

“YOU NEED PEOPLE TO HAVE PLACE:” RURAL STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF
PLACE, WRITING, AND COMMUNITY

by

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Introduction

Last year, my English III class studied Ivan Doig’s *The Bartender’s Tale*. We began by watching the Montana PBS documentary *Ivan Doig: Landscapes of a Western Mind*—which features a previous class of mine—and exploring the Ivan Doig Archive. Based on their

participation in class, assignment submissions, and discussions with me, students seemed excited to study a piece of Montana literature written by a Montana author. We read Chapter 1 of the novel together, and students engaged with the text, looking forward to reading more.

Then, I made a mistake. I assigned students to read Chapter 2 on their own, albeit with class time provided, but I had forgotten the daunting length of the chapter. Filled with character building, background information, and Doig's famously linguistically complicated sentences, the chapter is about seventy pages long, and when I assigned it without any intentional breaks, many of my students became uninterested with the novel. In fact, in their post-novel-study reflections, several students specifically named Chapter 2 as a section that they did not particularly enjoy.

As I reflected on my Chapter 2 oversight, I decided it was the perfect problem to address. Not only did it offer an opportunity to intentionally incorporate place-based pedagogy, but due to the timing of my study and my position as the only English teacher at my school, it was also a chance to revisit the text with the same group of students the following year. Therefore, I initially set out to explore how students experience place-based literature study, drawing upon rural identity, community and archival resources, and students' written expression. I designed a unit of study that revisited Chapter 2, incorporated excerpts of other place-based texts, featured a field trip, and culminated in a writing assignment.

However, as I collected data and existed within the experience of the unit of study with my students, unexpected themes emerged. We did engage in place-based text study, we did utilize archival resources, and we did revisit a rurally placed Montana text, but those elements of the study are not what stood out to me or to students. Instead, we found engagement and intrigue in the ways that we interacted with each other and our community. We reveled in following creative pathways in unstructured writing. I valued student reflection and expression of experience more than my own analysis of curricular design. I leaned into the dissonance that I

was feeling, threw out my original plan, and revised my research questions in order to interrogate the actual experience of the unit of study.

Therefore, this study looks to amplify student voices as they relate to the intersection of place-based education and writing. Students deserve to be heard in their educational spaces, and listening to how students talk about their experience in conjunction with examining their submitted work can reveal valuable patterns of perception to teachers (Azano; Comber; McInerney et al.). Especially in rural areas, teachers and students have an opportunity to capitalize on the sense of community in their place, even though some may view that community in stereotypical and not always wholly positive ways (Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen 5). Research on place-based education has mostly focused on student engagement in their work and in their community, but this study explores how students experience that engagement (or disengagement) and how they talk about their communities (Comber; McInerney et al.; Smith).

I begin with a review of the literature, focusing on place-based education, text selection, writing, and learning in community over time. Then, I situate the study within the theory of Critical Rural English Pedagogy (Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen). I present the findings, including student work samples and interview responses. I end with a discussion of the findings. Within the framework of place-based education and Critical Rural English Pedagogy, students engaged with the nuance of place in unexpected ways, bringing writing choice and writing community to the forefront of my discussion.

When I embarked on this unit of study—in tandem with my research study—I expected that my students would teach me more than I taught them. I expected them to express smart, relevant ideas. I expected them to be honest in their interviews. However, I did not expect to end the study with a keen sense of hope in the power of community. As my students often do, they surprised me with their depth of engagement in the unit, even when they may have

underestimated themselves, and I present this case study in order to add these rural students' voices to the conversation.

Research Questions

While my original research questions inquired about place-based education, archives, and rural identity, the questions evolved as patterns began to emerge in the data. Therefore, the following research questions guide the data analysis:

1. How does place-based education impact students' perception of their writing?
2. How do rural students describe their writing communities?
3. How do rural students interact with their place in writing and in discussions with their learning community?

Limitations

Geographical location and sample size limit this study. It represents just one class of students and one teacher, and the experiences discussed in the study are descriptive of just those participants. Even within the same school, a different class of students may have a varied perspective of the same unit taught by the same teacher, just as each individual student holds their own individual perception. While teachers may take away and adopt certain instructional strategies or curricular choices, this study does not aim to set prescriptive guidelines for what will happen if they teach the same or a similar unit. Instead, it explores the experience of the students within their own unique circumstances.

Literature Review

The review of existing literature discusses place-based education, text selection, writing, and learning in community over time. I begin with an exploration of place-based education as a pedagogical strategy for increasing critical engagement in students' place, moving into how text selection can support inquiry into place. Then, I review scholarly and organizational stances on

writing, especially the importance of student choice and voice. Finally, I incorporate understandings of the impact of learning in community over time. Working together, the literature establishes a foundation of knowledge that situates learning in place and supports incorporating students' placed perspectives in curricular choices.

Place-Based Education

In an era of public schooling defined by standardization, education scholars and researchers have been seeking alternative pedagogies to increase student engagement while maintaining academic rigor (McInerney et al. 3). Place-based education (PBE) is one such pedagogy, and "its aim is to ground learning in local phenomena and students' lived experience" (Smith 586). Peter McInerney, John Smyth, and Barry Down articulate the ultimate hope, writing, "PBE holds out the promise that young people can become valued members of society by engaging in worthwhile learning experiences that contribute to the betterment of their communities" (McInerney et al. 7). In order to meet its somewhat lofty goals, teachers implementing place-based pedagogies turn to the local, rooting learning in the community, which in turn facilitates transfer to global ideas (Comber 27). Place-based education connects students with their own surroundings in a meaningful way, and it can form a pedagogical foundation across subject areas. In its ideal form, "PBE invests young people with a sense of agency, acknowledges them as producers rather than consumers of knowledge, enriches their education through hands-on, community-engaged learning, and provides them with relevant knowledge and experiences to participate actively in democratic processes and devise solutions to social and environmental problems" (McInerney et al. 4). With its wide-ranging applicability and goals, PBE benefits from a nuanced definition of the concept of place.

Barbara Comber's seminal work in PBE reminds educators that place is highly contextual, integrating "social, cultural, political, and historical" background in addition to

“geographical and spatial” considerations (Comber 9). Doreen Massey, a social scientist and geographer, defines place as “spatio-temporal events” in which both space and time contribute to meaning-making (Massey 130). Therefore, the identity of a place is marked by a “throwntogetherness” that requires constant “negotiation” of the “here-and-now (itself drawing on a history and geography of thens and theres)” (Massey 140). While the instability of place may invoke unease, when paired with a “critical pedagogy of place” it “could potentially allow students to view place—its norms, limits, and possibilities—as a reciprocal and malleable concept they can affect” (Azano 10). As students explore place in the classroom and gain an understanding of how and why the negotiation happens, their confidence in the process and their power to construct nuanced perceptions grows.

Massey also argues that place “has affective dimensions and this in turn lends it a corporeality” (Massey 188). Affect in this sense is not necessarily the same as feelings, but it instead describes “an ability for a body to affect and be affected,” and it can be difficult for a person to describe (Wynhoff Olsen et al. 110). However, despite being tricky to articulate, as placed students experience a unit of study, their physical being may register in ways that have meaning. In this study, the term “vibe” seeks to capture the all-encompassing concept of affect in a student interview question.

The complexity of place requires equal complexity in PBE. Instead of dichotomizing place as good/bad, positive/negative, this/that, David Gruenewald advocates for a critical pedagogy of place that combines Paulo Freire’s *conscientizacao* and place-based education: “A critical pedagogy of place aims to (a) identify, recover, and create material spaces and places that teach us how to live well in our total environments (reinhabitation); and (b) identify and change ways of thinking that injure and exploit other people and places (decolonization)” (Gruenewald 9). Students should be invited to appreciate their place while also embracing concerns and

making change. Amy Azano echoes the importance of a critical perspective in PBE in her study of a teacher whose personal perspective of place limited the depth of exploration in the classroom: the teacher's "own biases functioned as blinders to opportunities for cultivating greater awareness," and "the place-based discussions and writing of his students remained unexamined" (Azano 8). McInerney, Smyth, and Down further drive home the point as they warn, "we have to be careful not to overly romanticize the notion of 'place' in the construction of young people's identities" (McInerney et al. 10). A critical pedagogy of place resists solely celebrating place, instead allowing for varied perspectives and experiences of place to exist at the same time.

Text Selection

One strategy for enacting a student-in-place centered approach is text selection. Rural texts can provide a mirror for rural students, affirming their cultural identity and experience (Bishop). Unfortunately, Chea Parton points out, many teachers do not have— or at least have a tough time identifying— rural young adult literature in their classroom libraries and reading lists (Parton, "Who's 'Ere"). Parton's website, *Dr. Parton's Literacy in Place*, works to increase the ease with which students and educators can find rural young adult literature, providing categorized and tagged lists of rural literature for perusal (Parton, *Dr. Parton's Literacy*). The availability of such lists is an essential tool for educators because when rural young adult literature is incorporated into the classroom, student motivation, engagement, and sense of academic relevance increases (Boyd and Darragh 233). For example, Ashley Boyd and Janine Darragh's case study focusing on one teacher's inclusion of a rural novel "illustrates one way in which teachers can affirm students' lived experiences and help them to identify that where they live is indeed something to be explored and celebrated" (Boyd and Darragh 233). Especially when many students witness community members leave their rural areas to pursue opportunities

in larger population centers (and, indeed, when the student themselves may yearn to leave)—a concept that Parton calls “out-migration”—teachers can provide opportunities for students to think about their place in critical ways that consider the implications of how place shapes identity and sense of belonging (Parton, “Out-Migrant”). The texts in this study, specifically the excerpts of Ivan Doig’s novel and the inclusion of his digital archive, work to elevate rural literature and voices as worthy of analysis.

Writing

The National Council of Teachers of English’s “Position Statement on Writing Instruction in School” asserts that “NCTE advocates for writing instruction that builds on students’ strengths, that values their many ways of using language, that promotes a broad view of what constitutes ‘text,’ and that promotes young people’s voices and purposes for writing within authentic contexts” (Calhoun-Dillahunt et al.) Furthermore, NCTE describes it as educators’ responsibility to “advocate for writing instruction that is process- (rather than product-) oriented and that invites students to become writers who (1) write for authentic purposes and (2) make authentic choices about processes and products” (Calhoun-Dillahunt et al.). Authenticity is a common thread throughout the position statement. Nadia Behizadeh reminds educators that the concept of authenticity is subjective, and “a student’s judgment of the authenticity of a writing task matters above all” when assessing it in relation to schoolwork (Behizadeh 28). In particular, students in Behizadeh’s study valued having their choice of topic, feeling like their writing had an impact on their audience, and placing expression in dominance over “correct” conventions (Behizadeh 33-36). NCTE’s position statement aligns with Behizadeh’s findings, and the main takeaway is to center students in conceptualizing and enacting the writing process.

Anne E. Whitney’s practical exploration of NCTE’s “Professional Knowledge for the Teaching of Writing” contextualizes its principles within the scope of secondary English

classrooms. One such principle is that “writing is embedded in complex social relationships and their appropriate languages,” which captures the “complex and dynamic” dimensions of writing (Whitney 17). Just as offering student choice in genre and mode can increase the efficacy of writing instruction, so can making space for non-Standard English or languages other than English (Whitney 18-19). Honoring the complexity of writing in this way can reflect an honoring of students’ lived experiences.

Furthermore, Whitney describes the link between writing and talk, describing the value of students talking about their writing with each other, asserting that “a classroom community has to be there” in order for it to be successful (Whitney 29). Kira Leekeenan and Amber Warrington also discuss the impact of talk in writing classrooms, noting that “when writing instruction facilitates student dialogue about writing, it has the potential to disrupt authority and shift conceptions of whose knowledge counts, as all writers in the room contribute knowledge about writing” (Leekeenan and Warrington 69). The teachers in their study found that it is crucial to “trust students to write about topics they care about” and “to allow seemingly off-task and tangential conversations” due to the element of community building that they enable (Leekeenan and Warrington 71). When students are able to see themselves as a writer within a community of other writers and learners, the National Writing Project’s goal of “a future where every person is an accomplished writer and engaged learner” seems within reach (“Home Page”).

Moreover, in regard to fostering a sense of community in writing classrooms, teens themselves offer helpful advice: students valued “freedom to write about what matters to them, constructive relationships around writing with their teachers, mentors, and peers, and models of writing from peers and published authors” (David et al. 69). Their emphasis on writing choice echoes other findings, and their mentioning mentor texts to use as models aligns with another of Whitney’s points. Namely, she draws a firm connection between reading and writing: “We learn

what to expect from written texts by reading other such texts” (Whitney 32). Not only can texts serve as mentors for students on a content-level, but they can also provide compositional guidance. Whitney even suggests “inviting students to choose different genres from one another, in the same way that you may have them engaging in choice reading” (Whitney 32). The recent “unessay” trend which encourages students to think beyond traditional writing follows the much-repeated advice of choice, and students and teachers report increased levels of creativity and confidence even though students generally defaulted to forms that they already had experience writing (Allagui 119-120). Therefore, writing choice, for the purposes of this study, extends beyond content and into form, as well.

Learning in Community Over Time

Another layer of interest for the purposes of this study is the concept of learning over time. Catherine Compton-Lilly establishes the importance of considering the element of time in educational settings: “If we accept the premise that people make sense of their lives within and across time, we begin to acknowledge the importance of not just the here and now, but of considering children’s longitudinal experiences in school in terms of educational policies, practices, and research” (Compton-Lilly 591). Just as it is important to consider the complexities of students’ place, it is similarly valuable to explore how time has an impact on students’ learning experiences.

Particularly, the concept of looping, in which a teacher works with the same group of students over multiple years, is an element of time-based educational analysis which has been previously explored across grade levels (Tipton). Limited data on the implementation of looping, particularly in the United States, makes it difficult to account for the number of districts using the model, but there are promising studies from other countries (including educational leader Finland) that suggest positive results in the areas of “academic achievement and the student-

teacher relationship” (Tourigny et al. 745). Caleb Christopher Tipton also notes that “the amount of time that student groups work with a teacher in looping allows students and teachers the opportunity to form more supportive learning communities within the classroom environment” (Tipton 55). While the term “looping” may be more familiar in younger grade-levels where the practice has historically been used to “compensate for unfulfilled classroom quotas,” it can be applied to secondary schools, as well (Tourigny et al. 745).

In small rural schools where departments are comprised of one person, like the high school in this study, the idea of teaching students for several years in a row is the norm, and “given the small number of students, and close interactions of most rural communities, rural teachers often have more opportunities to interact with and celebrate students over time” (Mitchell et al. 16). In classrooms such as these, Tipton claims, “instruction and learning can begin from day one because the teachers are familiar with student needs, and students are familiar with the classroom procedures and have existing relationships with the teacher and their classmates” (Tipton 56). As Lev Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development asserts, humans need to dialogue with others in order to learn; learning is not an individual process, but instead, it is social (Eun 25). When learning within an established community, this process is facilitated by familiar teachers and peers. The looped effect of the focal classroom opens inquiry into the effect of learning over time, especially in conjunction with building classroom community in order to facilitate authentic writing experiences.

Beyond writing community and classroom community, the general community in small towns is also a significant avenue of study. Although Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development accounts for the “small aura” of social relations in a learning environment, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger advocate for an expansion that recognizes individuals as also in conversation with the environment of ideas and norms outside the classroom (Lave and Wenger 49). They

posit that learning “concerns the whole person acting in the world” (Lave and Wenger 49). The boundary of classroom community and general community are blurred and malleable, allowing for cross-influence on student ways of being and work.

Conclusion

This study aims to examine the impact of place-based education and rurally placed texts on 12th grade students’ writing—and perceptions of their writing—within a rural context. Emerging through considerations of rurality are also considerations of the concepts of place and community, especially as they relate to the ideas that students express in their writing and reflections.

Theoretical Framework

As this study’s theoretical framework, Critical Rural English Pedagogy emphasizes the importance of rural people and rural texts that engage with the nuance of place and identity. First, I unpack concepts of rurality. Then, I establish key understandings of Critical Rural English Pedagogy.

For teachers in rural areas, place takes on a unique importance. Amy Azano, drawing from Patricia L. Hardre and Johnmarshall Reeve, notes that there are “practical implications for rural teachers” in studies exploring the efficacy of place-based education:

Where they are unable to control larger, external factors, such as funding and geographic isolation, rural teachers still can establish a learning climate that nurtures competence and supports student autonomy by ‘providing classroom climates in which teachers offer their students choices and options, respect students’ agendas, acknowledge their feelings and questions, and offer learning activities relevant to students’ goals and aspirations.’

(Azano 2)

The critical element of place-based education allows for student-centered learning that encourages critical engagement with students' rural place.

Rurality itself, however, is a tricky concept to define. While the United States Census Bureau defines "areas with populations less than 2,500" as rural, Allison Wynhoff Olsen explains that "rural" is not a "monolithic thing," and the socially constructed nature of rurality may necessitate the term "ruralities" to describe potential differences between rural places (Parker 52). The differences are particularly apparent in the common binary of stereotypes reflected in perceptions of rurality. Suzette Youngs, James E. Erekson, and Christine Kyser describe the two common points of view in the context of picture books: one depicts rural places as "deficient" sites that are "vilified as dangerous and wild... from which people would want to escape or which they should tame and urbanize" while the other side of the binary features nostalgically "abundant, happy, idyllic, and simple places to which people would want to escape" (Youngs et al. 25). Both stereotypes can be harmful in the ways that they perpetuate rural stigmas and invalidate rural realities.

Especially in rural areas that are flooded with "anti-rural prejudice [that] deems rural people as ignorant, backward, and sheltered with their ways of knowing as undesirable and unnecessary in modern society," adopting a critical pedagogy of place in the classroom can work to empower rural students (Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen 5). Robert Petrone and Allison Wynhoff Olsen's *Critical Rural English Pedagogy (CREP)* combines place-based education, critical pedagogy of place, and rurality in a way that speaks specifically to secondary English teachers and students: CREP aims to "(a) facilitate students' analyses and critique of discourses and ideologies related to rurality within language, texts, and society; and (b) foster students' abilities to create and disseminate texts that re-present more comprehensive, accurate, and socially just renderings and notions of rurality, and rural people and places" (Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen 7).

Not only does CREP advocate for centering rural texts, but it also encourages rural students to produce texts that reflect their rural realities.

Critical Rural English Pedagogy informed the curricular design of the unit in addition to providing a foundational disposition for valuing rural students' voices throughout the interview and data analysis process.

Methods

The methods for my study include a description of the research site, participants, unit of study, and data corpus. I describe the context of the study in addition to my data collection and analysis processes.

Site

Badgerton, Montana is located in the central region of the state, situated on the Missouri River and Interstate-15. The town's population was 600 at the 2020 Census. Community features include a local grocery store, two bars, a cafe, and several churches. The river is a major landmark, providing recreation for the community and a tourism economy year-round. Tourists travel to Badgerton in the summer months to enjoy phenomenal trout fishing, and they also flock to the area for big game hunting in the fall. Agriculture is another significant influence in the area; working ranches, farms, and livestock ranges surround the town, and many students live and work on their family land. The landscape is a mixture of mountain ranges and canyons to the south, buttes and buffalo jumps to the west, and sagebrush prairies to the east. One of Montana's major cities sits about twenty miles to the north.

The school, perched alongside the interstate highway at the top of the town's hillside slope, forms a focal point of the community. High school sporting events draw large crowds, and school teams and clubs enjoy widespread community support. The elementary, junior high, and high school all share one building, and the district serves Badgerton and surrounding areas,

encompassing about 180 square miles. About 110 students attend the high school. Staff members comprise their own department, and there is only one section of each course offering, meaning every teacher teaches six different courses each day. For example, I teach English I, II, III, and IV in addition to Spanish I and II, and I am the only English teacher and the only Spanish teacher at the high school level.

Participants

This study took place within the English IV class at Badgerton High School, which is comprised of twenty-seven twelfth-grade students and represents the entire senior class, except for one who took English IV a year early. There are fifteen males and twelve females rostered. Of the twenty-seven students, twenty-five also took my English III course together the year before, and for twenty-two of the students, I have been their only high school English teacher—I began teaching in Badgerton when they were freshmen. In my position as the teacher in the classroom of study, I underwent “teacher action research” due to my ability to affect change within the research environment (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 40).

In alignment with human research guidelines, I received IRB approval prior to beginning research. Students did not receive any incentive or reward for their participation in the study, and all students in the class, participants or not, were taught in the same manner. Twenty-five students signed the assent form to be included in the study, but a few did not turn in the parent consent form, leaving twenty-one participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data collection began during the third week of school, in late August. English IV meets during fourth period, class periods are fifty-six minutes long, and we operate within a four-day school week. Each class period routinely begins with ten minutes of silent independent reading followed by about five minutes of free writing. We devoted the remaining forty minutes

or so to the unit of study. The unit lasted thirteen days. After each lesson, I spent five to ten minutes writing a reflection in my lesson planning document. In total, the data include my lesson sequence and daily teacher reflections, student work samples, and student interview responses.

Lesson Sequence and Daily Reflections

The unit began with an exploration of the concept of making the familiar strange, utilizing an excerpt from “The Body Ritual of the Nacirema” and a class discussion. Students then wrote a short paragraph that applied the concept to our place.

The next day featured an excerpt from *The Bartender’s Tale*, a novel that we read in English III the year before, and a group activity that applied the “making the familiar strange” concept to the novel. Students created collaborative brainstorming posters to express their ideas.

The following day, we revisited the posters briefly, and I had planned to have a brief discussion to scaffold students’ creation of working Montana literature definitions that they would then apply to another excerpt from *The Bartender’s Tale*. However, once we began discussing what makes Montana literature “Montana literature,” we had to pause and discuss what makes Montana “Montana.” I wrote notes from our discussion on the whiteboard as we talked. Students were quite engaged in the discussion, and it ended up filling the rest of the class period.

On day four, students read and annotated a short excerpt from *The Bartender’s Tale*, wrote their working definition of Montana literature, and described how it applied (or did not apply) to the excerpt. They submitted their work on Google Classroom.

The next week began with a turn to a nonfiction academic text, *Billionaire Wilderness*. In order to explore the socioeconomic element of place, we began by searching local realty sites for listings in our area, discussing what the available homes might reveal about the people who live here. Then, I read an excerpt from the introduction of the book, which focuses on wealth

disparity in rural Western areas. After a brief discussion to check understanding, students chose a short excerpt to read in preparation for a jigsaw the next day. Students shared a summary from their chosen excerpt, and we had a whole-class discussion about students' understanding, opinions, and feelings regarding the content of the excerpts. My reflection in Appendix A includes observations from the discussion.

Day seven's lesson was a field trip. As a class, we walked to the Badgerton Museum and the CMR Honeymoon Cottage, where community members talked about the history of the town. We also quickly helped the food bank carry boxes into their facility, and we stopped at the grocery store before returning to school. A recap of the events of the field trip are included in my daily reflection in Appendix A.

The next lesson included a reflection and discussion about the field trip. We also searched for and discussed various texts about Badgerton and what the texts reveal about the place, its people, and their values. I wrote notes on the whiteboard. Finally, we discussed the final writing assignment and began brainstorming.

The next three days were work time for the final writing assignment (the assignment details are in Appendix B). On the first day, I grouped students by the genre that they thought they would write, and they discussed their ideas and the essential elements of the genre that they should make sure to address. I checked in with each student each day, discussing their ideas and answering questions. We also had a day on which students rotated through peer revision stations and a day to make final edits. In addition to at least 500 words of writing that engaged with the concept of place in some way, students also submitted a rationale that explained their writing, their Montana literature definition, and a description of how their definition applies to their writing.

The lesson sequence and daily reflections served as a tool to remember the unit of study, and they can be viewed in Appendix A. Rather than directly analyze them, I used them to add context to student writing and interview responses.

Student Work Samples

Throughout the duration of the unit, students submitted work on paper and on Google Classroom. I retained copies of students' physical work, and I printed copies of digitally submitted work, as well. Data analysis focused on students' final place writing submissions. Each student's submission contains their place writing, their rationale, and their Montana literature definition and application. I used textual analysis methods to find patterns and points of interest in student writing (Belsey).

As I scored students' final place writing, I categorized student writing into three major themes for analysis: Western/ranching, social structures, and everyday life. I made a list of students whose writing fell under the three major themes. About two weeks later, I returned to the students' final place writing submissions, printing them and continuing my analysis on physical copies of their work. First, I reread each submission, identified its genre, and wrote the genre at the top of the page. Next, I wrote two to four words that described its content. I also examined students' rationales, noting commonalities in the ways that students talked about the content and the form of their writing. Finally, I analyzed students' Montana literature definitions and how they applied their definition to their own writing. I returned to the digital files and copied/pasted their definitions and applications into a table in order to look for patterns in language and content.

Interviews

Upon the conclusion of the unit, I offered students the opportunity to voluntarily sign up to share more about their experience in an interview with me. I passed a piece of paper around

the classroom as they read independently at the beginning of the class period, and sixteen students added their names to the list. Due to scheduling difficulties, I only conducted seven one-on-one student interviews.

Prior to the student interviews, I sent an email to all sixteen students that had written their names on the volunteer list, inviting them to schedule an interview time with me. I also sent them the semi-structured interview questions (Griffin 186). I interviewed three students in my classroom during my preparatory period, three students in the hallway during our class meeting time, and one student in my classroom during advisory time. All interviews were audio recorded, and two interviews were also video recorded (per student comfort level). In addition to recording the interviews, I took rough notes on a piece of paper. Additionally, I opened a Google document on my laptop and enabled voice typing during the interviews to transcribe as we talked. After the completion of the first three interviews, I reviewed the transcription, making edits and additions based on the audio recording. For the last four interviews, I initially used “selective transcription” on the sections of the recording that proved relevant for analysis (Griffin 193). Ultimately, I transcribed the interviews in full in order to fully code the student responses.

Interview questions are included in Appendix C. The semi-structured interview questions are open-ended and center on student experiences (Griffin 186). After transcribing each interview, I coded the interviews for common themes and relationships with student work samples (Griffin 196). After coding, I determined three main themes throughout the student responses, and I mined quotations from each interview.

Findings

Findings feature two main strands: student work samples and interviews. Student work samples are students’ written expressions of their understanding and experience of the unit of

study, and the interviews are students' verbal reflection of the unit of study. Each section includes excerpts of student responses in addition to dominant themes and patterns.

Student Work Samples

Despite collecting student work samples throughout the entire unit of study, the findings only detail the final writing project for the unit due to the depth and breadth of the student submissions. Each student's final writing project includes a place writing, a rationale describing their place writing, their Montana literature definition, and a description of how their definition applies or does not apply to their own writing. In addition to presenting excerpts of students' writing, I also analyze patterns in student writing. All student names are pseudonyms.

Place Writing

The culminating writing project for this unit was a minimum 500-word student-chosen writing piece that engaged students with their understanding of place. In addition to free choice of topic—as long as it had something to do with place—students also chose their own genres for their writing assignment. Therefore, student writing varies in both form and content. Table 1 details each student's writing genre, dominant theme, and a few phrases that describe, or tag, their writing. Of the twenty-one pieces of writing, there are eight memoirs, five fictional narratives, three poem collections, two reflective essays, two setting descriptions, and one poetry and prose combination. Students' engagement with place in their writing fell under three dominant themes: social structures, ranching/Western, and everyday life. Four students' writing thematically addresses social structures, eleven detail everyday life, and six represent ranching/Western.

Table 1: Student Place Writing

Student Name	Chosen Genre	Dominant Theme	Writing Tags
Arielle	Memoir	Social Structures	Family, life story, emotional

Evan	Memoir	Everyday Life	Working, boating, imagery
Tyson	Memoir	Ranching/Western	Ranching, working, home
Ben	Memoir	Everyday Life	Summer, cars, new friendships
Joe	Memoir	Everyday Life	Dirt biking, hobbies, celebrities
Charlotte	Memoir	Everyday Life	Moving, belonging, home
Theo	Memoir	Everyday Life	Wrestling, school, personal growth
Liam	Memoir	Ranching/Western	Ranching, nature, personal growth
Oliver	Setting Description	Everyday Life	Football, drafted by AI, imagery
Sadie	Setting Description	Everyday Life	Bedroom belongings, form and function, clutter
Isabel	Reflective Essay	Ranching/Western	Ranching, family, personal growth
Boone	Reflective Essay	Ranching/Western	Cowboy, nature and animals, personal growth
Lily	Poetry	Ranching/Western	Cowgirl, country life, nature
Elle	Poetry	Social Structures	Moving, fitting in, landscapes
Josie	Poetry and Prose	Everyday Life	Field trip, school, small town
Ivy	Poetry	Everyday Life	Small town struggle, school, growing up
Luke	Fictional Narrative	Ranching/Western	Western, small town, back in time
Kennedy	Fictional Narrative	Social Structures	Mystery, thriller, memory loss, crime
Miles	Fictional Narrative	Social Structures	School, new student, anime inspired
Alex	Fictional Narrative	Everyday Life	Small town, logging, mountain region
Clara	Fictional Narrative	Everyday Life	Fantasy, nature, small town

Rationales

In addition to their place writing, students also submitted a one-paragraph rationale to explain their writing. I prompted them to tell me about the choices that they made in regard to their writing. Student rationales offer a metacognitive window into their writing process, pulling back the curtain on their decisions for form and content.

Many students further described their understanding of place in their rationale. For example, Arielle explained that she “wrote this because [she] feel[s] some people might relate,” and she “find[s] venting in a way like this is not as overwhelming.” Tyson wrote that he has “spent [his] entire life finding [his] place and [he] explained all of [his] different ‘places’ [he] has found in the last 5 years.” Joe chose to write a memoir because he “wanted to tell people that [our town] isn’t just some boring town and that some really cool people have visited.” Liam explained that “every place that a person lives and loves builds the person they become” to support his ranching memoir. Isabel justified her choice to write an essay about her family and ranch because she “feel[s] so strongly about this topic,” so she knew “it would be easy to write about.” Lily described one poem as an attempt “to bring justice to the beauty of cowboying.” Ivy unveiled the nuance of one of her poems in her rationale: “I was thinking about how there’s not much diversity in our town and most people dress and sound the same and have the same morals and lifestyles, but there’s always an oddball out that under a different circumstance would most likely fit in more than them.” Students used their rationale as an opportunity to tell me how their writing was significant to them.

A couple of students also acknowledged their stylistic writing choices in their rationale. Sadie wrote that she “chose to make it very choppy and imperfect” because she “wanted it to feel constantly interrupted and reflect how [she] feel[s] when reflecting on [her] room.” Boone

explained that he “wrote this piece with the idea that it would keep the reader in suspense.” These examples reflect the students’ ability to justify and take ownership of their writing.

Montana Literature Definitions

Students also submitted their own definition of Montana literature and described whether or not their place writing fit their own definition. Four students did not include this element in their final submission. Appendix D contains each student’s Montana literature definition and their application of the definition on their own writing.

Students’ Montana literature definitions reveal their understanding of our collective place, and their evaluations of their writing in regard to their own definition allow readers insight into the assumptions underlying their writing. Several keywords showed up across student definitions and applications. The word “country” showed up four times in the definitions. “Cowboy” was used four times across definitions and applications, and two of those times specified that Montana literature should not be all about cowboys. Four students used the terms “beauty” or “pretty.” “Rural” showed up six times across four students’ writing, and “mountain” was used nine times across definitions and applications.

The concept of work featured in four students’ definitions, ranging from ranching and farming to industrial and bartending. Community, specifically small-town community, is also prominently mentioned in the definitions and applications; two students used the word “community,” and “small town” can be counted thirteen times across seven students’ submissions. Moreover, thirteen students noted the landscape, or an aspect of the physical place, in their definitions, using language like “open space,” “towering mountains,” “old bars,” and “half-hour drives.”

Interestingly, five students formulated their definition in the negative phrasing, saying something to the effect of “it is not all ____.” Students seem to be resisting a homogenous

depiction of their place, hoping to instead capture the complexity of both the physical place and the people who inhabit it. In fact, Sadie directly stated, “Enough of the old west narrative...my life isn't ranching and farming like most people see Montana, but it's, in reality, a place of varied beliefs and ‘liberal views.’” Joe echoes the point by writing that Montana literature “doesn't always have to be a Western.” Liam summarizes the point well: “[Montana literature] should also involve all details of the unique life we live, not just the ‘cowboy’ lifestyle. It should have the difficulties as well as the excitements.”

Overall, fourteen students determined that their writing fit their own definition.

Interviews

Seven students completed an interview with me: Josie, Evan, Boone, Ben, Charlotte, Luke, and Alex. Throughout the seven interviews, students expressed a wide range of experiences, opinions, and reflections. Three main themes arose through the analytical process, pertaining to their descriptions of our place, their discussions of their writing, and, perhaps most unexpectedly, a clear acknowledgement of their communities outside and inside the classroom.

Descriptions of Place

In each interview, I asked students to describe our place and reflect on depictions of our place in popular culture. I also asked them to reiterate their definition of accurate Montana texts. Their responses echoed many of the findings from their definitions and applications, especially the idea that many representations of Montana present a narrow depiction that misses the nuanced reality. Three students specifically mentioned the television show *Yellowstone* as detracting from a wider understanding of our place. Luke said, “I think people see Montana as, like, old western, like tumbleweeds and, you know, elk, like *Yellowstone*, but that's not even close to what it is. I think it's a lot different. Like, yeah, there's prairie land, but there's not, like, people shooting tourists and all that. I think, you know, there's a peaceful sense to it that people

just don't understand.” Boone echoed the sentiment, describing how television shows like *Yellowstone* portray Montana “in a darker sense, kind of more of an action sense, but it's not really that way. It's more of just a quiet morning, like you wake up on a Montana morning just to watch the sunrise, and it's just calm and cool. You don't have to worry about much.” Ben also brought up the television show, saying, “I don't want to say *Yellowstone*, but *Yellowstone*...I mean, it *kind of* portrays what happens around here, especially what it looks like with the wildlife.” The popular television show provides a comparison point for their own perceptions of Montana.

Charlotte also discussed the one-sided depictions of Montana in popular culture, saying, “I think that they portray it as, like, very country, and, like, it is, but to the extent of, like, that's all it is.” Josie emphasized that point, as well: “I think [popular culture portrayals] are all based off of the old Western Montana, you know. Montana has changed a lot, and there's a lot of things people don't know. My family has lived here forever, and one thing that a lot of people don't realize is we have some amazing technology in Montana. For a while there, we were the number one in mapping technology in the world, and my grandpa loves mapping, and he got really into it, but I think a lot of that is lost because we are the country bumpkins, you know. You find us riding horses and things like that. When in reality, we're very smart and ingenuitive.” Evan also pointed out the dominant Western theme, explaining, “I always think [the popular culture portrayals] are trying to make it a little too Western. I mean, yeah, ranching is a big part of Montana, but you don't really see it that often. If you're just driving through, it's mostly your, just, kind of boring town.” The students understand the nuance of their place, and they clearly articulate the lack of nuanced representations in popular culture.

Writing

Students also expressed valuable thoughts about their place writing. Charlotte noted an appreciation for the “freedom...to do what I want about this topic.” Luke said, “I feel like we should do more stuff like [the place writing] in class where I could just, like, free write even more because, like, it was just way too much fun.” Boone told me, “I really enjoyed the place unit, especially the part where we got to write the paper. I really enjoyed that paper.” Josie also described the writing project as “fun,” adding, “I loved this project.”

Alex described the feeling of focusing on place in the writing assignment as “a flashback of memories.” Ben also said that it felt like “reliving memories.” Josie decided to focus on recent memories in her place writing, detailing her experience of our class field trip. She sums up the significance of the project, saying, “Being able to write about something you're passionate about, something you've been in your entire life, makes it easier to do those projects.”

Community

Finally, all seven students mentioned community, inside and outside the classroom, in their interview. Beginning with a question about Badgerton, students noted varying aspects of the community. Charlotte described it as “tight knit.” Ben said, “Not a lot goes on around here, but when stuff does happen, there are definitely a lot of people that show up, so I mean it's a very involved community, for sure.” Luke explained that it is a “very small town. Everybody seems to know each other even though you've never met them. Everybody gets along, like if you need help, they're always there to help you.” Alex noted, “I've described it like a place where people can connect really good.” Josie echoed the point, saying, “Here, whether you want to or not, you know the entire town.”

Within the classroom, students expressed interest in each other's work and dispositions about the work. Both Luke and Josie mentioned specific classmates that they noticed were

excited about their place writing, and it impacted their enjoyment of the unit, too. Luke further described that “everyone was happy to do it...it was definitely a happy, chill vibe.” Alex described the vibe as “cool” because of “all the people talking about their experiences.” Charlotte described “seeing other people’s perspectives” throughout the unit as “cool” and “informing” because she “learned a lot” as a newcomer to the state. Boone also enjoyed hearing about others’ perspectives, saying, “It was just kind of a neat thing to think about. Like, we have this place in our mind that we know of, and everyone's just got a different place in their mind, and that's just kind of something you need to think about.” Josie had the sense that “we came into some, like, actual real thoughts because everybody had such vastly different views on what Montana is” and that they “would have been stuck in our one point of view of what Montana is...without discussing” it. Not all students felt like varying perspectives were expressed by their classmates in discussions, however. Ben felt like a lot of his classmates “thought of [the unit] in a similar way” and that other people were saying what he was thinking throughout the unit.

Despite not initially setting out to examine a sense of community in this unit, it is significant that every student brought it up on their own. Clearly, students’ community has a meaningful impact on students’ educational experience.

Conclusion

Findings demonstrate the diversity of student expression and experience while also highlighting commonalities. In the next section, I will discuss two students’ experiences in-depth, first detailing Evan then Josie. I will also discuss the major thematic patterns of writing choice and writing community.

Discussion

Findings indicate several key patterns in student writing and interviews. First, I present two students’ pathways through the unit in the form of student spotlights. Next, I extend key

considerations for English teachers and researchers as I discuss two major patterns in the findings: the importance of student choice in writing and the presence of writing community.

Student Spotlights

In order to more deeply analyze students' experiences with the unit of study, I chose two students with differing viewpoints to spotlight. Each spotlight details their journey through the unit, including their interview responses, excerpts of their writing, and my reflections. The first spotlight focuses on Evan, a student who called the unit "boring" but found interest in his writing and hearing from his peers. The second spotlight shines a light on Josie. She enjoyed the unit and also talked about her experience within the context of her classmates. In addition to presenting a detailed overview of each student's data, I also offer a discussion of their significance.

Spotlight on Evan

While many students expressed similar sentiments in their writing assignments and interviews, Evan's experience throughout the unit is one of particular interest. Despite turning in a well-crafted place writing accompanied by a thoughtful rationale and Montana literature definition, he consistently described the unit as "boring." The following section describes Evan's path through the unit in more depth, including his writing and interview responses.

Evan has lived in Montana his entire life, and I have been his English teacher since he was a freshman. By my observation, Evan has always been an active participant in class. He seems confident sharing his ideas, and he is able to interact effectively with others' ideas, too.

From the beginning of the unit, Evan expressed ideas and viewpoints that varied from the others in the class. Initially, he did not return the consent and assent forms in order to participate in the study, but after our first discussion, I encouraged him to think about signing them. He turned in his forms the next day.

Evan's participation offered many opportunities throughout the unit for the entire class to dig deeper into our understanding of place. One stand-out instance occurred during our whole-class discussion about how we define Montana literature, which ended up being a discussion about how we define Montana generally. Early in the discussion, a student commented something about big cities not being part of Montana, and Evan added, "Yeah, Billings isn't Montana." From that comment, we were able to examine what we do consider to be Montana, and explore why Billings, despite literally being a city in Montana, does not align with our definitions. Evan once again contributed to the discussion with valuable insight, noting that what we had already written down, things like "outdoors and wildlife" and "cowboy slang," were also the view that tourists have of our state. As a class, we decided that even though we sometimes resent the picturesque, touristy stereotypes, those very concepts often stand out the most to us, as well. The discussion lasted over thirty-five minutes, and Evan's initial comment provided a critical direction.

After our discussion, students wrote their own definitions of Montana literature or texts. While other students noted the nature and Western culture of our state as determining factors of authenticity, Evan wrote, "I find it hard to take any representation of Montana that isn't negative or against the typical touristic idea of Montana seriously because I don't have a positive opinion on Montana." He later expanded this definition in his final place writing assignment, writing, "My definition of Montana is more industrial and working than most out-of-staters believe. Montana isn't all pretty mountains and rivers and glaciers." He decided that his writing fit his definition because it "is a small sample of how industrial Montana can be" as it describes "a hidden away and laborious job that many tourists will never hear about." Evan values work, a sentiment that we discussed at length in our analysis of Ivan Doig's novel a year earlier in English III, and his perspective—a perspective that sees beneath the glossy photographs that grace

tourism pamphlets—snaps into clarity with the words of his Montana definition. In his rationale, Evan further describes his job at a boat-loft and the opportunities that it has afforded him, including the purchase of a boat and truck, and he discusses that his summer job has given him “some ideas for future plans,” like becoming a “structural welder, heavy equipment operator, or a diesel mechanic” after high school. He concludes, “I’m not sure yet, but either way, I’m grateful for what I was taught and got to do.”

When it was time to sign up for an interview, Evan wrote his name on the list without my prompting, and he was the first student to talk with me. When I asked him what a Montana text needs to be like in order to align with his experiences, he echoed his original written response: “I always find it hard to, like, be entertained by reading anything about Montana unless it's, like, talking down about it. Everybody that talks about Montana is always talking up about it. So, it's always, ‘It’s pretty. It's cool.’ But I've always been kind of bored and uninterested about it, so anyone that's not talking bad about it, I just kind of get bored.” He noted the work of Ivan Doig as not fitting his definition because of Doig’s intense level of description and his focus “on, like, the feeling of the trees and the wind and stuff like that... He was really descriptive about the environments and how the people were, and that got really boring for me because I don't think about that type of stuff very much.” Evan noted, “I guess...I'm not observant enough to really recognize that as being, like, Montana.”

When it came time to do his own writing, however, Evan leaned into the high level of description in *The Bartender’s Tale* that “bored him.” When asked to discuss the place unit, he began talking about his writing, saying, “It was kind of weird to think about place because, since I wrote about my workplace, I had to think really descriptively of, like, what everything looked like, where everything was, how I felt about it, and I wasn't used to it, so it was kind of interesting to think about imagining me driving down the driveway into work, even

subconsciously acknowledging stuff around me. I didn't really think about it until now.” I asked Evan if anything that we read influenced his writing, and he said, “I would say that *The Bartender’s Tale* really helped me with that because it really described. Like, there was half a page [about] walking through a door. That was kind of what I based it off of, so I wrote 600 words worth of just driving 100 feet, so I tried to use the same process that I read in his books, like, tried to be as descriptive as possible.”

In fact, Evan wrote 729 words about his daily routine of arriving at his summer job, and each sentence is filled with strong sensory details that root the memoir in his experience of place. Interestingly, Evan used second person point of view throughout his writing, situating the reader as a “you” acting in the narrative. He titled the writing “Time for Work.” He first describes driving down the driveway, seeing all of the cars and equipment in the parking lot, and then reveals the specifics of his workplace, a boat loft: “There’s the Pontoon Rack, a strange sight to those unfamiliar with boats being held up in the air by steel I-beams. Of course, anybody should be slightly concerned with 15 full size pontoons and tritoons being held 20 feet in the air.”

Evan also provides a rich description of the truck he drives, a “‘71 Chevy bringing both pity and excitement when looking at it.” He writes with stunning authority and voice: “Noticing its rust holes, scratches in the clear coat over the light olive green paint caused by darned mice running around, then rusted and rotted off exhaust tips hanging gloomy behind the cheaped out on highway terrain tires. You give the poor truck one more solemn look before walking out and around the edge of Building 3.” The care that he displays in his word choices and subject matter is evidence of his confidence in the assignment, and a Chrome extension called Revision History shows that he spent fifty-six minutes actively typing in his document. While my interpretation as his teacher would be that Evan was engaged with the unit and its assignments, Evan expressed a differing experience in his interview.

When I asked Evan to describe the vibe of the unit, he offered an intriguing answer: “I don’t know. I would say it seemed like we were all just kind of bored of it, as far as I could tell. From people that I was talking to, not a whole lot of us were really interested in talking about *The Bartender’s Tale* again, but it was also kinda cool to hear all the different observations of people, what people would go through in a normal day, or what they would come up with when they were doing [the writing] ‘cause there were a lot of [ideas] that I heard where they were coming up with a fictional story in our normal setting, so it was something that I hadn’t thought about.” Even though Evan described the work as boring, he demonstrated thoughtfulness in his writing assignment, and he noted interest in hearing about his classmates’ work.

Evan’s progression through the unit demonstrates the subjectivity of classroom work; while some students enjoyed the unit, others did not. However, his acknowledgement of his classmates’ insights as “interesting” points to the importance of talk in the writing process. Despite finding most of the unit boring, Evan engaged with the final assignment and produced thoughtful work, and he found some enjoyment in the creativity of his peers.

Spotlight on Josie

Josie is a lifelong resident of her family’s ranch just outside of town. She has been going to school in Badgeron since she was in kindergarten, and I have been her English teacher since she was a freshman. From my observations, Josie often serves as the voice of reason in her class, and I look to her for mature, well-thought-out responses during class discussions. I have kept several pieces of her previous written work to use as examples for future classes. Josie turned in her consent and assent forms immediately, and she expressed excitement about the unit and my research.

From the beginning, Josie engaged fully with the readings, discussions, and assignments. Her initial Montana literature definition asserted that “Montana literature has to have an open

landscape concept to it, the small-town naivety, and stubbornness.” When she submitted her final place writing assignment, she retained much of her initial definition, writing, “it must have the small-town naivety and country feel.” She added, “However, the more I think about it, I know every person is going to have different requirements as to what makes it Montana literature. The way they view Montana is different from how I view Montana.” Josie consistently mentioned the nuance of perspectives in our interview, noting that most media depictions of Montana rely on old Westerns even though that is not our only reality anymore. She also notes that while she enjoyed reading Doig’s *The Bartender’s Tale*, it is set in the past, which is only “good up to a point” because “if someone’s going to read that, that is their image of Montana now, you know.”

In talking about her writing inspiration, Josie once again discussed the necessity of opening the narrow representations of our place. She drew upon her dad, a rancher who writes poetry, saying, “I wanted to show that Montana can be that kind of delicate, you know, and have poetry to represent it.” She expanded, “I had so much fun with this project. I loved this project.” The clear vision that Josie had for her project was on full display in her finished product.

Josie’s final place writing stands out due to its subject matter and form. While most other students focused on topics that mattered to them outside of the classroom, Josie decided to meld poetry and prose in a reflection of our class field trip. She engaged with place through a meta-exploration of our class’s physical place experience. Her piece begins with ten haikus, then she explicates each haiku in a paragraph. She features elements such as spotting her great-grandparent’s senior portrait in the historical class pictures, her classmates racing each other in the street on our field trip, her class helping out community members without thinking, and the sense of school spirit across the community.

Two lines stand out in Josie’s writing. The first appears after a description of her classmates sharing the food they bought during our quick stop at the town grocery store. She

described it as a senior picnic, and she wrote, “I believe that you need people to have place.” The second excerpt provides a complication that speaks to the reality of small-town life. The last line of her last haiku reads, “No one stays in place.” In context, the line discusses our return to the busy school day and students leaving my classroom to attend club meetings during our advisory time before lunch. However, in conjunction with Josie’s belief that people make place, it speaks to the concept of out-migration in rural areas (Parton, “Out-Migrant”). The students scatter from our collective place to go to their activities just as many of them will leave our town after graduation. While it does not seem to be Josie’s intent, in my reading, this last line provides a bittersweet reflection of rurality, and it powerfully concludes her poetry section.

Furthermore, Josie echoes her sentiment that “you need people to have place” in her reflection of the place writing assignment during our interview. After expressing her enjoyment of the project, she jumped right into discussing her writing community’s experience. She said, “One thing that just made me so happy was how much my other classmates got into it. There was one classmate, Boone, he just got so into it, and it was so fun seeing people talking about their project outside of class.” She reiterated the community aspect when asked about how she felt during our class discussions, saying, “I loved the discussions. I love my class because we can talk forever about anything, [laughs] but when these discussions came about, we came into some, like, actual real thoughts because everybody had such vastly different views on what Montana is...it was really fun to be able to discuss [the different views] because I think without discussing that, we would have been stuck in our one point of view of what Montana is.” Josie perceived a level of comfort in our discussions which made her “feel like everyone was talking and enjoying themselves,” adding “I think a part of that being so comfortable is because we have all been here for so long, so we feel comfortable voicing and saying, ‘hey, this is how it is,’ you know.” Even within our classroom, Josie emphasized the people in the place.

Overall, Josie said of the place unit, “I think for me it kind of felt empowering.” She continued, “I was already comfortable with this place, this subject, and so it made it so much easier to write and focus on the project and the learning aspect of it.” Once again, Josie’s experience in the unit is unique to her, but it demonstrates the importance of making space for students to embark on projects on which they can leave their creative mark in addition to sharing their experience with others.

Key Considerations

Through the data analysis process, two major patterns emerged that I present here as key considerations. The first is the value of writing choice, appealing to student engagement and reflecting their willingness to express nuanced knowledge. The second is writing community, both in the ways that students expressed their experience in relation to peers and in the ways that they wrote *about* their communities.

Writing Choice

The concept of choice featured dominantly in student interview responses. While I was initially nervous to create an assignment that encouraged full creative liberty from students beyond a conceptual guide, students accepted the challenge and appreciated the opportunity. Students chose topics and genres that made sense to them, and the freedom of expression allowed for authentic engagement with the nuance of their ideas (Whitney). Rather than focusing on fitting into a specific textual mold, students were able to channel their effort into articulating complex ideas.

The rationales offer an explication of the complexity of their writing pieces, and the depth of engagement as demonstrated by their own words suggests an eagerness to “re-present more comprehensive, accurate, and socially just renderings and notions of rurality, and rural people and places” (Petrone and Wynhoff Olsen 7). Standing alone, each student’s place writing

offers a limited sample of their ideas surrounding place, but their rationales reveal their thought process, strengthening each piece of writing when viewed through the lens of their intentions. From Joe and Ivy striving to address the intricacies of their place to Lily hoping to “bring justice” to her topic, each student’s rationale belies a willingness, perhaps even an eagerness, to undertake the task of expressing complicated ideas. Some students’ rationales even provided the key to understanding their whole piece, like Sadie and Boone explicating how the form of their writing reinforces the meaning. With an assignment that afforded students a lot of freedom to craft their writing in a way that they saw fit, the rationales were instrumental in uncovering students’ high level of critical engagement.

While scholarly research supports choice in writing topic and genre (see Allagui, Behizadeh, Calhoon-Dillahunt et al., David et al., and Whitney), teachers face tension with state education standards when implementing genre choice in the classroom. For example, Montana’s Common Core Standards for 11th and 12th grades separate three main genres of writing, listing them individually with several sub-standards each. Students are expected to write arguments, narratives, and explanatory/informative texts in distinct forms (“MT ELA Content Standards...”). However, this study shows that students, when afforded the choice, may decide to write poetry, a genre not mentioned in the writing standards, or blend forms, like Josie. They may choose to write a fantasy narrative inspired by traditional memoirs, like Clara. They may write an explanatory essay that channels the normally-narrative element of suspense, like Boone. Just as students exhibited a readiness to engage with nuance in the content of their writing, so did they in the genre that they chose for their project. While dictating genre may be helpful in early writing scaffolding, allowing students to choose their own genre and topic for writing projects fosters a more meaningful experience that empowers students to meld form and function.

Writing Community

Writing community also emerged as a dominant consideration of this study in two ways. The first way is that of a compound noun, “writing community,” and it addresses the manner in which students experienced the unit of study within a classroom of their peers. The second way uses “writing” as a verb and “community” as the direct object, and it addresses how students engaged with the concept of place in their writing projects. Both ways work together, and they are perhaps best summarized by Josie’s assertion that “you need people to have place.” The writing community in the classroom provided a sounding board for ideas and added interest to the unit as students talked about their writing, and many students featured the community in their writing to demonstrate their conceptualization of place.

While I held space for students to discuss their ideas with each other early in the writing process and allowed chatter as students worked, the sense of community was not initially an avenue of inquiry, so I did not make these moves with intention. I was surprised that every student mentioned talking with others—unprompted—in their interview, but there is a growing body of research that emphasizes the importance of talk. Leekeenan and Warrington mention that teachers should not always shut down “seemingly off-task” conversations in writing spaces due to their ability to enable community building, and the students in this class are no stranger to these sorts of instances of talk (Leekeenan and Warrington 71). As their teacher for several years, and as noted by Josie in her interview, I can say that this group of students can talk (and talk and talk) for hours about anything. Before we embarked on the unit of study, students had already established a community in the classroom, built over years of learning together in their rural place, and this translated into students celebrating each other’s ideas without being explicitly asked to do so (Mitchell et al.).

Perhaps this strong community bond enabled students to write their community with confidence. The Montana literature definitions are evidence of students' authoritative voice. Although there are commonalities in the definitions, each student expressed their own ideas in their own words. As a teacher, I hope to convey to students that their thoughts matter, that they should voice their opinions, and that they deserve to be heard by others (as they in turn listen). NCTE echoes my stance in their "Position Statement on Writing Instruction in School" as they advocate for "promoting young people's voices and purposes" in writing (Calhoon-Dillahunt et al.). Students are able to use their voices with confidence when teachers—in collaboration with peers—create environments where they feel valued and part of a community.

As students and teachers write, learn, and exist in community together, Ann D. David, Annamary Consalvo, and Amy Vetter remind teachers of the importance of scaffolding how to talk about writing (David et al. 5). Instead of expecting students to intrinsically know the language, teachers should be helping them build the vocabularies and navigate the norms in order to discuss their writing and writing strategies. While students did talk about their writing with each other in this unit, I did not explicitly teach them how, and I perhaps missed an opportunity to improve their skills. I did, however, provide students with the scaffolding necessary to discuss place, and the thorough, complex ideas that they expressed at the culmination of the unit reflect their ability to learn how to navigate previously unfamiliar topics. In future units of study, similar instruction and emphasis should be afforded to the element of talking about writing, and teachers should intentionally create opportunities for students to discuss their writing with their peers.

Conclusion

I set out on this study expecting to find interesting ways that place-based education impacts students' sense of self, but instead the importance of writing choice and connection with

others featured prominently in the data. The findings of this study indicate a need for further study on the topic of writing choice and writing community, especially when paired with place-based education and learning in rural areas. However, teachers can respond to the findings of this study in two major ways: trust students to choose and make time for talk.

As a teacher, I understand the inclination to provide strict parameters for assignments; standardizing requirements allows for quicker grading and seamless alignment with state standards. Nevertheless, I urge teachers to resist prescribing writing topics and genres, at least for some of their assignments. My students showed decisiveness and creativity when I allowed them to choose for themselves, and they reflected positively on being afforded the freedom to write in a form that fit what they wanted to write about. Trust students to choose their topic and genre; if the students are in any way similar to mine, they will make thoughtful, intentional choices about their writing.

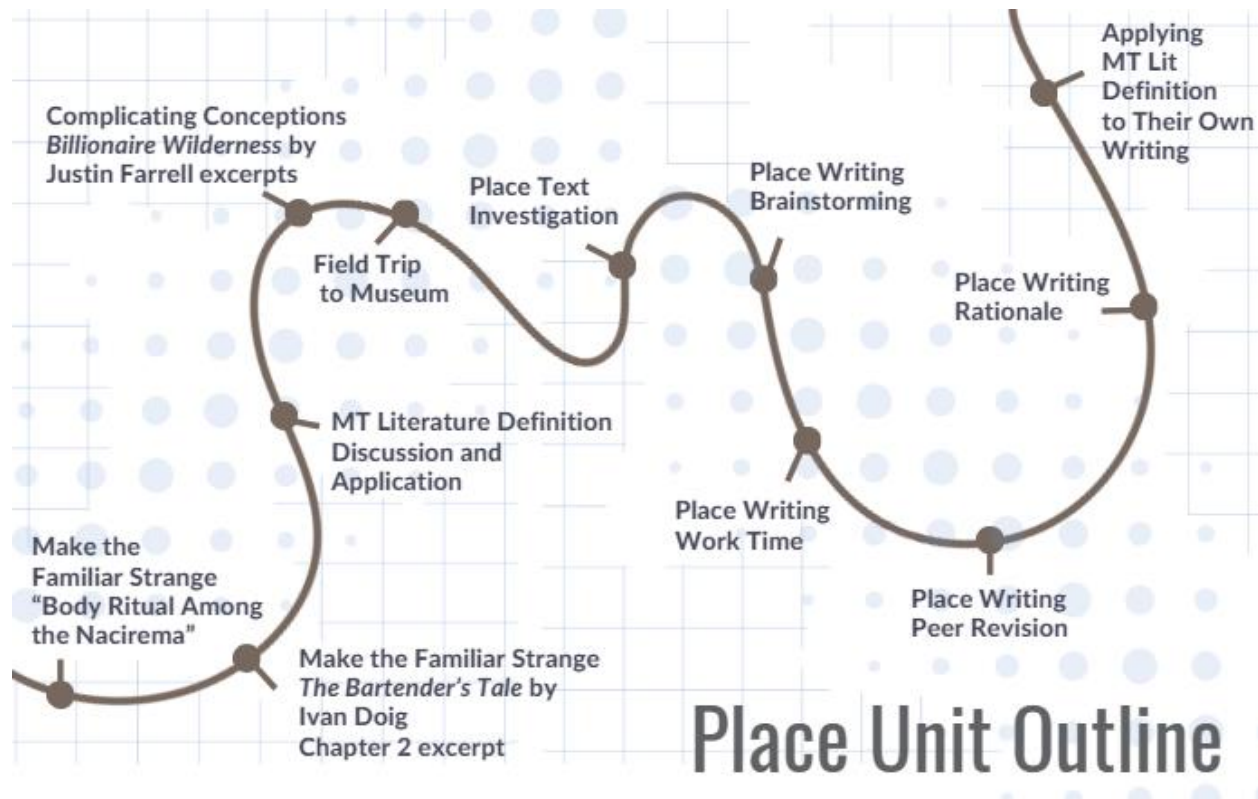
Making the time and space for students to talk to each other is equally as significant. While every teacher has their own tolerance for noise during work time, it is worth it to set aside time—maybe not all of the time, but at least some of it—when students can share ideas, learn from each other, and, yes, have off-task conversation. Not only were the moments of connection the moments that stood out to students who both enjoyed the unit *and* thought it was boring, but they were also the moments where community building occurred. The importance of talk was an unexpected finding, and its recurrence across student responses is unignorable. If we truly want students' voices to be heard in a variety of conversations, we need to allow them to practice by talking to each other.

Community, relationships, and connection were at the heart of the unit, just as those are the heart of our rural place. Through harnessing the people that make the place, teachers can empower students to write with confidence and authority. While this study represents the unique

perspectives of one group of students, it offers key considerations for teachers hoping to incorporate place-based education into secondary English classrooms. Students finding joy in each other, listening to each other's ideas, and appreciating what they each brought to the conversation—in person and in writing—gives me a renewed sense of hope in the power of knowing one another.

Appendix A: Lesson Plans and Daily Reflections

Note: The following lesson plans provide a loose outline of each day's activities. Many of the plans were adjusted in the moment during the lesson, and those changes may not be reflected in these initial plans. The image below provides a visual outline of the unit.



Day 1:

Supplies: Copies of "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema"

- Read "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema" in small groups, annotating.
 - After reading and annotating, discuss assumptions about the Nacirema as a whole class.
 - Potential discussion questions: What do you notice about the Nacirema? What can we learn about them from the information we have? What might their society be like?

- Ask students to reverse the spelling of Nacirema and invite them to share their reactions and understandings now that they know it is about Americans.
- Introduce the concept of making the familiar strange and using it as a strategy for analyzing the world around us.
 - Potential discussion questions: How does the article “make the familiar strange”? How else could we apply the concept? What might it look like to make the familiar strange in a different context?
 - If students need prompting, ask how someone might describe going to the grocery store or school in the style of “Body Ritual.” How might someone describe the people and customs of Badgerton as an outsider? (Going to the grocery store, restaurants/bars, the pool, etc. What does it look like?) What is unique in their community that would stand out when made strange?
 - Students write at least one paragraph discussing Badgerton in terms of Body Ritual. What could be investigated? Why?

Day 1 Reflection: Students played into the Nacirema article exactly how I wanted them to. They were confused as they were reading and thought that the customs were a bit odd. A few students noticed that the customs were not all that different from ours, and I would say that those students are known as being very empathetic usually. They also got the concept of making the familiar strange pretty easily. They were able to throw out several concepts in our place that could be made strange, and all of them immediately started writing after we brainstormed ideas.

Day 2:

Supplies: *The Bartender's Tale* copies, butcher paper/large sheets of paper, colored pencils/colored markers

- Read the first excerpt from BT Chapter 2 in small groups, focusing on language. When students come across a particularly interesting word, phrase, or idea, they can write it on the whiteboard.
 - Pg 37-43: Bar patrons talking with Tom in the introduction to The Medicine Lodge, then Rusty and Tom at home.
 - Do a quick comprehension check. Students turn to the people next to them and create a quick summary of the chapter. Combine their small group with another and share, revising into one summary. Combine one more time, share, and revise. Share with the whole class. Do this quickly– maybe about 1 minute per round.
- Revisit yesterday's "make familiar strange" discussion. Invite students to consider how to apply the concept to this excerpt in order to deconstruct assumptions, knowledge, etc. about the language in the passage as it relates to people in MT.
 - Ask students to help brainstorm questions that can help interrogate the passage. Potential starter questions: Is the language truly representative? In what ways is it/is it not? Are the characters authentic? In what ways are they/are they not? Who is represented/not represented? What is the effect for readers? What are the values of the people? How do we know?
 - Answer the questions in small groups first: Assign each group a question (or question pair) to begin with and a color to use. They should write their question on their butcher paper/poster first.

- They should answer the question with their first thought or gut reaction. Each group member should write something on the poster. Give students about 2-3 minutes. Rotate through the posters.
- Then, give students about 5-10 minutes to walk around to the posters and add quotes that support their answers, providing an analysis/explanation for how their quote demonstrates their point. Students do not have to add a quote to every poster, but they must add to at least one poster.
 - Using butcher paper is best here (large pieces) so that there is room for multiple students to write at the same time.
- Finally, have students return to their original poster. In their small group, they should read all of the answers, quotes, and explanations on the poster together. Then, they summarize the main ideas that are on the poster, deciding which group member will share out to the class.

Day 3:

- As a class, discuss the results of the posters.
 - Using the ideas that the class wrote on the posters, create a working definition of what MT literature/texts should be like in terms of language and characterization to apply to later excerpts and Badgeron texts. Have students do it individually and bring it to class tomorrow.
 - Remind students that they are the authorities; their background knowledge of their place matters here and adds significant value.
 - If/When disagreements about what is/isn't MT arise, lean in. Question student reactions, ask them to reflect on how they know things, and discuss why their perceptions might be different.

Reflection: Needed a bit more scaffolding to get to the questions.

Reflection day 2: Talked about MT definitions and components pretty much all hour (about 35 minutes). Students had a lot to say about what stands out to them about MT. One student made a comment about “Billings not being Montana,” and I stopped, and we dug into it a bit more. Another one said, “Well, it’s not what we think of when we think of Montana.” I then asked them what they do think about when they think of Montana, and that is the list under the comment on the board. We talked about how our perception might be closer to what tourists think Montana is, even though we sometimes resent tourists. Even though Billings is in MT, it is not very pretty or mountainous, so it is not the MT that we like. We also talked about Native American history in our state and the current reality of reservations. The students were very into the discussion, so we will need to revisit this again and actually refine it to fit textual analysis.

Fun day!

Day 4:

Supplies: BT copies, copies of the Close Reading assignment, colored pencils, Chromebooks

- Share out working MT lit definitions and compile into one for the class. Refine MT brainstorming into a text definition.
- Read the Backroom scene together/listen to audiobook (pg. 43-45).
 - Close Reading assignment; students will annotate the passage. Give students about 10 minutes to complete. Once they are done, have them get into small groups and begin the next step.
 - Apply the MT literature working definition in small groups.
 - Analyze the passage with the definition as a lens. What does it reveal? What is missing? Does the definition need revising?

- Discuss findings as a class. Remind students of making the familiar strange: How is a place like the back room both familiar and strange? How may this room characterize the place?
- Ivan Doig Archive connection: How do the artifacts in the archive characterize the place?
 - Students look at [notecards, photos, etc. for BT](#) in small groups. Find at least three artifacts to discuss at the end of class with another group.
 - What do the inclusions show? What can we learn from them? What kind of definition of place do they assert? Is it similar to or different from our place? How/Why?

Day 5

- Intro with exploring the real estate listings for the area, being sure that location filters allow for homes in the canyon. Explain to students that the texts today explore the economic side of place, especially as it relates to rural places. What do our local real estate listings reveal about the money in our community?
 - Give students about 5 minutes to find the “best” home for sale in the area to share.
 - Discuss the criteria that they used to determine what the “best” was for them. Was it price? Size? Quality? Land? Something else? What might the homes available in the area reveal about the people who live here/want to live here?
- Read excerpts from the Introduction and Chapter 2 of *Billionaire Wilderness: The Ultra-Wealthy and the Remaking of the American West* by Justin Farrell
 - Introduction is a great example of explaining a problem/curiosity, the research questions, and how he went about it.

- Chapter 2 focuses on the Yellowstone Club, which is removed from Badgeron, but our football team has played Big Sky, so many have been to the area. It also speaks to wealth in rural areas in general, which is very relevant for our area, especially up and down the canyon.
- Read together, annotating, and discussing.

Day 6:

- JIGSAW SHARE: Have small groups summarize and present. Have text excerpts available to draw on later when writing.
 - Discussion Questions:
 - How is Farrell presenting his argument? E.g. what kind of evidence does he use?
 - How might his arguments or argument style apply to our place?
 - How can we be nuanced in criticisms?
- The text is academic but fairly accessible. I want to read together to be able to stop and point out stylistic features while also discussing content and answering questions.

Reflection: Students found a lot of very expensive homes in our area that they liked. We talked about how much a down payment for those homes would be, and they were shocked (for a 7 million dollar house that one student picked out, the down payment would be about 1 million). That transitioned into the BW reading for the day. We read pg. 1-9 together, and then they are going to choose an excerpt to jigsaw tomorrow. I think that I am going to do more of a discussion with this instead of moving on to day 5. I'll give students time to prepare for the jigsaw, and then they'll share. After that, we're going to put desks in a circle, and discuss the

BW excerpts in the context of our place. I'll encourage students to think critically—and talk about how critical doesn't always mean negative but instead nuanced. Two things can be true at once, and opinions may be variable. We will discuss our place, and each student will note some research questions for our trip to the museum.

Day 2 reflection: I gave students about 10 minutes to read their excerpt, then they gathered with people who read the same one to share and create a summary to share. Their conversations were really in-depth about their passages. When they shared out with the class to do the jigsaw, I noticed that a lot of their language positioned the wealthy subjects in the book as “other.” “They” do this or think that. “They” want to be normal, but they are not normal. We talked about two things being true at the same time, and the students agreed about the examples from the book. I need to regroup on the topic after our museum visit and check for understanding critical research, etc.

Day 7:

Supplies: Signed field trip permission slips; notebooks; pencils

- Visit the Town of Badgerton Museum
 - While there, students take photos and notes to use for their writing. Before arriving, brainstorm the kinds of things that would be helpful to take notes on with students.
 - The museum is housed in the backroom of the Senior Center, so I will also draw some parallels to the backroom in the novel both in its inconspicuous location and its contents.

Reflection: Before we left, I asked students to write down at least 15 observations that they have during the field trip. I told them it can be things that they learn, things that they see, how they feel, anything. We checked out and walked down to the museum. The walk down the hill was

hot. Tyson challenged several peers to races. I commented on a group of football players who were lagging behind, saying, “I don’t want to lose you!” and one of them replied, “Ms. Weeda, I’ve lived in this town longer than you. I’m not the one who’s gonna get lost.”

We first went to the CMR Cottage. Two community members and the newspaper reporter were there to meet us. The owner of the cottage talked about the history of the cottage and about Charlie Russell. Then, students got to go inside the cottage and look around. After the cottage, we stopped across from the old bank building and the museum coordinator discussed the old bridge, the old ferry, and some Badgerton history. She had a “passport” that she had made them from the last time they went to the museum as 4th graders. Then, we went to the museum. The students wandered around inside, taking pictures, and making their observations. One student asked about a specific item that she remembered from last time. Another took pictures of an old wrestling singlet that he wants to recreate. Another was really excited about the collection of old cameras. While we were there, the adjoining door to the food bank opened, and a retired teacher who runs the food bank came over. Many of the students exclaimed her name and gave her hugs. We stayed for about 15 minutes in the museum. When we were gathered out front about to leave, my grandpa pulled up with a load of food for the food bank, and the retired teacher asked, “Are you going to get fired if you stay for a few more minutes? Can they help take some boxes in for us?”

I said, “Absolutely! We’re happy to help!”

They were also stoked to see my grandpa in the flesh; one student told him, “You’re a legend!”

He replied, “Okay, pal.” The students carried boxes inside for the food bank, said thank you to all, and then we walked to the store. We took the alleyway to the store, which is not the route I would have chosen. I gave students about 10 minutes to shop, and then we walked back to

school. The students bought a variety of items at the store, with one student buying popsicles for him and his buddies, and one group of boys buying sandwich ingredients (ham, turkey, white bread, cheese, avocado, sprouts, lettuce, and mayo), and they told me that they were going to tailgate during lunch time.

Day 8:

- Reflect on field trip experience.
 - First have them write for 5 minutes (in our daily routine time) about their experience on the field trip. What stood out to them? What do they remember the most? How did they feel? Focus on details.
 - Then, recap the field trip as a whole class, and ask students to apply their definition of MT to their experience. Discuss as a class after writing for a few minutes.
- Investigate Badgerton-specific literature/texts through lens. Students will brainstorm a “research question” for their own place explorations at the museum and subsequent writing project.
 - Brochures, tourism materials, menus, websites for town and school, maps, local books, etc. Gather and lay out around the room.
 - Before beginning, discuss Badgerton with students. Ask them to brainstorm descriptions of the place, pros/cons, defining elements, community attitudes, etc. quickly on a piece of paper, then share with class and write on the board.
 - Might need to prompt students to think critically about different elements. E.g., “Our town is known for fishing and hunting

tourism. What impacts of that do you notice in the businesses that we have? The jobs people work? The people in town?"

- Then, students will do as Doig and use the “archival” materials to help form a characterization of the place. Before students leave, have them choose at least 3 Badgerton texts and write a paragraph about what it evidences about the place.
- Discuss what the writing could look like: ethnography like Nacirema, investigative like BW, narrative fiction like BT, tourism material, memoir, landscape analysis, etc.
- Begin working on writing assignment.
 - Students form like-project groups and brainstorm criteria for success together (with input from me during/after but before they begin writing).
 - What does their writing need to have in order to either achieve similar goals of Doig, Billionaire Wilderness, or “Body Ritual”? Name the impact of the excerpts first and then determine what elements are crucial for their own writing.
 - Work time for their writing assignment.

Reflection: Students had a lot to say about the history that they learned about at the cottage and the museum. They were interested in the items and how they related to the time period, like asking if the bed that was in the cottage was big or small for the time. They also looked up the equivalent of \$75 for the kitchen addition in today’s money (about \$2,000). Josie had some really interesting analytical things to say about who we saw and what we did. I mentioned the fact of them jumping to help at the food bank without really being asked was amazing and spoke to community. Then, I had students find Badgerton texts. Instead of me curating a list, I wanted to see what students could find, so we put links in a shared Google doc. Then, I asked them to

share with someone around them what the text that they found tells about place. When they then shared with the class, I was impressed with their analysis and the types of texts that they found. We then talked about the writing assignment, and I told them to come to class tomorrow with an idea of the style they would like to write.

Day 9-11

- Continue working.

Reflection: We started by brainstorming places, people, and actions that represent students' ideas of place. I gave them about 1 minute for each category to make a list in their notebooks. Then, I had them think about the form that they wanted to write (article, poetry, fictional narrative, memoir, investigative, etc.). They got with peers who were thinking about the same form and shared their ideas. Then, I walked around to each student, and conferenced with them about their plan. There are some really good ideas!

Reflection Work Day 2: There were only about four students who did not have a clear idea of what they were going to write. When I talked with students, they were able to tell me exactly what they were writing, and several handed me their Chromebooks to read what they had so far. A few students asked to use their own pictures as inspiration, and I encouraged them to include the images in their final product. During Badger Time, Ivy showed me her poetry—AMAZING! She wanted help with the third poem in her series that she said doesn't feel the same, and we talked about how it's okay because it's about something different. We also discussed expanding the sense of smell that she is focusing on. I'm really excited to read her final poems.

Day 12

- Peer revision stations (Bought from Building Book Love on TPT)
 - Talk with teacher
 - Peer review (double time)

- Vocab enhancement
- Tech help

Day 13

- Final small group workshops for accolades and final revisions. Write one rationale paragraph to accompany writing, explaining the choices that were made. Include MT literature definition and apply it to their own writing. Submit.

Appendix B: Place Writing Assignment

Submit your place writing and rationale here. You will be sharing your writing with peers to get feedback.

Requirements:

- Focused on place through a lens of your experience
- Style is your choice (article, fictional narrative, investigative, poetry, informational, etc.)
- At least 500 words; list word count at end
- Include a one paragraph rationale that explains your piece: Why did you do what you did? What were you thinking as you wrote? How does it characterize place and your experience?
- Write out your MT literature definition and apply it to your own writing. Write at least 3-5 sentences describing how your writing does or does not fit your definition, how your definition has evolved, etc.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Student Interview Questions: 12th grade students

1. In your own words, describe Montana.
2. In your own words, describe Badgerton.
3. Tell me about what you think of portrayals of our area (Badgerton, Central MT, and/or MT in general) in novels, movies, TV shows, etc.
4. To be accurate or align with your experiences, what do you think a Montana text should include?
5. Have you studied anything in school that you consider to be an accurate Montana text?
 - a. Tell me about your experience. OR Why do you think you haven't?
6. Tell me about studying Ivan Doig's *The Bartender's Tale* during English III.
 - a. What stood out to you the most?
7. Tell me about revisiting *The Bartender's Tale* and studying place this year in English IV.
 - a. What stood out to you the most?
8. We wrote about place in this unit. Tell me about your writing.
 - a. How was your writing influenced by the texts we read?
9. Tell me what it felt like to focus on our place in our readings and writing assignment.
 - a. What does it feel like to have conversations in class about place?
 - b. How did you feel during in-class discussions?
 - c. What was the vibe of the whole unit? What do you think contributed to that vibe?

Appendix D: Montana Literature Definitions and Applications

Table D: Montana Literature Definitions and Applications

Student Name	Montana Literature Definition	Does their writing fit their definition?
Arielle	Not provided	Not provided
Evan	“My definition of Montana is more industrial and working than most out-of-staters believe. Montana isn’t all pretty mountains and rivers and glaciers.”	“My story is a small sample of how industrial Montana can be because it is describing a hidden away and laborious job that many tourists will never hear about.”
Tyson	“Montana literature needs to take place in a small town with people who are passionate about their community. The small towns need to have a bar and a store as the main attractions. It also needs to involve farming and ranching because that is such a big part of most of our lives.”	“My writing takes place in a small town and it involves farming. I talked about how ranching is my place and that is what I said had to be a part of my Montana Literature definition. I am very passionate about my community which is a part that I thought was important with my Montana Literature definition.”
Ben	“My definition of Montana literature is it had to come from someone who has lived here. Someone who has worked to support themselves and get to where they are. Someone who has taken time to enjoy all things big and small about Montana.”	“My definition applies to my writing because people like the tint guy or my dad have worked very hard to be able to experience such things. Who have taken out time to just enjoy what Montana has to offer, take advantage of the beauty and silence the state has.”

Joe	“Montana Literature embodies the open space along with the vast mountains and valleys and doesn't always have to be a Western.”	“I believe what I wrote goes hand in hand with my definition because I talk about growing up in the open space while being near rugged mountains, also my story is not a Western. It also means a lot to me because I grew up around mountains and at this point can't imagine myself living anywhere without them.”
Charlotte	“My Montana literature definition is that a piece of Montana literature needs to accurately describe its beauty and vast detail.”	“I think my writing could be better and more descriptive but I tried to describe Montana's beauty and how it affects me and how I see it.”
Theo	“My Montana definition has to include the outdoors and small towns. None of that big city life.”	“My story doesn't represent this much because it's about a room indoors. However sports are the driving point of a small town and the wrestling room is a sports area.”
Liam	“Montana Literature should be accurate as to the rural lifestyle. It should also involve all details of the unique life we live, not just the 'cowboy' lifestyle. It should have the difficulties as well as the excitements. It should involve the small town talk, the half hour drives, and the heavy involvement of the community in the small town. The Montana lifestyle is something that has to be experienced before it can actually be written about.”	Not provided
Oliver	Not provided	Not provided
Sadie	“Real Montana isn't all mountains and cowboys, it should be around our town and plains like Billings and the drive to [nearby city]. Enough of the old west narrative. Our city technology makes us just as advanced as places in rural Washington. My Montana isn't all mountains and ranching my Montana is the plains and cities like [nearby city].”	“Relating back to my definition, I believe that my telling of my room represents how my life isn't ranching and farming like most people see Montana, but it's, in reality, a place of varied beliefs and 'liberal views.’”
Isabel	“In any Montana literature it needs to talk about the country life and how beautiful Montana is.”	“This applies to my writing because I talked about how my ranch and how my life on the ranch has helped shape

		who I am today and how it is my safe 'place.'”
Boone	“Montana literature has to be written about real Montana not the big cities. It has to be about real rural Montana. It also has to be written by real Montanans. It can't be written by people who moved here because of <i>Yellowstone</i> or just have vacation homes here. Montana literature has to be about real Montana by real Montanans.”	“My writing does fit my definition of Montana literature even though I mostly wrote about working with my horse, the parts that I talked about Montana are about rural Montana. Since I was born and raised in rural Montana it is authentic Montana literature.”
Lily	“My initial Montana literature definition was that it's all cowboys and old bars, mountains, and open fields.”	“I feel that my poetry matched that pretty well.”
Elle	“Montana Literature to me is almost exactly as what <i>Bartender's Tale</i> depicts Montana as. Our state is a back-country, rural area that has small towns sporadically placed. I think of working at a bar and how that is most old men's guilty pleasure or a place where they can just get away. People have to do some type of farming. I think of seeing people fishing every place where there is water and it [is] hard to miss deer.”	Not provided
Josie	“My definition of Montana literature is that it must have the small-town naivety and country feel.”	“I did this in my writing because I used words that are only common in Montana. Another example is I write about my classmates racing down the road, this would not happen in bigger cities. However, the more I think about it I know every person is going to have different requirements as to what makes it Montana literature. The way they view Montana is different from how I view Montana.”
Ivy	Not provided	Not provided
Luke	“To me, MT Literature needs to have a setting based on the prairie land. For example, Ranches, farms, homesteads, and small towns.”	“In my essay, I talk about the prairie land. Small towns and old-timey towns. I feel as if my definition has not changed but I kind of put it into an 1800s feel to it.”

Kennedy	“My view of MT Lit is very country, western, small town, everybody knows everybody type of vibe.”	“My MT Lit idea does not apply to my story. My writing is the complete opposite. My writing is based off of the city rather than out in the country with the cowboys.”
Miles	Not provided	Not provided
Alex	“Montana Literature has slang and a feeling of a large place. The large towns, the small towns, dirt roads for miles, towering mountains, and all kinds of wildlife.”	“My Montana literature definition applies to my writing because it's about the wilderness. My stories talk about the mountains and the small town I used to live in. Both stories are based on people and things that happened. My story embodies the type of work and people that are in [hometown] and Montana's west side.”
Clara	“My Montana literature definition states that to be considered Montana literature, it has to be based on a location in Montana that has significance to the author and makes the readers feel like they can imagine the environment.”	“In my writing, I cater to this definition by telling a story about my connection to the place I grew up and how I admire the beauty of it. I used vivid descriptions and related characters back to real members of my family to improve the connections that I have to this writing.”

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