” refers to writing that occurs either outside traditional classroom settings or within them when conventional structures – such as hierarchical teacher-student relationships – are intentionally disrupted. I am fascinated by the ways in which third spaces can be both physical places and transformative spaces of liminality and community building. To me, third space writing is writing that is done in a space where traditional systems are disrupted, disregarded, or reimagined. Sometimes, these third spaces may be informal outdoor places on campus, such as the lawn by Montana Hall. Other times, these third spaces

may be the classroom my students and I share in Wilson Hall, where we sit in a circle and write together, creating a shared community of trust and conversation. Third spaces are places of incredible transformative potential. This paper is my attempt to probe, access, and open numerous types of third spaces.

I explore and complicate existing ideas about third space writing pedagogy throughout this paper. Specific research about writing in a third space, particularly in the United States, is limited. By considering other, adjacent research, though, I draw hypotheses about third space writing. Through an analysis of the history of public education in the United States, coupled with our country's rigid focus on curricular standards and testing, I illustrate that our traditional classroom system is predicated upon exclusion and symbolic violence and often constrains teaching and learning, causing teachers and students alike to question their agency. Next, I offer examples of pedagogical approaches, particularly for writing instruction, that may liberate us from our inherited systems. Then, I investigate pedagogical theories including liberatory educational theory, third space theory, and theories of place-based and eco pedagogy as lenses through which to reimagine and restructure educational spaces. Finally, I use my own experiences as a student and graduate teaching assistant to speak to my personal theories about the influence of space and place on writing. I discuss the design and results of my own research study, conducted over the course of this semester with my students. My research considers how students' perception of themselves as writers changes when the spaces in which they write are varied. Each of the sections of this paper builds upon one another in an effort to consider the following research questions: Does the removal of constraints such as walls, desks, or traditional classroom dichotomies and dynamics also remove constraints around creativity and interest? Can third space writing instruction engender greater engagement and agency in students? Given the potential of the natural world and third spaces to decrease students' stress and increase their personal connection, can third space writing instruction be a liberatory educational practice, both for students and for teachers?

PART II: Situating Ourselves Within the Public Education System in the United States

Before we can begin to answer questions about third space writing pedagogy, we must situate ourselves within the context this paper seeks to address: traditional classrooms in the contemporary public school system in the United States. For the purposes of this paper, I define a

traditional classroom as an in-person public learning space where teachers lead learning. Typically, traditional classrooms find students seated in desks with a teacher administering lessons from a desk, podium, or area at the front of the room. Traditional classrooms historically rely on the banking model of education, whereby instructors deposit information in students' minds (Freire). Alternatives to the banking model include John Dewey's early 20th century articulation of progressive schools, not as places devoid of structure but as places where students become active, not passive, participants in the process of their own education (Gibbon et al.). By adopting Dewey's belief that students should be motivated by "interest, not fear," we can disrupt the banking model of education and instead usher in a model of engagement, still within the walls of classrooms in public schools (Gibbon et al.).

Now that we have a working understanding of traditional classrooms – and the ways in which they might be disrupted – we must look back at the history of education in the United States that brought us to our present public school system. The journey of public schools in the U.S. has been long and violent. I do not use the word "violent" lightly. Indeed, systems of education frequently operate on the violence and oppression inherent in power dynamics. Sometimes, this violence is overt. Other times, it is subtle or symbolic. French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron coined the term "symbolic violence" in reference to systems that legitimize and sustain arbitrary cultural capital through misrecognition and pedagogic action (Bourdieu and Passeron). In these systems, the perspectives of the people who design the system become the de facto reality through society's internalization of the dominant cultural norms. This symbolic violence is pervasive and challenging to mitigate, because of its implicit reliance on misrecognition. People living within these symbolically violent systems often do not recognize their own subjugation within the system. Instead, people often buy into the system both because it is all they know *and* because they are taught, from a young age, to believe in the meritocratic value of the system (Bourdieu and Passeron). Symbolically violent systems sustain themselves when the people within the system believe there is no alternative. Bourdieu and Passeron articulate these systems as if they are inescapable. To me, that type of thinking is a trap. We do not have to live in symbolically violent systems, but in order to escape them, we do have to recognize them. To put this idea into laymen's terms: students learn, in the infancy of their educational journey, that higher grades are a good thing. Therefore, students strive to get good grades. However, students may not be taught to wonder if they all have an equal opportunity to

achieve good grades. Indeed, if they perform poorly in school, they may simply think of themselves as fundamentally less intelligent than their peers who perform better. This is the misrecognition inherent in systems of symbolic violence that allows arbitrary ideas about dominant culture and class to so successfully maintain their footing. In order to demolish that footing, people within the system must learn to recognize the trap that has been laid for them and choose a new path. If we recognize and disrupt elements of the school system that institutionalize symbolic violence, we can avoid the trap of misrecognition and self-perpetuating cycles.

Bourdieu and Passeron's theory of symbolic violence can be seen at play throughout the history of the public school system in the United States, particularly in the persistence with which the system has upheld arbitrary but ingrained ideals about who should access education, what education they should access, and how they should access it. The dominant cultural capital that shaped early iterations of the public school system – stratified along lines of race, ethnicity, gender, ability, and language – was institutionalized and resulted in systemic exclusion.

In the early years of nationhood, education in the U.S. was a fragmented thing, lacking any coherent overarching organization. According to the Center on Education Policy, “many children were excluded [from school] on the basis of income, race or ethnicity, gender, geographic location, and other reasons” (Kober and Stark Renter 1). Structured education was accessible primarily to white children in the Northeast part of the country. This education took many organizational shapes, ranging from church groups, schools set up by individual towns, private tutoring for wealthier children, or charity schools for poor children funded by benevolent societies (Kober and Stark Renter 1). Funding for these early schools also came from varied sources, including taxes, donations, and tuition. Free, universally accessible schooling was far from the norm and education was not compulsory.

A through-line in the history of education in the United States is its purported relationship to democracy. The Founding Fathers believed an educated populace would best preserve and protect the ideals of civic engagement and freedom (Kober and Stark Renter 2). In the late 1780s, federal land grants allotted land to new states joining the union, with the stipulation that a portion of these lands be designated for public schools. These land grants became cornerstones of communities across the fledgling country. In the 1830s, the concept of fully funded public schools began to gain popularity (Kober and Stark Renter 2 - 3). An early iteration of public education was referred to as “common schools.” Common school advocates believed education

that was accessible to all students would result in “literate, moral, and productive citizens” (Kober and Stark Renter 3). These early public schools included in their curriculum moral lessons and strong assertions of civic duty. Those in favor of common schools also often opposed private schools, arguing that private schools would draw away resources from common schools. The private school, common school dichotomy perpetuated separation along class divides. Some opponents of common schools felt that it was not their duty to pay to educate other people’s children, and that public education should not be equally accessible to children of all ethnicities (Kober and Stark Renter 3). Individual states slowly adopted public education throughout the 19th century, progressing from 55% of children aged five to fourteen receiving public school education in 1830 to 78% in 1870 (Neem 177). However, even as public schools became more common throughout the 19th century, strong views on class and ethnic divisions in education remained prevalent.

Non-white students were systemically excluded from the public education system in the U.S., despite arguments from educational reformers that more inclusive schools would beget shared culture and respect (Kober and Stark Renter 4). Most Southern states legally prohibited African Americans from learning to read. Even after states changed these laws in the wake of the Civil War, the subsequent rise of Jim Crow laws and the passing of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which legally codified segregation, perpetuated separation in the educational system (George et al.). Simultaneously, public schools were less accessible to girls than to boys, often offering girls an entirely different curriculum (Kober and Stark Renter 5). Children with disabilities and children of immigrants were similarly disenfranchised. As waves of immigration swept through the U.S. in the 19th and 20th centuries, public schools were allegedly intended to serve as the bastion of integration, language learning, and social and democratic connection. In reality, however, schools often stripped immigrant students of their cultural heritage and sometimes even their names in an effort to incorporate them into American society (Kober and Stark Renter 5). At the same time, Native American students were often forcibly removed from their families and sent to federally run boarding schools where a common objective was to, as Richard H. Pratt said in 1892, “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man” (Carlisle Indian School Digital Resources Center).

Civil rights movements in the 20th century slowly led to more widespread access to public education for children of all backgrounds. Legal rulings and acts such as *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Individuals with Disabilities Act, and the Elementary and Secondary Education

Act of 1965 gradually increased equality of educational opportunity (Kober and Stark Renter 6). However, the symbolic violence in the history of our schools cannot be escaped or forgotten. These foundation stones of stratification still uphold the system of public education in the United States.

A persistent struggle in the education system in the U.S. has been its inherent sense of disparateness. While many countries have a central, federal governance of their public school systems, the U.S.'s system has always been decentralized. States have "primary authority" over education (Kober and Stark Renter 6). For years, states made their own decisions about academic standards. Though there have long been discussions between educators about these standards, there was no codification of standards for many decades. Finally, in 2010, forty states adopted the Common Core Standards ("Read the Standards"). These standards were intended to make the U.S. more competitive in the global market ("What Happened to the Common Core?"). More states later joined the Common Core, though each state retains its autonomy to adopt or modify these standards per their own preferences. These standards have come under criticism for reasons ranging from government overreach to prohibitive cost to too complete an overhaul to too heavy an emphasis on standardized testing ("What Happened to the Common Core?"). The tumultuous implementation of the Common Core standards illustrates a recurring theme in the U.S. public education system: controversy.

Standardized testing is a particularly contentious element of the U.S. educational system. On the one hand, educators, parents, and government officials alike feel the pressure to keep American students competitive with international peers. On the other hand, educators, parents, and students alike feel the pressure to perform within a system that was not designed for everyone. Standardized tests serve as another prime example of a system that better fits the backgrounds and skillsets of certain students, like a microcosm of the historic U.S. public school system in general. Many educators argue that there are better, more holistic performance-based ways of measuring students' progress (Long). In my own classes for my Master's program at Montana State University, this is the most frequent complaint that I hear from fellow educators. Several of my classmates are teachers at public elementary, middle, and high school schools in Montana. Each of them routinely expresses their frustration with having to teach to standardized tests. Though the purpose of educational standards, including Common Core, are to prepare students equitably, that is often far from the reality of what happens when standardized tests are

attached to standards. Students have diverse backgrounds, interests, and abilities. Testing each student to the same standard often makes the teachers I know feel like they are failing those students whom the standard curriculum does not successfully serve. This is a reproduction of the same symbolic violence that has been in action since the beginning of the United States's educational system. We continue to construct systems that privilege certain cultural capital, while systemically standardizing the marginalization of those outside the circle of privilege. This is both a huge point of consternation and anxiety for teachers, and a further example of the division that is so ingrained in the U.S. public education system. Though standardized tests disenfranchise certain students and reproduce bias and inequity, teachers have no choice but to adhere to the curricular decisions made by their school boards and states (Long). But within this adherence, is there room for agency?

As part of our circular conversation about standards, my teacher friends and I often discuss our own power in our classrooms. How much leeway do we have in a system that often functions to reproduce inequality? Can we, as educators, tap into new ways of teaching in old systems? Can we teach in transformational ways within the parameters of standards and standardized testing? Can we avoid the traps that have been so carefully laid for us and our students, limiting our ideas of what we can and cannot do? In attempting to answer these questions, we will, again, be subject to discomfort. These are not questions for which educators have quick and easy answers. If we did, our jobs would be both much easier and much less rewarding. These are questions that require constant analysis and revision of our own practice. These are questions that require educators to be vulnerable, to sit in discomfort, and to wonder how we might do better by and for our students.

Before we can answer these questions, we must recognize where we stand within the public school system at the present. Recognizing our position is the first step in dismantling the symbolic violence inherent in the school system. Today, most public education in the United States continues to take place inside traditional, standards-centered classrooms. For some subjects, this education is very hands-on. STEM subjects often have the corner on the market in this regard; much of science is done in-the-field, while humanities more often happen at-the-desk. As a writing instructor in the State of Montana, it is that context, in particular, that I am interested in.

I am a graduate teaching assistant (GTA) at Montana State University. The majority of my students are freshmen in college, though I do often have students in higher grades, too. When students enter Montana State, they bring with them their reading and writing experiences from high school. There is nothing in either the Common Core Standards or the specific Montana Content Standards for English Language Arts that requires reading and writing instruction to center on or even incorporate experiences beyond the classroom (“Read the Standards” and “Montana Content Standards”). Although the Montana Content Standards for English Language Arts Programs encourage writing for different tasks and across the curriculum, there is no formal standard requiring Montana public schools to incorporate any spaces beyond the traditional classroom into their English or Writing classes (“K-12 Content Standards”). Therefore, when students enter Montana State University, whether they are coming from a Montana high school or another public high school in the United States, there is no guarantee that they will have ever received writing instruction that focused on anything but the traditional classroom. Over eight semesters as a GTA, I have observed that my students perceive writing as a one-dimensional thing that happens in highly structured contexts such as the traditional classroom or workplace. Rarely do my students seem to have either an interest in or experience with writing that takes place outside the classroom. Presumably, most of their writing experiences have been tailored to academic standards that require a rigorous focus on outcomes such as reading comprehension and sentence construction. However, it is my belief that we, as educators, can teach both to these standards and beyond them. We can help our students become competent readers and writers *and* we can give them experiences that elevate writing into a practice that can be transformational.

As educators, it is imperative that we be willing to tap into our discomfort and share our experiences with one another, even if those experiences are atypical or outside-the-standard. In sharing research or experiences that are experimental or even messy, we can help one another develop ideas about how to disrupt our pedagogical practices and teach in transformational or liberatory ways. Liberation is a very high bar in a Freirean sense, and it is dependent on collective consciousness. In order for our teaching practices to become liberatory, we, as educators, must build this collective consciousness by both teaching in ways that disrupt the system *and* sharing these teaching experiences with one another. Through this conversation and collaboration, we can facilitate a sense of liberation for educators. This is a collective conversation that is not yet happening on the scale I hope it one day will. I hope I might help to

get this conversation rolling, through my own willingness, in this paper, to probe and push back against traditional systems.

Documentation about teachers' conversations or liberatory writing practices in their classrooms is still limited, but there are recorded examples of non-traditional writing instruction at play in the state of Montana. Interestingly, these writing experiences take place largely during the summer, not the school year. This calendar delineation reflects the delineation many teachers feel internally. We fear disrupting our traditional school system, so we seek ways to work outside and beyond it. Summer camps allow teachers the opportunity to teach in different, potentially life-altering ways, without the strictures of the public school system. In Montana, there are several optional writing intensives such as the Yellowstone Writing Project and Missoula Writer's Collective that offer summer camps for students interested in writing. At these camps, students are taken to explore the ecosystems in which they live and are then given time to write. However, as was the case with my writing experiences growing up, participation in these camps is predicated on a preexisting interest in writing. And yet, that interest does not stem from nowhere. It stems, as illustrated in the case of my own early experiences, from educational opportunities that allow students to engage with the world around them. These are the opportunities we, as educators, must create for our students. We cannot forever be afraid of disrupting our traditional system. Instead, we must deliberately and continually disrupt it in order to bring more of these transformative opportunities to more students. I believe that we can and must perform this disruption within the parameters of our traditional public school classrooms, because these are opportunities all students deserve to access. These are opportunities that we cannot leave as the sole province of summer camps and extra-curricular experiences. These are opportunities we must find a way to incorporate into our daily teaching practice. These are opportunities that can transform traditional classrooms and liberate us and our students from inherited systems of exclusion and symbolic violence.

PART III: *Liberation from Inherited Systems*

The problems we face in traditional classrooms today are not new. Ever since the formalization of the public school system in the United States in the nineteenth century, educators have been pushing back against the limitations of the traditional classroom and

outcome-based pedagogy. For decades, educators have sought a way to liberate themselves and their students from this prescriptive system.

In 1963, the National Council of Teachers of English commissioned a report summarizing commonalities in the teaching of composition. The result, commonly referred to as “The Braddock Report,” illustrated that writing instruction in the United States in the early 1960s was largely focused on products and outcomes (Smith 1). Educators evaluated writing according to students’ adherence to prescribed usage and mechanics. Despite the fact that the objective of public schools was to produce specific outcomes, there were few shared tenets of process across schools. Educators realized the flaw in this design, recognizing the importance of the process on students’ sense of engagement and agency. In an attempt to effect a pendulum swing away from outcomes-based pedagogy, writing instruction in the 1970s through 1980s shifted to a focus on process, rather than product (Smith). Arthur Applebee, a twentieth century leader in secondary education in the United States, believed in a “more comprehensive reconceptualization of teaching,” in which students took active roles in order to increase the efficacy of process-oriented writing instruction (Smith 2). Applebee understood that students would be more interested in the process of writing if they felt more personally engaged and responsible. Rather than treating students as passive recipients of information, Applebee believed they should be integral participants in the classroom dynamic.

In the 1990s, educators in the United States recognized the limitations of the traditional writing classroom in promoting students’ agency, particularly because students’ experiences with literacy outside the classroom are so varied. Susan Florio-Ruane of Michigan State University argued that “the forms and functions of literacy in school children’s lives transcend classroom reading and writing instruction.” Here, Florio-Ruane articulates that students’ relationship to reading and writing is much bigger and more complex than the narrow experience of the traditional classroom. Yet, do we, as educators, tap into this relationship in meaningful and agency-inducing ways, or do we stifle this relationship through our adherence to traditional classroom structures and standards? Do we meet each student where they are at and build a pedagogical process that addresses their needs, or do we prescribe the same method for everyone? In answer to questions like these, English teacher Richard Graves believed educators should keep in mind “both the different home and community experiences children have around literacy and the nature (and limitations) of classrooms as places to learn and practice literacy”

(Graves 28-29). For some students, the traditional classroom fails to meet their needs or interests. For some students, the pedagogical approaches at work in traditional classrooms limit their abilities, not only to learn, but also to feel engaged or agential. These limitations make clear the need for disruption of the traditional classroom dynamic and space.

A possible disruption to the traditional classroom is a physical change of place or space. According to theorist Edut Rindenow, the rigidity and prescriptiveness of traditional classrooms, coupled with the extreme focus on standardized and mass testing, constrains pedagogical possibilities that might be accessed through reimagining the spatial configurations of teaching (Rindenow et al.). By reimagining the spaces in which we teach, educators might be able to change students' relationships with the spaces in which they learn. Physical learning space should be an "integral component of instructional design" (Rindenow et al.). Unfortunately, research about the relationship between pedagogy and space remains sparse (Rindenow et al.). It is this gap in the research that my study with my own students works, in part, to fill. By disrupting the space in which I teach writing, I hope to transform my students' relationship with writing. I am aware this is a lofty hope, but I am also aware of many other educators who strive for similar transformation through their pedagogical practices.

Popular pedagogical practices that work to liberate students and teachers from inherited systems of education are re-wilding writing or nature writing. These pedagogies reject the wild / human dichotomy and are grounded, instead, in a theory of symbiosis and connectivity (Paulsen et al.). Nature writing or wild writing can be considered a solution to many of the disconnects in the world, including those between people and place and between students and subjects (Paulsen et al.). These are the pedagogical ideas that initially piqued my interest in re-designing writing classrooms. These ideas have heavily inspired and informed my own work with my students this semester as I have tried to facilitate connection and community within my classroom. I have drawn upon many examples of successful nature writing pedagogical practices that have, indeed, been transformational.

The Adventure Risk Challenge (ARC) Program has been teaching high school English courses in California's National Parks since 2004. Designed to target underserved teens, many of the students arrive at the program well below grade level in terms of both writing and speaking skills (Fester). Educational activities are not dissimilar to those one might find in a traditional composition classroom; literary circles, writing workshops, journaling, and vocabulary lessons

are all still on the docket. The only difference: the setting. These outdoor learning environments are “absent the trappings of classroom mainstays like desks, screens, or a bell schedule” (Fester 1). At the conclusion of the program, students “find themselves transformed” (Fester 1). This transformation is multidimensional, impacting everything from students’ confidence to comprehension. Another ARC Program, held for rural students at either 21 or 40 day summer camps, concluded that students’ experience of writing outdoors is “beneficial for at least three reasons: (1) positive social environments, (2) greater facility in generating ideas and descriptive details, and (3) enhanced concentration while engaged in writing tasks” (Lundahl 2022, 1). At the California National Parks ARC Program, those who took the SAT both before and after the program saw a double-digit gain in their scores (Fester 1). This statistic suggests that concerns about the possibility of divergent testing outcomes arising from non-traditional classrooms may be overstated. This is reassuring, as we live in a country where academic outcomes do matter. No educators who hope to keep their jobs can entirely forgo caring about student achievement, even if we understand that success metrics function as another form of institutional legitimacy in systems predicated upon symbolic violence. And yet, by disrupting the space of traditional classrooms so as to give students greater agency, we can avoid falling into the trap of perpetuating symbolic violence.

Many educators argue that place-based or outdoor pedagogical practices should not center on outcomes so much as the quality of the experience. Jeff Stickney, a Philosophy professor at the University of Toronto, encourages educators to move away from outcome driven learning and to, instead, observe the curiosity and care that can be engendered by place-based pedagogy (Stickney). While the ARC Programs are immersive, weeks or months long intensive courses centered in the outdoors, educators such as Stickney have managed to incorporate the outdoors into their institution-based curriculum. Stickney routinely takes his Philosophy students on walks in the outdoors and instructs them to consider the life around them, past and present, plant, animal, and human (Stickney). Stickney’s practice provides an excellent example of how educators may transform the traditional classroom and bring the outdoors into students’ daily educational life by prioritizing a pedagogy grounded in care and consideration, rather than outcomes.

Standardized testing and outcome driven pedagogy often lead students to feel disenfranchised by literacy teaching (Neville et al.). In order to help students to feel engaged in

their instruction, evidence suggests that the educational experience should be a holistically positive one (Neville et al.). One strategy for improving the positivity of the learning experience is to change the environment, offering students new spaces in which to learn. Quantitative studies find improvement in students' writing following experiences in the outdoors, designated quiet time, and instructional approach (Neville et al.). A case study of an ARC Program also saw academic gains, as well as identity development, increased student confidence, and generally improved communication skills (Zanto et al.). These positive experiences and the subsequent increase in student engagement can result in the desired academic outcome, without the added stress of traditional assessment and classroom constraints.

The research presented in this section is part of a growing body of work across the overarching field of education and the subfields of writing instruction, place-based learning, and transformative pedagogies that suggests there is value in taking classes out of their classrooms. Writing in third spaces, specifically in the United States, is still in its nascent stages of research. In order to explore this relatively young field and incorporate it in my own pedagogical practice, I must first consider its parents: third space and pedagogical theories.

PART IV: *Theoretically Speaking*

Liberatory Pedagogy & Third Spaces/Places

Just as educators have long been identifying the flaws in the traditional education system in the United States, so too have scholars long been offering theories of alternative pedagogical practices. Brazilian educator and Marxist philosopher, Paulo Freire, advocated for a revolutionary theory of education by which the political nature of human interaction would be acknowledged and systems could be transformed. His seminal theory, liberatory educational pedagogy, proposes the idea that education should be a process by which collective critical consciousness is realized (Freire). In order to achieve this critical consciousness, we must recognize the flaws in oppressive systems and act in defiance of them to create new realities.

The problem that may arise if we act upon this theory, though, is one of reproduction. How, in creating new systems to correct the flaws in old systems, do we avoid new types of flaws? Systems are built on power dynamics, both in terms of who is in charge of the system, and who benefits from the system. These dynamics, as Freire proposes, are hard to forego and serve as the breeding grounds for oppression. Building a new educational system would be both

immensely challenging, logistically, and immensely challenging, theoretically. And the reality is that we *do* exist in our current educational system, warts and all. Freire himself would likely not believe that our current educational system in the United States is conducive to liberatory pedagogy. However, this is the system we have. I am not advocating for a fatalistic approach or asserting that members of society have no means by which to change our oppressive systems. I am advocating, though, for change that comes from within. It is an absolute conundrum that we recognize both the limited capability and paramount necessity of liberatory educational practices within traditional school systems. We may not be able to fully dismantle systems, but we can work within them in powerful ways. Rather than building a new educational system from scratch, which is unrealistic in the context of our real world, I advocate for an adoption of Freire's principles of liberatory pedagogy, even – and perhaps especially – when they disrupt the context of our traditional educational system.

One of the most fundamental ways we can realize critical consciousness within the context of the traditional education system in the U.S. is by disrupting the standard teacher-student relationship. For Freire, “only through communication can human life hold meaning.” (Freire 75). Teachers communicate with their students constantly. This communication, perhaps more than any other communication that happens between peoples, is often explicitly meaning-making. It should also be meaningful. In Freire's ideal liberatory educational context, we would dismantle our teacher-student relations so that all classroom participants are equal contributors to the making of meaning and the transmission of knowledge. In a realistic educational context, such an overhaul of the teacher-student relationship may not be possible, but a shift is.

In order to make this shift happen, we must dispense with the teacher-student dichotomy. Even within the physical context of traditional classrooms, we can disrupt this traditional hierarchy. Teachers do not have to exist as the sole voice or arbiter. Students can be given greater agency. At the same time, liberatory educational practices need not center the student. Such centering can be counterproductive, both in decreasing classroom order and in placing undue onus on students. Moreover, when teachers try to soften their power, we are sometimes guilty of engaging in nothing more than false generosity (Freire). This is an innate struggle of trying to change contexts. While we cannot immediately change the structural context in which we teach in public schools in the United States, we can change the context of communication as part of

our liberatory praxis. Even within traditional classrooms, we can give more credence and weight to students' voices. Thus, we may become co-creators of knowledge, teacher-students and student-teachers (Freire). In creating classrooms founded on reciprocal respect and meaning-making, we can disrupt traditional classrooms and transform them into third spaces or places.

There are several understandings and usages of third spaces/places in academic research, each of which is helpful in building a more complete understanding of how we, as educators trying to work within and sometimes against traditional classrooms, might tap into these third spaces. Gloria Anzaldúa, in her memoir *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, articulates third space, or *Nepantla*, as a "space-in-between" where binaries cease to exist. For Anzaldúa, borders are systems of oppression. Binaries uphold these systems. Throughout her memoir, Anzaldúa advocates for hybridity, moving between English and Spanish, prose and poetry, with a fluidity and frequency that illustrate her belief that borders – whether between languages or genres or countries or ethnicities or genders or sexual orientations – are permeable and able to be crossed. She moves with ease and authority across previously constructed boundaries of literature. *Mestiza*, a Latin American word for a woman of mixed races, defines both Anzaldúa and the movement she champions. In *Borderlands*, she advocates for an understanding of third spaces in which new identities are formed. These spaces, both physical as in the Mexico / U.S. border, and mental, as in the cultural reckoning an inhabitant of this space must do, are often spaces of discomfort. Through this discomfort, transformation blooms. Like Freire, Anzaldúa believes in moving away from systems in which victims passively accept their subjugation. Instead, she hopes for a *Mestiza* consciousness, a new consciousness that does not simply blend two identities but interrogates the realities of myriad identities or systems and creates a better alternative. Anzaldúa believes in the power of people to generate new ways of being, no matter how flawed the initial system or how challenging the process of transformation.

Coming less than a decade after *Borderlands*, Homi K. Bhabha's 1994 *The Location of Culture* echoes Anzaldúa's positioning of the third space as one where hybridity flourishes. Bhabha posits that third spaces are liminal areas of intersecting ideas where new, hybrid identities are formed (Bhabha). For Bhabha, third spaces are not physical, but solely theoretical. In his understanding, as in Anzaldúa's, third spaces often begin at points of intersectionality. As multiple cultural identities intersect, they create a need for a new identity or understanding. The

space in which this understanding takes shape is a third space, a genesis point of new epistemologies and narratives. Similarly, Freire and Bhabha speak to one another across their shared understanding of collective consciousness as a place where the oppressed communicate to challenge dominant paradigms. Unlike Freire's ideal liberatory theory, however, Bhabha's conception of a third space is not predicated on departure from a system. Instead, Bhabha's third space functions as the meeting ground between the oppressor and the oppressed, between the colonizer and the colonized, a place where dichotomies are deconstructed and hybridity flourishes. Though this theory successfully allows for mental liberation and new epistemological creation, it is not directed toward physical intervention in systems, largely because Bhabha's understanding of third spaces centers the intangible.

A different, more material understanding exists in the theory of sociologist Ray Oldenburg, though he does not talk about third spaces, but about third *places*. If Bhabha's idea is entirely theoretical, a space that exists only in the ether, and Anzaldúa's third spaces are hybrids that occur both in the corporeal and contemplative realms, Oldenburg's third places are explicitly physical. Oldenburg is interested in physical places, arguing that third spaces, outside of home and work, are essential to building the relationships of community. He defines a person's first place as the home and their second place as the workplace. His examples of third places include hair salons, cafes, bookstores, bars, and any public places where community is made. Importantly for Oldenburg, these third places must be places people enter without obligation. In that sense, it is challenging to classify traditional classrooms as third places. However, in an America where people are "not contented" and suffer from a "problem of place," we are likely to revel in community wherever we find it (Oldenburg 39). Especially in a post-Covid world, we are starved for human connection and in dire need of third spaces / places where the bonds of community might flourish.

In my classes at Montana State, I often hear middle and high school educators bemoaning the decrease in students' social skills since the pandemic. In the class that I help to teach at Montana State, myself and the other instructors observe, first-hand, the decline in students' written and oral communication skills. If we imagine the backbone of humanity as community, then the heart of humanity is communication. Per Oldenburg, we need third places in order for community to be built. Extending that thinking out, we need third places for communication to flourish. The place we, as educators, have control over, is the classroom. Therefore, it is this

place that we must try to transform from one of isolation or separation into one of communication and liberation.

Place-Based Pedagogy & Ecopedagogy

Initially, when I was considering what to write about for this paper, I wanted to write about place-based writing. My personal experience with writing, as I have detailed, has been heavily influenced by the places in which I have lived and written. Much of my writing has drawn inspiration from the natural world around me, and I am someone who would always elect to be outdoors rather than indoors. However, when it came time for me to design a research study that included my own students, I recognized a constraint. I, like most teachers in traditional classrooms, would not have the luxury of teaching in an outdoor environment. This led me to make the theoretical shift toward third spaces/places. And yet, the relationship between third space theories and place-based and eco pedagogies remains important in understanding the transformative potential of different pedagogical practices.

Foundational place-based scholars David Sobel and Gregory Smith define place-based education as an approach that “addresses two critical gaps in the experience of many children now growing up in the United States: contact with the natural world and contact with community” (1). Like Oldenburg’s third place theory, Sobel and Smith’s place-based pedagogy emphasizes the importance of community for students. Often, this sense of community is generated by immersing students into their physical surroundings. Place-based pedagogy offers a practice to “extend young people’s attention beyond the classroom” and “increase students’ engagement with learning and enhance their academic achievement” (Smith and Sobel 1). Students need not leave the classroom for this engagement to occur, however. By integrating the world-beyond-the-classroom into the classroom, students are able to interrogate their place in the world. Through this interrogation, they learn to develop and express their identities and to empathize with others. When they communicate about this interrogation, they begin the process of creating community that is integral in both place-based and third space/place pedagogy.

Place-based pedagogy relates closely, too, to ecopedagogy. Freire’s liberatory theory, predicated on the idea that students gain critical consciousness as a “result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” is a cornerstone of contemporary critical ecopedagogy (Freire 73). As students age, there is often a thinning of pedagogical variety,

especially in countries, such as the United States, that prioritize rigorous standards and testing (Wenham). However, diversified pedagogical approaches are crucial to students' sustained engagement and empowerment. Critical ecopedagogy as a practice that prioritizes education about and within the outdoors can, like Freire's critical pedagogy, be a revolutionary and liberatory experience for students (Wenham). In order for critical consciousness pedagogy or critical ecopedagogy to be realized, students must be in the world, experiencing the world.

The benefits of experiencing the world beyond the traditional classroom are myriad. The natural world, in particular, has long been a transformative educational space. Outdoor education promotes a sense of well-being and happiness that should be a crucial goal of education in general (Sobel). Interactions with nature can be formative in children's development of motor skills, communication abilities, and social and emotional intelligence (Yigit-Gencten et al.). Ecopedagogy offers a rich template for prioritizing students' mental health, with outcomes ranging from increased happiness to elevated engagement to reduced stress. Nature-based learning is often seen to yield higher enjoyment and engagement than traditional educational experiences (Barnes et al.). Natural settings have been shown to restore focus, attention, and improve performance when compared with standard classrooms (Lundahl 2018). The length of time immersed in the natural world has an impact on student learning, but any amount of time outdoors is beneficial. Research conducted on "green breaks" found that attentiveness and working memory are both improved by as little as ten minutes of structured outdoor time (Mason et al.). Increased time and regularity of outdoor education results in increased benefits, such as improved retention and understanding (see Tal et al. and MacDonald). Contemporary studies indicate that there is much to be gained from nature-based education that takes place outdoors.

Outdoor education, like most non-standard pedagogies, has not always been widely accepted, however. Millennia ago, education that either took place outdoors or heavily considered the natural world was the norm (Murphy and Thaiss). By the twentieth century in the United States, though, academic learning had moved almost entirely indoors. In the eighteenth through twentieth centuries, classrooms were arranged in "uniform rows, with fixed curricula and standardized assessments" that "limited opportunities for...critical thinking and creativity" (Rindendow et al. 1). Inside these classrooms, emphasis was placed primarily on empirical measurements about students' work across disciplines, including English and Writing. It is these traditional classroom models that we, contemporary educators, have inherited.

However, there is room for play and progress even within this traditional system. Educators can choose to incorporate place-based pedagogy into their classrooms, even when they must stay, literally, in the classroom. We have the power to increase students' opportunities for critical thinking and creativity. And, we have the proof that place-based pedagogy and third spaces create these opportunities.

Third Spaces as Places of Agency

Given their own choice, students will often independently seek out spaces other than the traditional classroom to do their studying, meeting, and writing. Students in university-sponsored writing groups, for example, choose to “meet outside the classroom, sometimes on campus but more often off campus at coffee shops, fast food restaurants, or other hangouts” (Moss et al. 28). This fact confirms Oldenburg's theory of the importance of third places, illustrating students' desires for places that feel conducive to community.

Research confirms the benefits of taking students to third spaces as part of their instruction time. Whether it's trips to the British Museum, interactive workshops, or online simulations, teaching that incorporates a “range of different spaces” feels like “dynamic play rather than didactic instruction” and can be transformational in students' creativity, self-expression, and engagement (Abegglen et al. 7). Reiterating the idea of Freire's liberatory educational theory, studies show that “There is liberatory potential in these spaces of solidarity, collaboration and trust – to challenge the repressive structures within which we work and study” (Abegglen et al. 13). Importantly, these “spaces of solidarity, collaboration and trust” can also be spaces of traditional classrooms – so long as something about the traditional structure is disrupted, so that students are able to access greater agency within the space. Students' engagement in writing diminishes when they believe their autonomy or agency is muted (Myhill et al.). The prescribed location of the classroom can feel very constraining for students. However, spaces outside the classroom may also feel daunting or intimidating to students. This is particularly true if students feel comfortable speaking up and being heard in their traditional classroom space. In this sense, classrooms themselves can function as third spaces if the hierarchy of the teacher-student dichotomy has been successfully mitigated to allow students to feel like fully fledged members of the classroom community. Third spaces, be they literal places beyond the classroom walls or new iterations of the dynamics within the traditional classroom,

are spaces which disrupt the perceived stagnancy and rigidity of traditional classrooms and give students access to newfound agency.

Third spaces can be incorporated into classrooms in myriad ways. In a study of 14 Indian school children's short stories inspired by their experiences in the outdoors, it was discovered that these stories allowed students to move beyond marginalization, "despite muted agency" (Jamal et al. 1). Though the writing was completed within traditional classrooms, the experiences about which students wrote took place in third spaces beyond school walls and transformed students' understanding of themselves and the world around them. Re-analyzing these experiences through the lens of writing was an agency-inducing experience for students. In another study, a professor took her students to the same spots in Central Park each week to make observations in a nature journal. One of the students' main takeaways of the experience was about the "non-human agency of an urban park" (Warkentin 1). In this way, a third space allowed students to see that agency is inherent in nature and is neither acquired nor lost solely through the classroom. A third study found that interaction between students and outdoor spaces was directly tied to students' feelings of agency and empowerment (Häggström and Schmidt). When students are exposed to third spaces, they become much more than passive learners. They become active observers and participants in an ecosystem larger than their classroom. They become writers and producers of their own knowledge, transforming their educational experience and finding their agency.

PART V: *In My Classroom*

As a GTA at Montana State University, I help teach Lit-110: Introduction to Literature. On Mondays and Wednesdays, I attend a big lecture-style class taught by a tenure-track professor in the English Department. On Fridays, though, I get to teach by myself. I have taught for four semesters now. Each semester, I have two sections. Sometimes I have five students in a section, and sometimes I have twenty. Each of my eight sections has been entirely unique, and I take away something different from each section.

A fundamental tenet of our Lit-110 class is the importance of writing. Obviously, it's a literature class, not a writing class, but the professor, the other instructors, and I all strive to ensure that we prioritize writing time in each class period. It is my opinion that literature allows

students to feel a sense of recognition or connection. I think these glimmers of community and interiority are strengthened when we allow students time to do their own writing.

During nearly every class period for Lit-110, we give the students a writing prompt. Sometimes, the prompt relates to the day's readings. Other times, the prompt is seemingly random. Students have five to fifteen minutes to write, depending on the day. We never require that they share this writing. We don't have any way of knowing if they are writing about the given prompt, and we don't care. We just want them to write. We want them to have the designated time to write. In a world where nearly everything is instantaneously accessible at the tips of our fingers, it is nice to slow down and ask students to pause and sit with their own words for a few moments.

This writing exercise is always interesting. Inevitably, each semester I have some students who love reading and some who haven't picked up a book since grade school. I always have some students who love writing, and some who grimace when asked to take out their notebooks. Interestingly, the students who love reading and those who love writing are not always one and the same. Some students love creative writing prompts, while others love essays. Some students send me emails analyzing poems, and other students send me texts about their weekend. Some students never share their writing at all, but speak during every class period. To me, all of this is writing and all of it is meaningful communication. I am interested in all of it.

It has been this experience of teaching, more than anything else, that has made me curious about students' engagement with writing. I have noticed, in my two years as a TA, that students very rarely self-identify as writers. I don't know precisely why this is, but I suspect it has something to do with the vague and lofty ideas and ideals we have about what it means to be a writer. Just as our educational system in general is rich with strata, so is our perception of writers. We fear that because we do not have certain certifications or accomplishments, we are not writers. I believe this to be false. I believe that anyone who writes is a writer. This is the realization that I want my students to arrive at. Importantly, though, I want them to come to this conclusion organically. I can tell them that anyone who writes is a writer, but simply depositing this statement in front of them holds all the flaws inherent in traditional banking systems of education. There are some things that students best understand upon their own realization, rather than through instruction. Their own identity as writers is one of those things. For this reason, it was my objective, as I planned my pedagogical approach for this year, to create a classroom

environment that would foster the seeds necessary for that realization. Telling my students they are writers may not be enough to make them believe it. Creating an environment where they feel autonomy over their writing also may not be enough to make them believe in their authorial power, but I believe it's a step in the right direction. The regulative discourse, the foundational understanding, that I want to instill in my classroom is one predicated on students' knowledge of their own qualifications (Bernstein). Their qualifications and legitimacy do not derive from me. Their validity as writers is inherent in their validity as people, as communicators, as members of our community.

Throughout my semesters TA-ing, I have often taken my students outside to write. When it is nice out, my sections can frequently be found sitting criss-cross apple-sauce in a circle on one of Montana State University's lawns. In my ideal world, I would take my students outside every day and we would hike through mountains and sit on beaches and climb trees and trek across moors and write and share and write and share. However, this is a Lit-110 class at a state university. We have a designated syllabus that, unfortunately, does not include any wilderness traipsing. Moreover, this is Montana and our weather often does not allow for outdoor writing time. So, this semester, I have tried to find other ways to transform the context of my students' writing experience. I have tried to design an alternative, both to the traditional classroom teaching model I have inherited, and to the fully immersive outdoor teaching model I would love to be able to do. I have tried to operate within the system I inhabit, in a way that is deliberate and potentially transformative.

For the first ten weeks of the Spring 2026 semester, I have given my students allocated writing time during our Friday recitation sections. During some weeks, this writing time has happened inside our regular classrooms, at our desks. During other weeks, this writing time has happened in other spaces. In early February, it was so unseasonably warm that we were able to sit outside and write. We flocked to the yard between Wilson and Montana Hall. Three girls, not wanting to get their pants damp on the grass, chose to move to a bench near the library. One boy, seeing a pop-up kiosk, wandered away to collect a free donut. I'm not a drill sergeant and the whole point of my pedagogical design is to give my students autonomy, so I let the meandering commence unquestioned. The other students sat with me in a circle and wrote for fifteen minutes. The prompt I gave them that day was: "What is something you have a unique perspective or knowledge about that no one would know from looking at you?" After our writing

time elapsed, a few students volunteered to share. One girl said that, despite being white-passing, she is Latina. She talked about ICE and her grandparents. Another girl said she had spent the time writing about the loss of the prairies in America. A boy read aloud his poem about contemplating the meaning of life.

We spent another class period in the American Indian Hall. There, the students were free to disperse across the building to write. They chose comfy chairs near big windows. Their prompt that day was: “Describe your dream life in 10 years from now. Where will you be, what will you be doing, what will your life look like.” When they were done, I met with my first, smaller section in the upstairs of the building, in the Native American Literature Library. We sat around a small, round coffee table and talked. No one wanted to share their writing, so we chatted about weekend plans. With my second section, after their writing time elapsed, we met in the large common room in the American Indian Hall. We sat at a long conference-style table and went around from one person to the next and everyone shared their dream job. Few people read from their writing directly, but many glanced at it in reference as they spoke. In each group, I participated in the conversation equally, sharing my own writing and job aspirations. When the conversation lagged, I sometimes allowed the silence to swell until someone broke under the awkwardness and started speaking. Other times, I broke the quiet, prompting us onwards or deeper or backwards in our discussion, trying to encourage, not to pry.

Another day, I had planned to take my students to the library. However, because we had to review for an upcoming exam, we decided that the space of our traditional classroom was better suited to our needs. I was wryly amused by the irony in this, a confined space being more productive than a classic third place. Our review went well, though, both insofar as my students got largely good grades on their exam *and* insofar as there was widespread participation in the review, which involved a trivia-style quiz I had made for them to study. Hands sprang into the air and answers were shouted out with an abandon that I realized most students would have been too shy to access in the library, sharing that space with students outside our class community.

One Friday, I gave them the option to spread out in Wilson Hall and write in an armchair or get themselves a treat from the vending machine before returning to our classroom to share their writing. To my surprise, none of them opted to leave the classroom. At first, I was disappointed by this, wondering why none of them were seeking a third space. Then, I paused to wonder. If a third space is defined as a place where community is made and new ideas are

formed, aren't those the very things we had collectively been doing all semester? It was very important to me, this semester, that our classroom be a space different from my perception of traditional classrooms. Rather than coming to class with a prepared slideshow of information to impart to my students, I come to class with questions about our readings. These are questions I don't have answers to, questions that occur to me throughout the week. *What was Shakespeare's real opinion about life after death? Whose stance on family history do you agree with in August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson"— Boy Willie or Berniece? What does Natalie Diaz mean when she says "Stars had closed their eyes or sheathed their knives?"* To each of these questions, and to many others, my students had answers that I had never thought of. We discuss our readings together, creating understanding collectively. Sometimes, as in the case of "bearded like the pard," from "All the World's A Stage," I explain the literal meaning of a line to my students. But when it comes to interpretation, I try to make sure their interpretations of meaning hold just as much weight as mine. After reading a poem aloud, before offering any commentary of my own, I always ask what they think of it, what they think it means, what their favorite line is, what they would write about that piece. I try to de-center myself as the all-knowing instructor, and instead center the idea of our classroom as a place where we can discuss competing interpretations and come to new understandings, perhaps thereby creating our own third space of community and knowledge.

By disrupting the context of my students' typical writing experience, I hope to simultaneously disrupt a lot of other things. I want to disrupt their perception of me, as a bank-clerk with information to give them. I don't want them to look to me for answers about our readings. Instead, I want them to write about our readings and then discuss them, so that we are co-creators of learning. At the same time, I hope that the new environment, both outside a traditional classroom and in a restructured traditional classroom, will more readily allow students to move away from their typical ideas about power dynamics in the classroom and step into their own authority. I want them to recognize that the cognizable objects in our class are theirs as much as mine. The things we read and the things they write and the words they say form the basis of our learning. My students already know how to write. I want my students to realize that they can read what others have written, and better understand humanity. I want my students to realize that they can write, and understand what it is that makes them human. I think of all of my students as writers. American educator and activist Myles Horton says it is the "confidence you

have in people” that makes you a good teacher (Horton 145). We have to be confident in our students’ capabilities to learn, to teach us, to help us develop better systems, to be writers, thinkers, doers, to become who they are capable of being.

I have learned so much about teaching and people through my time as a GTA, especially with regard to how different people’s brains work. I was always someone who loved reading and writing. I was aware that not all of my peers had the same affinity for these subjects while I was growing up, but it was not until I had my own students that I paused to wonder *why*. My students have helped me reconsider much of what I thought I knew about reading and writing. In many of my students, I have observed doubt and dislike and disinterest regarding reading and writing. This observation inspired the work in this paper. I know, first-hand, the potentially life-affirming power of reading and writing. I want to create a first-hand opportunity for my students to recognize that power, too. But I would never have known how to facilitate that opportunity for my students without them being vulnerable about their experiences.

When my students are vulnerable and honest about their relationship to writing, I have a clearer understanding of their needs. When I understand their needs, my writing instruction becomes better. It logically follows that when I am vulnerable about the fact that my experience is singular and not universal, I become more open and receptive to what my students have to show me. This vulnerability is necessarily linked to discomfort. By positioning my students as equals in our shared classroom, I must be willing to step away from the authority granted to me by the system in which I work. Stepping away from this authority is nerve-wracking every single time. My students are accustomed to our public school system in which they look to their teacher as the all-knowing classroom entity. That is not a podium I want to stand on in my classroom. I want my students to respect me, of course. But I think their respect is better when it is earned than demanded. When I give them back their power to speak openly, to contribute to the conversation in our classroom, to be co-developers of our classroom community, I hope any respect they have for me is because of the respect they know I have for them. I am confident that, together, my students and I can build classroom environments that are spaces of agency and transformation, both for them and for me. In order to instill the confidence I feel in them, I have to be willing to take that first step toward transformation by giving students back their power. In all of the classes I have taught at Montana State, I have been confident in my students to help lead our classroom where it needs to go. Similarly, this semester I have had confidence in my

students to lead my study where it needed to go, even if that is a direction I may not have expected.

PART VI: *My Students Writing in Multiple Spaces*

In March, I administered a survey to my students to ask about their experiences with writing in our course across the semester thus far. The survey was administered online, through the Qualtrics platform. All data was collected anonymously, without any identifying information attached. I reminded my students both verbally, before they began the survey, and in the text of the survey itself, to refrain from including any personally identifying details in their responses. I administered the survey on two different Fridays, during our normal recitation section timeslots. A total of sixteen students answered my survey, out of twenty-one total students in my classes. The students who did not fill out the survey either were not in attendance on either Friday the survey was offered, or opted not to fill it out. None of the students who were present on survey administration days told me they did not want to take it, though they may have privately refrained from doing so. The survey results were deeply interesting to me, for multiple reasons.

Of the sixteen students who answered the survey, ten were freshmen, three were sophomores, and three were juniors. No seniors participated in the survey. I wanted to understand the class-standing range of my students, to get a sense of how much writing they have done at the collegiate level so far. With the same goal in mind, I asked if they had taken any writing classes and if these classes were core requirements or electives. Thirteen students responded that they had taken required writing classes. Two students have not taken any writing classes. Only one student has, so far, taken an elective writing course.

To better understand how the students viewed writing, and themselves as writers, I asked a series of questions about their experiences with writing. In response to whether they write for pleasure on their own time, ten students said no, four said sometimes, and two said yes. The next question asked students whether they considered themselves to be writers before taking our class. Thirteen said no and three said yes. However, these responses were not yes or no check boxes, and the students' written responses warrant a closer look. Some students responded with answers such as: "No, I really only write for assignments¹." However, another said: "I think that I have

¹ For all quoted survey responses, I have kept the quotes exactly as they appeared in the students' own words, including any spelling or grammatical errors.

always been a good writer, but I wouldn't have considered myself to be a writer." Another replied, "No because I merely jot down thoughts I have that I would like to get off of my head or write a to do list sometimes." Yet another responded, "No, I thought a writer had to be a professional." These responses intrigued me. Of course there are some students who simply did not think of themselves as writers, point blank. Yet, many of the students who answered "no" did so because of their underlying perception of the qualifications necessary to be a writer. One discounted their ability as a writer, because they were "only" writing to get their thoughts down. In my opinion, though, that is where some of the best writing starts. The parameters and strictures that students perceive as existing around writing exist in students' minds for a reason. Whether because of experiences they have had in traditional classrooms or in the world outside of school, many of my students did not believe they met the qualifications to be a writer. If the only qualification necessary to writing is writing, though, would their perceptions of themselves as writers change? In my ideal world, the classroom ethos we present to students from the first day they step into school would be one predicated on their inherent abilities. If they can communicate, they are communicators. If they can spell, they are spellers. If they can write, they are writers. Ability is the only qualification necessary, and the nurturing of that ability *and* the belief in the power of that ability is what schools would teach kids, in my dream world. In the real world, though, I was clearly swimming upstream with my students this semester. At eighteen plus years old, they had already decided, in a thirteen to three majority, that they were not writers. It was my hope that, through constructing a course that incorporated both physical spaces beyond our classroom walls *and* made the confines of our own classroom feel more like a collective space of shared agency, my students and I might, together, disrupt their perceptions of themselves as writers.

In answer to the question, "Do you think of yourself as a writer now that you are part way through this class?" nine students said no, six students said yes, and one was "in the middle." At first, my heart dropped a little when I saw these results. I wished that all thirteen of my students who had answered no to feeling like writers before the class would have been swayed in our ten weeks of class time before they took the survey. When I separated my emotional response from my intellectual one, though, I was fascinated by the students' answers to this question. Some of my students had rather philosophical responses, including: "No because I think the act of writing and considering yourself a writer as a part of your identity is seperate." This response opens a

veritable Pandora's box of rabbit holes to jump down from a sociological perspective. I was deeply compelled by this answer. Was I asking students to alter some part of their identity, or merely acknowledge a proficiency? Personally, I don't think being a writer as an identity has to be an overhaul of one's internal world. Rather, I think identifying as a writer merely gives someone authority to better advocate for themselves in whatever facets of their identity they care most about. For this student, though, they clearly saw identifying as a writer to mean something greater. Though this response did not necessarily better help me understand my survey results, it did better help me understand my students and the myriad, nuanced ways in which their brains work.

Another student who answered "no" did so because, even though they "write a lot," they are "not making money from it." This answer made me grin, albeit with some chagrin. I think of myself as a writer, and I don't make money from it yet either, my friend. Still, this was another interesting perspective. Can we only identify as something if it has a financial benefit to us? I don't think so, but again, this answer reflects not a disinterest in writing but a different worldview than my own. A third student who responded "no" did so despite the fact that they "do enjoy writing in this class." Okay, I'll call that one a win! Seriously, though, each of these responses piques my curiosity much more than if the students had simply said "yes." Clearly, for these students, my class has not convinced them that the only requirement necessary to be a writer is to write. However, they are all engaging deeply with the idea of what being a writer means to them. That independent critical engagement means more to me than if they had all been converted to my line of thinking.

Through their responses, my own understanding of students' perspectives is enriched. I appreciate the open-ended nature of these survey questions, because they allow the responses to feel like a conversation. Each of these answers is one of my students speaking up, allowing their own opinion to take up space with authority. This sense of conversing, even and perhaps especially if in disagreement, is much more reflective of my pedagogical goals than convincing every student to agree with me would be. I don't want them to agree with me for the sake of agreeing with me, ever. I want them to engage with questions in thoughtful ways and answer in whatever way is true to them. This is the agency I want my students to have in our classroom, and this is the agency I see reflected back to me in their survey responses.

That being said, I was still pleased by those students who did respond “yes” to thinking of themselves as writers now that we are part way through our class. One said, “Seeing the ways people write and the parallels to myself helped me see that possibility.” This recognition of connection between themselves and other writers articulates the sense of community that is integral to foster in third space classrooms. Another student responded yes, they feel like a writer now because they have learned that “A writer doesn’t have to be a professional. Just someone who enjoys writing.” For this student, the joy of the writing is enough to consider themselves a writer. That reflects my own goals for school systems in general. Classrooms, whether traditional or reimagined, should be places where a joy of learning is instilled, where students feel empowered because of the pleasure they take from their experiences in class. Another student had a pragmatic response: “A bit more. I’ve realized that anybody in any profession can be a writer for a multitude of reasons.” This perspective echoes my own belief that everyone is a writer and that writing is useful for anyone. One student replied that they “absolutely” think of themselves as a writer, which I was absolutely glad to read.

In ten weeks, three or four students changed their mind about whether or not they are writers. If I were to conduct this survey at the end of the semester, it is possible that a few more might join that number. Or, not. If I were a high school English teacher, with some students in my classroom again and again over the course of four years, I might be even more successful at helping them believe that they are all writers. Or, I might not. As the survey responses indicate, some of students’ self-identification as writers is beyond my influence. Some of them have preconceived understandings of qualifications or identity that preclude being a writer from ever being something with which they identify. Some of them will never think of themselves as writers unless they write professionally. Others may, in time, grow to enjoy writing more or to think that, through the practice of writing, they are writers. A lot of this has nothing to do with me and my pedagogical approach, and everything to do with the students themselves. This realization was actually incredibly liberating for me, because it removed some of the onus I had placed on myself. Also, it should not be my objective, as an educator, to convince students to see writing in the same way I do. When I realized that that level of influence is beyond my scope of power, I felt freed. Freed to teach in the way that I find most meaningful, without an outcome-driven objective. In this way, my study became a liberatory educational practice for myself.

After having completed this study with my students and reviewed their responses to the survey, my goal is not to convince students that they are writers, but to create a space where they write and talk about writing and talk about what it means to be a writer. Moreover, my goal is to create a space, within the traditional classroom, where my students' perspectives on writing carry as much weight as mine. If I do this, I de-center myself and disrupt the hierarchical nature of the traditional classroom. If I do this, my students and I become co-creators of knowledge. I cannot do this alone, though. I need my students to join with me, to step into their agency, to engage in writing and speaking in meaningful ways. This engagement comes, as my survey reflects, from centering the content. The central focus of our classroom is not my opinion on writing, but reading and writing itself. When answering the survey, each student had an opinion on writing that was influenced, to however great or small a degree, by the experiences they have had with writing over the past ten weeks in our classroom. These experiences shape their perspectives, which in turn shape our classroom. When my students bring their perspectives into the classroom, we create a new, shared space of conversation and ideas. Reading through these survey responses illustrated to me the circular, generative process of teaching that incorporates third spaces and places.

When it came to literal third spaces and places outside our classroom, my students responded to those, too. Describing how they felt as a writer in each of the different spaces – the American Indian Hall, the lawn outside, and our classroom – they once again had varied opinions. Some students felt no difference between the spaces in which we wrote. Some preferred writing in our normal classroom space. And some preferred writing in other spaces on campus.

“The setting never changed how I wrote or what I thought about when I wrote, but it was nice to have a different setting sometimes,” one student wrote. Another student agreed, responding: “In our regular room, I just feel fine. I liked the other building (the American Indian Hall) the best. It was just nice to not be in the same room, and go into one that had plants and wasn't as grey. Outside was very nice and it felt good to be out there.” This student clearly preferred spaces that were more dynamic than our traditional classroom in Wilson Hall. The Wilson classrooms are indeed very gray, sometimes even without windows. Conversely, the American Indian Hall is a much more open-concept building with tall windows and long beams of natural light. Moreover, while there, we wrote in comfy chairs spread around the common

area of the building, rather than in classrooms. One student favored the American Indian Hall above all other writing spaces this semester, writing: "I felt like I've done my best writing ever when in the American Indian hall." They went on to say: "Writing outside is markedly more fun because the environment is unique," reasserting the idea that environment influences the enjoyment students feel while writing. And of course, the outdoors is a much richer environment than any classroom.

Several students emphasized this point. "I liked going outside. I was listening to music and it was warm and the wind was blowing just a little bit and it felt like I was in a movie!" one student explained. Even for those who didn't have quite such a romanticized experience, many felt that writing outdoors provided a new level of creative inspiration. "Writing in the classroom can be boring for creative writing as its a sad place to write. Outside was lovely due to the warm sun and I did feel like I wrote better," one student affirmed. Another said that although they felt "mostly the same" in each space, "perhaps writing outside may have boosted creativity." And yet another stated that they "hit a block" in the American Indian Hall, but "outside I felt free like i could just write freely." These responses illustrate that there was no ubiquitous experience of writing in our Friday sections this semester, and that students' preferences were entirely personal.

Somewhat to my surprise, there were many students who said they preferred writing in our normal classroom in Wilson. One put it simply: "I felt better in our classroom." Another said that they felt "the same in each space," but found it easier to write "sitting in a desk" because their brain "wanders a lot." This explanation elucidates a potential shortcoming of spaces outside the traditional classroom. While some students find these spaces engaging or inspiring, others find them overwhelming and counterproductive, preferring the structured familiarity of a traditional classroom space. Another student admitted that while they "enjoyed going outside just as a change of scenery," they felt "most productive as a writer in the classroom on Monday and Wednesday where the desk is more stationary." This response was interesting, as it referenced the large lecture hall in Reid where our Lit-110 class meets as a whole, rather than in our small Friday recitation sections. The desks in Reid are indeed stationary, set on levels in an auditorium-style room. The desks have heavy wooden seats attached to them and are bolted to the floor, mitigating students' ability to rearrange themselves. Conversely, the desks in our recitation section in Wilson are made of plastic and are very lightweight. I always ask that my

students position these desks in a loose semi-circle around the edges of the room so that they are facing one another and not sitting in rows. I prefer this set up, because I think it allows the room to feel more like a space of inclusive dialogue where we are all in a circle, rather than the hierarchical structure of an auditorium-style classroom or neat lines of desks. I was fascinated, therefore, that a student preferred the more typical lecture-type setup in Reid. This difference in our preferences continues to illustrate that everyone's experience of educational spaces is unique, and there is no perfect one-size-fits-all approach to classroom design.

Moreover, this response made me wonder: do students sometimes prefer that which they are most familiar with because there is discomfort in newness? According to Anzaldúa, feeling discomfort is a necessary part of third space transformation. Although it is never my goal to make my students feel uncomfortable, I want to keep the importance of discomfort in mind as I consider future classroom construction. Just because something has always been one way does not mean that it is the right way. As I have discussed throughout this paper, the entire concept of reconfiguring classroom spaces has required me, as the instructor, to sit with my own discomfort as I reconsider my pedagogical priorities and my role in the classroom. But if I truly want to position my students as equals in our classroom community – and I do! – then I cannot be the only person feeling occasional discomfort. Going forward, I do not intend to deliberately make my students uncomfortable. However, when I notice that they seem to be feeling discomfort, I want to encourage them to sit with that, rather than run from it. If a student does not want to leave the classroom because they find other environments uncomfortable, I want to probe *why*. I want my students to tap into their vulnerability and be a part of this complicated conversation. Anzaldúa elucidated that the process of transformation is never easy. If we believe in the power of these transformed spaces, though, we must be willing to do the hard work of moving through discomfort. For me, that might mean sitting with my students and asking about their preferred learning spaces, knowing that they may not want to answer this question. For my students, this might mean answering questions that require vulnerability they typically do not have to access in the traditional classroom. Though this conversation may initially be uncomfortable for us all, I believe that asking my students *why* they feel a certain way and hearing their honest answers is an integral part of creating a collaborative, community-focused classroom. Sometimes, we have to try unfamiliar and uncomfortable ways of being, to test a potential path toward transformation.

The next set of survey questions asked students to describe one piece of writing they did this semester and where they wrote that piece. Gratifyingly, in this small sample size all but one of the students could remember a piece of writing they did and were able to describe their writing in detail. One student said their favorite piece of writing was one done in response to a prompt about being between a rock and a hard place. “I’ve been having a rough week and I realize writing it got a lot out and it was just better after that,” they confided. Another agreed about the cathartic power of writing, saying: “In this section I remember writing about a person who maybe failed you in not sure if the prompt exactly, but I remember writing something that I had never said aloud before and by putting it on paper felt extinguishing, it lifted an intense feeling of my chest because the wound was new.” A third student expressed taking pleasure in their craft: “I wrote about what brings me joy. I liked thinking about the big and smaller things in my life that made me happy.”

Some of the answers identified opposite experiences with writing. One student responded, “I had to write a paper based on human nutrition. It sticks out to me due to how incredibly stressed and freaked out I was about it. Cried like 6 times in one day over it.” This response was not about a piece of writing done for our Lit-110 class, but clearly illustrates the stress that students often associate with writing assignments. Another student also talked about a writing project for a different class, though once again expressing a different opinion on the process of writing. “I have a worldbuilding project,” they said, “that I got to expand on during class writing which was lots of fun.” For this student, they were so engaged with a writing assignment from another class that they used their free writing time in our class to keep working on it, highlighting the passion that some students have for writing. Many of the students’ responses repeated an appreciation for prompts that helped shape their writing during our classes. “There was a prompt in my friday section that allowed me to think of a time i felt most at peace,” one wrote simply. Another straightforward response recalled “we had a prompt on loneliness.” A third said the piece of writing they remembered stemmed from a prompt “to write a poem about todays world.” They “wrote about a storm which resonated with me because of the current weather.” One student recalled a prompt about “love and what true love really looks like,” explaining, “I personally thought about my grandparents and even myself and it was just fun to really think about how people love one another.” Another student enjoyed responding to an essay question, stating: “My favorite writing I’ve done this semester was on the first exam, writing

about the poem "a display of mackerel". I basically tied it to my experiences guiding fishing trips and how although fish look the same, they all tell different stories." Each of these responses provides an example of how students remember writing prompts that pique their interest, illustrating the importance of writing prompt design as part of an engaging writing pedagogy.

When asked where they wrote the piece of writing they remembered, students had varied responses again. Eight said that they wrote their pieces inside the classroom, either in Wilson Hall during our Friday recitation sections or in Reid Hall during our Monday and Wednesday lecture periods. Six students said they wrote their pieces in a different space, ranging from "outside," to "the American Indian Hall," to "on my own" to "all over campus." These responses don't show a strong correlation between remembering a piece of writing and any particular space, further highlighting the fact that students' relationships to the spaces in which they write are varied and unique.

The last set of survey questions asked students whether they intend to continue writing on their own time after our class ends and, if so, what spaces they will seek out to write. Four students said they do not plan to continue writing after our class ends, one even remarking: "Nope. Once it's in I plan on never touching it again." I'm not sure what the "it" they refer to is, considering that they have no culminating writing project in our class, but I appreciated the forthright assuredness of this response. One student said they are unsure if they will keep writing. Another said they may continue writing, expressing that they work a full time job and have a full course schedule, so their free time is limited. Nine students said they will continue to write after our class ends. Those nine named a variety of locations in which they will choose to continue their writing practice. One student said, "I would probably do it in a desk setting or in my bed, before I go to sleep." Several concurred about writing in their own homes, one saying: "I like to write in my room alone, feels peaceful." Another listed two places, responding: "In my room, definitely outside." One student expressed a preference for writing inside, stating: "I'll probably do most of it inside on my computer but for idea visualizing I'll consider going outside." Others preferred outdoor or public spaces. One student said, "I would like to write outside or in the library or where i can watch the world go by." Someone else replied, "Probably in my home, or even in the setting where it takes place in a small pocket journal. Sometimes when I'm out in the woods for a week or more, It's fun to write about every day as they go on." Though these responses offer a variety of spaces as answers to where students will write, they all

share one fascinating commonality. Every space mentioned is one where students have at least equal authority with everyone else in the space. Most students expressed a preference for writing in their rooms, where they presumably have complete autonomy. Many students are interested in writing outdoors, in spaces that are inherently devoid of human hierarchies. And some students want to write in public third spaces, such as libraries. Each of these are spaces that allow students to retain the fullness of their independent agency. These responses suggest an agreement with Oldenburg's theory that the ideal third space is one that people enter voluntarily, rather than through obligation. Of course, our traditional classrooms – and even our class periods that take place in spaces beyond the classroom walls – are places students feel obligated to be. This is less true, perhaps, at the college level where students have more choice about whether or not to be in school. This increased level of autonomy suggests the possibility that there is greater breadth for student engagement and agency at the college level than in earlier education. However, traditional classrooms are part of an educational system in which students have some sense of obligation. There is an irresolvable tension, here, between volition and agency. Students rarely enter our classrooms entirely of their own volition, without any sense of obligation. And yet, they are still able to find agency within the constraints of obligation. For us, as educators, I think this tension makes our goal clear. We should strive to make these spaces as accessible and community-centric as possible, in an attempt to facilitate students' sense of belonging in and ownership over the space, rather than obligation to be there. I don't yet have the perfect classroom model figured out and, indeed, my students' survey responses confirm that there is no perfect model. The responses also confirm to me, though, that we have the power to incorporate third spaces and places into our pedagogies in ways where students and teachers alike feel liberated from preconceived notions of writing, outcomes, and achievements.

PART VII: *Looking In & Looking On*

Going into this study, I expected to find that most, if not all, of my students would prefer writing in spaces other than our traditional Wilson classroom. At first, I was shocked to realize that this was not the case. Upon further consideration, though, I find the real result much more compelling and luminary than the one I anticipated. The variety in students' responses regarding their preferred writing spaces echoes what the whole history of the public education system in the United States has been telling us: we uphold systems of symbolic violence when we try to

institutionalize one correct standard for education. There is no uniform “answer” to the question of how to educate. Students have diverse needs, personalities, interests, and preferences. Teachers have diverse approaches, personalities, interests, and preferences. I think it is unlikely that any one teacher could design a course that engaged all students equally all the time. Despite having experiences in my sections this semester that, ostensibly, differed only according to how much class they attended, my students actually had extremely varied responses to the set-up of our classes. This suggests to me that variety itself may be the thing we, as educators, ought to offer our students. If students are never going to have uniform responses to an experience, perhaps the best thing we can do is offer them a variety of experiences so that different students have the opportunity to feel sparks of interest in different spaces. If the responses during this semester were to be extrapolated, I suspect that a recreation of this study a dozen times would yield hundreds of different student responses. I hope that is work I get to do, in one form or another, so that I might continue down Freire’s unending path of liberatory praxis.

I was intrigued, in this study, by the recurring idea of the importance of discomfort as a cornerstone of transformation. I myself felt uncomfortable with this idea, given that my whole pedagogical design centers on facilitating students’ sense of agency. I realize, though, that agency and discomfort are not mutually exclusive. For some students, they felt the most comfortable writing in spaces where they experienced no discomfort associated with people or places external to our classroom community. While I am glad that they felt comfortable in these spaces, I remain curious about whether their experience of and engagement with writing would change if they pushed themselves beyond their comfort zones into new spaces or places. Throughout the history of our public educational system, we have trained students to perform in specific, standard ways. They expect to do the work in the way they have been trained to do it, and become uncomfortable – and perhaps, sometimes, unwilling – to do this work if the environment is not what they have been conditioned to expect. Perhaps those students who preferred writing in the familiar space of our traditional classroom did so because they were able to access Bhabha’s intellectual third space and create new epistemological realities for themselves, finding agency that way. Or, perhaps it was simply a matter of preferring normalcy.

Something I did not ask my students in the survey that I would certainly add to this study in the future is: “If you preferred writing in our traditional classroom, was that because you felt more comfortable there, or more empowered there?” I would additionally ask: “Where do you

think your sense of engagement or empowerment over writing stems from?” And most importantly, I want to know: “Was there anything about the design, set-up, or organization of our classroom that felt different to you than other classes?” I am fascinated by these questions, as I think they would further illuminate the extent to which traditional classrooms themselves may be able to become third spaces, if certain conditions of the classroom are disrupted. It was my intention this semester to disrupt the hierarchy of my classroom so that it became *our* classroom – a shared space of community and collaboration for me and my students. I did not think to include a set of survey questions about that attempted transformation, however. And those are answers I now greatly wish I had.

For some of my students, removing constraints such as walls, desks, or traditional classroom dichotomies and dynamics also removed constraints around their creativity and interest in writing. For others, my attempted incorporations of third spaces made no difference. Whether this was a failure of my study design, or a failure of an educational system that had already convinced students they would never be writers, or simply a reality that they have no interest in writing, I cannot say. All three are likely to blame, in part. Still, those students who changed their perspectives about whether or not they were writers over the course of our ten weeks together give me all the encouragement I need to think that this study was worthwhile and worthy of replication and modification.

The research question that I feel most well equipped to answer at the end of this paper is if third space writing instruction can engender greater engagement and agency in students. To that, I think a preponderance of the evidence says absolutely. Of course, not every one of my students’ responses reflected that sentiment. But, as we’ve seen throughout the research today, there will never be a system that universally works for every student. Moreover, theories ranging from liberatory theory to place-based pedagogy to the various articulations of third space theory support the idea that changing spatial and relational configurations of classrooms can increase agency. And my own students’ responses largely reflected this, too. Whether they listed our traditional classroom or a different space on campus as their preferred writing location, many of them expressed feelings of inspiration or focus or creativity. In my own observations as the instructor of the course, I can confirm this, too. When I sit back and let students’ voices take up more space, I witness their confidence increase. Again, this approach does not work for every student. As much as I wished that they all raced to answer my questions, that is not the case.

Nonetheless, I find it much more effective when I structure our sections as conversations than lectures. When I stand at the podium, I see students scrolling on their phones, checked out of our classroom community. When I sit with them, in our circle in Wilson or on the lawn outside or at the long table in the American Indian Hall, I see their faces turned toward me and one another – perhaps out of obligation or politeness, but engaged regardless. And for many of them, when they start talking, I witness their sense of authority bloom. When they email me a poem after class, or read aloud a story about their dad’s struggle with addiction to their peers, or walk across campus together to sit on a park bench and ignore our writing prompt for that period, I feel like we are successfully creating community together.

Bearing witness to this transformation of my students from strangers into community members leads me to my answer for my third and final research question. Given the potential of the natural world and third spaces to decrease students’ stress and increase their personal connection, can third space writing instruction be a liberatory educational practice, both for students and for teachers? Yes, yes it can. Speaking for myself, I know that to be true. I find so much value in teaching my students this way, even if it does not reach them all as immediately or universally as I wish it did. And for every student who I feel I am not reaching in this approach, I become that much more inspired to redesign the approach next time. I do not think the flaw is in third spaces, though. I think the flaw is in my application of the theories or the students’ willingness to participate in the classroom. The research throughout this paper suggests that third spaces engender greater engagement with writing and writing identity than do traditional, banking-model public school classrooms in the United States. Though there is no fast or flawless way to change systems or ways of being, I see so much value in continuing to incorporate third spaces – both those beyond the classroom, and those of transformed classrooms – into my pedagogical practice going forward.

PART VIII: *End Materials*

APPENDIX I: Survey Questions

Q1: What year are you in college?
Q2: Have you taken any writing classes? If so, were these core requirements or electives?
Q3: Do you write for pleasure on your own time?
Q4: Did you think of yourself as a writer before this class? Why or why not?
Q5: Do you think of yourself as a writer now that you are part way through this class?
Q6: For our Friday sections, where were you given time to write?
Q7: Describe how you felt as a writer in each of the different spaces we wrote this semester
Q8: Describe ONE piece of writing you did this semester and why that piece sticks out in your memory / resonates with you
Q9: Where did you write this particular piece?
Q10: Do you intend to continue writing on your own time after this class ends?
Q11: If you intend to continue writing on your own, what spaces do you think you will seek out to do this writing?

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