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ABSTRACT

At the heart of the human condition is the struggle to know one’s self. There is beauty in this endless endeavor. It is full of fluid edges, moments of joy, glimpses of certainty, and innumerable defeats. It is magnificent and messy and continuous. But it’s worth the effort because knowing one’s self, even only partially or momentarily, is the most valuable understanding one can ever gather and the only way one can ever endeavor to understand and teach another.

The struggle to know one’s self is central to human nature; the groundwork of teaching lies in understanding that same human nature. The teacher strives to measure the hills and valleys that have shaped the lives and learning of her students. In doing so, the teacher learns more about her unique self. Teacher and students travel together, walking each other home to self-understanding.

This writing stories particular experiences of teaching and learning in particular places – both inside and outside of school – where I have gathered glimpses of the being I am becoming. It is rooted in the understanding that my being is shaped by the interweaving of places, experiences, and stories. I, in turn, shape places, experiences, stories, and other beings. My internal landscape mingles with the external landscape. Therefore, knowing who I am and where I am is requisite for good teaching.

Through this writing, I endeavor to know myself – deeper, clearer, and better. Along the way, I’ll work through many ideas, but I will remain committed to understanding what it means to be me – here and now – in communion with a living world. As I write towards (momentary) understanding, I’ll consider how I live the truths of the being I am becoming in my daily learning and teaching.

This is a story of a being becoming. A being, like you, who is never static; rather, a being who is continuously living, growing, shifting – becoming. Walk with me on this messy, yet beautiful journey of self-discovery – a journey home.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

You Come Too

My Mother Place

Story, Place, and Experience

There’s a Bug in Here

How We Go On

Where I Teach

Writing Here

Teaching Tayo

Bringing English Education Back to Earth

What I Know and What I Hope (for You)

Homecoming

References
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“Here is a list of generous ones whose good works have not been forgotten: in [me] there remains a rich inheritance born of them… Their glory will not fade” (Ecclesiasticus 44:11-14).

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To Ann Frances Gallagher Brennan and Thomas Patrick Anthony Brennan

Too, also
We look to the horizon beyond which the future awaits us; and each of us has the conviction that she has a destiny.

There is a task which only she can perform.
There is a place which only she can fill.
There is a story which only she can write.
There is a life which only she can live.
There is a fire which only she can carry.
There is a being which only she can become.

Ann Gallagher
Valedictory
St. Ann’s Academy, 1964
You Come Too
I begin each semester with a return to Robert Frost’s “The Pasture” – a poem, a place. The introductory poem of North of Boston, “The Pasture” frames the compilation and positions readers in familiar Frost territory – New England farmland. These lines, spoken in the unhurried and uncomplicated language of the farmer-poet, set forth the course of the collection and underscore the interweaving of human life and the natural world.

The Pasture

I’m going out to clean the pasture spring;
I’ll only stop to rake the leaves away
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):
I sha’n’t be gone long. – You come too.

I’m going out to fetch the little calf
That’s standing by the mother. It’s so young,
It totters when she licks it with her tongue.
I sha’n’t be gone long. – You come too.

I first read “The Pasture” in January of 2004; it was required reading for an Introduction to World Literature course I took with Bill Conlogue during my freshman year in college. Since then I’ve gone back to these words so often that the spine of the Dover edition I first held over a decade ago has worn in such a way that the text naturally opens to a particular place – page 27, “The Pasture.”

Most recently, I visited this place with students in my Literature and the Natural World course. During the first week of the semester, “The Pasture” is the first literary text we read. In beginning here, I follow both Frost and Conlogue; I use the poem to
offer direction, to underscore human and nature interconnections, and to invite students to work alongside me throughout the semester.¹

Together we read the poem and consider how the parts come together to make the whole. We begin at the surface. The first three lines in each stanza are written in iambic pentameter; the final lines are in iambic tetrameter. The stanzas follow an abbc deec rhyme scheme. The language is ordinary and the tone is informal; there are seven contractions in eight lines. A pasture is a grassy area suitable for animal grazing. It’s spring. The “I,” a farmer, speaks to “you,” a farmhand or child or friend. We, readers, overhear one side of the conversation. In the first stanza, the farmer informs his listener that he is going to rake away the dead leaves that have jammed the spring. In the second stanza, the farmer tells his listener that he’s going to collect a newborn calf to bring it into the herd. At the conclusion of both stanzas, the farmer invites his listener to join him in the work, assuring that it won’t take too long.

We move along the surface fairly smoothly; we generally agree that it’s a nice poem. But then I remind students that there’s more to the poem than what we see upon first glance. Digging in, we discover richer meaning. The “I,” the poet, speaks to “you,” the reader. In the first stanza, the poet informs the reader that here, and in what follows, he’s going to rake away the leaves – the pages, the writing – that have choked the water of inspiration, purity, and life. Removing the dead leaves allows the water to flow clear once more. That life-giving water will continue to sustain the pasture, the cows that feed

¹ Teaching is folk art. We borrow bits and pieces from those who came before us and stitch them into our own teaching. I’ve learned from some master teachers; they’ve handed down stories, techniques, and patterns that I continue to weave into my own classroom. My reading of “The Pasture” is one such example. In 2004, Bill Conlogue shared it with me; it continues to guide both my teaching and my living.
there, and the poet who it replenishes – both literally and metaphorically. In the second stanza, the poet informs the reader that he’s going to gather the vulnerable calf, a symbol of new life. Much like the poet takes care of the pasture by cleaning the spring, “the mother” – the definite article makes this an archetypal mother – takes care of the calf by cleaning it; “she licks it with her tongue.” These images of cleansing suggest (re)birth, a theme introduced in the layered meaning of the word “spring” – a place where water emerges from the ground; the first season; the source, beginning, or origin. Both the poet and the mother give, protect, and preserve life. After each stanza, the poet invites the reader to join him in this work. The poem, of course, is nothing without the reader; the reader gives life to the poem. “The Pasture” is reborn each time a reader picks it up, engages with it, and understands what it has to say. So the poet invites the reader to journey with him, but makes it clear that there will be work – reading, interpreting, imaging, and creating – to do along the way.

Having cultivated a deeper understanding of the poem, we turn back to the title – “The Pasture.” A pasture is an enclosed tract of land, a bounded place. It is tended to land, managed by seeding, mowing, and fertilizing. Domesticated livestock – cattle and sheep, for example – graze there. Carved out of the wild terrain that surrounds it, the pasture borders need continual care. This is a perpetually *made* place. The pasture is a lot like a poem, another bounded and *made* place. Both are creations; both require work; both sustain life. “The Pasture” is the convergence of the past and the future – past[+future]; dead leaves and newborn calves. Written in the present tense, the poem brings together the past and the future in one place. There is work to be done here and now.
In “The Figure a Poem Makes,” Frost (1972) explains that a poem begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life – not necessarily a great clarification…but in a momentary stay against confusion. (p. 440, emphasis mine)

I’m called back to “The Pasture” so often because it offers me a momentary stay against confusion. Literally, the pasture, a human-made place, pauses the chaos of the wild that surrounds it; it offers clarity. Metaphorically, “The Pasture,” a human-made poem, temporarily halts the disorientation and uncertainty that so often consume me. It reorients me and reminds me that we work; we come to know; we make meaning. The farmer clears; the cow cleans. I write.

Although I am not a poet and this is not a poem, I hope to follow the figure Frost outlines. I aim for writing that illuminates and clears, writing that concludes in a momentary stay against confusion. Along the way, I’ll work through many ideas, but the question at the heart of my inquiry will remain constant: What does it mean to be me, a human – here and now – in communion with a living world? As I write towards (momentary) understanding, I also consider the following complimentary questions: Who am I? How have I become – and how am I becoming – this being? How do I live these truths in my daily learning and teaching?

In his Nobel acceptance speech, William Faulkner (1950) said that the only thing “worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat” is writing that emerges from “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself.” What follows is an exploration of
the tangled questions that lie deep within my human heart. It is the knotting of places, stories, experiences, self, teaching, and learning. It weaves together threads of aggression and grace; separation and wholeness; hostility and hospitality; disruption and revelation; fear and truth. It is full of hope, courage, compassion, and love.

Connecting the writer’s life to the life of the sphinx moth, Gary Paul Nabhan (2004) describes the moth’s appearance “out of the darkness”; it hovers “suddenly about a freshly opened blossom, coming under the spell of its pungent perfumes” (p. 3). It “lingers before the illuminated flower for a moment, then dips into the ephemeral world hidden within the floral tube, where it draws energy from the flower’s nectars” (p. 3). After another moment, “the moth is nowhere to be seen. It is loading up with pollen, which it will transport from flower to flower, enabling something potentially far more lasting to occur – cross-fertilization and regeneration” (p. 3). The moth darts “off through the darkness, seeking another floral encounter that might nourish its own life and open new possibilities for others as well” (p. 4).

In the text’s opening scene, Nabhan (2004) introduces the title and substance of his book, *cross-pollinations*. He points out that cross-pollination is much more than a metaphor; it is “a requisite for sustaining the diversity of life on earth” (p. 12). The sphinx moth’s “evolutionary dance with the flowering plants” is an example of cross-pollination (p. 4). But it’s not just plants and insects that benefit from this intermingling; humans do, too. If we toil in isolation our “endeavors will atrophy, wither, or fall short of [our] aspirations” (p. 13). We need guidance and inspiration from other beings and other places to survive and thrive.
Nothing is separate here; everything is interconnected. Where I live and where I work; what I read and what I write; where I teach and where I learn. Wherever I am and whatever I’m doing, I’m perpetually trying to grasp what it means to be me here, now. In an attempt to nourish my “own life and open new possibilities for others as well,” this writing freely wanders through different places, times, disciplines, and genres (Nabhan, 2004, p. 4). It gathers lived experiences, stories, meditations, and theoretical thinking. Sorting through these things, placing them near each other, and layering them over one another embraces multiple ways of knowing while simultaneously reminding us that there is much we don’t know. The chapters that follow could be read in isolation, but they’re better understood in context, collaboration, and together. There is repetition throughout, because seeing through multiple angles at various points in time allows us to understand what we’re seeing more fully. An example of cross-pollination, this writing endeavors to offer a momentary stay against confusion – by momentarily staying amidst the confusion.

The place where these diverse ways of knowing converge resembles what ecologists call an ecotone, “a transitional area of vegetation between two different plant communities… It has some of the characteristics of each bordering biological community and often contains certain species not found in the overlapping communities” (Ecotone). The border along the pasture and the woods is an ecotone; this writing, which so often runs the edges of multiple ways of thinking, is too. We’re in a fertile place where new ideas, new understandings, and new life germinate.

The ecotone is a borderland, and borders are potentially dangerous, potentially wondrous places. John Elder (1998) warns that “[a]n individual venturing over the line
in the quest for life more abundant may well end up as a meal for some pioneer venturing in from the other direction” (p. 4). But if we’re careful, if we pay attention, and if we go together there are abundant opportunities to be found along the rugged edges; there are new ways of understanding where we are and who we are.

This writing journeys many places, but it sets off from and ultimately returns to my native soil – the place of my “beginning, becoming, and homecoming” (Conlogue, 2013, p. 1). It picks up conversations already begun, carries them a bit further, and hands them off to whomever wanders this way next. My individual voice joins a collection of voices – poets and theorists, family and friends, teachers and students, foxes and hawks – that challenge, inform, enhance, and illuminate my own thinking; I hope to reciprocate this generosity as I meander, clear, and discover.

“My Mother Place” is a meditation on the simultaneous, ongoing, and overlapping creation of both home and self. Throughout this writing, I trace my (continuously deepening) connection to the land I call home and reflect on how that place shapes me and how I, in turn, shape it. My awareness of this place began on the surface – in childhood explorations. Eventually college beckoned me elsewhere, but I made my way back as a caregiver – for my mom and for this place; in this new position, I gathered a deeper comprehension of this place. Most recently, my work here – clearing paths, planting gardens, and writing stories – has offered me a more intimate understanding of my place. Along the way, I’ve witnessed the maternal care present here. In the diligence of the mothers who surround me, I’m reminded of the courage and love of my own mom;
her generosity mirrors the abundant offerings of the shared place we all call home – (mother) earth.

“Story, Place, and Experience” shapes the earthen story methodology that holds together this entire text. In this essay, I draw on theoretical thinking, canonical literature, and my own lived experiences to construct my conceptions of story, place, and experience. In addition, I consider how these ideas naturally braid together; we come to richer understanding when we consider them in relation to one other. The conversation deepens when I dwell in the (ongoing construction) of self and suggest that our beings are very much fashioned by the stories we hear and tell, the places we’ve been and are, and the experiences we’ve had. This writing concludes by explicitly introducing the aims, means, and assumptions that guide this text.

“There’s a Bug in Here” is a phenomenological inquiry that explores the precariousness of my studenting in the classroom. I begin by overviewing the concept of identity negotiations and underscoring the implicit and explicit expectations of acceptable student identity. To explore my understanding of my own studenting experiences and to offer alternatives to the standardized student identity, I develop a stream of consciousness narrative (a text-within-the-text) that draws on my own lived experience, (deliberately) disrupts (stifling) academic discourse, and opens a conversation about the importance of cultivating cohesive classrooms.

“How We Go On” is my philosophy of education. This writing critically examines the models we replicate and the stories we tell. This discussion is rooted in my analysis of Gary Snyder’s “For the Children.” As I explicate the poem, I simultaneously develop my understanding of where we are, where we might go, and how we can get
there. I consider where we are by examining larger cultural stories and thinking about how our commitment to efficiency and pursuit of progress produce damaging narratives that are reproduced in school. I introduce the homecoming curriculum as a counter to the standardized curriculum-as-plan and as a way to nurture healthier, more connected places, beings, and stories.

“Where I Teach” grows from a homecoming question: What has happened here? I develop the parallel histories of Penn State Wilkes-Barre and the Conyngham family, the original owners of the property where the campus now sits. Both were committed to education and local community advancement. However, both contributed to the extraction (of coal, money, ideas, people, hopes, etc.) that, ultimately, undermined northeast Pennsylvania. I shift the attention to our present place and tie our campus theme of movement back to the disruptive movement narratives that have made this an endangered place. All the while, I weave in observations from my classroom and the students that inhabit it. I conclude by suggesting a more meaningful, placed language that reorients us and encourages us to think about who we are, where we are, and the work we do – here and now.

“Writing Here” outlines my place-based freshman composition course. I begin by explaining how I lost my place in my teaching. I taught generic, standardized, packaged material; as a result, my students produced generic, standardized, and packaged reading, writing, and thinking. After much reflection and analysis, I recalibrated my curriculum and pointed the conversation back home. I analyze literature that underscores the interweaving of place and writing and I highlight the importance of placing the curriculum, especially in such a significant course – one that every student will take, most
often, in their first semester. The second-half of the essay overviews my *Writing Here* curriculum. I conclude by dwelling in the possibility of this course as an *enabling ground* that brings students to new awareness of who they are and where they are.

“Teaching Tayo” is a return to my literary roots and a reading of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*. As I unpack this story, I pay particular attention to what the text says (explicitly and implicitly) about the responsibilities of teachers who compose the narratives in classrooms. Tayo encounters many teachers along his journey; three, in particular, offer different, sometimes conflicting perspectives. One teaches the old-time traditional ways; one believes the new, white ways taught in school; one negotiates both horizons. Ultimately, Tayo learns how to dwell within the tensionality of the binaries that surround him. In this dialectic middle-ground, Tayo – like good teachers – gathers from both sides and shapes a new, alternative, all-encompassing narrative of vitality, health, and interconnections.

“Bringing English Education Back to Earth” builds an argument for placing teacher education, particularly English education. In this writing, I note my concern about the sparsity of place in curriculum literature. I suggest that to develop and grow, curriculum theory cannot remain in the abstract and standardized; it must be rooted in the uniqueness and fluidity of place. I offer the integrated curriculum as a pattern we might use as we craft place-conscious curriculum. This writing reminds us that teachers teach from their experiences; therefore, teacher education programs must provide opportunities for place-conscious teaching and learning. This should not be difficult to do, especially in English education courses which already focus on relationships and representations.
To demonstrate one possible way to place English education, I detail my *Earthen English Literacy* curriculum.

“What I Know and What I Hope (for You)” grows from the idea that what we know shapes who we are. I linger in this thinking and wonder about what I know. In doing so, I realize that much of what I know is place-specific. From there, I turn my attention to my nephews. Speaking directly to them, I develop my hopes for them. Each of these hopes is rooted in the earth. I hope they grow to be conscious of their places and I hope they feel the threads that gather us (past, present, and future, human and more-than-human) together. I conclude acknowledging that for them to live these hopes, there is work to do – here and now.

“What Homecoming” returns to where we began, my homeplace – Ann Lane. In this writing I dwell in the idea that we are all walking each other home.

Fourteen years ago, Robert Frost offered me an invitation. Today, I extend the same invitation to you. Come with me on this crossing through stories, places, and experiences. There is work to do; I long for your companionship and your help along the way. We’ll clear the water, tend the pasture, care for the calves, and stay together. Here, along the borders, in the stories, and with(in) each other, we’ll find a *momentary stay against confusion*. 
My Mother Place
At the beginning of all my stories is a mother –
a person,
a place.
My home.
I’m from Ann Lane, a new name for an old railroad right-of-way. A red street sign and a silver mailbox mark the entrance to my place. The gravel driveway is a tenth of a mile long and canopied by overlapping boughs of birches, oaks, and maples. Fences stacked high with Pennsylvania bluestone are visible throughout the forest; they served as borders back when this land was farmed. Three quarters of the way, the driveway rolls right and slopes down to the house. The grade is fairly steep and an adventure to navigate in the winter when the ground is layered with ice.

My mom fell in love with this property, 10 acres of hardwood, and my parents purchased it 30 years ago. At four years old, I often walked this land with my mom. We were regulars at the construction site: she reviewed plans and double-checked materials; I inhaled the sweet smell of the turned earth and imagined what the world would look like from my (yet to be built) second-story room. I intently watched as the foundation of the house was planted in the rocky clay soil. With amazement, I witnessed skilled workers position 2X4 studs, the bones of this home, and I observed the electrician thread the wires that continue to run power through this place. I felt the excitement on my birthday in 1989 when the well drillers struck water, nearly 200 feet below the earth’s surface. And I can still remember my grandpa, frail with age, looking out the newly hung windows in the living room; his slight frame mirrored by the tall, thin winter trees upon which he peered.

Nestled into the rolling Appalachian Mountains in the northeast corner of Penn’s Woods, this is where I became (and become) me.
I claimed this place as my own as a small child. An avid reader, my mom always had a new book of poems or short stories that we would read together and apart, during the day and at night. I remember one from *Ready... Set... Read!* that stuck with me. I memorized it, performed it when Trick-or-Treating, and declared it on certain occasions when I climbed atop a stone-wall in the back of the property. Standing at the intersection of two walls, I looked out over this kingdom and proclaimed:

This is my rock
And here I run
To steal the secret of the sun;

This is my rock
And here come I
Before the night has swept the sky;

This is my rock,
This is the place
I meet the evening face to face.

This place was, and is, my rock, my foundation, my North.

Sports helped me quickly learn the unique topography of this land. It was here that my brother, three years my elder, and I spent many hours defeating imaginary foes. Baseball and football were played in the front yard. I learned how to slam the ball deep into the clearing of right-center field; a pull to the left sent the ball into densely intertwined picker bushes, and a late swing popped the ball into the house. During post routes, completions were the result of the receiver’s awareness of the dip at the north-end of the yard and the quarterback’s perfectly placed throw. The most spectacular plays, however, involved leaping into the overhanging trees and snaring the ball from their outstretched limbs. Our handles were polished on the driveway that doubled as our
basketball court. The ball always had movement as it bounced off the rocks. A true
domarcourt advantage, the hoop was set in a cement pad on the slant of the driveway: a
shot from the right was 9 feet; a shot from the left was at least 11. A quick pass snapped
dirt into our eyes. We played every afternoon and when it got too dark my parents turned
on the flood lights and we continued late into the evening. I left blood and sweat in this
place. In return, it offered me grass stains, gnat bites, and skinned elbows – evidence of a
childhood well spent.

The thick forest, our audience, then and now, muffles the sounds of civilization,
but a symphony of life still echoes through this timbered cathedral. You can hear it in the
early morning melodies of the hermit thrush and the white throated sparrow. It’s clear in
the cry of the coyote and the yip of the red fox. In the evening, the chorus of chirping
crickets is complimented by the deep, solemn call of the great horned owl. Even the
darting chipmunks, the rushing creek, the groaning trees, and the screeching red-tailed
hawks contribute a verse. It’s a delicate balance of voices perfectly orchestrated.

College interrupted my story in this place, but it didn’t take long for a particular
moment in a particular place to usher me back.

Three weeks into my freshman year, I met my mom and dad in a hospital room at
Moses Taylor. My mom had been admitted for tests. A teacher by profession, several
years earlier, she noticed that some numbers and words she wrote on the board weren’t
the numbers and words she had intended to write. She caught these gaffes, but they
concerned her. A year or so later, she retired; nobody would have suspected her slipping,
but she was acutely aware of it. Now, a doctor I did not know came into the room and
asked my mom a series of questions: *What is today’s date, Ann? Can you tell me what season it is? Can you draw a box on this sheet of paper? Ann, what is your address?*

My mom, the smartest person I know, smiled at the doctor, complimented her, and took my father’s hand; it was time to go.

*Alzheimer’s,* the doctor explained to me and my sister a few minutes later in a poorly lit nearby waiting room, *early onset.* My mom had worried about this long ago; my dad had accompanied her to tests. *It was just part of growing older,* doctors said; *nothing to worry about.* *We all forget sometimes, don’t we?* She sensed it was more and she was adamant that my siblings and I not know; she didn’t want her diagnosis to change the direction of our lives. *It’s a degenerative disease…there is no cure.* People her age don’t get Alzheimer’s; that’s for old people. *It could have been triggered by undiagnosed head trauma from a much earlier car accident; it could be genetic…*

The cause didn’t matter. My life, our lives, were changing. For the next few years, my mom felt comfort at times, but most situations caused anxiety. Eventually, the only place where she found peace was at her house in the woods. She blazed the route home; we followed. I don’t remember any conversation surrounding this decision. Sometimes paths naturally unfold because of deeply sown beliefs, ones that exist beyond words, ones that have always been held and nurtured in our hearts. My mom loved this place, she built this nest, and here she felt safe. My father and I rearranged our lives to ensure that this remained her place.

After a few years of commuting to school, and too much travel between here and there, my compass pointed me back to Ann Lane. Acceptances were deferred, positions were declined, and plans were revised. I landed a place in the English department at the
school where I continue to teach. I rescued my dog, Shaggy, and I went home to (re)inhabit my mother(’s) place.

In the early years, my mom and I traversed this land a lot. In doing so, I began to know it in different ways as I experienced it through her ever-changing perspective and her perpetual present. She would often reach for my hand, an invitation; you come, too, also. We walked together. Even though they could no longer be named, she leaned down and touched the ferns, paying particular attention to where the sun lit upon them. As we hiked up and down the driveway, she examined the rocks, cleaned them off, and handed me the ones that passed her inspection – typically, smooth and roughly uniform in size. In late spring when the buttercups smeared across the grass, she gently massaged their silky petals between her index and thumb. And on one walk in the backyard, she approached her favorite tree, the sugar maple whose buds are always first to emerge, and rubbed her hand across the fissures and creases of its shaggy bark. She, literally, felt this place; she read the Braille.

And what she gathered, she retold through attentive language. Words that make the familiar strange and ask us to look and to see again. Poetry. A breeze made the trees dance and the leaves laugh. The deer in the front yard was a horse and the groundhog scurrying back to its den was a running rock. The summer sky was beautiful blue, snow was all that milk, and the knocking downy woodpecker was welcome to come in. Thunder remained angels bowling, but rain became tears; don’t cry. The fading sun piercing through the greatroom windows was a flame, and darkened areas shaded from
the sun were holes; be careful. Even I was recreated in poetic form; my fair skin and
dark hair logically led to my new name, Whitie.

Although my mom’s words have fallen mostly silent, this place still speaks to me.
A few nights ago, the call came when I was awakened by the wind snapping a tree
outside my window. Quickly following the initial crack were the familiar sounds of
breaking branches, scattering leaves, and the final thump of the wood hitting the ground.
The next morning, I went out to assess the damage. The inside-out leaves and the
frazzled look of the immediate area quickly pointed me in the right direction. The thick
smell of wintergreen that lingered in the air indicated the fall of a sweet birch. I found
the tree and the pile of limbs it took with it as it fell through the understory. As I stood
there wondering about the age of the tree and taking a guess at its height, I thought about
all this tree had given in life. I filled my lungs with the oxygen it produced; white-tails
browsed it, birds nested in it, and the thick undergrowth flourished because of the shade it
provided. But its story didn’t end the night it came crashing to the forest floor – a new
chapter began. In death, this tree continues to give life: safety for slugs and snails; cover
for salamanders and voles; food for fungi and lichens; a hideout for mice; and stability
for the soil. A woodpecker will eventually excavate and inhabit the snag, wood-boring
beetles will penetrate its sapwood, and the young white pine standing amid the chaos will
climb to fill the new gap in the overstory. The entire forest will benefit from the
deadwood’s slow, steady release of nitrogen and the rich nutrients it will return to the
earth. Eventually, the decomposition of this tree will foster new growth, new
composition – the cyclical process that sustains life.
These days, I’m more attuned to the life cycles that unfold around me, both inside and outside. Gathering stones last spring for the front walkway, I saw the meticulous maternal care that went into preparing homes and protecting eggs. I followed a deer path to recover rocks that had been dislodged from the fences over the years, hit by hooves, loosened by paws. On my walk, I saw wisps of Shaggy’s long golden hair woven into a house wren’s nest balanced on the electric box alongside the garage. Out of a small crevice, I sensed a long-tailed weasel watching me, her kits close behind. Overturning one stone revealed a silky pillow carrying spider eggs, the promise of the next generation. Before I returned the stone to its place, I paused to better examine the woven white sac. So often seen; so rarely carefully considered. Here, in my hands, were the lives of hundreds of spiders. Their mother wisely stuck them here last fall. She picked a good place; they survived the winter. She will never see her spiderlings weaving their threads or crawling across the earth, but her instincts, her effort, and her love ensured their future. I commended the spider, long gone now, as I gently returned her offspring and the stone onto which they were stitched back into place.

I headed back to the house, hugging a rock that was just about as much as I could carry. On my slow, wobbly walk, my triceps burned and my forearms began to bleed; each of my uneven steps shifted the stone and its rough exterior burned across my skin. This was one of many such trips, but on this particular occasion I thought about the determination of that spider, that weasel, and that house wren. When I placed the rock in the front yard, I took a step back and looked up. Through the window I saw the silhouette of a little lady – courageously persisting. Mothers. Tough. Resilient.
Scrupulous. Love(d). Without them, life unravels here. Without them, this place is unwritten.

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Like me, those mothers and so many other creatures seen and unseen are leaving their mark here. But none of us were the first do so, nor will any of us be the last. We simply join the ledger of others who have worked here and hoped here. Everywhere I look, I sense another story; I feel another being who was here. Occasionally, I’ll stumble across an old wooden railroad tie or a rusted spike and fastener – reminders of hands that once toiled here. The house itself hints back to other lives engaged in this place. Then there are the stone-walls; they are extensive and would have required an enormous amount of patience and physical labor to construct: lifting the rocks, carrying the rocks, balancing the rocks. As I look at those stacks, I think of all the known and unknown beings that have passed through this woods and wedged their knowledge and care into the bedrock of this place. Their stories are part of this place – protected by the layers, entombed by the moss. I am surrounded by evidence that we do not live alone. We are staked by the lives of others who have also worked here and left a piece of themselves here. Their stories in this place continue to be told: I read them; I hear them. I learn from them.

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In this forest, I am surrounded by generations of life and sacrifice. And when I forget that I’m but a single yarn in the tapestry of this place, Shaggy quickly reminds me. I discover a lot by simply following her feathery tail. A sighthound, she alerts to the slightest movement in the woods; her gaze penetrates much deeper than mine. Pogo-
sticking ensues and I often strain to see what she sees. Sometimes it’s a turkey, sometimes it’s a squirrel; usually I can’t see, but her attentiveness underscores that we’re in the company of other beings, each of us co-existing in this place. Each of us with a history here; each of us with faith in the future of this place.

On summer days in the late afternoon, when the strength of the sun has subsided, I often find myself on the second-story deck. Here, I feel deeply aware of my place; here, I feel at home. My most faithful companions usually join me; Shaggy never lets me stray too far and my mom regularly accompanies me, too. Her muscles have atrophied and rigidity has set into her bones, but her grip remains strong. There’s a small step from her bedroom to the porch she drew onto the blueprints of this colonial. She sits stately in her transport wheelchair, framed by the doorway, patiently waiting for me. Fingers clenched, arms pretzeled, back straight, head bowed, eyes closed, her left foot keeping beat with the song in her mind. I lean down, gently unfold her arms, and place them around my waist. She holds me. My arms beneath her arms. Intertwined. We rise together. Her head on my right shoulder; the first to greet her sylvan friend. Oh, neat! I smile knowing her brown eyes are open and she’s aware of her most beloved home. I see.

I carry her to her wicker wingback chair and gently lower her into place. The sun warming her body, the leaves rustling a familiar refrain, the freshly cut grass tickling her nose. The white oak reaches out to her and the sugar maple wraps around her back, enveloping her, and us, in a comforting embrace. Perched in the canopy, we join the chorus of this place. Shaggy through her quick high-stepping and enthusiastic bark. My mom through the words she voices, the rhythm and intonations of the sounds she makes, and the occasional laughter that spontaneously bursts through. And me through the
scratch of the graphite on the paper I use to compose this story; carbon and wood – the earth – alive in my human hands.

In the final compilation of this woods, my passage will be a minor footnote: She was here. The was ensures the everlasting is. My DNA is etched into this place; the arrangement of my letters no more or less important than those of the infinite other beings who have and who will write their stories here. I am a part of this place, and it is very much a part of me. I give life to this place, and it gives life to me. Although I will hold it for a flickering moment, this place will hold me for eternity.
Story, Place, and Experience
I am
the convergence of
stories, experiences, and places.

I am
the messy confluence of
beings who came before me and beings who will come after me.

All is alive in me,
the being I’m becoming.

I teach who and where I am.

I teach knowing that
whether we’re young or old,
full of vitality or overcome with fatigue,
students or teachers,
we are –
at our cores
– vulnerable, complex, chaotic, beautiful beings
searching for understanding, belonging, and connection.

I teach loving awareness;
I teach that we are beings becoming,
beings walking each other home.
During my first year in graduate school, I enrolled in *Composition Theory and Practice*. The first assignment of the course was to write a literacy narrative. I titled mine *I Am Here* and wrote about my search for self and the texts (literary and otherwise) that helped me understand the self I was becoming. I storied particular experiences – both in and out of school – and reflected on what I learned from those experiences and how they influenced me. As I composed and shared my story, I realized that those life experiences and my responses to them, across time and in different places, fashioned me into the being I was; they shaped the teacher I was becoming. I delighted in this composing; it was personal and meaningful. And when my professor wrote back – “this powerful narrative brought me to tears” – I was enlivened by the possibility of connection and my (re)recognition of the power of language to help us see (and become) anew.

I hoped to continue following this thread, but by the next semester the implicit curriculum – Eliot Eisner’s (1985) term for that which is not necessarily stated, but is implied and learned nonetheless – made it clear that scholarly work requires rigorous (external) research and objective analysis. There was no room for the *I* in academic writing. I wrote more essays, but many of them could have been sub-titled *I Am Not Here*. I (silently) wrestled with my displacement as I wrote my final compilation – an extended look at the importance of place in Charles Frazier’s *Cold Mountain*. I named the piece *Where am I?* – a question from the text, a frame for the analysis, and also a nod to my uncertain positioning. Both the literary characters and I searched for answers to that central question; we continuously revised our stories and, thus, our beings as we (re)imagined our places and our connections (or lack thereof).
There were several reasons I did not pursue further study after I earned my master’s, but one important factor was that I was eager to get into a classroom and craft courses that showed my own students that the I does matter – it is eternally present, incredibly meaningful, and perpetually becoming. Whether they were writing in the third person or outlining the history of electric cars, their writing was filtered through a particular I who gathered, sorted, and composed as only that I could.

Eventually I returned to graduate school. In the years I had been out of school, my full course load limited opportunities for my own writing. I had forgotten about the literacy narrative I had written eight years earlier, but those seeds lay dormant in me; they stirred again when I enrolled in Mark Kissling’s *The Place of Place(s) in Education*. The first assignment for this course was a place(s) narrative. I titled my piece *This is My Place* and I storied some of my places of learning and my experiences within those places. As I had previously, I wove together both informal and formal places and considered how those places and experiences guided me to be the person I was becoming. Simultaneously, outside the lines of my composition, I thought about how alive those experiences remained inside of me and how formative they continued to be.

As I wrote my place(s) narrative, I felt the same gratification and excitement I did when I wrote my literacy narrative. I had forgotten the joy of searching for, discovering, and storying the being I was becoming and the exhilaration of tracing the continuous-creation of that self back to particular experiences in particular places. I had (re)discovered a thread that I had previously let slip through my fingers. I was determined to hold onto it this time and follow where it might lead me. That was, of course, until the end of the semester when the place(s) project came due. A lifetime of
schooling had made the implicit curriculum clear to me. Maybe the I was acceptable in narrative writing, but for the “culminating assignment of the course” I hesitated. I shifted to an eloquently written, well developed objective analysis of a text – a safe place. I had spent weeks reading, researching, and writing. And then in a moment – pretty late in the process – I sat at my desk and I trashed it all. I had been down this path before. And it wasn’t fair to my reader or to me to compose another line in which I was not fully, authentically present. I wrote a paper titled *Storying Who and Where I Am*. A vulnerable I in a mess of places stood at the center of the writing. I looped the thread of personal inquiry around and around my wrist and I promised myself I would not lose it (myself or my place) again.

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This is a story of a being becoming. A being, like you, who is never static; rather, a being who is continuously living, growing, shifting – becoming.

Wallace Stegner (1938) helped me conceptualize the self as becoming. In *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, he theorizes that

[p]eople…were always being looked at as points, and they ought to be looked at as lines. There weren’t any points, it was false to assume that a person ever was anything. He was always becoming something, always changing, always continuous and moving, like the wiggly line on a machine used to measure earthquake shocks. He was always what he was in the beginning, but never quite exactly what he was. (p. 491)

My being is always becoming. It is perpetually shaped by (and, in turn, shapes) my experiences. And those experiences – continuous, interactive, lived, and storied – happen
in specific places which are sensed through my individual self, comprehended through language, and fashioned by all the experiences I’ve had and all the places I’ve been. Understanding who I have become and who I am becoming, requires careful consideration of the experiences I’ve had, the places I’ve been, and the stories I tell.

This is meaningful work on a personal level, but it’s also valuable professionally. As Parker Palmer (1998) convincingly posits, “we teach who we are” (p. 2). As a result, knowing ourselves “is as crucial to good teaching as knowing [our] students and [our] subject” (p. 3). I teach who I am becoming; I become through my teaching. Here I seek to deepen my own self-understanding and clarify that which is alive in me, because my inner landscape entangles with the outer landscape of the classroom and shapes the place, the experiences, the stories, and, therefore, the beings alongside me in our shared community of learning and living.

In an attempt to understand how to live more honestly, teach more faithfully, and connect more meaningfully, this writing looks inward and explores my journey of becoming. My inquiry focuses on the question: What does it mean to be me, a human – here and now – in communion with a living world? As I seek to answer that question, I encounter and dwell within additional complimentary questions: Who am I? How have I become – and how am I becoming – this being? How do I live these truths in my daily learning and teaching?

As I search for understanding of the being I am becoming, I am guided by the beacons of story, place, and experience. Here I linger a moment in each of these concepts as I consider how they illuminate my thinking about being and becoming.

I begin with a story. But bear with me as one story always leads to another…
August 23, 2016 was a Tuesday. I was still teaching full time at Penn State Wilkes-Barre and commuting twice a week to University Park for classes. This was my second year juggling both commitments, and Madhu Suri Prakash’s Contemporary Philosophies of Education was my first class of the semester. I took my usual route from northeast Pennsylvania. 118 to 220 to 80 to State College – the McAllister Parking Deck, to be exact. 124.6 miles, 5 counties, 14 roads, and two hours later, I arrived.

My normal walking route would take me down three flights of stairs, onto McAllister Alley, through the Centennial Walkway, by the bronze statue of a pig and piglets, across College Ave, up Old Main Lawn, past the Carnegie Building, along Fraser, over Curtin, and into Chambers Building on the northwest side of campus where the majority of my other classes took place. But this day was different. Contemporary Philosophies of Education was scheduled in room 215 of the Business Building on the northeast edge of campus. I was a little disoriented getting there and I fumbled around a bit before I found my way.

The Business Building is new (it opened in 2005) and bright (there are floor-to-ceiling windows in the atrium). A few weeks later when a Career Fair was held, the place filled with recruiters and professionally dressed college students looking for internships or first jobs. On this day you could feel the energy pulsing as young adults huddled around temporary cubicles with resumes in hand nervously taking those first steps towards achieving their dreams of security and financial stability.
I marveled at the juxtaposition of those desires and the conversations that unfolded a floor up in *Contemporary Philosophies of Education*. In room 215, the bedrock of big business and so much of our economy – development, progress, and consumption – were questioned and alternative perspectives were offered. Despite her background in economics, Madhu was anything but business-as-usual. She brought soil into an otherwise sterile building. I heard that soil when she spoke; I tasted it in the assigned texts; and I’m pretty sure I saw some of it suspended in the liquid that filled the numerous mason jars she brought to every class. As one who enjoys holding the earth, I liked it.

On our first day together, Madhu began by explaining the importance of stories and she shared with us her story. She walked us through India, Syracuse, and State College. She admitted that she’d been “doing Dewey all [her] life.” She referenced a Muriel Rukeyser quote carved into a statue in New York: “The universe is not made of atoms, but of stories.” She reminded us that our stories mattered and that embedded within those stories were our philosophies of education.

I envisioned each of my stories as atoms, the basic unit of matter. I saw protons and neutrons huddled in the nucleus, electrons orbiting. I imagined those particles as the things that mattered most to me – beings, places, experiences, beliefs, and hopes. I thought back to high school chemistry and the strong force that holds the nucleus together; without that force the nucleus would be unstable and decay. In this instance, I pictured the strong force as braided threads that wove together those elements and created my stories. I visualized all my stories, all those atoms, joining together to make molecules, which combine to make cells, which create tissues, which make up organs,
which bring life to an organism – me. At the core of my being are stories germinating from earlier stories, living and growing, entangling with others’ stories, and nourishing the soil for the stories yet to be told.

For the following week, we read Parker Palmer’s (1998) “A Culture of Fear: Education and the Disconnected Life.” Palmer’s words resonated with me so deeply that I ordered and quickly devoured the entirety of The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life. Near the conclusion of the chapter on fear, Palmer explores the complexities of home as both something inner and also “as open and vast as the sky itself” (p. 59). “We are at home,” he writes, “in a universe that embraces both the smallness of ‘I’ and the vastness of all that is ‘not I,’ and does so with consummate ease. In this home, we know ourselves… as integral parts of the great web of life” (p. 59). I thought about the beauty of that delicate wholeness, and I returned to the widening diagram of atom-to-organism I sketched the week before. I added additional layers. An atom to a galaxy. A story at the center, stories spiraling, stories connecting, and stories becoming.

I’ve committed my professional life to stories, but that wasn’t always my plan. An inadvertently checked box on a college application directed me to the English department during the July 2003 freshman orientation at Marywood University. When I arrived at the registration table, I discovered that my nametag read Ann Brennan / English. At that point in my life, I’m not sure what academic subject I would have thought I was good at, but I’m certain that it wouldn’t have been English. It wouldn’t have been science or math or history, either. Maybe gym. I was a gym class All Star.
Having no clear alternatives to suggest, I attended the English department breakout session; there I met my assigned advisor and enrolled in fall semester classes. The English course I took during that first semester – Writing Skills – didn’t do much to quell my fear that I was in the wrong place. But the Introduction to World Literature course I took the next semester did. In week eleven, we began reading Joseph Conrad’s (1899) *Heart of Darkness*.

In a preface he published two years before *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad (1897) writes that the task of the writer, the storyteller, is “by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see.” If he is successful, the story he tells will reveal “a glimpse of truth for which [we] have forgotten to ask” (Conrad, 1897). *Heart of Darkness* is a novel told through multiple frames; the main character, Marlow, relays his experience in the Congo to his shipmates aboard the Nellie. As he tells his story and as his readers listen alongside the fellow travelers, we all must navigate through misperceptions, ambiguity, and ignorance to glimpse the truth that Marlow attempts to remember, understand, and articulate. The text explores European imperialism and the savage exploitation of both the people and the land in Africa. There is much to gleam from this novel, but it shaped me most by showing me our dependence on language, our inability to fully communicate anything, and the necessity of working out our experiences and our being through stories which are never finished, but perpetually becoming. The meaning of those stories, admits Marlow, is not easily attained; the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel, but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one
of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral of illumination of moonshine. (Conrad, 1899, p. 29)

Stories offer a reconstruction of reality and a reflection of experiences; they’re cloudy and partial and constantly revised. But catching a glimpse of the truth, however obscured or fleeting, is better than seeing nothing at all.

I believed this then, and I believe it now. Stories give us those glimpses.

As I learned to read more carefully, I began to appreciate that the writers I admired most – some from many centuries ago – were wrestling with the same epistemological and ontological questions I was trying to work out. They wrote about conflicts of the human heart and what it means to be human, in a particular, yet, perpetually shifting, here and now. They used language, their slippery tool, to reanimate the world, a slippery place. They inquired, imagined, and wondered. The stories they shared encouraged me to do the same and helped me understand that I was not alone; rather, I was connected to others who made the same journey and who created and shared their own ways of making meaning. They told their stories. As I breathed life into them, they breathed life into me. The stories helped me question what I saw and thought and was; they gave me new ways of seeing, thinking, and being; and they reminded me that what I saw, and thought, and was would never be stable or static, but always becoming.

A year later, I met Leslie Marmon Silko (1990) when I read “Landscape, History, and the Pueblo Imagination” as background for a Survey of American Literature course. In this essay, Silko writes about the importance of the “oral narrative, or ‘story’” within the collective memory of the Pueblo people (p. 34). Remembering and retelling that story is particularly important for a people so often and so violently uprooted and
displaced. Lost to these people was their land, but also threatened was their identity and their ways of knowing. Through the stories they carried over trails of tears and death, Indigenous people kept alive bits of their collective memory, language, culture, wisdom, names, and experiences.

In *Ceremony*, Silko (1977) underscores the importance of the “oral narrative, or ‘story’” by following Tayo, half-Laguna Pueblo and half-white, as he returns home from WWII and struggles to resituate himself into his native New Mexico land. *Ceremony* begins with two framing poems, both of which emphasize the central role of stories, both of which draw upon the oral tradition. The first poem introduces Though-Woman, the spider, who, along with her sister, created the Universe. The final two stanzas read:

She is sitting in her room
thinking of a story now

I’m telling you the story
she is thinking (p. 1)

The second poem, titled Ceremony, begins:

I will tell you something about stories
[he said]

They aren’t just for entertainment
Don’t be fooled. *They are all we have*, you see,

all we have to fight off
illness and death.

*You don’t have anything*

*if you don’t have the stories.* (p. 2, emphasis mine)

The narrative that unfolds is a story of (re)creation and (re)inhabitation. Disoriented and disrupted, Tayo must decide which stories to consume. He is surrounded by many – his aunt, his cousin, and his fellow veterans – who chase the Western stories taught in school and ingested through excess and alcohol. But he also meets several – Josiah, Night
Swan, Betonie, and Ts’eh – who remind him that healing and belonging are attainable only through remembering and reimagining the communal stories. In numerous scenes Tayo is seen vomiting, a figurative clearing out of the damaging and sickening settler stories he’s ingested. This makes way for the more nourishing Native stories to grow in his belly – a place that connotes birth. Nurturing and carrying, remembering and retelling, Tayo is reminded that these things have “never been easy” (p. 259). But his future and the future of his people are dependent upon him remembering to remember and keeping the collective memory and stories alive; “just remember the story” is the most important directive he receives along the way (p. 102). Tayo is the messenger; his story of becoming is the cure.

Tayo’s story, however, does not stand alone. Silko expertly weaves Tayo’s story, told as prose, alongside the Native story, told as a long-poem. The point being that the stories we tell and the stories we live are part of the “ancient continuous story” (Silko, 1990, p. 34). This concept is eloquently described when the old medicine man, Ku’oosh, attempts to heal Tayo by “using the old dialect” and whispering sacred place names (Silko, 1977, p. 34). Speaking in his mother tongue, but written for readers as English, Ku’oosh uses an Indigenous term to describe the world as fragile:

The word he chose to express ‘fragile’ was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process, and with a strength inherent in spider webs woven across paths through sand hills where early in the morning the sun becomes entangled in each filament of web. It took a long time to explain the fragility and intricacy because no word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way…the story
behind each word must be told so there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said. (pp. 35-36)

Nothing – no word, no being – stands in isolation. Everything is interconnected and continuous. We can glimpse those connections and that continuity by tracing back the stories woven in the words we use, the stories we tell, the lives we live, and the places we are. To do so, however, requires “great patience and love” (Silko, 1977, p. 36).

I left college comfortable with my commitment to stories. They offered me standpoints from which to see; they welcomed me into dialogues I valued; they introduced me to different times, people, and places; and they taught me how and why to pay more specific attention to my own place in the world. The stories I studied showed me that we tell stories to lay a pattern on a world that’s forever beyond our reach; we tell stories to restore balance and locate ourselves; we tell stories to make sense of our experiences; we tell stories to remember, (re)imagine, and relate; we tell stories to understand what it means to be human, here and now. We tell stories to connect and continue; we tell stories because we know the narrative is eternally becoming; we tell stories because we long for companionship and conversation and the opportunity to contribute our voices – however humble, however cautious – to the “ancient continuous story” of humankind.

**Place**

My pursuit of stories brought me to graduate school. While there I held a teaching fellowship and as part of my responsibilities I taught freshman composition and literature classes. I was just a few years older than my students and a novice writer myself. Self-doubt was (and is) never far from my mind. As I walked up South Orange
Avenue and made my way into Jubilee Hall for my first class as a teacher, I wondered: What do I know? What will I teach them? I was confident I was not qualified to teach students how to write; to better prepare myself, I spent my two years at Seton Hall leafing through as many books on writing as I could get my hands on. Annie Dillard’s (1989) *The Writing Life* and Anne Lamott’s (1995) *Bird by Bird* were two of my favorites. But it was Eudora Welty’s (1978) *On Writing* that brought together my interest in stories and my attention to place.

At the heart of every story is a place. Real or imagined, places both anchor and shape stories and those that tell them. Welty (1978) introduces place as “one of the [supposedly] lesser angles” of fiction, but emphasizes its importance by spending the entire essay answering the question “What place has place in fiction?” (p. 39). It quickly becomes clear that place has a central place in fiction; in fact, Welty contends, fiction “depends for its life on place” (p. 42). For Welty, place is “the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible, gathering spot of all that has been felt, [and] is about to be experienced, in the novel’s progress” (pp. 46-47). The best stories pay close attention to place; the best storytellers speak “most clearly, explicitly, and passionately from [their] place of origin” (p. 132). She points to Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County as an example of “the mastery of place in fiction” (p. 52). She argues that “[e]very story would be another story, and unrecognizable as art, if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else” (p. 47). This line brought to mind farmer-poet Wendell Berry (2010a) who has dedicated his life to following the weaving together of self, work, and place. He echoes Welty when he reflects on the role of place in his own writing and acknowledges that “[what] I have written here, I suppose, must
somehow belong here and must be different from any [writing] I might have written in any other place” (p. 4). In addition to Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County, I’d add Berry’s Port William to Welty’s list of the “mastery of place.” I’d also include Steinbeck’s Salinas Valley, Twain’s Mississippi River, Thoreau’s Walden Pond, Abbey’s canyons and arches, and Cather’s Great Plains.

I thought of my own story. And I recognized that so much of that story has been formed by my lived experiences in my own places – particularly, Ann Lane, Dallas Township. I would be a different person and I would tell a different story if I lived or spoke from any place else. And as I heard Welty talking about fiction, I understood her conversation not to be limited to novels, but to include all the stories we tell, even the non-fiction. I remembered Wordsworth (1798) who composed his lines a few miles above Tintern Abbey and wrote that we “half-create” the world we behold (l. 106).

Every word we utter, every story we tell is a bit of a fiction, an attempt to (re)construct. Our efforts are always incomplete, partial, provisioned, and continuously becoming; we can never really convey the truth. But we can discover glimpses of it through stories authentically told and particularly placed.

Stories and places are inseparable. Neither are as simple as they first appear. I was familiar with the complexity of stories, but I didn’t always appreciate the overlapping layers of place. I began to on Monday, January 11, 2016. On that day, Mark Kissling’s The Place of Place(s) in Education met for the first time in room 106 of the Agricultural Sciences and Industries Building at University Park. I arrived a few minutes before our scheduled one o’clock start time. Even without a lot of bodies in it, the room
was cramped. We arranged the outdated chair-desk combos into an oval. There were markers and sheets of white paper and place-specific questions written in colorful chalk on the board. We folded our papers into thirds and made name placards; I wrote my name in blue marker and on the reverse side I used a pencil to answer the questions: Where are you from? Why are you here? What do you like to do when you’re not here? I moved through the questions pretty easily and briefly jotted my answers. But there was one that had me writing more: How do you define “place”? Good question. I thought I provided some good answers: where I stand; the dirt beneath my feet; a location; a dot on a map; something meaningful; a noun; a verb; a starting point; a destination; man-made or natural; surface, but also depth; changing. We went around the horn and introduced ourselves by walking through our answers, but we were instructed to leave our place definitions – we’d return to them at a later time. I faded in and out of the conversation, because my mind was elsewhere; I kept thinking of additional ways to define place. And that struck me, because it demonstrated that my body could be in one place even if my consciousness was in another place. There was more to place than just the physical present. That opened up new possibilities; my pencil moved again – this time in my notebook. Place is multidimensional; something real; something imagined; something I can inhabit; something I can’t touch; yet, it’s also something I can feel; it exists before me while simultaneously existing because of me and outlasting me; it’s individual and shared; it’s outside of me and within me; it’s dynamic; it’s here and there; everywhere and nowhere; maybe somewhere; it’s experienced and made; it’s living.

In the years following that initial inquiry, my understanding of place has grown and, as a result, my attention to place has deepened. Place is interdisciplinary; not
moored in any one discipline, but present in all disciplines. “[N]ot so much bounded…as open and porous,” place gives and receives (Massey, 1994, p. 121). Philosopher Edward Casey (1996) writes that “place is not one kind of thing: it can be psychical as well as physical, and doubtless also cultural and historical and social” (p. 31). Like Casey, ecocritic Lawrence Buell (2001) describes the multiplicity of place which, he suggests, is “a configuration of highly flexible subjective, social, and material dimensions, not reducible to any of these” (p. 60). Similarly, geographer Robert Sack (1997), viewing humans as “geographical beings transforming the earth,” claims that place is a force that braids together nature, culture, and society, but it does so “without reducing any of these components to the others” (p. 1). Obviously, stacking all of place into a neat definition is difficult, maybe even impossible. Describing place as “[o]ne of the trickiest words in the English language,” historian Dolores Hayden (1995) likens place to “a suitcase so overfilled one can never shut the lid” (p. 15). The defining and re-defining, the knowing and re-knowing of place is ongoing. Places, like humans, are “forever astir, alive, changing, [and] reflecting”; they are forever becoming (Welty, 1978, p. 54).

This is certainly the understanding of the members of the Western Apache that anthropologist Keith Basso (1996) met during his time mapping their sacred places and place-names. Working with skilled guides, Basso came to understand that for Indigenous communities speaking the name of a place means awakening the story of the place; it means slipping “into the past and construct[ing] ancestral place-worlds” in the present (p. 13). The places, the experiences, the stories and, therefore, the beings are always becoming anew in the present. Traveling with Charles Henry, a “veteran maker of place-worlds,” Basso learns that “place-making is a way of constructing the past…[and] also a
way of constructing social traditions and, in the process, personal and social identities” (p. 7). The things that happened in a place are wrapped up in the stories associated with the place-names; these experiences are part of the private and shared identity of the Western Apache. Basso underscores this when he suggests that “what people make of their places is closely connected to what they make of themselves” (p. 7). In reciprocal relationship, “the physical landscape becomes wedded to the landscape of the mind” (p. 10). The roots run deep and entangle; the places, stories, and people are intimately united.

Many earthen writers agree with the Western Apache belief that place is not only where we are, but also who we are. Lawrence Buell (2001) notes that “[t]here was never an is without a where” (p. 55, emphasis mine). And Gary Snyder (1990) writes that “[o]ur place is a part of what we are” (p. 29). Speaking from his farm and reflecting on the life-giving and life-sustaining offerings of the land, Wendell Berry (1977) says that “we come from the earth and return to it…While we live our bodies are moving particles of the earth, joined inextricably both to the soil and to the bodies of other living creatures” (p. 97). We are not only always in place, we are perpetually of place, too. Through our living and storying, we make places; places simultaneously make us and the stories we tell.

I find myself most at home with the place-makers who live attentive to the land and understand that wisdom and life are in the soil; their conception of place is rooted in the earth (e.g., Cather, 1913; Conlogue, 2013, 2017; hooks, 2009; Jackson, 1996; Leopold, 1966; Kingsolver, 2001; Silko, 1977; Snyder, 1990). These individuals “know in their bones the responsibility that flows between humans and the earth” (Kimmerer,
Humbled by the generosity of the land, their stories teach us how to gratefully accept what is given, responsibly use what is offered, and honorably share what we have. They’ve learned from the patterns of the living world that surrounds them that they “are bound in a covenant of reciprocity, a pact of mutual responsibility” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 382). Their lives and their work are grounded in this principle.

**Experience**

Places are storied and places are experienced. Wallace Stegner (1992) reminds me of the place of human perception and experience in the making of places. Despite deep ecologists’ warnings against anthropocentrism, Stegner writes that he is the only instrument through which he “can enjoy the world and try to understand it” (p. 201). Therefore, he concludes, a place is not a place until people have “experienced and shaped” it (p. 201). Further, “[n]o place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered” in stories (p. 202). For Stegner, the human experience of and within a place – and the (re)telling of that experience – is necessary for the place to exist. Without the human experience, there is no perception, there is no story, and there is no place.

I cultivated a deeper understanding of the experience-place-story-self connections when I returned to graduate school and discovered philosophers who spoke of the importance of experiences – continuous, interactive, and placed – in the creation and ongoing revision of self (Dewey, 1938; Aoki, 2005; Elbaz, 1983; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; and Kissling, 2012, 2014). These theorists guided me as I developed my own thinking about experience as a way of becoming.
My understanding begins in John Dewey’s conception of experience. Dewey (1938) theorizes that there is an “organic connection between education and personal experience” (p. 25). For Dewey, “education comes about through experience,” but not all experiences are educational (p. 25). In fact, many experiences in the “traditional schoolroom…[are] largely of the wrong kind”; they are mis-educative because they discourage or impede further experience (p. 26). To distinguish between experiences, Dewey offers two criteria – continuity and interaction – to determine whether an experience is worthwhile educationally.

Continuity extends both forward and backward and implies that no experience is isolated from previous or future experiences; “the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (p. 35). Healthy and educative experiences lead to growth and the “desire to go on learning” (p. 48).

Dewey’s second criterion is interaction – the “interplay” between the internal and the external (p. 42). Interaction is the relationship between the inner-self and the outer-world, the subjective and the objective, the being and the place, the reader and the text. These interactions are situated and connected; “[a]n experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment” (p. 43). Experience is a back-and-forth between the individual and the external surroundings, between the past and the ongoing.

Dewey’s understanding of experience as continuous and interactive reverberates in Ted Aoki’s (2005) notion of the Zone of Between – the ecotone where learning and teaching happens. Aoki introduces two horizons of curriculum: the scripted curriculum-
as-plan – “programs of study, curriculum guides, lesson plans, and unit plans” – and the situated curriculum-as-lived – the “experienced curriculum” that unfolds in the “face-to-face living” of the classroom (Aoki, 2005b, p. 231). There is tension in the place between the two horizons; each side – the theory and the practice, the curriculum and the instruction, the limited and the open, the beginning and the end – pulls for the teacher’s attention. While some might instinctively try to dissipate the discomfort of the tension by choosing a side, Aoki celebrates the continuity and interaction that unfolds in this middle-ground, this “dialectic between” place (Aoki, 2005a, p. 163). Here the teacher is “mindful not only of the planned curriculum but also of the…live(d) curricula” of both her students and herself (Aoki, 2005c, p. 419). In studying this place, we see the Zone “as a sanctified clearing where the teacher and students gather…an extraordinarily unique and precious place, a hopeful place, a trustful place, a careful place – essentially a human place” (Aoki, 2005a, p. 164). Dwelling within this place, messy and meaningful experiences happen; teaching and learning – life – happens here.

In this “third space,” the Zone of Between “where newness can enter the world,” the teacher’s actions are shaped by her content and curricular knowledge, but also by her experiential knowledge; this is a place of continuous negotiation (Aoki, 2005c, p. 422). Freema Elbaz (1981) proposes a lens through which to examine teacher knowledge as more than just the commonplace categories of “knowledge of subject matter” and “knowledge of curriculum” (p. 47). She broadens the understanding of teacher knowledge by specifying three additional categories: practical knowledge of “instructional routines, classroom management, student needs”; personal knowledge which guides teachers to “work toward personally meaningful goals”; and interaction
which implies that “teachers’ knowledge is based on, and shaped by, a variety of interactions with others in their environment” (p. 47). Faced with an assortment of situations in the classroom – many of them occurring simultaneously – teachers draw on each of these “sources of knowledge to help them to deal” with the particular issues and needs at that moment in that place (p. 47). Later, Elbaz (1983) names this complex and layered understanding *practical knowledge* and defines it as:

- firsthand experiences of students’ learning styles, interests, needs, strengths and difficulties, and a repertoire of instructional techniques and classroom management skills. The teacher knows the social structure of the school and what it requires, of teacher and student, for survival and for success; she knows the community of which the school is a part, and has a sense of what it will and will not accept. (p. 5)

Embodied within the teacher who dwells in the Zone of Between is a balancing of both theoretical and practical knowledge. Pulled by forces from within and outside of the Zone, the teacher draws on her perpetually evolving *practical knowledge* to direct and respond to the present situation in ways that align with her knowledge, experiences, and purposes.

Building from Elbaz’s *practical knowledge* framework, Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly construct their conception of *personal practical knowledge*. This knowledge is neither entirely theoretical nor entirely practical. It is a combination of both, blended by the “personal background and characteristics of the teacher and expressed by her in particular situations” (Clandinin, 1985, p. 361). *Personal practical knowledge* is created through experiences that, like Dewey (1938) suggests, include
dimensions of continuity (moving forward and backward) and interaction (moving inward and outward) and also Clandinin & Connelly’s (2000) third dimension of place (the location of the experience). *Personal practical knowledge* is not objective or static; rather, it “is the sum total of the teacher’s experiences” – continuous, interactive, and placed – over the course of the teacher’s life (Connelly, Clandinin, & He, 1997, p. 666). These experiences form the teacher’s *personal curriculum* (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988).

Mark Kissling (2012, 2014) uses the term *living curriculum* to describe something similar to Connelly and Clandinin’s *personal curriculum*. For Kissling (2012), a *living curriculum* is “a course of learning across the times and places of our lives” (p. 81). Drawing on He’s river metaphor, Kissling (2014) theorizes

> If the entirety of a river is one’s *living curriculum*, specific sections of the river are *experiences*, as each section is distinct in its own particular place but connected to other sections upstream and downstream. The many flows that exist within the river and across its sections, at the surface and deep into the water, are *curricular currents*. Distinct on their own, the messy confluence of these currents comprises a life. (p. 82, emphasis original)

Freeing the term *curriculum* from the traditional and constricting confines of the classroom, Kissling offers a much broader comprehension of curriculum; it “is a course of living. It is what a person learns over the course of life” both in and out of the classroom (pp. 82-83). Within this *living curriculum* are experiences that are both continuous and interactive; all these experiences happen in place(s). As the experiences of a life accumulate, “thematic sequences of experiences, or curricular currents” take
shape (p. 83). Kissling suggests that “[a]lthough curricular currents flow together to form a living curriculum, some currents are more central in a person’s life than others, in the same way that a river has a prominent surface current” (p. 83).

This notion gave me a new perspective from which to see my own being and living. The river metaphor offered me a new way to think about how I’m eternally becoming the (fluid) being that I am. It brought to mind Annie Dillard’s (1982) who writes that “the mind and the world [are] inextricably fitted twin puzzles. The mind fits the world and shapes it as a river fits and shapes its own banks” (p. 15). This exchange is not linear; it is transactional – the river and its banks, the reader and the text, are continuously shaping each other. So, too, are the being and the experience, the being and the place, the being and the story. Each brings meaning and life to the other.

As I’ve followed the curricular currents that flow through my own life, I’ve come to see that all the experiences I have had in all the landscapes I’ve traveled through, around, above, and below are alive in me; they are the me I am becoming.

**Bringing It All Together**

I returned to graduate school for many reasons. On the surface, I was like many others who enroll in doctoral programs; I was looking for ways to grow professionally and I imagined a terminal degree would help me achieve that goal. But there was something much deeper, much more powerful driving me. I couldn’t have named it when I applied and I’m not sure I fully grasp it now, but I was (and am) searching for understanding; I’m trying to glimpse what it means to be me, here and now. I went back to graduate school as a way to explore, question, and (re)imagine; I hoped this journey
would help me better understand myself, my place, my work, my living, and my becoming.

At the beginning of graduate school, I was hesitant to admit and articulate that my interest was a deeply personal one. I worried it sounded self-centered and, maybe, naïve. I found some comfort when I read Parker Palmer (1998) write that “[t]he work required to ‘know thyself’ is neither selfish nor narcissistic” (p. 3). But as colleagues presented papers and published articles, I wondered if I was sabotaging my chances for future professional growth by remaining stubbornly committed to my own individual pursuit. I thought about alternative routes; I could redirect my steps, put a stake down in a traditional research framework, and produce something recognizable. But I knew that wouldn’t be me and the work wouldn’t be authentic. And that’s not what I’m here for.

Still I remained selective about what I revealed and to whom. When I shared glimpses of the path I was following, I found encouragement to carry on, to be the seeker of my own truths. I received this message clearly and powerfully during the initial meeting of Contemporary Philosophies of Education. The first question Madhu posed to the class: What is one burning question that brought you back to school? I seriously considered giving a generic, stock answer. But I worked up my courage, and I didn’t. Instead when my turn came I read what I had written in my notebook: I want to understand more about the interconnected web of life; I want to understand more about how we come to be and how we can come home; I want to understand more about how we care for the beings we are becoming, the other beings we encounter, and the places we live. Madhu smiled, offered affirmation, and shared an eloquent (re)envisioning of
what I had just said: *How do we nurture each other? How do we allow ourselves to be nurtured?* Yes; I want to know that.

Over the next fourteen weeks, we encountered many philosophers from diverse walks of life. Each of them (often deliberately) troubled the assembly line of living and dying that so often permeates our Western culture. Each of them offered their own truths and understanding of what it means to be human. We traced their arguments by identifying their aims, means, and assumptions. In doing so, I began to see my own aims, means, and assumptions more clearly.

And that has brought me here. My assumptions are, I hope, clear. Stories matter; places matter; experiences matter; beings matter. Each is dependent upon the others; each shapes and is, in turn, shaped by the others. Stories, places, experiences, and beings are never complete, but always becoming. My aim is to be a more connected being, both internally and externally; to live with humility, hospitality, integrity, sense, and sensibility. To love and come home. And to embody all of this in my learning and my teaching. Guided by those assumptions and hoping to achieve those aims this is my means: writing that – in form and in content – genuinely and honestly follows the wonderings that consume me; writing that examines the stories we hear and the stories we tell through the lens of my own lived experiences in places of learning; writing that seeks to create, not destroy, connect, not separate. Writing that stories the becoming of my being.
There's a Bug in Here
SPEAK!
I can’t hear you.
I’d like you to talk more in class.
You know, you could talk.
Be forceful with your language.
Why don’t you lead the conversation? Drive it, even?
Don’t you have anything to say?
I wonder if you might jump into future conversations more quickly.
An important component of this course, you are expected to participate.
Among other things, this means…. engaging in the class discussion.
Let your voice be heard.
Tell ‘em what you think.
Others are missing out on what you have to say.
There’s a quiet passion there.

A profound silence.
A few years ago, I was cleaning out a catch-all drawer and I came across a piece of paper folded in half and then into thirds. Centered at the top of the page was the name of my elementary school. *Ann Brennan* was written in cursive on the left margin and the document was dated 6/91. I quickly realized that I was holding my Kindergarten report card. It was really just a list of categories like “Language and Concept Development” and “Recognition of Numerals and Concepts.” Under each header were more specific abilities like “speaking in complete sentences” and “reading sentences.” Each point was given a plus (+) if the skill had been mastered and a check (✓) if the skill still needed development. This particular report card was a long list of plus signs. At the bottom of the page Sister Sheila left a handwritten note: *Ann is an intelligent little girl. She quietly observes all around her. She is her own person.* I can’t speak to the validity of the first sentence, but twenty-seven years later, I can attest to the accuracy of the claims offered in the final two sentences.

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I was never a lover of school. I begrudgingly attended, because there weren’t any viable alternatives. Compulsory schooling is just that – compulsory. While I was there, I filled my notebooks with countdowns: *Days till the end of the schoolyear; Hours till the end of the week; Minutes till the end of the day; Seconds till the end of class.* I couldn’t wait to get out. I had friends. I attended small schools, learned from well-meaning teachers, and I generally succeeded – at least according to the quantitative ways *success* is measured in school. I never experienced any trauma and I often found encouragement and kindness along the way. But, still, I strongly disliked being in school.

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In social interactions, like those within the classroom, we seek to create an acceptable version of the self. To do so, we try on roles, consider relationships, narrow in on appropriate portrayals, and offer performances (Brooke, 1991; Newkirk, 1997). With our audience, context, and purpose in mind, we make choices about what we’ll divulge and what we’ll withhold; “we selectively reveal ourselves in order to match an idealized sense of who we should be” (Newkirk, 1997, p. 4). To describe this interaction and to underscore both the individual and the social influences, Robert Brooke (1991) introduces the term “identity negotiations” (p. 12). For Brooke, identity denotes “what is most central or important about the self”; and negotiations – which create identity – denotes “attempts to mitigate the clash between opposing forces, to compromise between conflicting camps, to satisfy groups with different demands” (p. 12). These identity negotiations are perpetually occurring within the classroom.

There are (unwritten) rules and (implicit) expectations about who we should be in the classroom (Fried, 2005; Pope, 2001). Anyone who has successfully passed through one knows there are certain “institutional expectations” which students must perfect (Jackson, 1990, p. 35). Philip Jackson (1990) writes that these guidelines are all part of the “hidden curriculum” of the classroom which “each student (and teacher) must master if he is to make his way satisfactorily through the school” (pp. 33-34). Students who “have discovered how to respond with a minimum amount of pain and discomfort to the demands, both official and unofficial, of classroom life” are school-wise (p. 35). Among other things, the school-wise individual practices resignation and “learns to subjugate his own desires to the will of the teacher and to subdue his own actions in the interest of the common good”; “[h]e learns to be passive and to acquiesce to the network of rules,
regulations, and routines in which he is embedded” (p. 36). Conformity is privileged over curiosity, and, as a result, “probing, provoking, and exploring” must be replaced with submission and passivity (p. 36).

What Jackson (1990) calls school-wise, Gary Fenstermacher (1986) calls studenting. In classrooms, Fenstermacher argues, students student. “[W]hether and how much” a student “learns from being a student is largely a function of how he students” (p. 39). Studenting is the path to learning in classrooms; it complements teaching. While teachers “explain, describe, define, refer, correct, and encourage,” students “recite, practice, seek assistance, review, check, locate sources, and access material” (p. 39). Competent students – i.e., ones who are adept at studenting – work “independently,” strive to achieve “the highest level of success possible,” apply “universalistic criteria” to their studies, and specialize in competition (Mehan, 1980, p. 134).

I had high hopes for myself when I attended my first class at University Park. A lot had changed since I had last been in school. For one, I had been teaching full-time for six years. I had presented at conferences, assumed leadership roles, and received both student and employer commendations for my teaching and involvement on campus. I was sure this time the classroom would be different; I’d be a more confident student because I had more life experience now. In addition, teaching had given me a new appreciation for the diversity present in the classroom. At the beginning of each semester, I remind my students they each have valuable perspectives to share, experiences to draw from, and stories to contribute. I believe that; I told myself the same was true for me. I could talk. I had things to say.
My first class met on a Thursday at one o’clock. A lovely teacher introduced herself; there was only one other student in the course. I didn’t feel lost; this was going to be okay. We got acquainted and did some semi-directed freewriting. Thirty minutes into a three-hour class, I was feeling the same way I had always felt in a classroom – out-of-place. As I made the mile-trek back to my car, my strides lengthened, my arms swung, and my speed quickened. Frustration mounted. Questions raced through my head: Why am I so terrible when I’m a student in a classroom? Why can’t I be the easy-going, confident, and articulate person I am when I’m a teacher? Why do I turn into a rigid, doubting, incoherent soul when I’m a student?

I’ve actively wrestled with some variation of these questions for the past several years. But, really, they’ve confounded me for much longer. I wish I could say that my wondering has led me to answers, but it hasn’t. Instead, it has shown me glimpses of my (silent) self in the classroom. These moments demonstrate that I have not succeeded in negotiating my student identity; I’ve not reconciled how to balance that which is “most central or important about” me with the expectations inherent in my position as a student. I do not know how to be authentic in such an artificial place.

I’m an intensely private being who gains traction gradually. I’m a patient listener who does not perform well on-demand. I seek understanding, not information, and I bristle at the suggestion that we’re not equals. But in a classroom, we’re divided. In this public place, I’m asked to demonstrate, accumulate, and submit – quickly. I’m expected to objectify and keep my distance. I’m supposed to talk. That is not me.
There’s a Bug in Here:
The Text within the Text

Prologue

When I was in elementary school, my sister called me Bug. The name stuck. Bugs aren’t made for school. There are too many dangers there: curious kids with magnifying glasses; bottles without air-holes; stomping shoes; detached legs and antennae; exterminators; sterilizing agents; stifling conditions.

What follows is an exploration of the peculiar place of a Bug in the classroom. In an effort to share these glimpses as authentically as possible, this writing has been recast as something that disrupts traditional disciplinary conventions. The form, however, is appropriate for the types of questions it raises; specifically, for my main question – How am I learning to be (or not to be) in the classroom?

In search of such a form, I looked to fiction. With the thread of individual performance in mind, I narrowed in on the narrative mode and, more specifically, stream of consciousness. This style, first coined by William James (1890/1950), challenges the appearance of consciousness as “chopped up in bits” and “jointed”; instead, it more naturally views consciousness through the metaphors of “a ‘river’ or a ‘stream’” – “it flows” (p. 239). Using stream of consciousness gives me the freedom to tell my story unencumbered; in addition, it provides me an opportunity to reveal my perspective and dissolve the distinctions between my internal thoughts and the external events that surround me.

This writing does not follow a linear path, nor does it stay put. These choices are deliberate. Refusing to run straight, this story questions the progression of the traditional
manufactured narratives in school and the imposed separation common in both the explicit and implicit curriculum (Eisner, 1985). The text enters different places, because I did not learn (and surrender to or object to) studenting in one place at one time. This is a conversation that stretches twenty-eight years and countless places; what’s included is only a small representation – glimpses. At times, the line between truth and fiction is blurred. This reflects the reality of our existence. All knowing is, at one level, based on perceptions, fictions, stories.

Through this text, I’m negotiating an identity. And it’s not the traditional academic role of writer-as-examinee, a position that suggests the purpose of communication is to demonstrate a sufficient amount of accumulated information. Instead, I aim to portray myself as both a writer-as-reflective thinker and a writer-as-explorer (Brooke, 1991). As such, this writing originated in moments of reflection on my perpetual uneasiness in the classroom. This reflection directed my focus to a conflict – the classroom fragments, assigns limiting roles, and silences. And that perception led to my desire to share this story so that it might inspire us to think carefully about the roles we offer, the relationships we cultivate, and the voices we listen for – and to – in the classroom.

Underlying my writer-as-reflective thinker/explorer turn is the belief that my particular story, if developed effectively and woven into others’ stories properly, will illuminate the larger social circumstances that shape actions and distinguish roles in the classroom. To help me achieve this goal, this text embeds thick description and elements of autoethnography as it aims to tell my personal story “as well as the larger cultural
meaning for [my] story” (Creswell, 2013, p. 73). The text employs hermeneutic methods as it moves back and forth through a “wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of [my] personal experience” and also looking “inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). My goal is to tell my story – reflecting on my own experiences and perceptions as both a student and a teacher – and use that analysis to understand the larger cultural stories (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

In the session titled Yes, But Is It Research? at the 1994 Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Eliot Eisner “reiterated a hope expressed in his 1993 AERA presidential address that colleges of education would soon accept novels as dissertations” (Sacks, 1996, p. 403). Two years later, in a conversation with Howard Gardner, Eisner further developed his argument by pointing out that literary pieces offer opportunities for evoking empathy, reaching a larger audience by providing “access to content that would be otherwise inaccessible,” and getting at ideas that facts fail to reveal (p. 413). In addition, he “relinquish[es] the notion that scientific disciplines are the sole forms through which human understanding is advanced” and calls for opening new “possibilities for people to pursue to make it permissible to explore new forms of inquiry that everybody who has thought about it recognizes contributes to the enlargement of human understanding” (p. 413, p. 415). Eisner posits that the educational novelist

\[\text{\newline}^{2}\text{Over the last twenty-five years, colleges of education have accepted many dissertations written in alternative forms (Jacobs, 2008). In addition, the broader scholarly research community has also welcomed artistic renderings of theory and findings (Fletcher, 2008; Lather, 1997; Richardson, 1997; and Tanaka, 1997).}\]
“would become as grounded theoretically and analytically in the current substance of educational scholarship” as any other doctoral student but would employ a literary form “that would perform a function that other forms simply don’t have the capacity to perform” (p. 415). Towards the conclusion of the conversation, Eisner says that “sometimes the function of a novel is to... make us feel uncomfortable, to give us an insight that we never had before” (p. 424).

What follows is not a novel, but it is grounded in theory and does aim to tell a story – at times an uncomfortable one – that couldn’t be told in another form. My hope is that this writing – which is poetic and jarring, joyful and distressing – offers an insight, starts a conversation, and teaches us something about the classroom and our place in it.

That’s enough studenting. Let’s get real…

_____

It happens every year:
Crickets thunder,
Nights cool.

Unable to sleep, I roam downstairs.
Through the trees I witness the brightening sky.
Birds gather and the day awakens.

I wish the sun would sink.
That night would last.
That I’d just stay here.


Stephen Dedalus
Class of Elements
Clongowes Wood College
Sallins
County Kildare
Ireland
Europe
The World
The Universe”

Bug Brennan
AP English
Seton Catholic High School
37 William Street
Pittston
Luzerne County
Pennsylvania
United States of America
North America
Western Hemisphere
Earth
The Milky Way
The Universe
Heaven

“himself, his name and where he was”

“Then he read the flyleaf from the bottom to the top till he came to his own name.

That was he.”

“This is she.”

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3 Joyce, 1916.
Layers.
Enlarging outward; contracting inward.
Looking out, the view filtered through these layers; looking in, likewise filtered.
I know the spheres that surround me through my positioning in the preceding layers.
Reverse the order.
What I see in myself is shaped by the layers I travel through to get back home.

Perpetually geographically situated. I see (myself) through places.

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In August 1990, Wyoming Area Catholic hosted a *Welcome Night* and invited new members of the Kindergarten class and their parents to an informal meet-and-greet in the Kindergarten classroom. There’s a lot I don’t remember from that night, but some things – thanks to still images – remain in my mind.

In one photograph, I’m standing in the dead center of the reading circle. There’s activity around me, but I’m clearly stationary. My right arm is bent at a $90^\circ$ angle and my hand is extended upward; I’m waving. What stands out to me more than the purple Los Angeles Lakers cap I’m wearing is my smile. I know that smile well and wear it often when I’m in situations that make me uncomfortable. My teeth are clenched and the tension in my neck is visible. It was probably on that night that I knew this place wasn’t for me.

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Think back to August 29th. How did the classroom look when we arrived? What was the configuration?

*Columns and rows, all facing the front.*

Why?

*That’s how classrooms look.*

Why?

*Because that’s how we’re conditioned to see the world. Divided. An all-knowing keeper of information in the front; passive empty vessels sitting, waiting to be filled. Both*
dependent upon someone else somewhere else to determine what information is worth passing down, what perspectives are worth seeing.

Who says?

The progress-driven, generalizable-focused culture in which we live. The same dominant voices that determined the layout in the first place. The same perspectives that said this is the front and that is the back; you go here and you go there.

What’s the goal then?

Division of people; division of labor; division of self.

Let’s think about the shoemaker, once a respected and valued member of the community. What were his responsibilities when crafting a shoe?

Stripping the hide, drying it, cutting it, molding it, stitching it, and oiling it. Shaping the sole, punching the eyelets, fastening grommets, et cetera, et cetera. Ultimately, fitting the shoe and selling it. His hand – literally – was part of every step from conception to sale. A craftsman, he took pride in his work.

What happened when we started thinking more about profit and efficiency and less about craftsmanship and durability?

The shoemaker was separated from his work and set on the assembly line. Maybe he’s now the eyelet-puncher. Punch, punch, punch. All day, all week, all year. Never a part of what came before; never a part of what comes after. Isolated. Expected to perform this repetitive task. No questions.

Is this more efficient? Sure.

But...

But what?

It alienates and differentiates.

So…. Where is the acceptance? Where is the resistance?
Over six-hundred years ago, Chaucer wrote the *Canterbury Tales*. He gave us *The Knight’s Tale, The Miller’s Tale, The Cook’s Tale, The Friar’s Tale, The Squire’s Tale, The Pardoner’s Tale*, and so on…

So far we’ve heard *The Pharmacist’s Tale, The Physician’s Tale, The Judge’s Tale, and The Accountant’s Tale*. Who would like to go next?

How about you, Bug?

*Umm. Ok.*

*Bug’s Tale, by Bug Brennan…*

Bug is quiet in class.
Ok.
I mean, like, really quiet.
Ok.
You know, extraordinarily quiet.
She is who she is.

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I feel you staring at me. I see the remnant cottage cheese spraying from your mouth as you over-enunciate your words. I hear the disgust in your tone.

Exasperated.

Well?  
* I’m not going to talk.*
Well?  
*Nope.*

You know, you’re something. Tom’s the genius; Erin’s the lawyer; and Joe’s the humanitarian.

What are you?  *Just the athlete.*

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One brother has three degrees from Harvard; my sister’s a federal law clerk; another brother got a full-ride to college.
I’m five months away from graduating with highest honors, and you’re gonna tell me I’m always gonna be just the athlete in a world where that will do me no good?

And then we’re all going to carry on like nothing happened?

Something did happen. We say stuff. We don’t say stuff. We perceive things. We influence each other in deep ways.

You may carry on. Following up our one-sided conversation with one of your Hallelujah outbursts.

But I won’t. Because I’ll wonder – now and too often – if you’re right. If I’ll never be anything more.

By now I should realize this is what we do in school. We sort and separate and compare.

    But what about appreciation for individuals?
    Don’t stack them next to each other.
    Don’t put them in a line –
    shortest to tallest; A-Z; dumbest to smartest.
    Don’t rank them.

    Respect them for the gifts they are
    and the gifts they give.

Because if you don’t, they won’t. And I’m proof of that.


You remember the adults in the prime-time specials, right? Never saw them, but occasionally heard them. Wah, Wah, Wah, Wah ... Wah, Wah, Wah, Wah. I looked into it once and apparently they used a plunger trombone to create those voices. They were looking for a sound to mimic what children might hear when adults speak. They nailed it.

Sometimes when I talk I think I sound like a plunger trombone. Like I’m speaking a different language that’s decipherable only by me. In my head what I’m thinking makes so much sense. But there’s a detour somewhere along the route the idea travels to get to my mouth. What I utter isn’t necessarily what I was thinking; I go off-course. As I start
wondering about why and where, I simultaneously attempt to bring it back, but soon I lose both where I am and where I was originally trying to go, and the whole thing turns into a mishmash of incomprehensible nonsense – a bunch of sound and fury. My frustration grows and my self-consciousness builds.

This doesn’t happen everywhere. But it does regularly happen in the classroom and it sometimes happens other places when there’s a speed component involved. Speed components should be part of some Olympic sports and gameshows, not classrooms. I’m awful at Jeopardy! It’s not that I don’t have the answers, I just can’t formulate them quickly enough.

In a classroom, time is of the essence. I hear, “Take your time,” but the reality is there’s a finite amount of time. Whether it’s an individual lesson or a standardized exam, time matters.

32 or 50 or 75 minutes.
15 weeks or 180 days.
There’s a lot of material to get through.
We have to hurry.

When we leave part of the curriculum and move on to the next unit, there’s no time to return to something from earlier in the day or week or year.

By the time I’ve formulated what I think, we’re long past the point I wanted to make.
I’m too late.
I’ve wasted my time.


YOU COULD SHOOT!!!

Standing straight out from the basket behind the three-point line, I hear the assistant coach – irritation coming through louder than encouragement. I picture his face getting redder.

I’m wide open. It’s a shot I can make – we all know that.

But we’ve been here before.

I don’t shoot.

I dribble into the defense. There are several options from here. A contested lay-up I know I’ll make; an internal dump off to an offensively-inept teammate; a pass out for a foul-line jumper.
This particular play begins with a quick first step, a curve along the right-side of the key, long strides; a tight turn; fluid movement from dribble to shot. An unconventional form and a swift release. The familiar snap of leather on nylon.

I know the cliché: “You miss 100% of the shots you don’t take.”

But not every shot is meant to be taken.

A pass can lead to a different shot. Exploration and freelancing can take us to wonderous places inaccessible via any other route.


Wendell Berry wants us all to go back in time and be farmers. What he’s saying is oppressive, rural-centered, too Christian, and not sustainable. I implore you to point out anything in his writing that suggests anything different.

My body tenses as I hear these words. That’s such an unoriginal, overworked argument; what I’m hearing is wackadoodle.

Then my frustration turns inward when I realize that – once again – I’m not going to have the time and I’m not going to have the words and I’m not going to have the confidence and I’m not going to be able to articulate a response. I don’t say anything.

brow furrows
breaths shorten
jaw clenches
neck tightens
shoulders stiffen
silence deafens

When did the tone get so aggressive? When did dialogue morph into debates argued from deeply entrenched sides? When did the rhetoric get so condescending?

What happened to conversation?
Maybe we’re all afraid just like Parker Palmer says.\(^4\)

Maybe some fear being exposed; they talk with authority. Maybe some fear being exposed; they remain in silence.

I’m competitive.
I should thrive in classrooms that set up winner/loser dichotomies. But I don’t. These places aren’t like courts or fields.

You know what I would do if the Wendell Berry exchange happened in a game? I’d first say, *Wow, that’s weird that Wendell Berry came up in a basketball game.* But… then I’d make my rebuttal through my actions – they “speak louder than words,” right?

I’d always start games slow. Ease into things. Get other people involved. Settle into a pace. Whatever. But, inevitably, in the heat of competition something would happen. Somebody would take a hard swipe. I’d get bumped. We’d fall behind. The other side would speak. And then I’d focus and plot my reply.

I’d call a clear out. Get my opponent at the top of the arc. Do something fancy – maybe a between-the-legs dribble, a crossover, or a spin move – and then drive the ball through the gut of the defense. End it with a finger-roll.

Aggression and grace.

And if that didn’t demonstrate that I was here to play and that there was validity in what I could do and see, too, I’d do the same thing again and again until it became clear.

In cross country, I remember some guy was ahead of me as we hit the final straight-away at the district meet. Approaching the finish line, I heard one of his buddies say something about a girl catching up to him. He picked up his speed, but I’d already made my move. He looked back; thought there was plenty of time. There wasn’t. I sprinted the last two tenths. Outkicked him to the finish. Walked away. Point and counterpoint. No words necessary.

I’m here.

I say middens, not mittens.
Buddens, not buttons.
Badaydas, not potatoes.

You must be from Minnesota.
_Umm, no._
Canada?
_No._
Your accent sounds like you’re from a cold, northern region where there’s lots of snow.
_Im from here._
Really?!
Yes.

The academic argument is just that – an argument. It’s written from the third-person point of view and omits any discussion of the author and his or her feelings. It’s dependent upon properly cited evidence procured from experts in the field. Make a claim and defend it. But keep yourself out of it.

As _defend_ suggests, arguments are combative. And they demand an objectiveness that requires distance from the things I seek to know.

Objectively analyze, scrutinize, evaluate, and dissect.
Use a microscope; use special gloves; use tests.
But whatever you do, don’t use yourself.
You’re irrational and emotional;
you’re primitive and dangerous;
you’re sentimental and confusing.

If you must reference yourself,
be sure to do it like this:
_The experimenter measured…_
Just never,
_I felt…_
_I thought…_
Nobody cares what you felt or what you thought.

The logic of objectiveness: I’m pointless.

―I have never, ever said that everybody ought to be a farmer."5 But we all ought to pay attention to the food we eat and the places we live. We should think carefully about how our choices, food and otherwise, affect the land and each other.

What’s so parochial about that?

This is how it goes. Just me and my Malibu. Heading home. My mind replaying every moment. Re-narrating the scenes (as I wish they had been).

Our classrooms are constructed using the efficiency template. “Time is money.” Figuring out new ways to assemble products faster differentiates one producer from the next and potentially greatly impacts the bottom line. I comprehend the logic. But the collateral damage is what concerns me. Profits increase, but what else happens?

I’m what else happens.

I’m an example of what comes out of classrooms molded by and committed to the narrative of differentiation, separation, and competition.

Curriculum-as-plan; Curriculum-as-lived.6 Doing vs. Being.

Doing: I’m replaceable; insignificant; trivialized; categorized; beneath

Being: I’m autonomous; significant; appreciated; individual; equal

More being; less doing.


I’m the storyteller there’s no time for.

5 Berry, 2012a.
6 Aoki, 2005a.

Classroom discussions often turn to back-and-forth volleys. Sort of a call-and-response ritual. The first question is expected; the response requires no (deep) thought. It’s posed to get the conversation started. Something similar to the WE ARE…PENN STATE routine unfolds around me. I should be good at this. I know the drill.

What did you think about Bowers?\(^7\)

*There shouldn’t be a wrong answer, but still I hesitate. Doubt seeps in. What if there is a correct answer? There’s always a correct answer, an answer that will lead us to where we should go next. There’s a should go because there’s always a point, always a place the curriculum says we need to get to. It’s never as open-ended as I perceive it to be. My answer probably isn’t the correct one. What if I’m the only one who thought the tone was dismissive and abrasive? Then there’s gonna be follow-up; I can’t get into follow-up. This is the easiest, most subjective question of the day; it’s a softball question, and I can’t articulate an answer. I’ve been down the mind-to-mouth path of confusion too often; I’d rather avoid it.*

By the time I’ve talked myself through the should I-shouldn’t I conversation, everyone’s moved on. The moment has passed. And I’m annoyed. I’ve missed another opportunity to enter, another chance to contribute.

This bothers me. I’m content not talking. I’m fine not sharing here. But I feel the pressure of this place. I can read the cues. It’s uncomfortable.

I converse with myself and play it all out. *This is how it could go, but this is how it probably will go.* Worry enters. I wonder how it’ll sound this time.

I take too long.

Then I get annoyed that I didn’t say something; *I’m supposed to say something.* And then I get annoyed that I’m annoyed by that because I didn’t want to say something to begin with. I get even more annoyed when I realize that I’ve once again fallen victim to the studenting role – thinking I had to say something instead of just being present in the silence.

\(^7\) Bowers, 2008.
There’s always a right and a wrong here. In real life, there’s a lot of gray area. I inhabit the gray area there. But in a classroom, where we play manufactured life? Yeah, there’s typically a right and a wrong. How do I know?

Multiple choice,
true-false,
fill in the blanks.

Umm, thanks for that.
Anybody else have an idea?
Let me repeat the question.

This place screams there’s one right answer. I’m not it.

I doubt.

You. More often, me.

I’ve been taught to be skeptical, find the mistaken logic, point out the weakness, and seek errors.

Expose it all.

Elbow says: We “now have a state of affairs where to almost anyone in the academic or intellectual world, it seems as though when he plays the doubting game he is being rigorous, disciplined, rational, and tough-minded. And if for any reason he refrains from playing the doubting game, he feels he is being unintellectual, irrational, and sloppy.”

I have a highly trained doubting muscle. I engage it daily.

This writing is really interesting. I doubt it.

I doubt I’m getting through.
I doubt I’m making sense.
I doubt my decision to do this instead of that.

I doubt here, because I’ve learned how.

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There? I don’t doubt. *I believe.*

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At the beginning and the end of the school day, I board Nat Noakes’ gray fifteen-seater van. I attend a parochial school outside of my public school district. My local district is responsible for providing transportation for me and the others who travel my way. Russ Bus Company won the contract and Mr. Noakes is the only driver I’ve ever had.

Melodies from the 1950s spill out from the speakers. Seventy-five years old, Mr. Noakes could easily be my grandfather. Eager to engage in conversation, he asks, “So whatcha learning these days?”

> Learning (n): “the action of receiving instruction or acquiring knowledge.” On one hand, learning is passive; it is something received. On the other hand, it requires possession; it is something acquired. The first part of this definition suggests I’m an account waiting for a deposit, an all too common approach in school. The second part of this definition implies knowledge is something to be controlled. Both angles show knowledge as sacred and scarce. It is protected and distributed via selective transmission to those deemed worthy enough to hold it.

**What am I learning?**

**Well...**

*I’m learning separation from my teachers, other students, maybe even myself.*

*I’m learning that important things happen inside, not out.*

*I’m learning that my head matters more than my body.*

*I’m learning the division of subjects and the definition of intelligence.*

*I’m learning that people get sorted and we work alone.*

*I’m learning that everything is an object to be exposed.*

*I’m learning how to accumulate information and regurgitate it on demand.*

*I’m learning a life of boxes and fragmentation.*

*I’m learning that school is a game that I’m not good at, that I can’t win.*

*I’m coming to understand that maybe learning isn’t what I’m after.*

Oh, you know, this and that. Some stuff. Nothing much. Hey, did you watch the Sixers game last night?

Y’all are gonna get As. Get that concern outta the way and do what ya gotta do.

I’m not going to get over the hierarchical nature of this relationship; it’s always going to be on my mind. It’s not your fault and I appreciate your encouragement. But we’re part of a system that requires a grade and that grade is determined by you. And even if you tell me the grade doesn’t matter, the truth is that it does. It’s a requirement: future schools will ask for it; future employers will file it away. There’s value implied and judgment delivered, and both make me incredibly uncomfortable.

I feel the same way when I submit my own students’ grades. I’ve tallied the numbers. But I know the people entrusted to my care are more than numbers. They’re people. They don’t fit into neat categories.

What does it mean?
You’re an A. You’re a C. Everybody’s an A.

How about:
Let’s talk.
These are strengths.
These are things that could be pushed further.
What if you considered this?
These are possibilities.

OK, but what’d I get?

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For Clifford Knapp “[t]eaching depends on establishing a person-to-person relationship with [his] students.” He aims to connect with his students on a human level.

I admire this. But I also hesitate. Is that possible?

For me?

Could I ever cultivate person-to-person relationships in here? Or would they always be teacher-to-student?

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I think a person-to-person relationship in a classroom would be a slow growth sort of thing. I wonder if 15 – or 30 or 45 – classes would suffice. Person-to-person requires a level of vulnerability that just isn’t present when we remain teacher-to-student. Reaching each other on a human level is healthier, of course. But there’s a risk there, too.

I’m not sure I trust you.
In here I’m cautious.

You have so much to say in your writing.

Writing is different. I can take my time. I can edit. I can create a voice and negotiate an identity. I’m confident I can keep your interest long enough to make my point.

Maybe we could communicate through letters. Isn’t it beautiful to get something in the mail? Written by hand. There’s something deeply personal about it.

The next time a teacher asks me a question, I’m gonna say, “You know, I’m going to write you a letter in reply. It’ll arrive sometime next week.”

There would be laughter. But I’m not joking. My letter would be more thoughtful than whatever I’d be capable of muttering on-the-spot.

If I write something, I’ve thought about it. Probably dwelled in it too long and taken it through too many drafts. But it had my attention and it has my love.

I can’t offer that in the spoken word. There’s too much pressure there; too much doubt; too many relationships to consider; too much judgment; too much fear. My words become garbled mumbo jumbo.

Right now, you’re speaking so eloquently. I think you regularly do.

I’m not sure about that. But if that’s true, it’s because we’re not in a classroom.

But I’m still your teacher.

But there’s not a public audience here. And, maybe, more importantly, I trust you.

I know you’ll let me talk; you’ll let me meander; you’ll listen; and you’ll comprehend.
You'll reciprocate with generosity and kindness. It won't be a battle. There won't be any gotcha-moments.

What have I done to earn your trust?

This. Repeatedly.

You've let me talk. You've meandered with me. You've listened. And you've comprehended.

You don't attack or permanently play devil's advocate. You haven't cut me off. You let me lose my way and find it again. You let me be (and become).

You probe and question, but there's a sincerity to it. It's authentic. You show a genuine desire to journey with me to discover where the path will lead. We go together.

You've cared for my story, and so you've cared for me. You've treasured what I've offered, and so you've treasured me. You've heard what I haven't said, and so you've heard me.

I do not fear a conversation rooted in mutual respect, honest curiosity, and sincere acceptance.

In this place, I am valued; I am heard; I am appreciated. I am whole.
How We Go On...
4 light gray marble tiles –
8 feet tall; 3 feet wide; 1 foot deep –
set atop 4 black marble pedestals climbing like steps.

Situated in the “heart” of the campus,
circled by grass and stone tiles,
etched with donors’ names.

The sculptures that rise are similar in form,
but there is a distinct difference.

The lowest is coarse and rough.
Subsequent ones are slightly less amorphous.
The highest – the aim – is polished and smooth.

Emerging
“depicts the intellectual and personal development of students
from unsure freshman” (the most formless)
to more self-reliant, self-assured seniors (the most carefully carved).

Emerging.
To rise out, become.

Become what?

___

At the entrance of the next building
there is a bronze torso –
arms extended in front,
hands holding the head.

___

Reattach the head.
Reconnect it to the heart.

Reverse the order.
There’s never a finished, always a becoming.
In the title poem of his 1983 compilation *Axe Handles*, Pulitzer Prize winning poet Gary Snyder tells a story about shaping an axe handle for his son, Kai. “Axe Handles” takes place in April and describes a father teaching his son how to throw a hatchet so skillfully that it “sticks into a stump.” The boy remembers an old “hatchet-head / Without a handle, in the shop.” He retrieves it and “wants it for his own.” The father uses the hatchet they had been throwing to cut an old axe-handle “to length” to make a new handle for the salvaged hatchet-head. As he’s working, the man remembers an insight from Ezra Pound: “‘When making an axe handle / the pattern is not far off.’” This is pertinent to this activity because the man is using a hatchet, the pattern, to make a handle for the found hatchet-head. He relates this to the boy: “Look: We’ll shape the handle / By checking the handle / Of the axe we cut with.” Immediately after, the man recalls a quote from the 4th century poet, Lu Ji: “In making the handle / Of an axe / By cutting wood with an axe / The model is indeed near at hand.” The speaker realizes that “Pound was an axe. / Chen was an axe. I am an axe.” They were each models – teachers – who handed down cultural patterns. And the son, just a “handle” now, patterned on the models who came before him, will soon “be shaping again” for the next generation.

“Axe Handles” is a story of home. Rooted in this domestic scene, the poem widens to reflections on parenting, historical wisdom, cultural values, and the future. “Axe Handles” freely crosses cultures, disciplines, and time to deepen the seemingly simple interaction between the father and son. It concludes with wonder and awe in “How we go on.” The poem explains that we – Lu Ji, Pound, Snyder, Kai, you, and me – go on through each other. We a part of an inter-generational conversation. We are “shaped” by those that came before; we are “shaping” those that come after.
When I think of my nephews and future generations, I worry about the story, the Grand Narrative, we’re telling them. I worry about the pattern we’re giving them and the world we’ll leave them. Gary Snyder’s (1974) “For the Children” eloquently captures some of this concern. This poem considers the plight of Turtle Island and wrestles with the challenges we face. But, in typical Snyder form, there’s hope. When I think of the different paths we may blaze along our journey, I’m often drawn back to these lines. They guide me.

The rising hills, the slopes,
of statistics
lie before us,
the steep climb
of everything, going up,
up, as we all
go down.

In the next century
or the one beyond that,
they say,
are valleys, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it.

To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:

*stay together
learn the flowers
go light*

In sixty-eight carefully chosen words, this poem begins where we are, points to where we may go, and offers specific directions for getting there.
Where We Are

Snyder describes our current place on a rapid upward curve driven by consumerism, anthropocentrism, extraction, accumulation, and development. The slope on the y-axis continues to rise with no summit in sight. Big business and the powerful few maintain their rapid ascent. They use scientific reasoning, quantitative data, and efficiency to justify their damaging movement. As they climb, they plant flags and open up new areas; they conquer and claim triumph for mankind. But as they continue “going up, / up,” the rest of the tribe “all go[es] down,” a necessary by-product of economic progress. After all, those who fail to rise are most likely savages, backward, or uncivilized; it’s necessary to trim the fat, the disposable.

This narrative is the one that we see and hear and consume on a daily basis. It’s written by those who go “up, / up,” and it’s recited by those who “go down.” This story is an important part of the “Promethean task of keeping the global industrial machine running” (Sachs, 2010, p. 35). In his much-cited 1955 article in the Journal of Retailing, economist Victor Lebow notes that our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego satisfaction, in consumption. These commodities and services must be offered to the consumer with a special urgency. We need things consumed, burned, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever-increasing rate. (p. 7)

Happiness is a purchase away; call now; this is the new must have; free shipping; while supplies last; out with the old; click here; retweet, share, snap for a chance to win; this
could all be yours. Our commitment to packaged obsolescence continues to waste our places and our stories.

In our pursuit of *having it all* and consuming our way to fulfillment, we’ve often consented to and retold a destructive story. Here’s a bit of the narrative we’ve too often accepted as natural. In my thirty-three years of life, the world population has increased from 4.8 billion to 7.3 billion, a 52% increase. That number is expected to rise to 9.7 billion in 2050 and 11.2 billion fifty years later (United Nations World Population Prospectus, 2015). More people will necessitate more food, more fuel, and more production. Most of that stuff will eventually end up in garbage dumps, many of which are located in my home state of Pennsylvania – the country’s largest importer of trash; twenty-eight states and Canada send their junk here (Land of Waste, 2016). The cell phones in our pockets, the tablets in our bags, and the computers on our desktops contain heavy metals extracted from the earth. A quick search on *Google Earth* shows another consequence of our consumption: over 500 mountains in the Appalachian range have been partially or completely destroyed by mining, most recently mountain-top removal mining. Streams, valleys, and people have been polluted and destroyed as a result of our abuse of the earth. A World Health Organization (2017) report revealed that in 2015 nearly 1.6 million children under the age of 5 died because of hazards that “could have been prevented through addressing environmental risks” (p. xi). The temperature is rising and we continue to release carbon as we knock down and burn up the forests that would help to lessen the strain. Our beef-heavy diet means more clearing for growing food to be consumed by cattle, and, eventually, more methane belched into the
atmosphere. “Industrial vandalism” is present everywhere we look (Berry, 2012b, p. 169). We tout our freedom, but we’re more dependent than ever.

In our excessive consumption and our hasty pursuit of profit, we’ve lost our place. This disorientation has resulted in the impoverishment of the land and the deprivation of the human spirit. In his first encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis (2015) writes that the distance caused by the “intensified pace of life and work…causes harm to the world and to the quality of life of much of humanity” (p. 15). We’ve witnessed the impact of this story: lost languages, lost cultures, lost species, lost ecosystems, lost places, and, perhaps most damaging, lost selves. Our pursuit of development and our commitment to progress continue to lead us further from ourselves, from each other, and from the soil under our feet.

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How did we come unstitched from our natural places? After all, at our elemental level, are we not simply nature? Are we not composed of hydrogen, carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, and calcium? Were we not born of the earth and are we not destined to return there? Are our bodies and our land not “made of the same stuff” (Sanders, 1993, p. 50)? We are from the earth, we are nourished by the earth, and we will return to the earth; yet in the living of our lives, we’ve become so far removed from the earth that for many the land is now a stranger, Other, something different, something to be tamed, defeated, and used.

The “Resources” entry in *The Development Dictionary* points to specific language that may form the basis of the “mastery and dominion images” that shape our perspective and shift nature to the position of Other (p. 232). Vandana Shiva (2010) traces the roots
of the “desacralization of nature” narrative back a few centuries to Francis Bacon and the terms he used to describe scientific inquiry (p. 231). Shiva argues that Bacon’s method suggests “a peculiarly masculine mode of aggression against nature and domination over women and non-Western cultures” (p. 231). Specifically, “[b]oth nature and the process of scientific inquiry appear conceptualized in ways modelled on rape and torture” (p. 231). “The discipline of scientific knowledge, and the mechanical inventions it leads to, do not ‘merely exert a gentle guidance over nature’s course; they have the power to conquer and subdue her, to shake her to her foundations’” (p. 231). For Bacon, then, “nature was no longer Mother Nature, but a female nature, conquered by an aggressive masculine mind” (p. 232). Nature becomes something to be controlled, something to be harnessed, and something to be used for our own “needs” – as Ivan Illich (2010) defines the term. We consistently use this perspective (explicitly or implicitly) to justify our damaging treatment of the very nature upon which we depend and the very nature that we are.

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Education, from Latin educere, meaning “lead out,” is always directional. The way our education system points is “up, / up.” Recognizing the endless pursuit of vertical movement, Wes Jackson (1999) and Wendell Berry (2010b) conclude that there is only one serious course of study in school: upward mobility. Jackson (1993) points out that this commitment to upward mobility is a product of “the mind-set that fuels the extractive economy.” Berry (2010b) argues that this focus “put[s] our schools too much at the service of …our ‘economy’” and reduces education “to job training” (p. 32). With an emphasis on careerism and specialization, schools at all levels dispense curricula
which aim to duplicate the pattern laid out by our industrial society, a model that serves a destructive economy.

The primary curriculum of school, which Ted Aoki (2005) names the curriculum-as-plan, is based on the industrial efficiency model that privileges generalizability and replicability. It’s crafted outside the classroom, approved by state and federal policy-makers, and distributed widely. The curriculum-as-plan prizes certain ways of knowing, prioritizes particular resources, and imposes narrow ways of evaluating. Too often, “in place of actual experience with the phenomenal world, educators are handed, and largely accept, the mandates of a standardized ‘placeless’ curriculum” (Gruenewald, 2003a, p. 8). This generic, anywhere education, while perhaps efficient and cost-effective, “easily deteriorate[s] to an education of ‘nowhere’” (Noddings, 2002, p. 171). Maintaining this where-less perspective through manufactured curriculum misses the fundamental diversity, unity, and multiple ways of knowing alive in the students we teach, the places we inhabit, and the communities of which we are a part (Gruenewald & Smith, 2007).

The curriculum-as-plan is the explicit model schools publicize, but, as Aoki (2005) acknowledges, it would be naïve to think that these mass-produced outcomes and goals are the only things students learn. Much more is taught, often implicitly, and learned in school. In Experience and Education, John Dewey (1938) introduces the concept of collateral learning and points out that it’s a fallacy to think “that a person learns only the particular thing [s]he is studying at the time” (p. 48). In addition to the “spelling lesson or lesson in geography or history,” students simultaneously learn societal values and privileged ways of knowing, being, and doing (p. 48). Since Dewey, many theorists have wrestled with the reality that students learn what is intended and also what
is not necessarily stated (Durkheim, 1925; Jackson, 1968; Illich, 1971; Martin, 1976; Giroux, 1981; Apple, 1982; Eisner, 1985).

Through school curricula, whether explicit or implicit, patterns – cultural norms, values, beliefs, and ways of being – are passed on. Too often, the models replicated in school are based on the narrative of “everything, going up, / up” and emphasize standardization over creativity and separation over wholeness.

The curriculum-as-plan is an obvious example of standardization in school but looking closer at the doings of school reveals an ever-present pattern of uniformity. Philip Jackson (1968) considers the routine of school and examines the “cultural significance” in “the humdrum elements” of the “daily grind” (p. 4). He describes school as a “highly stable” environment that provides a “fairly constant social context” (pp. 6-7). Although he wrote a half-century ago, Jackson’s reading of school remains relevant and accurate today. There are small variations, but a school is still a school, a classroom is still a classroom. With a quick glance, we know them by their physical setup: black/green/white/smart boards; prearranged desks; bulletin boards; inspirational posters; and grimy windows framing an outside world that most students won’t experience during the school day. Below the surface is more consistency. Bells impose an artificial structure and movement through the school and the day. There are lines, and dress codes, and the same packaged lunches pulled out of the same mass-produced lunch boxes and set atop the same pre-fabricated tables. Number 2 pencils, scantron sheets, and corporate textbooks. To succeed in these places requires “intellectual prowess” and, more importantly, “institutional conformity”; the same could be said of most of the places where students will eventually work (p. 34). In school, “model” students master the
hidden curriculum and comply “with the procedural expectations of the institution”; i.e., they complete their work, raise their hands, exercise restraint, and learn “to be passive and to acquiesce to the network of rules, regulations, and routines” (p. 34).

Part of the institutional expectations that “model” students master is separation – between different ways of knowing, within themselves, and between humans and nature. This division is evident throughout the hierarchal structure of school and particularly in the curriculum-as-plan, which cuts the world into discrete perspectives or disciplines. At an early age, students learn – implicitly – that these ways of knowing exist in isolation and some are more valid than others (Kawagley & Bernhardt, 1999). In addition to slicing the world into competing subjects, the curricula in school privilege the mind over the body and often remove the heart from academic conversations (Palmer, 1998; Uhl & Stuchul, 2011; Rose, 2009; Williams & Brown, 2012). By elevating the mind and negating the heart, Christopher Uhl and Dana Stuchul (2011) argue that school models “through word and example, to separate your knowing and thinking from your feelings, your head from your heart, your mind from your feeling body” (p. 16). But, of course, learning is embodied; it “involves the whole person, body, mind, spirit, and the total environment with which a person interacts” (Gruenewald, 2002, p. 535). And it is that “total environment,” specifically, the immediate place, that is so often eliminated from the curricula which consistently separate students from the natural world that surrounds them (Gruenewald, 2003a; Gruenewald & Smith, 2007; Jardine, 2000; Louv, 2005; Noddings, 2005; Orr, 2004; Sobel, 2005). Reflecting on both his school days and his own teaching, Bill Bigelow (2014) concludes that school teaches “that the important work of society...occurs indoors with books, and paper and pencils” (p. 38). Further,
students learn that the land beneath them is “inert stuff – mere dirt on top of which happens real life” (Bigelow, 2014, p. 38).

The disjointed and standardized curricula in school trace particular threads in the story of our world and aim to reproduce particular cultural norms to achieve particular goals. The objective is to highlight beliefs, assumptions, and ways of knowing that produce efficient, “model” employees and consumers trained to ingest packaged, ready-made ideas. This story might be beneficial to those who go “up, / up,” but it doesn’t support the health and well-being of individuals, communities, or ecosystems.

Perhaps the curricula in school points in the wrong direction. Maybe we should look down, in, here.

Where We May Go

Eventually the earth speaks, too. The x-axis in Snyder’s poem “represents the limits of the earth’s carrying capacity” (Elder, 1999, p. 273). We may dream of perpetual rising, but gravity will eventually draw us back. And this is how the story will end: “Either nature’s limits are respected, and human activity is limited within ecological bounds, or nature’s limits are disregarded and violated in order to exploit nature for society’s limitless greed and consumption” (Shiva, 2010, p. 240). I hope for the former, but brace for the latter.

And in hoping for unity and balance, I return to the second stanza of “For the Children.” These lines offer a vision of where we might eventually find ourselves. On the distant horizon, there “are valleys, pastures, / we can meet there in peace.” We: humans (all of us) and nature (all of it). Meet: “to arrive in the same place” as “equals.”
We, humans and nature, will arrive in the same particular place as equals. If we come in peace, not as conquerors or omniscient beings, we’ll discover harmony in this place.

Arriving at the tranquil pasture pointed to in “For the Children” will require sowing healthier, more connected beings, relationship, and communities. And to do that requires looking and seeing ourselves and our world more clearly, specifically, and holistically. School can demonstrate this connection and exemplify this vision. Instead of continuing to replicate a damaging pattern, school could highlight another more natural pattern for living in communion. This might help us realize that we’ve been standing in the fabled pasture all along.

There are challenges, for sure. Our destination is not guaranteed; the stanza ends with the ominous reminder that this is where we will meet only “if we can make it.” There are “coming crests.”

**How We Get There**

Snyder’s warning lingers. Can we make it? And, if so, how? Fortunately, we’re not left stranded; “For the Children” provides direction and shows the way to growing more peaceful, cohesive places and beings.

- *stay together*
- *learn the flowers*
- *go light*

Cultivate community; study the ways of nature; be mindful, not wasteful. Be present. Illuminate new ways of knowing; light the path for future generations to follow. It’s important that the poem refuses to end with a period. We’re not there yet; the story isn’t complete. There’s work to do.
To create a more peaceful place requires critical examination of the models we replicate and the stories we tell. It necessitates an honest evaluation of the world we’re making. If we look closely, we’ll see the wounds inflicted on our individual and collective selves and places. We’ll recognize the damaging results of generalization, replication, standardization, and separation. We’ll perceive the disempowerment, disorientation, and displacement. It is true that these outcomes stem from a variety of causes, of which our education system is just one. However, the impact of schooling is far-reaching and long-lasting. To make our way to a more harmonious place, we must begin here – in school, a place where the past and future meet and perspectives are shaped, cultural values are passed on, actions are directed, and students are shown how to live in the world.

As a counter to the dominant pattern of upward mobility produced by our economy and replicated in school, Wes Jackson (1996) and Wendell Berry (2010b) propose another model – the homecoming major. Jackson (1996) envisions that the homecoming curriculum would prepare young people to “return home or to go some other place and dig in” (p. 3) This course of study would help students “become native to [their] places in a coherent community that is in turn embedded in the ecological realities of its surrounding landscape” (p. 3). As this major evolves, students “will increasingly discover answers to questions [they] have not yet learned to ask” about themselves, their relationships, and their places (Jackson, 1999). The homecoming major will highlight the seamlessness of the world and show that there is a “high level of uncertainty” involved in paying attention to and accounting for where we are (Jackson, 1999). This curriculum
will help students begin “the tiresome job of learning to see what is before [them] and what the possibilities are” for becoming responsible members of their places (p. 109). It will encourage students to measure the progress of their community by “how independent of the extractive economy it has become” (Jackson, 1999). The homecoming major will guide them as they engage in the most important work of our time – “a massive salvage operation to save the vulnerable but necessary pieces of nature and culture and to keep the good and artful examples before us” (p. 103).

The emphasis for both Jackson and Wendell Berry, who later picks up Jackson’s term, is on the particular, the webs of the human and more-than-human, the near and far, and the past, future, and present. In his commencement address at Northern Kentucky University, Berry (2010b) argues that the “proper goal of education” is “understanding what it means to be a human in a living world” (p. 34). To begin to develop this understanding means establishing ourselves in place and “making [ourselves] partners with air, soil, water and other organisms” (p. 34). It means learning to adapt to our natural places instead of imposing our rigid, manufactured structures upon them. As Berry reminds his audience “local adaptation is a necessity for the survival of all species: They either adapt to their places, or they die” (p. 34). Regrettably, we have too often “exempt our own species from this stark choice” (p. 34). But coming home and adapting, Berry contends, “is not an elective. It is a requirement” for our individual and collective health and survival (p. 34).

At the basis of Berry’s imagining of the homecoming major is “a curriculum of questions” (p. 34):

1. What has happened here? By ‘here’ I mean wherever you live and work.
2. What should have happened here?

3. What is here now? What is left of the original natural endowment? What has been lost? What has been added?

4. What is the nature, or genius, of this place?

5. What will nature permit us to do here without permanent damage or loss?

6. What will nature help us to do here?

7. What can we do to mend the damages we have done?

8. What are the limits: Of the nature of this place? Of our intelligence and ability? (pp. 34-35)

Berry recognizes that “these questions cannot be answered – and they are not likely to be asked – by a specialist” working in a niche in isolation (p. 35). But these questions “can be asked, and eventually answered to a significant extent, by a conversation across the disciplinary boundaries” (p. 35). This conversation, Berry notes, “would collapse the rigidly departmented structure of our present academic and professional system into a vital, wakeful society of local communities elegantly adapted to local ecosystems” (p. 35).

Homecoming offers a holistic model for living, teaching, and learning. Berry (2010b) poses the “curriculum of questions” at the heart of homecoming (p. 34). Raising “vital, wakeful” individuals prepared to explore these questions means we’ll need to highlight and hand down alternative patterns (p. 35). Instead of the manufactured model, the homecoming curriculum directs our attention to the webs of connections looping around and through us. It is arranged using a different objective (growing humanity, not
trained consumers), different scale (small, not big), different language (common tongue, not specialized discourse), and different time (generational, not short-term) than what many of us have learned in school and grown accustomed to in our daily lives. It’s collaborative, experiential, and authentic. It requires patience, reflection, and service. The homecoming major shows us how to come home, to heal, to connect, and to belong. It helps us “stay together / learn the flowers / go light”.

We must come home to our real places and specific locations. To do so means paying attention to, grasping, and caring for the uniqueness of our places – from soil to memory, language to climate, history to culture. Awakened to all that our places encompass, we might cultivate stronger attachments to our places and make wiser decisions that ensure the growth and well-being of ourselves and our places both now and in the future. Berry (1990) contends that a “human community, if it is to last long, must exert a sort of centripetal force, holding local soil and local memory in place” (p. 155). The homecomer holds on and hands down because she recognizes that we will lose that which we cannot story, refuse to see, or won’t protect. And if we lose our places, we lose ourselves.

The homecoming curriculum is nested in place, but also underscores connections. Homegrown lessons germinate from the needs and concerns of the local community. These investigations might educate “people in the art of living well where they are” (Orr, 1991, p. 9). In addition, lessons growing from home orient learners and implicitly argue that our immediate place matters; it deserves our attention. Exploration of these issues spirals out far beyond our local place to demonstrate that here, now is intrinsically
connected to *there, later* (Casey, 1996; Jardine et al., 2003). Robert Brooke (2003), drawing on the teaching of Paul Theobald, suggests that by centering education in local civic issues, history, biology, economics, literature, and so forth, learners will be guided to imagine a world as intradependent, filled with a variety of locally intradependent places, and to develop a richer sense of citizenship and civic action. (p. 6)

As the concentric model expands, learners realize that they’re members of not only their immediate place, but also of the broader communities.

School can cultivate homecomer tendencies by legitimizing local knowledge and focusing the curriculum on local questions, concerns, and issues. Digging through familiar ground, we will discover fertile opportunities for placed, collaborative learning that leads to more responsible living (Brooke, 2003; Goleman, et al., 2012; Gruenewald & Smith, 2007; Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2005; Wigginton, 1985). Although attention is focused on the parochial, answers are informed by a conversation between local knowledge and centralized knowledge. This type of learning breaks down the artificial boundaries constructed by the dichotomies we often take for granted: thinking/acting; school/life; human/more-than-human; there/here; information/understanding, and separation/collaboration. Considering these issues in interdisciplinary ways models good stewardship and responsible membership.

The patience, fidelity, and hospitality required for membership are virtues nurtured by the homecoming major which aims to grow homecomers – stickers, dwellers, natives, inhabitants – who act to unify and hold together their places and remain committed to the shared relationships (both human and more-than-human; the living, the
dead, and the yet to arrive) and meaning alive in those places (Berry, 2012c; Illich, 2006; Jackson, 1996; Orr, 1991). Although these are good intentions, they will not be achieved without affection and “the terms of value that cluster around it – love, care, sympathy, mercy, forbearance, respect, [and] reverence” for the placed and particular culture, geography, memory, and community of home (Berry, 2012c). Affection “is never abstract”; it is specific, personal, and partial (Berry, 1990, p. 200). Affection does not grow overnight and it cannot be discovered in the classroom of any one particular discipline. It is nourished through cross-pollination; it slowly accrues and requires faithful attention. But it’s worth the wait and the work because knowledge without affection “leads us astray every time”; affection, on the other hand, consistently “leads…to authentic hope” for wiser, more generous, and more closely connected beings, lives, and places (Berry, 2012c).

**Outlook**

At the heart of any conversation about living rests three questions:

For what?
For whom?
For where?

The curricula in school implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) teaches the following answers:

For profit and progress
For me
For up, out, away, and anywhere but here
Often it is these answers that underpin the methodology of school and inform the methods incorporated in the classroom. This pattern might provide short-term benefits to those who go “up, up”; it might be efficient and profitable; it might even temporarily satisfy our impulsive instincts. But is that living? Is that all? Or is that just one pattern, one way of answering the questions and telling the story? Imagine the world we’d be making if these were the answers we offered:

For healing, wholeness, and belonging

For all of us – “those cloaked in feathers or scales or chintin or fur, those covered in leaves and bark,” and those draped in skin (Sanders, 2009, p. 277)

For here

Nearly sixty years ago, Aldo Leopold (1949) famously asked, “[W]hat is education for?” (p. 210). Four decades later, Wendell Berry (1987) answered that “[t]he inescapable purpose of education must be to preserve and pass on the essential human means – the thoughts and words and works and ways and standards and hopes without which we are not human” (pp. 88-89). And each of those “essential human means” trace their roots back to connection. We are not human – we do not exist – without connection within ourselves, to each other, and to the life within our places.

Echoing the many place-conscious, eco-sensitive beings who came before me, I believe that education is for understanding what it means to be me, a human, here and now, in communion with a living world. Of course, this is a lifelong pursuit and there’s no standardized way of getting there. But learning how to come home enables us to place ourselves and feel the threads that gather all of us (living, dead, and yet to come; human
and more-than-human) together. In coming home and in making home, we will achieve a
sense of connection and belonging.

When I think of my own students, I realize that many of them will not return to
their native homes; they shouldn’t. But I hope they will eventually find a place, settle
down, and stay. And when they do, I hope we’ve done our part and shared with them a
pattern of affection that blossoms from humility and is nurtured by our commitment to
study, listen to, learn from, and care for the places we live and the life, both ephemeral
and eternal, held in those places. I hope this will, in turn, grow responsible “seeing
beings” who model and hand down the pattern of coming home (Berends, 1997, p. 58). I
hope these individuals and the generations that follow, mindful of their own ignorance
and limitations, will create rooted and meaningful work that contributes to the health and
well-being of their places and all the life within those places. I hope they’ll recognize
and appreciate our debt to the beings who came before us, our dependence on the beings
who walk with us, and our obligation to the beings who will come after us. There is
nothing more important than telling, living, and breathing this story. It’s how we will go
on…
Where I Teach
I wasn’t planning on being here.
I had accepted a position with Teach for America.
In June, three months after I applied for a teaching position
at Penn State Wilkes-Barre, I received a call.
*Could you come in next Monday?  We’d love to meet with you.*

The campus is five miles from where I grew up, but I didn’t know it too well.
History Day was there back when I was in elementary school.
My memories of the place were filled with awkward tri-fold poster board presentations;
in 1998, the theme was migration. I researched cars.
Everybody wants to go somewhere, right?

I remember the rolled-up dollar bills in our pockets;
we were eager to spend them at the Snack Bar that was exciting to those of us coming from my tiny school.
There were also the friendly competitions where we’d race each other up the path in the woods, circle the water tower, and sprint back to the old stone carriage house.
Those were the days when I could outrun the boys, even when I was wearing fancy shoes.

I don’t know that any of these memories populated my mind when I returned to the campus that June day nine years ago.
But I do know that when I hooked a right into the parking lot, I thought about all that was riding on this interview.
I was fresh out of graduate school, under-qualified and inexperienced.
But I was determined to find a way home.

A day later my phone rang again.
*The job is yours.*
I said yes before I heard the salary.
It didn’t matter.
I was ready to return to my roots and write my story here.
Could I be the poet of this place?
Nah, I’m just an unknown face.

Unrecognized, unheard outside this door
Perhaps, someday, I’ll be something more.

During a recent Faculty Senate meeting, our new Chancellor and Chief Academic Officer Dale Jones voiced his concern about the campus’ declining enrollment and shaky retention rates. In the fall of 2016, the campus enrolled 436 degree-seeking undergraduate students; that’s a 22% decline from the fall of 2012. In 2017, that number dropped again to 400. With such low numbers (Penn State Wilkes-Barre is the smallest Commonwealth Campus), the need to retain students is elevated. Before briefly overviewing his vision for the campus and outlining the need to both attract and retain more students, Dr. Jones encouraged faculty to consider the following questions: Who are we? Who do we want to be? I believe that we cannot provide truthful answers to those questions unless we simultaneously address two equally important questions: Where are we? Where do we belong?

To know who we are we need to know where we are (Stegner, 1992). Place and self exist in a coextensive association; each brings life to the other. Our very beings are interwoven with place; people and places, lives and settings interanimate. If we wish to know who we are, we need to look at where we are and what has happened here.
You teach at Penn State Wilkes-Barre? Yeah.
Where’s that? Lehman, Pennsylvania.
Oh.

Penn State Wilkes-Barre grew out of the specific needs of a specific place.\(^\text{13}\) In 1916, when the first class was held in a building twelve miles southeast of the campus’ current location, Northeastern Pennsylvania’s coal was still being extracted from the earth, separated by breaker boys, piled onto trains, and shipped across the country; it fed the furnaces of countless houses and industries. The Anthracite Coal Region as it’s still known, despite the last load pulling out nearly 60 years ago, needed engineers to maintain safety and help improve methods both in the mines and on the rails. Thus, the Penn State Department of Engineering Extension, as it was known then, was born.

During World War II, the school, then The Pennsylvania State College Wilkes-Barre Technical School, again responded to the needs of its place; courses were offered for men and women to learn the skills necessary to fill the industry-positions left by young men who headed off to war (Penn State Wilkes-Barre, 1966). By 1950, the school had expanded and classes were moved to the larger Guthrie Building in Wilkes-Barre. A few years later, the institution was approved to award associate degrees in Engineering. A little over a decade after, Penn State Wilkes-Barre moved to where it now sits, a 43-acre parcel of the Conyngham estate in Lehman, Pennsylvania.

It is here that two places, two histories, and two commitments to education intersect. In 1910, John and Bertha Conyngham founded Hayfield Farm, a 900-acre

\(^{13}\) This story is my attempt to stitch together some of the stories of this place. I draw on texts, both oral and written, that I’ve heard and read here and there, then and now. And I gathered some information from people I’ve met along the way, each of whom has inhabited this place in some way.
property in proximity to an even larger tract of land that Conyngham’s father owned. Hayfield was a picturesque place that “present[ed] the ideal hobby” and ample space for Mr. Conyngham’s gentleman’s farm (“Nine-hundred Acres,” 1935, p. 11). It was home to Conyngham’s cherished Clydesdale horses and both Aberdeen Angus and Scotch Highland cattle. In addition, Welsh Mountain, Highland, and Shropshire sheep, Irish and Sardinian donkeys, and Chester White pigs roamed these fields. Imported livestock thrived here.

But this place was more than just the leisurely interest of a wealthy couple. A Country Life feature article, one of two that ran in 1935, describes Hayfield as a place of teaching and learning. Here Conyngham, like his father before him, did “much to help the neighboring small farmers – teaching them to produce more and better crops by scientific planting, and helping them to improve the breeds of farm animals” (“Nine-hundred Acres,” 1935, p. 11). It is fitting that Penn State Wilkes-Barre eventually came to this land. Penn State, Pennsylvania’s only land-grant university, was chartered as “one of the nation’s first colleges of agricultural science” (“Our History,” 2015). And, like Hayfield, Penn State aimed “to apply scientific principles to farming” (“Our History,” 2015). The eventual union of these two stories in this place seems natural.

Twenty-two years after the founding of Hayfield Farm and at the height of the Great Depression, John and Bertha Conyngham embarked on a two-year journey to construct their summer residence – Hayfield House. While John tinkered with the farm, Bertha made the house. The first 1935 feature article from Country Life magazine describes the mansion as “colonial in inspiration,” but also giving “the impression of an Old English baronial estate” (“Hayfield House,” p. 19). Constructed using native
fieldstone, the walls are highlighted by contrasting white columns and trim. Precisely placed Vermont slate covers the roof. The residence is over 30,000 square feet; it’s extravagant and specific. Yet, it appropriately fits its surroundings. One early visitor remarked that if he hadn’t been told the house was recently constructed, he “would be inclined to take it for granted that the place had stood for a long time” because it perfectly “form[ed an] integral part of the charming surroundings” (Williams, 1934, p.15). The Conynghams, in both the farm and the house, paid attention to their place. Throughout its history, Penn State Wilkes-Barre has done the same.

Through Hayfield, the Conynghams planted seeds; so, too, did the Penn State representatives who came to the Wyoming Valley over a century ago. Both shared a commitment to educating local men and women to serve the local community. As Hayfield was then, Penn State Wilkes-Barre remains: it is a place of inquiry and experimentation, a place where new knowledge is discovered and shared, and a place committed to community enrichment and advancement (“Our Mission,” 2017).

In a 1934 interview he gave upon the completion of Hayfield House, John Conyngham remarked that he “never wanted it to be finished”; he enjoyed the planning, the tending, and the growing (Williams, p. 15). Although John and Bertha are long gone, Hayfield still isn’t finished. The marriage of Hayfield and Penn State Wilkes-Barre opened a new chapter. The story here continues; it lives and it grows.

I think about that story each semester when my freshman composition students and I visit Hayfield House. Part exercise in reading a text and part introduction to people and offices they’ll need in the future, our trip to Hayfield fulfills many goals of the place-
based writing course. Most students have never been inside the house; those that have been generally entered through a side door, met with security to register their cars, and exited the same way they arrived. Our walk through the house always elicits some oohhs and aahhs. We inevitably meet faculty and staff along the way. Feeling the excitement of students experiencing the place for the first time, the folks we encounter often offer threads of Hayfield stories they have heard; in doing so, they contribute to the ongoing making of this place. Many students eagerly ask questions; unfailingly, someone asks if the place is haunted.

Hayfield House is the keystone of the Penn State Wilkes-Barre campus; it’s the primary photograph on the campus website, and it’s the thumbnail image used to mark the campus’ geographic location on university-wide maps. Solid inlaid oak planks line the floors of the family residence. The 1,500 square foot living room is anchored by marble fireplaces – one from a 1639 English residence; the other a duplicate crafted by local artisans. The library includes leaded stained-glass pocket doors that were originally in Tuileries Palace in Paris. There’s a floating staircase, a Tibetan room, and a breakfast room complete with canvas – hand-painted in China – covering the walls. Family crests are carved into doorframes and sculpted farm scenes adorn several fireplace mantles. A vault door in the basement once guarded a climate-controlled room that held Mrs. Conyngham’s furs. Upstairs is her Marie Antoinette inspired boudoir. There’s a widow’s walk that’s off-limits today, but surely offers an unmatched view of the rolling hills atop which sits Hayfield.

We pass through the servants’ quarters – appropriately, my office is here – and climb to the third floor. When I reach the top, I lean over the banister to confirm that
everyone is with me. As students file past me, I’m struck by many things. For one, I rarely see them standing and these moments remind me that I’m shorter than most of my students, primarily 18-year-old males. Also, I notice similarities in their styles. I hear their heavy Carhartt boots plodding up the stairs. I see mud on their well-worn jeans and tans on their lower arms. Some wear baseball caps; years of sweat mean those caps are perfectly molded to the skulls beneath them. I overhear conversations about hunting, fishing, and, often enough, farming.

The juxtaposition of who we are and where we are always gets me here. Many of the first-generation students who enroll in my classes come from blue-collar families. And now they are walking through the residence of an aristocratic couple, imagining a different time and a different way of life. The Conynghams supplied tools, equipment, and lumber that made both the mines and the rails work more efficiently. My students and I talk about ancestors who dug in the mines, built the rails, tended the farms, and, in a few instances, assisted in the construction of Hayfield House.

This place was built by those laborers and their families. Their future now finds themselves here. As we continue our tour, I can’t help but be proud of those walking with me. They’re claiming a place their ancestors made and continuing the story their ancestors began. John Conyngham never wanted this place – this story – to end; it hasn’t. The story endures. Whether my students realize it or not, they’re writing it, here, now.
My contribution to the story takes place here, in the margins. I am a full-time English instructor on a campus founded to educate engineers. The most popular majors at my school continue to be science-related. I am a female educator in a place where male faculty outnumber female faculty 3:1, a ratio that’s mirrored in our student body. I teach mainly general education classes. Students are required to complete the courses I offer; many of them wouldn’t be here if they weren’t. My classes are the only ones that regularly meet in a multi-purpose room housed within the Athletic and Recreation Building, a structure situated on the edge of campus. When the university-wide Board of Trustees visited Penn State Wilkes-Barre in the summer of 2016, this room was used to store the contents of the library which was gutted, updated, and used to host our esteemed guests. In the fall, it fills with vendors during the annual artisan fair on campus. On winter nights, it’s a team-room for men’s and women’s basketball. And in the spring, faculty make their way here for robing before graduation. As classrooms go, this is not necessarily prime real estate.

The official university designation for my classroom is Multi-Purpose Gym, Room 101. In between classes I can easily put up a few shots – the basketball court is 53 steps from my door. I refer to my classroom as Gym 101, but it has become known to
some on campus as the Ann Brennan Room. The sign, scrawled in marker by a student a few semesters ago and taped outside the door, identifies the room as such. We’re re-writing the map here.

I’m the only one that teaches here full-time. Occasionally, a Spanish class instructed by an adjunct takes place in the room next to mine. At those times, my class proceeds with the accompaniment of the Mariachi music that’s playing on whatever film they’re watching in the next room over. There are three academic buildings on campus where most of the classes take place, but fate brought me here. A new faculty member, I was originally assigned to this (supposedly) less-than-desirable place. Apparently, as a result of space-constraints during certain times, it was typical for new faculty to find themselves here, wait it out for a semester or two, then complain and get a new classroom. But I didn’t. I stayed.

There were two times, however, when I found myself somewhere else. One fall semester, a computer glitch sent me to a different room in a different building. My freshman composition students and I met in AC 109 for our first Tuesday class. This particular classroom is designated as a special technology classroom. There are video conference capabilities, numerous pull-down screens, and fabric tiles on the walls that help the acoustics. I am not a tech-savvy person and this place felt uncomfortable. As my students were introducing themselves, the ground shifted and the screens shook. On August 23, 2011, Lehman Township, Pennsylvania, felt the 5.8-magnitude earthquake that centered in Virginia and rolled, among other places, north to us. I took this as a sign; that afternoon the Registrar kindly reassigned my class to Gym 101.
Two weeks later, I was displaced again. This time the culprit was Tropical Storm Lee. After an extraordinarily wet August, the ground was already saturated when the storm made its way north. A downburst sliced trees in the campus arboretum and heavy sustained rain backed up the drainage pipes outside the Athletic and Recreation Building. Before long, water penetrated the building and made its way into Gym 101. (Add swimming pool to the list of things this room has been.) While the folks from the maintenance department ripped up the carpet, cut out damaged walls, and ensured that no mold was growing, my classes met in the basement of the Science Building. Another technology room, S2 was cluttered; there was limited board space and the place smelled like a Bunsen burner. Upon arrival, nothing felt right. Then a few minutes into our first class, a chipmunk joined us. In Gym 101, I had safely re-homed frogs and a snake, but a chipmunk proved a bit more difficult to capture. Eventually I trapped the rodent in an upside-down trashcan, which I slid down the hall and out the door. Having returned the creature to its natural surroundings, I headed back to my unnatural surroundings and class carried on.

A few months later, Gym 101 was ready for human habitation. Thankfully, I’ve been rooted here ever since.

Six years ago, a colleague visited two of my classes. Interestingly, her observation report points to the distinct characteristics of the classroom:

G101 is fairly *tight* with furniture (long tables and moveable chairs) that is *not* conductive to movement. With fully attended classes on both occasions there is a certain *compactness* that is fine for most occasions but can present some
challenges. Ms. Brennan made no complaint about the classroom’s *tightness*, but in the interest of supporting faculty who often simply make due (while more vocal colleagues get numerous accommodations), I would encourage the administration to reach out to such collegial faculty about the adequacy of their classrooms for the activities they commonly have students engage in. (Observation Report, April 25, 2012, emphasis mine)

To her credit, my colleague was looking out for me; to his credit, the Director of Academic Affairs did reach out. I ultimately declined his offer to facilitate my move.

This is my kind of place.

Instead of *tight* and *compact*, I experience this place as *comfortable* and *close*.

Wallace Stegner (1992) calls a placed-person a lover of “known earth, known weathers, and known neighbors” (p. 199). I know my place. Heel to toe, it is 24.5 size 10 sneakers deep and 30 sneakers wide. It could fit 36, but not comfortably. 24 is the most that should occupy this place at once. 15 would be ideal. It’s a humble classroom and it’s adaptable; there’s nothing flashy about it. In these ways, I’d like to think I reflect my place. Speckled gray tile carpet, cream color paint, sandpapery blue chair-rail glued to the walls. There are two windows, too high to reach, each with semi-permeable shades permanently drawn. Drop-ceiling, fluorescent lights, a clock on the back-center wall, and an old-fashioned turn pencil sharpener below it. 12 rectangle tables, 6 on each side, 2 in each row; 3 chairs per table. (When students inhabit this place, the arrangement is different, but now, as I sit here alone, this is what I see.) Navy-blue speckled chairs, no wheels, no adjustments; the kind of seating you might envision in a cheap ballroom. A black trash container. A projector on a cart, both probably from before I was born; on the
side, a sticky note with Hayfield 107 written in black sharpie. A white board runs the length of the front wall. There’s a white oak podium with a desktop computer and a cupboard that houses additional electronics. Proudly displayed on the front of the podium, a Penn State (not Wilkes-Barre) emblem. Behind the podium, in the far front corner of the room, next to a finicky thermostat – one of two in the room – there is a telephone attached to the wall. There’s a dial tone, but it doesn’t work for outgoing calls. And it doesn’t ring when called. Yet, the number is prominently visible: 570-675-9490. Nobody can get to us. We can’t call out.

“I tell my students. We write to an audience with a purpose. I write to you, kind reader, to story this place (and me and us), to add it to the dialogue, to position it in your mind, to show where we are and who we are. And make clear why it matters.

Words are what we use to explain, understand, and connect to a world we may only ever partially comprehend. The words we choose reveal a certain conceptualization of the world. And that worldview shapes what others see and frames the parameters of the dialogue. Therefore, we need to be particular about the words we offer and exchange. They carry weight; they reveal and hide, separate and unite, focus attention and direct actions.

At the annual Fall Campus Meeting on August 16, 2017, Chancellor Jones introduced the theme for the 2017-2018 academic year – *Penn State Wilkes-Barre: On the Move!* Dr. Jones spoke to a concerned, yet hopeful audience all too familiar with the
recent, steady enrollment decline and eager to learn more about clear and achievable goals for growing the campus community. To address some of the anticipated questions, Dr. Jones’ presentation outlined Movements, or priorities, for the year; each Movement was tied to specific outcomes identified in the campus’ Strategic Plan. The purpose, I think, was to acknowledge some of the challenges we face while threading a positive narrative and emphasizing the need for continued teamwork. In addition, the talk aimed to reignite a fire of passion and commitment that had dwindled under the previous administration. In an attempt to remind the audience why they’re here, Dr. Jones eloquently highlighted many of the wonderful things – people, places, and opportunities – Penn State Wilkes-Barre offers. The discussion suggested that we could not reach our potential without energy and, ultimately, movement. The presentation was, no doubt, well-intentioned and there certainly was a thoughtful discussion of the aim to enhance Penn State Wilkes-Barre’s status among regional institutions of higher learning.

But words matter. And when I heard on the move then, and when I read it woven into formal university correspondences, it makes me uncomfortable. This language echoes the broader cultural pursuit of going someplace bigger, better, more desirable, more certain, and, maybe, more profitable. Higher education is not immune to these objectives; in fact, this language has become normalized in the discourse of universities that, too often, aim up, away from, or out. Aggregating data and climbing both national and regional rankings have become commonplace goals for schools. But such destinations are abstract, idealized, unattainable and, ultimately, meaningless.

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112
The *movement* framework unsettles me because of where we are and the complicated history of *movement* (from) here. At the boom of Anthracite mining, *movement* – from the earth, to the rails, across the county – drove coal barons and railroad tycoons. They undermined people and places and overran this region and much of the life that inhabited it, made their money, and then moved onto the next place where the process of exploitation and depletion began again. Perpetually moving, their damage never ceases.

Things get messy here, because Penn State Wilkes-Barre has a place in the larger narrative of disruptive *movement*. The Conynghams built their summer home – the place the university now inhabits – on sturdy ground, but they had financial claims in the mining industry and they equipped the mines with tools of extraction. They contributed to the instability of local ground. In addition, Penn State Wilkes-Barre was originally founded to educate engineers who would keep the mines and rails running – engineers who would ensure continued *movement*. This history is alive in the present. Penn State Wilkes-Barre is an endangered place – in part due to the *movement* narrative that benefited some, but drove out generations of people from this region.

The challenges here are real and the numbers are worrisome. There is certainly work to be done. But I don’t believe the answer is *movement*; instead, I think we’ll cultivate a more sustainable place if we grow *in place* – here. We can do so by shifting our attention to the questions posed by the homecoming curriculum. In doing so, we might begin to refocus the conversation on where we are, on the story written in this place, and on the aspects of our place that need tending. From there, we might be better able to read, listen to, ask questions of, and be present *here*, not chasing someplace else.
We might introduce a more meaningful, placed language that helps us reconceptualize who we are, where we are, and the work we do. Instead of a language of movement, this will be a language that keeps things in place – a language that encourages us to dwell a while, make amends, and have hard conversations. Without a language that points back here, we will continue to look beyond here, now in pursuit of an elusive and imaginary destination. If we maintain this route, what will become of here and us?
Penn State Wilkes-Barre is one of twenty-four Penn State campuses located throughout the Keystone State. In 1916, the first class was held in Wilkes-Barre, a city of over 70,000 located twelve miles southeast of the campus’ present location. Nearly fifty years later, the campus moved to a forty-three-acre parcel in Lehman, a rural township with a current population of just under 3,500. Despite sitting in Lehman, the campus’ official name is Penn State Wilkes-Barre. We suffer from a bit of a geographic identity crisis.

This confusion is apparent every semester when my business writing students take their first crack at composing resumes. Inevitably, several students identify the campus’ location as either “Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania,” or “Dallas, Pennsylvania,” the slightly larger township to the North. A commuter campus, most Penn State Wilkes-Barre students hail from nearby locales, but they still cannot properly name the place they travel to daily to attend classes, work on projects, and hang out with friends. They don’t know where they are.

Regrettably, academia rarely helps students find themselves where they are. Instead, the academic terrain often demands detachment and displacement; it encourages generalization and whereless-ness. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the composition of higher education. Wendell Berry (2000) calls the language of the university “middling [and] politically correct” (p. 137). Further, he argues that this language is “incapable either of reverence or familiarity; it is headless and footless, loveless, a language of nowhere” (p. 137). I long for the language of here – my specific somewhere – and I try to bring that language into my writing, into my classroom, and, hopefully, into my students’ hearts, minds, mouths, and hands.
This is the story of my attempt to place myself in the particular, the unique, the local soil beneath my feet. The first part of the story explains how I lost track of and then rediscovered place in my teaching. The second part outlines my placed composition course, Writing Here. At the heart of this story is my belief that here matters.

Missing Place

In the fall, I teach three sections of freshman composition. For most of my students, my Monday morning writing course is their introduction to college, their welcome to Penn State Wilkes-Barre. At this critical point in their lives, students are trying to find themselves – in the classroom, on campus, within their majors, and in their relationships. Many of them don’t have direction and don’t know where they’re going. They’re uneasy and uncomfortable and wondering whether they’re in the right place (Somers & Saltz, 2004; Mauk 2003). These are common enough feelings for the first days in a new place, but for many of the first-generation students who file through the door of Gym 101, this confusion will continue far beyond their first semester.

If students remain lost, they are not likely to return. This is an administrative headache with costly repercussions. But what concerns me more than enrollment numbers or tuition dollars is the thought of students remaining in a disoriented state of wherelessness – here, but also in their lives outside of school. With this in mind, I began to wonder if my freshman composition curriculum helped my students find their place here and, in doing so, prepared them to place themselves in all the places they will inhabit after they leave Penn State Wilkes-Barre. I asked myself: How does this course help students enter this place? How does it help them cultivate a sense of belonging here, engage with/in this place, embrace the interdependence of this place, and pay attention to
the patterns, interconnections, and tensions that unfold around them? How does it help them make this place (their own)?

Over the course of several semesters, I examined my freshman composition course syllabus and scrutinized the overview, goals and objectives. I reviewed essay prompts and in-class activities. I flipped through the nationally recognized reader that accompanied students throughout the semester. I thought carefully about students’ writing. And I looked at the layout of my classroom.

At the culmination of my initial research and self-reflection, I asked, What am I doing here? And, to be honest, there wasn’t a lot of here in anything I was doing. My syllabus was stocked with generic university approved language and legalese. Essay prompts offered flexibility, but were not rooted anywhere. The classroom setup in Gym 101 didn’t look much different from any other classroom: tables with chairs neatly arranged and rarely moved. The title of our text was Everything’s An Argument; unwittingly my course was making a very clear argument: here – the “immediate, present, particular, [and] specific” – doesn’t matter (Jensen, 2004, p. 60).

Generations of educational theorists have examined the consequences of what gets left out of the classroom. From Dewey’s (1938) conception of collateral learning, to Giroux and Purpel’s (1983) exploration of the hidden curriculum, to Eisner’s (1985) null curriculum, a rich body of work argues that that which often goes unnoticed and unsaid subtly, yet powerfully, shapes attitudes, beliefs, and ways of knowing. The curriculum of my freshman composition course was pointing students nowhere or, at best, elsewhere. I read this disconnect in their writing: research proposals that grappled with big issues, but never examined those issues as they relate to our local place; narratives that remained at
the surface and relied on clichés; and rhetorical analyses that failed to call out the damage of mass-produced, generalized, and replicable portrayals of beings and places.

Like much university curriculum, my course failed to reveal the intersection of the global and the local, and, instead, focused entirely on the universal. Both Wes Jackson (1999) and Wendell Berry (2010b) warn about the limitations of this outlook. Speaking to graduates at different places and at different times, Jackson and Berry both explain that an education that points up, away from, and out of has damaging environmental and personal consequences. Proposing healthier alternatives Berry (2010b) advocates for an education that prepares students for the process of “local adaptation” (p. 34). Jackson (1999) wants something similar; he calls for an education that will help “a graduate go some place and dig in.” With Berry’s and Jackson’s concepts of homecoming in mind, I sought to turn my freshman composition course back home. Once we learned to see our local place, we could begin to think of our broader collective place. But we could not get there without first being here.

**Placing Composition**

Writing and place, the word and the world, are interwoven. In her landmark essay, Marilyn Cooper (1986) proposes an “ecological model of writing, whose fundamental tenet is that writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems” (p. 367). Writing, then, is “a web, in which anything that affects one strand of the web vibrates throughout the whole” (p. 370). Cooper envisions writing as an activity “by which we locate ourselves in the enmeshed systems that make up the social world” (p. 373). Through writing, we place ourselves.
In the thirty-two years since Cooper’s publication, many more professionals have explored the intermingling of place and writing (Bruce, 2011; Buell, 2001; Dobrin & Weisser, 2002; Keller & Weisser, 2007; Owens, 2006; Reynolds, 2004; Sinor & Kaufman, 2007; Weisser & Dobrin, 2001). This field has become known as ecocomposition, which “examines the relationships between discourse and environment” (Dobrin & Weisser, 2002, p. 9). Ecocomposition is more than just nature writing and tree hugging. It is an exploration of the interdependence of writing and “all environments: classroom environments, political environments, electronic environments, ideological environments, historical environments, economic environments, natural environments” (Dobrin & Weisser, 2002, p. 9; italics in original). Ecocomposition “locates writing in place” (p. 10).

Thinking of writing in terms of ecology reveals the inter-webbing of place, self, and word. When we write, we write from somewhere. This somewhere consists of both an internal place and external place(s) and the interplay between and among them. When we write, we write to somewhere. Therefore, it feels natural to explore place explicitly and deeply in a composition course. Where we write from, to, and about affects every decision writers make.

Attention to place helps ground writing. In addition, “[u]sing place as an entry point” gives novice students a way to enter important conversations that surround them (Esposito, 2012, p. 71). Place-based writing de-centers the classroom and follows paths marked by students’ interests (Plevin, 2001). Thinking about the places we inhabit encourages reflection on not only where we are, but also who we are; place and self are inseparable (Owens, 2006). Critically examining our shared place emphasizes this
interaction and directs us to carefully consider the ways we influence our places and the ways those places influence us (Owens, 2001). We write from a place that is a “chaotic mosaic” of lived experiences which are filtered and known through our own individual minds (Short, 2013, p. 67). And all of this underscores an important point about writing: we do not write alone, or apart. We write, like we live, in conversation.

**Composing Place**

I titled my revised freshman composition course *Writing Here*. Throughout the course, we’re physically *writing here*, in this place. We’re also *writing here*, i.e., creating this place through our writing. In addition, the title implies that *writing here* is different than writing there; this is an important point given the expectations of academic writing. Finally, *writing here* underscores that all writing happens *here*, in a contingent and situated place.

In this course, we spend a good amount of time discussing writing; it is the content. But place is the lens we use to examine everything from writing, to our communities, to our relationships, to our own individual beings. Knowing our place requires sensory engagement; places ask us to listen, taste, smell, touch, and see. Places are both independent and relational. They ask us to re-think, remember, re-imagine, and re-organize. They are full of repetition and if we look closely we’ll realize that they demand we pay attention. The skills we develop as we become more *placed* people are the same skills we draw upon to write powerful prose and meaningful communications. As I reworked my course, I sought to put place in the forefront to ensure that we recognized it, explored it, and understood it.
Wedding content and context, the course foregrounds place on the very first day. When students introduce themselves to the entire class, I don’t prompt them with any place-directives. But inevitably they unintentionally shine the light on place, thus underscoring its importance. Each one ties him/herself to a specific place: I’m from Tunkhannock; I graduated from Pittston Area; I was an Army child who spent time in Yuma, Arizona, Tooele, Utah, Fort Rucker, Alabama, and Leavenworth, Kansas; I’ve lived my whole life in Wyoming, Pennsylvania; I grew up in Shickshinny, but now I live at Harveys Lake. I discretely jot down each of the place-names that enter the conversation.

At the conclusion of their introductions, I call out their places to point to the intermingling of self and place. We use those places to identify ourselves; they anchor us. Yet, we often gloss over these places; we take them for granted (Geertz, 1996). There’s danger here because what we do not pay attention to, “what we will not grasp is lost” (Gioia, 2012). I’m not comfortable erasing life-giving places – my students’, mine, or ours.

Writing Here is rooted in place and follows three main branches throughout the semester: readings, writings, and Adventures in Place. There is no formal reader; course readings are distributed electronically and crafted by professionals in the field and students from our own pasture. Readings and writings are arranged around five topics: conceiving place; remembering place; reading place; storying place; and portraying place. The class spends roughly three weeks on each focus. Mirroring the messiness of place, there is overlap throughout. The units are layered; we regularly weave back to earlier readings, discussions, and activities to inform our present readings, discussions, and activities. This webbing is deliberate; the course aims to emphasize connections.
We meet for fifty minutes three times a week. Most Mondays and Wednesdays take the form of a typical composition course: we remain in Gym 101; desks are arranged in a circle or in small clusters; we write and we talk about writing – our own and that of others. Fridays are for Adventures in Place; we move from the traditional written text and turn our attention to reading the text(s) that surround us. Often these adventures take us out of Gym 101, onto different parts of our campus and, sometimes, off campus entirely. A third of the course is designated for these activities and they are part of the explicit curriculum because they are that important; they give us an opportunity to feel, read, explore, and be in our place. Although we each spend many hours a week here, it’s uncertain how often we are actually present here. These adventures encourage us to be present: to be alert to our place, to savor our place, and to describe our place through precise language. In addition, our adventures emphasize that place is not just something we talk about, and it’s not some abstraction. Instead, place is immediate and specific; it’s lived and storied.

What follows is a guide to the course. It is framed around the five primary topics; each topic is detailed individually. Each section begins with an introduction to the topic and readings, transitions to an overview of an adventure from that unit, and, where appropriate, concludes with a description of the formal writing activity.

**Conceiving Place**

We begin our semester-long place-based journey with Jackson (1999) and Berry (2010b) who highlight the importance of looking at our local place(s). To deepen our conception of place, we turn to Basso’s (1996) “Preface,” Geertz’s (1996) “Afterword,”

Although we explore place through numerous perspectives, we dwell most deeply in Wallace Stegner’s (1992) “The Sense of Place.” In addition to laying the groundwork for some of our future explorations, this piece resonates with my students. Every semester, my classes populate with several students who come from farming backgrounds and many students who enjoy spending time outdoors. When they list their interests on the first day, it’s not atypical for the majority of students to identify hunting, fishing, mountain biking, and/or camping as some of their favorite pastimes. A lot of my students pride themselves on being “lovers of known earth, known weathers, and known neighbors both human and nonhuman” (p. 199). Reading Stegner honor that knowledge, especially in an academic setting where oftentimes that knowledge is dismissed as rudimentary, welcomes them into the conversation.

Stegner argues that a place becomes a place through human attention, sensing, and language. Specifically, he says, “a place is not a place until people have been born in it, have grown up in it, lived in it, known it, died in it – have both experienced and shaped it, as individuals, families, neighborhoods, and communities, over more than one generation” (p. 201). Further, he posits that “[n]o place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments. Fictions” (p. 202). Stegner’s piece becomes a touchstone in this course and we return to it often as we write our here into being.
Adventures in Place: Where We Are

To emphasize that our place is something living and evolving, students (working in teams of four) draw deep maps that depict our campus and the paths they traverse through our place. In composing their maps, students construct their place in a material way while simultaneously reflecting on their presence in this place.

At the completion of the exercise, students tape their maps to the walls of Gym 101. I then add a few more visions of this place: the official university visitor map; the campus 911-emergency map; a 1965 artistic rendering including proposed campus expansions; and two Google Earth depictions of our place – one the traditional view and one the satellite view. We observe, touch, and question over ten different interpretations of our place. We talk perspective, scope, and focus. What’s centered and what’s marginalized. We also discuss colors, shapes, and scale; place-names (both official and colloquial). We consider what these maps say about our place and our place within that place. We point out similarities and differences; what gets included and what gets excluded. I ask where each began, and how that starting point influenced the rest of the work. We talk about experiences and purposes and how each of those things shape what we see and what we attempt to reproduce. In addressing each of these topics, students make the place meaningful by illustrating and storying their experiences in this place.
But the discussion also leads us to important points about writing. Here we explicitly tie together writing and place.

14 I use Brooke & McIntosh’s (2006) conception of deep maps as “drawings of psychological locations (both literal and abstract) created by writers to represent their relationship to place” (p. 131).
Remembering Place

Having planted some seeds about how we conceive of and perceive places, we move into conversations with expert guides who adeptly show how physical and emotional ties to their (home) places shape their own being and writing. These place-conscious writers explore known terrain and follow the interweaving threads of self and place. Our readings take us to the Kentucky hills (hooks, 2009), eastern Utah (Abbey, 1968), the desert southwest and rural Appalachia (Kingsolver, 2002), Bloomington, Indiana (Sanders, 1993), and the farms and mines of home ground in northeast Pennsylvania (Conlogue, 2013).

Adventures in Place: Where I’m From

In an attempt to reveal connections to our (home) places, we turn to George Ella Lyon’s (1993) poem, “Where I’m From.” Lyon’s poem, like poetry in general, pays close attention and uses carefully chosen language, details, and syntax to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. In framing this adventure, we return to Stegner’s (1992) claim that “no place is a place until it has had a poet” (p. 205). In this adventure, students become the poets of their places. They travel (physically and/or mentally) to a place they call home. We begin here because it’s known ground. Using familiar (and loved) places is a good entryway to discussing the concept of place; in addition, the topic gives students confidence in their writing because they’re writing about places they know well (Esposito, 2012; Jacobs, 2011; Lundahl, 2011; Mauk, 2003).

In this guided exercise students reflect on their homeplace and it’s meaning in their lives; in doing so, they see place as more than a neutral backdrop. In addition, they consider the particular things that make that place. Similar to Lyon’s poem, I direct
students to pay attention to the mundane, common, taken for granted things within their places; it’s often these things which make a place a place. Through a series of questions, I ask them what they see, hear, smell, taste, feel, and remember when they think of home. Students’ places come to life most vividly when they write about specific senses, people, items, and words: *chewed dog bones* and *well-worn photo albums*, *rusty basketball hoops* and *Fisher Price forts*, *Ciocia and Nonno*, *pig roasts* and *spaghetti sauce*, *home base* and *bailing hay*, *Be brave, Try your best*, and many more colorful sayings from home.

Exploring familiar and meaningful terrain, students see the objects, names, language, and sensory details that make their places unique and important. Lawrence Buell (2001) points out that a “place may seem quite simple until you start noticing things” (p. 62). Places get much more complex when we recognize all that they hold. They get even more knotty when we realize that places hold us. The excitement and enthusiasm that fills the room during our read-aloud is a reminder that we feel strongly about our places; we want to story them and share them. They are, often, who we are.

**Writing: Homeplace Narrative**

For their first formal writing, students look home and compose a narrative that brings their places (and, in turn, themselves) to life. They begin by defining place and considering what is necessary for a place to become a home. Instead of writing broadly, I ask students to write specifically, to collect abundantly, but then to sort and focus on particular aspects of their place to show how and why that place is home. They observe, detail, and reflect. Through this writing it becomes clear that place is personal; it’s made through interactions, experiences, and memories.
For over a century, locals have earned certifications and degrees from Penn State Wilkes-Barre. But when I ask students when the university put down roots in the Wyoming Valley, most do not know. And when I bring up the disorienting effects of our campus’ name, most aren’t sure why we’re named after somewhere we’re not. I get confused looks when I walk students outside and ask who realized there was a pond adjacent to our building, or about how the main entryway directs our view of the campus, or about the history of the overgrown path that cuts through the campus woods. Oftentimes, this is the first-time students have seen or thought about these places that they walk past and through daily. These questions and the uncertainty they reveal demonstrate that there is much we don’t know about our place.

To gather more information, we consult a few historical texts. We read two university publications that overview the history of Penn State Wilkes-Barre. In addition, we read two 1935 feature articles from *Country Life* that offer pictures of the property prior to our arrival. We also review timelines and additional documents maintained on the university website. These texts provide foundational details, but there is, of course, much more to the story than these summaries provide. To introduce students to the larger ongoing conversations surrounding our place, we head to the university archive collection. Here students have an opportunity to leaf through countless personal correspondences, blueprints, scrapbooks, yearbooks, and university documents. Through their research, they develop new ways to read their place.
Adventures in Place: Touring Hayfield House

When Penn State Wilkes-Barre moved to Hayfield Farm, the property where the university now sits, there were only two structures on the land – Hayfield House, a 30,000 square foot stone mansion, and a comparably aesthetically pleasing stone carriage house. For the first several years after the university’s arrival, every classroom and office on campus was housed in Hayfield House.

To compliment the archival research students are conducting, we head to Hayfield House. Here we experience the history of this place in a tangible way. Our guide is a campus historian, a librarian who is also trained in giving public tours of this historic house. As we roam through the house, we begin to read it as a text. Paying attention to wallpaper, layout, and design features, we discuss the type of place created by those who originally inhabited this house; we imagine how it looked to them. In addition, we examine the changes made over the years and we consider how the university has simultaneously reworked and preserved the structure throughout the years. We talk about the type of place it is today. Along the way, we meet people – administrators, staff, and faculty. Excited to see a group of 24 students breathing new life into this place, these “place-maker[s]” often stop and share the stories they’ve heard and made; these inclusions make the official tour stories all the richer (Kissling, 2016, p. 331).

As we walk through Hayfield House, we begin to stitch together a narrative of this place. Our time here often exposes threads that students hold onto and follow through their writing. This adventure also demonstrates that the places we know, we know through stories, half-creations; it’s difficult to know what stories are true and what stories are fiction. The point is not to decipher absolute validity; rather, it is to appreciate
that the history of our place is constantly growing and we’re actively revising it – as we stand in the place and as we retell the stories we’ve heard.

*Writing: What Has Happened Here?*

In their next formal writing, students pick a lens through which to read our place. They draw on archival material, campus experts, and relevant outside resources to show this place through that perspective. This assignment gives students the freedom to look at our place in a way that is meaningful to them. Their completed compilations depict the campus in numerous ways: through native flora and fauna; through consumption; through gender; through the eyes of the faculty senate; through the year 1972; through donations; through the names and addresses listed in the back of a yearbook; and through the perspective of a farm manager. Collectively these readings offer new understandings of our shared place.

*Storying Place*

We are, at our cores, storytellers. We are creatures who value stories and we yearn to both tell and hear stories. Our stories are the way we “come to know, understand, and make meaning in the social world while also making ourselves known, understood, and meaningful in the world” (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015, p. 82). To fully know a place and to fully know a person, we need to know that place’s stories and that person’s stories as they relate to that place. Ultimately, “knowledge of place is held in stories” (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015, p. 132).

Story is a theme that naturally emerges throughout the course, but in this unit we spend time reading texts that explicitly explore the webbing of place and story. We draw on excerpts from Silko (1990, 1977), Basso (1996), and Lopez (1989). And we discuss
how every story adds to the lore of our place, deepens our understanding, and offers us a new way of both looking and seeing. The multiple stories we hear demonstrate that places are layered; they’re living.

*Adventures in Place: What’s YOUR Story Here?*

In the excitement of thinking about others’ stories, I don’t want my students to lose sight of their own stories here. I ask them to think about their campus maps and the personal routes they marked. I encourage them to narrow in on one particular place, *their place*, within our shared place. Individually they (physically) go to those places and while there draft a letter home sharing that place with their reader (a parent, grandparent, sibling, etc.) and showing why it’s important.

This activity takes writing out of the classroom. In addition, it shifts the audience. By this point in the semester, students have done a lot of writing for a more formal, academic audience. But different writing situations present different audiences which require different writing styles. Since their readers aren’t with them in this place, writers need to pay closer attention to the details they include, the context they provide, and the language they use.

We reconvene in the classroom. And the following week, together, we go to some of the places students identified as *their place*. As we walk to each of those places, we get a better feel for our surroundings. Among other places, our travels have taken us to a niche in the library, the putting green adjacent to the campus, a smoking hut, and the soccer field. One student led us to the top flight of stairs that lead to the non-existent second floor in the Science Building. And we’ve also traveled to the lawn adjacent to the Tech Center. A green area that each of us regularly passes, either by foot or automobile,
we saw it in a new way when a surveying student pointed out all the benchmarks concealed among the blades of grass. These serve as control points for students practicing with surveying equipment and mapping the area. Each of our stops offer us new benchmarks and new ways to organize our place. When students read their letters and tell their stories in their places, we come to see those places anew and, in some instances, for the first time.

Writing: (Inter)Views

This writing is framed by the over-arching question, *What is this place to you?* Penn State Wilkes-Barre has over one-hundred full-time employees. Each offers a different way of knowing, making, and interacting with this place. Through interviews with some of these people, students get an opportunity to hear these stories and tap into a bountiful stream of knowledge and experiences. These conversations offer students “the chance to step outside of [their] narrow cultural backgrounds … if only for a brief period, and to apprehend the world from the viewpoint of other human beings” (Spradley, 1979, p. v). In short, these interviews give students an opportunity to see others’ perspectives and view our shared place through new angles. In addition to deepening their connection to our place and introducing them to new people, these conversations help students learn how to ask, how to listen, and how to make connections.

Students work in pairs and identify (at least) two peers and four employees to interview; ideally, there will be diversity in gender, service years, departments, positions, etc. Together and apart we draft questions that will lead us to the essence of what *this* place is to *those* people. Students transcribe the conversations. They look for themes that run across the interviews; they make claims and draw on language from the
interviews as evidence. They evaluate and interpret both words and conversation, place and understanding, and what is said and what is not said. Their writings yield a variety of ways to construct Penn State Wilkes-Barre – as a place of opportunity; a family; a place of healing; a place of growth; and home. These stories offer students a way to connect and a sense of belonging.

**Portraying Place**

With a solid understanding of some of the ways that we perceive our place, we turn our attention to how we portray our place. In the competitive world of higher education, it’s critical for institutions to deliver consistent messaging that builds their brand and highlights what sets them apart. At Penn State, the goal is to develop “communications and marketing strategies that ensure that the University’s image reflects our mission of teaching, research, and service” (Penn State, 2017). The Office of Strategic Communications strives “every day to define and convey what makes Penn State…Penn State” (Penn State, 2017).

We discuss effective argumentation and the interdependence of credibility, emotions, and evidence. We think about how context, audience, and purpose influence these things. Turning our attention to our university, we explore the Office of Strategic Communications’ webpage and analyze the university’s “Brand Manual” and “Brand Storybook.” We pull our attention back home and examine our campus’ “This is Penn State Wilkes-Barre” webpage; we spend time discussing our “Mission, Vision, and Values.” We scrutinize the effectiveness of the campus homepage and various additional publications the university distributes in orientation packages. We discuss how these documents attempt to create this place.
Adventures in Place: WE ARE...PENN STATE WILKES-BARRE

The university has consistent ways of portraying itself – from template websites to uniform furniture. Even the Lion Shrine, an iconic attraction on each Penn State campus, is constant regardless of place. Sculpted from concrete at a statuary in Pittsburgh and mounted on limestone pulled from Centre County, the Nittany Lion, a fictional creature, provides a symbolic link to the other campuses while simultaneously suggesting we’re all interchangeable. Despite the common refrain – we are one university geographically dispersed – we’re not really all the same. Indeed, we are connected, but also distinct. And oftentimes the uniqueness of the individual campuses gets lost in the university-wide branding campaigns. We are not, in fact, (generic) Penn State. Rather, we are (specific) Penn State Wilkes-Barre. And being at the Wilkes-Barre campus is different than being at any other campus. Students inhabit this place; their experiences inform their perspectives and allow them to depict this place very differently and, often, more particularly than the ways developed by marketing professionals 126 miles away.

Working in teams of three, students create one-minute portrayals of our place. This adventure gives students an opportunity to practice argumentative techniques using digital formats. We begin with an introduction to the Media Commons where students can sign-out cameras, recorders, and iPads. They have access to the green screen and they experiment with lighting. Early on, they identify target audiences and consider what aspects of this place to highlight. Armed with the appropriate technology, they head into the campus to capture scenes and voices that bring the place to life. The day we view these mini-representations is inevitably the most exciting meeting of the semester.
Students’ portrayals of our place show that they have begun to put down roots here, that they feel a sense of pride in this place, and that they are experiencing this place personally and specifically.

*Writing: Print Media Analysis*

This writing activity asks students to identify one Penn State Wilkes-Barre print publication (formal or informal) and analyze how it defines and conveys what makes “Penn State [Wilkes-Barre]…Penn State [Wilkes-Barre].” In their examinations, they consider audience, purpose, and rhetorical appeals. They think about our campus’ mission and goals. They also show an awareness of the difference between claims made about Penn State generally and claims made about Penn State Wilkes-Barre specifically. They think carefully about inclusions and omissions and language that points here or somewhere else. Ultimately, they consider how these publications represent who we are and where we are.

*Enabling Ground*

In *Writing for an Endangered World*, Lawrence Buell (2001) points out the “limits of [our] habitually foreshortened environmental perception” (p. 18). This “foreshortening, whether fortuitous or intended, is the negative manifestation of….‘environmental unconscious’” (p. 22). By this, Buell means our “chronic perceptual underactivation in bringing to awareness, and then to articulation, of all that is to be noticed and expressed” (p. 22). In other words, Buell makes the argument that (because of inattention, specialization, ignorance, etc.) we often fail to see and that which we fail to see we fail to value, articulate, and protect. “[I]n its negative aspect [environmental unconsciousness] refers to the impossibility of individual or collective perception coming
to full consciousness at whatever level: observation, thought, articulation, and so forth” (p. 22). This is a restricted and worrisome place. But rather than dwell in the limitations, Buell turns to the potential of our current “foreshortened” awareness. There is opportunity to “awake to fuller apprehension of physical environment and one’s interdependence with it” (p. 22). This potential for breakthrough is “achieved in grasping the significance of unnoticed detail” (p. 22). There is hope that we can still bring to awareness and articulation that which has been suppressed. Our environmental unconscious, then, when awakened becomes an “enabling ground” for a “startling and productive reenvision[ing]” of our environment and our place within it (pp. 22-23).

I think of Writing Here as an “enabling ground” – a re-envisioning of both the content and context of freshman composition that brings new awareness to the inter-webbing of self, place, experiences, and writing. The class aims to help students learn how to be thoughtful seers who use language to communicate effectively and ethically. Although students won’t always be here – transience is a reality of college – they will always be somewhere. I hope the focus of Writing Here helps students write well, but I also hope it helps them pay attention to their places, be mindful in/of their places, become native to their places, and contribute to the long-term health of their places. The ground cultivated here enables students to enter the academy and join the conversation, but, more importantly, it enables them to (more fully) participate in and care for the abundance of life and meaning that envelops them every moment of every day in their places.
Teaching Tayo
The moment when
night and day touch.

A gathering
of stars and sun,
birds and worms.

An instant
pregnant with possibilities.

A celebration
of becoming….

You are the sunrise;
the place where all things converge.

What light will you shine?
What will be the story you share?
A few years ago, I was teaching Leslie Marmon Silko’s (1977) *Ceremony* in my *Nature and Literature* course. *Ceremony* follows Tayo, half-Laguna Pueblo and half-white, as he returns home from WWII and struggles to resituate himself into his native New Mexico community, a place where he’s never really fit. Tayo’s mixed-ancestry is just one of the many dichotomies that are in flux throughout the text. In previous readings, I had picked up the tension between formal (white) education and traditional Indigenous understanding – a common current in Native people’s stories, both lived and fictionalized. Although I recognized the education strain, it was never the primary thread I traced; instead, I saw it more as a sub-theme used to support the larger textual conversation. Maybe it was because I had recently enrolled in graduate education courses, but on this particular journey through the text, I heard the education discussion louder and clearer. It was no longer a minor motif; rather, it was the story. In Tayo, the gatherer, I saw Tayo, a student and, eventually, Tayo, a teacher.

In *Ceremony*, I read Tayo “dwelling aright within” the tensionality of the binaries constructed around him (Aoki, 2005a, p. 163). Living in an unstable place between the white world and the Laguna world, Tayo, the “half-breed,” negotiates (Silko, 1977, p. 30). He gathers from both sides – consuming stories that nourish and throwing up those that starve; remembering ways of knowing that lead to wholeness and forgetting worldviews that end in separation; learning to create and unlearning to destroy. In this mediation, Tayo never entirely inhabits the white world or the Laguna world – neither is privileged; instead, he lives within a hybrid place. Here, he shapes something new – an alternative, all-encompassing narrative of vitality, health, and interconnections. This is what good teachers do, too.
The textual structure of *Ceremony* mirrors the metaphorical pull Tayo negotiates along his journey. The organization requires readers, like Tayo, to reconcile between different – sometimes conflicting – ways of thinking and knowing. The text opens with poems growing from the Laguna creation story; this is a story of stories. Throughout, the Indigenous story (written as a long poem) unfolds alongside Tayo’s story (written as prose); both require our attention. Neither story is linear, both are circular with the narratives emerging like memories and dreams; it’s a compilation of chance arrivals, random associations, and hazy understanding. The text moves (unannounced) internally and externally, backward and forward through place and time; it positions readers in an unstable in-between place – a dialectic middle-ground – where they are asked to participate and create. A traditional sequential reading of the novel will not suffice – we must learn to read anew; to find meaning, the cycles must be followed, the jarring shifts back and forth must be felt, and the uncertainty must be experienced. Gathering from both the Native thread and the contemporary thread, readers weave these stories together in generative and authentic ways that align with their own individual stories, experiences, and purposes.

This collecting and creating reflects the daily actions of teachers who dwell within a similarly tensioned Zone of Between (Aoki, 2005a). Like Tayo, teachers are situated between two horizons. For teachers, one is the scripted, formalized, and standardized curriculum-as-plan and the other is the fleshly, unplannable, and unique curriculum-as-lived. For Tayo, one is institutionalized, scientific, and didactic knowledge and the other is Indigenous, spiritual, and experiential knowledge. Both perspectives grow from
particular ideologies and epistemologies. Both sides have their own purposes, languages, and stories. Within this “pedagogic situation,” the teacher, like Tayo, hears both sides simultaneously, interprets and adapts, takes into consideration both her own living curriculum and that of her students, and architects a new curriculum that gathers and grows. Teachers, like Tayo, (continuously) compose new, living narratives.

**Tayo, the student**

Throughout the text, Tayo encounters teachers who profess particular ways of thinking and making sense; they exemplify certain ways to live. Many, like Rocky, reproduce the manufactured (white) narrative taught in school; some, like Old Grandma, hang onto the Laguna traditions passed down through the generations; fewer, like Betonie, inhabit a middle place that brings together multiple ways of seeing. To find healing and belonging, Tayo must determine which teachings to remember and which teachings to forget.

Rocky, Tayo’s full-blooded Laguna cousin with whom he is raised, adheres to and preaches the scripted (white) ways of knowing he learns in school. An exceptional student and an all-American athlete, Rocky plans to enroll in college. In preparation, he attends boarding school in Albuquerque. When he returns home after his first year, Tayo notices that Rocky “deliberately avoided the old-time ways” and regularly justifies his perspective by pointing to textbooks that call the old-time ways “superstition” (Silko, 1977, p. 51).

Rocky ingests the mass-produced stories taught in school and trusts his teachers when they tell him, “Nothing can stop you now except one thing: don’t let the people at
home hold you back” (p. 51). Embarrassed by Indigenous understanding and practices, he shapes his life to fit the pattern advanced in the books he’s read. Chasing the illusion of “importance and power,” and eager to push beyond the (perceived) limits of his background, Rocky deliberately cuts away his ancestral roots; he enlists in the Army to “show” he loves America by fighting in the “white people’s war” (pp. 36-74).

Rocky’s naïve embrace of the (white) story manufactured in authoritative texts is most evident in his encounter with the Army recruiter. Outside the post office, the government official hands Rocky a pamphlet that constructs one (white) narrative of the war. “Rocky read each page of the pamphlet carefully”; without question, he gives credence to what’s written (p. 64). Watching him, “Tayo knew right then what Rocky wanted to do” (pp. 64-65). What follows is significant; the wind blows and the Army man’s pamphlets swirled and “scattered like dry leaves across the ground” (p. 65). This image suggests dead, meaningless leaves – pages – of writing; there is no life in the narrative they build. It is ironic and tragic that Rocky’s enlistment – an affirmation of the (white) stories he’s consumed – leads to his own demise. He dies engaged in a (white) battle fought in a foreign place. Having severed all connections to his people and his place – having done all that the books taught him to do – Rocky perishes.

When Tayo leans too far into Rocky’s (white and partial) way of seeing, his identity fractures further. In these moments, he describes himself as “white smoke,” “hollow inside,” and brittle “clay, slipping away with the wind, a little more each day” (pp. 15-27). Sleeping in Rocky’s bed, he feels the “contours and niches” Rocky’s life had made in the mattress; notably, “Tayo’s bones did not fit” (p. 31). The story that
Rocky teaches does not lead to wholeness; Tayo doesn’t belong in a narrative narrowly constructed around the pursuit of an elusive (white) vision of power and progress.

Further underscoring his unsuitable positioning in Rocky’s (white) horizon, Tayo later wakes in fear, conceding, “The light makes me vomit” (p. 31). Aunt Thelma closes the shades and Tayo “felt better in the dark” (p. 31). Significantly, Old Grandma does, too; “blind as the grey mule,” she “sat by her stove, comfortable with darkness” (pp. 27-31). The juxtaposition of light and dark, white and brown, educated and ignorant is meaningful. Rocky inhabits the white place; Old Grandma stridently holds onto traditional teachings. The school textbooks would describe Old Grandma as living in a dark, archaic, primitive, rudimentary world; she refuses to adapt.

Despite her blindness, Old Grandma does have an ability to see deeply; it is she who recognizes that the Army doctors are damaging Tayo – “[t]heir medicine drained memory out of his thin arms and replaced it with a twilight cloud behind his eyes” (p. 15). Concluding that the Army medicine is not helping Tayo, Old Grandma determines that “the boy needs a medicine man” (p. 33). Despite her daughter’s fear of the gossip that will pick up when the medicine man comes to visit Tayo, who is “not full blood,” Old Grandma calls on Ku’oosh (p. 33). When he arrives, the medicine man “smelled like mutton tallow and mountain sagebrush”; Ku’oosh, like Old Grandma, is a relic from the old-times (p. 34).

Alone with Ku’oosh and hoping for healing, Tayo tells his story and traces his sickness back to his concern that he may have unknowingly killed someone during the war. “In the old way of warfare, you couldn’t kill another human being in battle without knowing it” because it was close-quarter combat (p. 36). But in contemporary warfare,
“killing across great distances without knowing who or how many had died” is common (p. 36). Ku’oosh’s scope, however, is limited; he cannot conceive of such a war, because he does not understand the complexity of the contemporary narrative or the reach of contemporary technologies. Not surprisingly, Ku’oosh, a man stuck in the past, performs a static, traditional scalp ceremony that fails to heal Tayo.

Ku’oosh’s unsuccessful ceremony hints at the broader sickness that will continue if the Lagunas remain solely in the past and refuse to adapt their rituals and stories to fit in the changing world. Unable to heal themselves in a world they do not comprehend, they will eventually be subject to harmful (white) medicine – literal and metaphorical – which, like the culture that produces it, attempts to silence the Native narratives. Tayo’s experience with the Army doctors serves as a warning of the results that will follow if the Lagunas resist reimagining the stories they pass on. At the hospital, Tayo is unconscious and unhealed. He “is invisible. His words are formed with an invisible tongue, they have no sound” (p. 15). This will be the fate of the Laguna people; the powerful forces that control the narratives will succeed if Tayo follows the elders and remains hidden inside and isolated. The dominant white world will make these people, their stories, and their traditions invisible; they will be scrubbed from the textbooks and permanently quieted.

Tayo’s responsibility is to bring these horizons – represented in Rocky and Old Grandma – together to create something new and whole; he is asked to preserve the rituals, traditions, and ways of knowing, but, in doing so, radically reconceive of them in ways that fit his contemporary place and time. In Betonie, he discovers a teacher who shows him how.
When Tayo travels to Gallup to meet Old Betonie, the Navajo medicine man, he witnesses many Native people who had been formally schooled “only enough to know they wanted to leave the reservation” (p. 115). Like Rocky, these tribal people are chasing an illusion; they ended up here – in a tourist-trap – “hungry and dirty and broke” (p. 115). Taken advantage of and treated like a commodity, “by the time they realized what had happened to them, they must have believed it was too late to go home” (p. 115). Early on Betonie gives Tayo an ultimatum: he “could go back to that white place” and join the Native people dying under the bridge in town or he could trust him and stay (p. 123). Cautiously, Tayo chooses the latter; he stories his experiences and Betonie teaches him how to gather and re-imagine.

Betonie is a bit of a historian and a radical seer. He wears the clothes of a traditional medicine man and has “a medicine man’s paraphernalia…painted gourd rattles and deer-hoof clackers,” but he also collects phonebooks, calendars, old newspapers and an assortment of other modern documents that track people and patterns (p. 120). He brings things – people, places, experiences, and cultures – together. When Tayo asks about the contemporary objects, Betonie explains that “[i]n the old days it was simple. A medicine man could get by without all these things. But nowadays” revision is necessary (p. 121). Elaborating further, he says that the old ceremonies used to be enough, but “after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies” (p. 126).

This underscores a key difference between Betonie and Ku’oosh. Ku’oosh recognizes that “there are some things we can’t cure like we used to…not since the white people came” (p. 38). But Ku’oosh has a firm grip on the old ways and, like Old
Grandma, is not capable of adjusting his worldview or altering his practices. As a result, his ceremony falls short. Betonie, on the other hand, understands the ceremonies must change and adapt. He acknowledges that “the people mistrust” his re-envisioned ceremonies, but he also knows that everything – old and new – in his medicine bag is meaningful; “this growth keeps the ceremonies strong” and alive. Betonie realizes that things “which do not shift and grow are dead things” (p. 126). He shifts and grows; this is why his teaching heals and his stories continue (p. 126).

Betonie, like Tayo, is inclusive; he, like Tayo, is of mixed-ancestry. His “grandmother was a remarkable Mexican with green eyes” (p. 119). Both Betonie and Tayo have hazel eyes – an outward sign of their blended backgrounds and a metaphorical reminder that these characters see (and write) the world similarly and more holistically; these are the privileged beings who will join together, not separate the world. Betonie teaches Tayo that it’s important to remember, but also create. He knows that Tayo has been sick for a long time, but warns him “his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything” – in a bringing together of all the binaries in a reborn ceremony (p. 126).

Tayo’s healing begins with Betonie in “the lava-rock foothills and pine of the Chuska Mountains” (p. 139). Here, Betonie tells Tayo the mythical story of a son-in-law stolen by Coyote. Over the four days the man is missing, he turns into Coyote. His family follows his tracks to the trees under which he spent each night: “a hard oak…a scrub oak…a pinon…[and] the juniper” (p. 140). They find him “under the wild rose bush” and realize that he, Coyote now, is the one they’ve lost (p. 140). His people travel to the “four old Bear People” – “they have the power to restore the mind” – and ask them
to save the son-in-law (pp. 140-141). The old Bear People “said they would come” and
tell the man’s family to “[p]repare hard oak / scrub oak / pinon / juniper and wild rose
twigs” (p. 141). The old Bear People instruct them to “[m]ake hoops / tie bundles of
weeds into hoops. / Make four bundles” (p. 141).

As readers hear the Indigenous version, Betonie re-constructs it and performs the
ritual on Tayo. Walking through the hoops (literally) here and (figuratively) throughout
the circular narrative, Tayo symbolically sheds the darkness that clings to him; similarly,
in the original tale, the Coyote skin loosens from the son-in-law as he travels through the
hoops. Betonie’s scalp ceremony metaphorically frees Tayo, “but it wasn’t over. / All
kinds of evil were still on him” (p. 144). Tayo’s journey has just begun. Betonie reminds
him: “It’s up to you… Don’t let them stop you. Don’t let them finish off this world” (p.
152).

Tayo, the teacher

Before the war, Uncle Josiah, “an old Laguna man,” takes advantage of the
drought-induced drop in cattle prices (p. 8). He purchases “special cattle” – not the
Herefords who grew weak and thin in the desert, but rugged cattle that “were descendants
of generations of desert cattle, born in dry sand and scrubby mesquite” (p. 74). He plans
to create a new hybrid-breed; future generations will “grow up heavy and covered with
meat like Herefords, but tough too, like the Mexican cows, able to withstand hard winters
and many dry years” (p. 80).

Josiah, like Betonie, understands the importance of adapting amidst changing
conditions. Both men weave things together. In addition to the cattle, Josiah also
combines different ways of knowing. Preparing to breed the cattle, he reads scientific
“books the extension agent loaned him” (p. 75). But he also recognizes the limitations of such texts; they “were written by white people who did not think about drought or winter blizzards or dry thistles, which [Josiah’s] cattle had to live with” (p. 75). Although he reads the academic books and grasps the institutional knowledge they espouse, Josiah also ties in his own experiential knowledge. He has place-specific understanding about topography and weather. He’s “not going to make the mistake other guys made”; he’s not going to rely solely upon generalized knowledge and attempt to grow a transplanted breed unsuited for the harsh, desert southwest (p. 75). Instead, he’s going to create something new – a hybrid-breed that will thrive in this place.

Prior to enlisting, Tayo promises to help Josiah with the cattle. But when he returns from war, the cattle are gone and Josiah is dead. Tayo carries a heavy guilt; he tells Betonie that Josiah died “because there was no one to help him search for the cattle after they were stolen” (p. 124). Immediately after Betonie’s successful scalp ceremony, Tayo dreams of the “speckled cattle…Some of them had spotted calves who ran behind them” (p. 145). Josiah’s efforts have been realized; the calves represent a new breed. The hybrid-cattle – the offspring of the “white-faced cattle” and the tough desert Mexican cattle – symbolically resonates within the being of Tayo – the “half-breed,” the survivor (p. 30-75). Tayo understands he needs to find the cattle; “there would be no peace” until he gathers them and brings them (and, metaphorically, himself) home (p. 145).

Following Betonie’s stars, Tayo travels to Mount Taylor, a sacred place where Lagunas had traditionally hunted. In more recent times, the place was “taken” by “white ranchers who came from Texas”; they renamed the place “North Top” and claimed it as their own (p. 185). They logged the land and shot predators for sport; they erected fences
and “posted signs in English and Spanish warning trespassers to keep out” (p. 187). Armed patrol men secured the perimeters. On the other side of a wire fence demarking Floyd Lee’s property, Tayo spots the cattle. Stolen and misplaced, they had been pacing “as if waiting for some chance to escape” (p. 188). With Josiah’s pliers, Tayo cuts “through four strands of heavy steel” and leads the cattle out (p. 189).

The cattle are home, but Tayo isn’t safe yet. One final encounter awaits him.

Emo is a WWII veteran. He tells damaging stories of conquest – both on the battlefield and in the bedroom. He “grew from each killing” and returns home carrying war souvenirs – bitter stories and “the teeth he had knocked out of a Japanese soldier” (p. 61). He mocks Tayo, the “half-breed,” who he had hated since grade school; “the only reason for this hate was that Tayo was part white” (p. 57). Emo resents the white world – a place he (temporarily and partially) accessed when he wore his Marine Corps uniform – because he doesn’t belong in it. As a result, he also resents the Laguna world, because it separates him from the white world. He attempts to escape his own identity and brags about convincing numerous women that he was white. Ultimately, his actions reinforce the (white) stereotype he tries to shed; he becomes a “drunk Indian” (p. 253).

Emo is like many others who came home from war disillusioned and angry. Tayo understands why so many of them turn to alcohol to wash away their hopelessness; “liquor was medicine for the anger that made them hurt, for the pain of the loss, medicine for tight bellies and choked-up throats” (p. 40). But Tayo also understands that these men are looking for their places and working out their identities; “belonging was drinking and laughing with the platoon, dancing with blond women, buying drinks for
buddies….and repeating stories about the good old times” (p. 43). They repeat these stories “like long medicine chants” (p. 43). But this medicine does not heal; rather, it corrupts and divides. Tayo realizes this and cries for Emo and the others who have succumbed to the ever-present darkness and resentment that has always flowed through the world.

When Tayo comes home healed, contempt consumes Emo. He crafts damaging narratives about Tayo. He tells anyone who will listen that Tayo is crazy; he claims Tayo lives in a cave and believes he’s a Japanese soldier. As a result of the stories Emo’s told, the (white) people are afraid of Tayo. Emo gathers guns, authorities, and doctors with medicine to permanently silence Tayo.

To complete the ceremony, Tayo must confront the evil Emo represents. Emo was “coming to end [the story his] way” (p. 235). Tayo understands the stakes: if he loses, the darkness wins. En route to this final encounter, he scans the landscape and sees things – dualities – coming together:

All things seemed to converge there: roads and wagon trails, canyons with springs, cliff paintings and shrines, the memory of Josiah and his cattle, but the other was distinct and strong like the violet-flowered weed that killed the mule, and the black markings on the cliff, deep caves along the valley the Spaniards followed to their attack on Acoma. (p. 237)

In this moment, Tayo understands the perfect balance of existence. This moment of convergence echoes Betonie who warned Tayo not to “be so quick to call something good or bad” and Josiah who told him “nothing was all good or all bad either” (p. 120, p. 11). He recognizes “the pattern, the way all the stories fit together – the old stories, the
war stories, their stories – to become the story that was still being told” (p. 246). Point and counter-point – Indigenous and Anglo, wet years and dry years, ancestral and modern, reader and text, wholeness and separation – coexisting. This recognition shapes the ending Tayo writes.

Emo, the destroyer, does not see through Tayo’s lens; he can conceive of only one way for this relationship to conclude – privileging one perspective and silencing Tayo and his alternative story of healing, wholeness, and hope. On the autumn solstice, Tayo’s friends capture him and attempt to return him to Emo. Tayo escapes; an angry Emo tortures the friends for their failure. Hiding in the shadows of an abandoned uranium mine – a nod to man’s ability to gather something natural and turn it into something catastrophic – Tayo watches the intoxicated scrum. At one point, it is almost too much for him to endure: “He was certain his own sanity would be destroyed if he did not stop them and all the suffering and dying they caused” (p. 252). The “they” here refers to all the destroyers from all time, not just Emo. As Tayo considers intervening, a sudden wind blows through and stokes the fire the men had set (p. 253). Tayo had been told that finishing the ceremony “never has been easy” and, indeed, if the wind had not brought him to his senses, he would have “jammed the screwdriver into Emo’s skull the way the witchery had wanted” (p. 253). Had he, the darkness would have triumphed; “He would have been another victim, a drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud” (p. 253). But that is not how this story ends.

Following Betonie’s lead, Tayo – the gatherer, the storyteller, the hybrid, the connector – creates something new. Tayo’s ceremony wraps up in unity and healing, not separation and sickness. His restraint demonstrates his understanding that the complex
dualities of the world exist simultaneously. “He had arrived at a convergence of patterns; he could see them clearly now” (p. 254). Tayo embodies this convergence; he dwells “aright within” the tensioniality of the binaries around him (Aoki, 2005a, p. 163). This is evident throughout the text, but especially in the scene Tayo imagines on his way home. Under Betonie’s stars, Tayo brings all his teachers – representing diverse ways of knowing – together: “Josiah was driving the wagon, old Grandma was holding him, and Rocky whispered ‘my brother.’ They were taking him home” (Silko, 1977, p. 254).

At the conclusion of the text, Tayo is back home telling the elders his story. He’s teaching them a new way of being in the world; his story shows them that “to be alive is to live in tension” – to have one’s heart in conflict with itself (Aoki, 2005a, p. 162). His words are valuable, because the dualities are inextinguishable and in constant flux. Old Grandma hints at the circular movement; she remembers hearing these stories before – “only thing is, the names sound different” (Silko, 2005, p. 260). The witchery of the world “is dead for now”; Tayo’s ceremony offers a healthier alternative to the darkness. But eventually a counter to Tayo’s alternative will come to be; the witchery will rise again. And when it does, Tayo – and all of us – will be challenged to gather, interpret, and re-imagine once more.

At the heart of Tayo’s story is a very basic question: “What are you doing here?” (p. 176). This question is relevant to all readers, but it speaks directly to teachers who dwell within a tensioned place, a “sanctified clearing….an extraordinarily unique and precious place, a hopeful place, a trustful place, a careful place – essentially a human place” (Aoki, 2005a, p. 164). In this place, teachers craft stories of living and being that
shape the next generation and generations after. Feeling the pull from both sides – the curriculum-as-plan and the curriculum-as-lived – what do we do? Do we create? Do we destroy?

What are you doing here?
Bringing English Education Back to Earth
The inaugural Environmental Literature Institute (ELI) convened at Phillips Exeter Academy in the summer of 2016. The week-long conference was sponsored by The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE), ORION, and Milkweed Editions. Twenty-three educators from across North America were selected to participate. The program sought to create “a community of teachers working in the environmental humanities” (“ASLE Collaborates,” 2016). The sessions initiated conversations about the place of the earth in the classroom and offered practical approaches for bringing the outside in or, even better, getting students beyond the walls of the school and out into the fresh air.

The early success of this institute demonstrates that there is a desire for these discussions. ELI-2016 welcomed earth-conscious educators; that community expanded with ELI-2017 and ELI-2018. Many educators in the humanities (at all levels) are looking for guidance on how to root their curriculum in the earth (Christensen & Crimmel, 2008; Crimmel, 2003; Gruenewald & Smith, 2007; Siperstein, Hall, & LeMenager, 2016). The interest is there. The need for environmentally-informed perspectives persists. And, so, the conversation continues.

Here, I’d like to add a voice to the conversation – one that was notably absent during my time at ELI – the voice of an earthen English teacher educator. In what follows, I’ll blaze a path for bringing English education back to earth. My route begins in my conception of place, moves to a survey of place in curriculum, underscores the importance of place in teacher education, and concludes with suggestions for growing an earthen English literacy curriculum.
Place: An Earthen Approach

Understanding place is central to understanding both self and others. Recognizing this and aiming to “thrust the very idea of place, so deeply dormant in modern Western thinking, once more into the daylight,” Edward Casey (1997) traces the “story of how human beings… have regarded place as a concept or idea” (p. xi). Doing so reveals “how much intelligent and insightful thought has been accorded to place in the course of Western philosophy” (p. xi). Walking through this history, Casey hopes, will helps us “reappreciate [the] unsuspected importance” of place in our lives (p. xi).

The conversation that Casey reawakens is vital because it emphasizes the centrality of place in our lives. He opens the text by underscoring this significant point:

We are immersed in [place] and could not do without it. To be at all – to exist in any way – is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. Nothing we do is unplaced. How could it be otherwise? How could we fail to recognize this primal fact? (p. ix)

Indeed, how could we forget? Yet, as Casey and others demonstrate, we have often been made to forget, overlook, ignore, and dismiss our places (Cresswell, 2013; Geertz, 1996; Gruenewald, 2003; Jardine, 1990; Pinar, 1991).

Clifford Geertz (1996) concurs when he points out that place – “a dimension of everyone’s existence, the intensity of where we are” – often “passes by anonymous and unremarked. It goes without saying” (p. 259). He speculates about some possible
explanations: place is commonplace and it “is difficult to see what is always there”; place is hard to define and “it is not a clear and distinct idea”; and, most importantly, place is subjective and immediate – it “makes a poor abstraction” (p. 259). But Geertz concludes that, despite the slipperiness, place deserves our attention because “no one lives in the world in general”; we live in exact, detailed, particular places (p. 262).

And those places, argues David Gruenewald (2003b), “make us”; places shape our identities, our perspectives, and our actions (p. 621). Surveying insights from across disciplines, Gruenewald engages with a variety of ways of thinking about place with the goal of “demonstrat[ing] the power, range, and immediacy of place” (p. 623). He examines place from five interrelated dimensions – the perceptual, the sociological, the ideological, the political, and the ecological – gathered from a variety of perspectives including “phenomenology, critical geography, bioregionalism, ecofeminism… literature and Native American thought” (p. 623). Rather than attempting to pin place into a tight definition, Gruenewald uses the dimensions to demonstrate the “fundamental idea that places are pedagogical”; they help us understand “who, what, and where we are, as well as how we might live our lives” (pp. 623 - 636).

Of the five dimensions Gruenewald (2003b) offers, two are most closely woven into my understanding of place. Growing from phenomenological thought, the perceptual dimension shows that “places are the ground of direct human experience” (p. 623). This dimension explores the close relationship between “the body [and] the natural world” that “makes possible any human identity or cultural formation” (p. 623). Gruenewald turns to Wendell Berry to develop the ecological dimension of place. Underscoring the importance of scale and local knowledge, “Berry advances a
bioregional understanding of place” (p. 634). At the core of this thinking is the belief that “cultural practices should be aligned with the ecological limits and features of places” (p. 634). Thinking through both the perceptual and the ecological dimensions of place highlights the reciprocal relationship of beings and the natural world; who we are is very much contingent upon where we are.

My understanding of place grows from the soil cultivated by earth-conscious philosophers. As such, I conceive of place as a living location – it is where I plant my feet – and, simultaneously, a personal living experience – continuous, interactive, relational, and situated. Place is immediate and local, but no place exists in isolation. Like Gary Snyder (1990), I envision place as “a mosaic within larger mosaics” (p. 27). Like a mosaic, the place I inhabit is composed of smaller tiles – native plants and animals, unique topography, and shared experiences, stories, memories, and language. While my place of origin is a unique frame, it is part of a pattern, the larger mosaic. Together, all the places we inhabit, all the smaller mosaics and each tile within them, remain vibrantly particular, but each also contributes to the unification of the larger whole. “The world,” Snyder writes, “is places” – distinct, layered, and interdependent places (p. 25, emphasis added).

**Placing Curriculum**

Teaching and learning are placed activities; we learn and we teach in particular places. Yet, “place as a concept is largely absent in the curriculum literature” (Pinar, 1991, p. 165). This is not too surprising because “[f]rom its conceptions as a specialized field, curriculum has tended toward the abstract” (p. 165). Curriculum is typically formulated on principles “applicable anytime and anywhere” (p. 165). Overlooking the
particulars, the connections, and the embodied, curriculum often fails to pay attention to place. To develop and grow, curriculum theory cannot remain in the abstract, standardized, and scripted. Instead, it must be rooted in the uniqueness and fluidity of place; it must be brought back to earth.

David Jardine’s (1990) conception of an integrated curriculum accomplishes this. It disrupts the “analytic, definitional, and frequently disintegrative approaches to educational phenomena” by “pointing to a sense of interrelatedness, interdependency, or interconnectedness” (p. 110). The curriculum he proposes “has to do with keeping things in place, nested in deep communities of relationships that make them whole, healthy and sane” (Jardine, LaGrange, & Everest, 2003, p. 166). He writes that “[t]here is a sense, then, in which this interrelatedness of things underlying the integrated curriculum requires seeing every action as an action on behalf of all, every thing speaking on behalf of all things” (Jardine, 1990, p. 117). This concept echoes Aldo Leopold (1949) who, decades earlier, wrote that “the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts” (p. 203). Action by one effects the whole. Like Leopold, Jardine implies that this biotic community is worthy of our care, respect, and attention.

For Jardine (1990), where we are should shape the curriculum. To highlight the where and the relationships that abound within it, Jardine stories a teaching experience. At the beginning of the semester, he gives students “a blank piece of paper” and instructs them to “write down as many possible ways the paper could be used to demonstrate, illustrate, or teach features of the various curriculum areas” (p. 107). They begin by naming the expected: “writing on it, painting or drawing on it, reading from it, folding it” and so on (p. 107). The conversation shifts when “one student suggested that you could
talk about trees and still remain… ‘on topic’” (p. 107). This opens up many new perspectives and opportunities including “sun and soil and water and logging and chainsaws and gasoline and refineries”; they’re all part of the story (p. 107). Jardine reflects that

because of this serendipitous turn of attention, suddenly and unexpectedly, everything came to be co-present with the paper, everything seemed to nestle around it. Some topics seemed close to the paper, others distant, at the ends of long and tenuous tendrils of interconnection. Some connections were obvious and immediate, some connections were stretched, but nothing was absent altogether.

(p. 107)

Returning to Snyder’s image, Jardine’s exercise shows that the paper is part of the mosaic. So, too, is the where. And the curriculum. It is dense in discipline-specific content, but that content is shaped by, accessed through, and understood within living relationships growing in actual places.

Following Jardine’s logic a bit further, the paper activity demonstrates that “every object is a unique center around which all others can be gathered; at the same time, that very object rests on the periphery of all others, proximal to some, distant to others” (p. 108). In terms of human activity, our lives are our centers. I come to know the world through my center. But my center is not your center and yours is not mine. And while I navigate through my center, the paper exercise teaches me that my center is not necessarily the center; instead, it is my center in relation to my surroundings. To help anchor this perpetual shifting, Jardine offers the earth as the primary center to which all
other centers are connected – the center present within all other centers. My center is my center, but it is always in relation to the earth.

Recognizing and demonstrating this positioning is a primary responsibility of education; therefore, what we learn and what we teach in school must be earthen. Jardine makes this explicit when he writes that

the integrated curriculum is, at its roots, more than a matter of interrelations between curriculum areas or subject matters. It is an ecological and spiritual matter, involving images of our place and the place of our children on ‘this precious Earth.’ It raises the question of how we are to understand that we are people of this precious Earth, caught up in its potentialities and possibilities. It raises the question of how the deep and moist interweavings and integrity of the Earth are both an original constraint on our lives, but also an original blessing, and original freedom; overstepping the boundary pushes the Earth beyond what is possible for it to sustain. (p. 111)

This is vital and generative work. Jardine’s theorizing reminds us that we will ultimately be sustained not so much by mastery of skills or high grade-point averages, but by our ability to live responsibly and lovingly on an earth that we were born of and that we will return to, an earth that came before us and will carry on after us.

**Placing Teacher Education**

Since Pinar and Jardine, many more earth-conscious theorists have sought to reorient education and (re)integrate curriculum to underscore the ways that schools (and their inhabitants) connect to, shape, and are shaped by their places (Gruenewald & Smith, 2007). In addition to the theoretical work, many practitioners have been developing
place-based pedagogy in their classrooms (Goleman, Bennett, & Barlow, 2012; Smith & Sobel, 2010; Elder, 1998). These early theorists and teachers have offered ways to place teaching and learning.

Teacher education programs provide a great place to continue this work and (in some instances) keep up with what’s already happening in some schoolrooms. In placing the curriculum, education programs will offer pre-service teachers theory and practice that help them recognize the abundant life and learning opportunities that surround them and guide them to develop effective ways for weaving their immediate places into the curriculum. This type of teaching imagines the classroom in new ways; therefore, placed education programs will develop curriculum that helps teacher candidates determine where “to look to for local knowledge and how best to gather local information in a respectful manner” (Vinlove, 2015, p. 4). This is probably best accomplished through hands-on, experiential learning. Clifford Knapp (2007) describes such an activity when he discusses taking his graduate class to a local bookstore where students “investigated the teaching/learning potential of that location” (p. 15). Mark Kissling (2016) provides another great example of this type of teaching and learning when he stories the “Waste Tour Curriculum” embedded in his social studies methodology course. He concludes that (re)introducing students to “familiar and unfamiliar places on campus,” the tour offers new perspectives and inspires new ways of thinking about curriculum (p. 336).

Opportunities like these are particularly important because “teachers teach influenced by the experiences of their lives”; therefore, “such place-based learning [at the pre-service level] is imperative to future place-based teaching” (p. 336).
Despite the work already done, future efforts to (re)embed education programs will meet some resistance. Of primary concern is the reality that state certification boards often have teacher preparation programs hamstrung. The combination of general and professional education requirements are many and rigid; there is not a lot of room for additional place-based classes (Plevyak, Bendixen-Noe, Henderson, Roth, & Wilke, 2001). In addition, place-conscious practice is interdisciplinary and the curriculum will need to support and model this type of work. This is not a conversation to be confined to a single class, nor should it be limited to just science or social studies content courses. Instead, these ideas will have to flow through every course in the program. In opposition, there will be some who argue that place-based theories and methods are superfluous and not worth the effort to weave into the curriculum. Complicating matters, there isn’t a lot of research nor are there a lot of examples to use to create place-conscious teacher education programs (Ajayi, 2014). And even when there are some places to look – for example, Antioch New England Graduate School in Keene – place-based practices are, by definition, not one-size-fits-all. The curriculum, content, and practice are context-dependent. Finally, such programs will need to balance helping teachers root themselves in their current place, while simultaneously helping them develop perspectives for coming to know new places (Witt, Peterson, & Trombulak, 2016). After all, most graduates won’t find work in their college towns; they’ll need to move elsewhere and settle in there.

Although there will be challenges, they will be far outweighed by the benefits of placing teacher education. Among other things, a placed curriculum helps pre-service teachers recognize that we exist in a collaborative ecosystem full of relationships and
needs. In addition, it demonstrates that we are always place-bound; we exist in the webbing of place. (Re)embedding the curriculum also gives teachers an opportunity to experience teaching and learning as situated, “social, collective” activities (Lave, 1996, p. 149). It’s not a stretch to think that many of these teachers will bring these lessons into their own classrooms and be better equipped to more deeply root the teaching and learning in their places (Kissling, 2016; Powers, 2004). Finally, on an administrative level, placing teacher education makes sense. Higher education is a competitive place, and institutions are always looking for ways to distinguish and market themselves. Place-conscious education programs “can make a clear case that what they offer is different, that their students will be formed in local and distinctive ways” (Baker & Bilbo, 2017, p. 15). In other words, a placed teacher program makes the argument (to pre-service teachers and the public) that we’re not all the same, we are specific and unique, and – in this place – we embrace that diversity.

**Placing English Education**

Earthen teaching and learning has a natural home in the English Language Arts. What better place to develop an appreciation for the complexities of place and wrestle with “systems, connections, patterns, and root causes” than in the English classroom (Orr, 2004, p. 23)? Here we focus on representation, relationships, and stories; we develop our abilities to observe, empathize, perceive, interpret, and understand. We wrestle with questions about point of view, culture, language, scope, values, and meaning. We consider context – social, historical, ethical, political, and human. We critique, comprehend, create alternatives, generate possibilities, and persuasively construct narratives that inspire, empower, and encourage. We inquire. We analyze what’s said
and listen for what’s not said. Yet, too often, the earth is silent in the English classroom. This is incongruous. It is within the pages of literature and the lines of composition that we aim to deepen our understanding of what it means to be human, but the earth – the place where our human lives take place – rarely enters the conversation (Beach, Share, & Webb, 2017; Bishop, 2004; Bruce, 2011; Esposito, 2012; Longhurst, 2012; Lundahl, 2011; and McClanahan, 2013). In the English classroom, we could easily pay closer attention to the earth and our relationship with it.

In recent years, some earthen education pioneers have offered paths for placing (K-16) English literature and writing classes (Bishop, 2004; Bruce, 2011; McClanahan, 2013; Longhurst, 2012; Lundahl, 2011; Rous, 2000). There are fewer scholars who are exploring ways to place English teacher education (Ajayi, 2014). Recently, some climate-change-focused teaching-texts have appeared (Beach, et al., 2017; Matthewman, 2011; Siperstein & LeMenager, 2016). But, overall, the attention given to preparing teachers for place-responsive pedagogy is still in its infancy.

More consciously preparing pre-service English teachers to bring teaching and learning back into place seems like a reasonable next step.

**Earthen English Literacy**

Writing about the integrated curriculum, David Jardine (1990) reminds us that mastery of a subject is “of little use if that knowledge is understood in such a way that there is no longer any real ground that is safe to walk” (p. 112). As a result, every subject “must be earthen in how it is understood, how it is taught, and how it is grounded” (p. 112). With this directive in mind, I conceived of an *Earthen English Literacy* course that helps teacher candidates teach with an awareness of place and with a commitment to
inspiring their own students to think carefully about how we live on the earth – this includes thinking about how we relate internally, to one another, and to our natural surroundings. In addition, this course provides pre-service teachers ample resources and activities that encourage them to create opportunities for their own students to critically examine the earth-story they’ve been told and thoughtfully develop alternative, healthier narratives.

What follows is an overview of some key places within the *Earthen English Literacy* curriculum; of course, many of these ideas could also easily find their way into already established courses in education or within other concentrations. The *Earthen English Literacy* curriculum introduces students to objectives, content, practices, and methodology associated with teaching English, but the theory, texts, activities, and conversations are place-conscious. The curriculum aims to help pre-service teachers understand how and why place matters and use that awareness to shape their own placed English classrooms.

**Reflecting Place**

To reveal our assumptions about place, we need to reflect on who we are, where we are, and how we think. That’s why this course incorporates a lot of reflective writing; it encourages students to think and to critically analyze what they think, why they think it, and what it all means. The curriculum includes independent narratives and reflections tied to other assignments. Some of the writing is private, some shared between teacher and student, and some public. Reflective writing offers students a safe place to experiment with new ways of thinking and wrestle with meaningful place-based
complexities. Sometimes it’s good to share some of these ideas, because we’re all better off when we hear and, ultimately, learn from each other.

The first major writing of the course is the **Places of Learning Narrative**. This assignment asks students to think about the places they learn best. Although they’ve spent a good chunk of their lives in classrooms – and likely acquired a great deal of knowledge there – they’ve also done a lot of learning outside classrooms. Sometimes our most memorable and impactful learning happens in modest places as we complete seemingly mundane activities: in the car on family trips; around the stove in the kitchen; or wandering through a nearby woods.

For this narrative, students remember and reflect upon their places of learning, and then they tell the story of one of those places and themselves within that place. For this activity students think carefully about place and begin to see learning as something shaped by place and also occurring throughout life in all the places they inhabit. In addition, as they identify the particular details of their place – how it is situated, how it looks, how it feels – they reveal features they might try to replicate in their own teaching and in their own classrooms. Finally, this writing guides students to reflect on their own emerging focus on place, self, and learning; these things are at the heart of the course and understanding of them will deepen as the semester unfolds.

At the conclusion of the semester, students reflect on this growth in their **Where I Am Narratives**. As they develop their narratives, students place themselves and me in their journeys. They show where they were at the beginning of the semester, make clear the path they’ve taken to get to where they are now, and project the future steps they’ll take to get where they’d ultimately like to go. Throughout, they consider the place of
place in their own learning and teaching; they think about the interweaving of school and the earth. In addition, the narratives help both me and the writers understand more clearly where all that we’ve discussed about self, teaching, learning, literature, writing, and place will (or won’t) fit into the writers’ future classrooms. Finally, this narrative encourages pre-service teachers to use the semester as an orientation guide and to think about how these ideas will inform and direct their own teaching.

Teaching Place

*Earthen English Literacy* asks teacher candidates to critically examine the common sorting and teaching of texts in the curriculum-as-plan. “Organized by genres, time periods, or narrowly construed national traditions, literary works or ‘informational texts’ [in the English Language Arts classroom] are [too regularly] presented as ‘pearls on a string,’ without meaningful connections between them” (Beach, et al., 2017, p. 33). Similarly, writing instruction often “covers different modes or genres, but may lack real purpose and audience” (p. 33). Of course, context is necessary for any critical analysis. So, too, is meaningful connection to readers in their present places. These things are embedded in the texts we read and the texts we write, but students need help discovering that the texts are speaking to them and about their relationship to the world – here and now.

Ecocriticism offers a particularly pertinent lens through which to examine texts and bring the analysis back to earth.\(^{15}\) As the field has grown, many definitions have

\(^{15}\) Despite the growth of ecocriticism, this school of thought is still absent from popular mainstream teaching methods textbooks (for example: Atwell, 2015; Burke, 2013; Milner, Milner, & Mitchell, 2017).

Fortunately, there is a rich body of accessible ecocritical literature that will enhance any literacy course, provide necessary background, and inspire ways for bringing critical analysis and writing
emerged for ecocriticism, but perhaps the best and most succinct understanding comes from Cheryll Glotfelty (1996): “Simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment…ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (p. xviii). Ecocriticism is firmly rooted in the belief that texts should be read with a focus on the natural world – the place – and an awareness of how that place affects and shapes the characters and also how those characters affect and shape their places. Ecocritics are committed to the belief that it is a human obligation to care for and protect the earth. The lens they use to read texts is focused by these common principles.

Ecocriticism is heterogeneous, interdisciplinary, and welcoming. It includes a cross-fertilization of ideas across many fields. As a result, no overarching methods exist for this critical theory. However, it is easy to develop some initial questions that an ecocritic might pose to a text:

— How does the text portray place? Static or dynamic? Independent or interdependent?

— How do these places look? Feel? Sound?

— How are the characters portrayed in relationship to their places?

— How does the place interact with the characters and vice versa? Destructive or nurturing?

— How is the local related to the global?

back into place (Beach, et al., 2017; Brooke, 2003; Dobrin & Kidd, 2004; Dobrin & Weisser, 2002; Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996; Owens, 2001; Weisser, 2001). In addition, there are several special edition journals and edited texts that bring together place-based practitioner stories from diverse classrooms (Elder, 1998; Leslie, Tallmadge, & Wessels, 1999; Lindblom, 2011; Rahn, 1995; Russell, Westman, & Wood, 2011).
— How does the text’s physical setting affect the plot? The characters?
— How do the characters affect their places?
— How does the depiction of place help us understand causes, influences, and outcomes?
— How does the place-narrative encourage readers to live in the world?

*Earthen English Literacy* emerges from ecocritical thinking and the course is guided by ecocritical principles. Throughout the semester, teacher candidates think about place from an ecocritical perspective. At no point is this more explicit than when students develop their own place-conscious unit plans; these types of learning activities help pre-service teachers develop their capacity for earthen thinking, reading, writing, and teaching.

In the *Place (Reading) Unit Plan*, students select a literary work as an anchor and develop a 3-6-week earthen unit plan around their chosen text. Using the text as a guide, they identify the target grade level and the course in which they would place this unit. As they shape the unit, pre-service teachers critically access their understanding of ecocriticism and use this lens (rather than the much more common anthropocentric lens) to frame the goals, objectives, supplemental material, lessons, and activities. In doing so, teacher candidates construct ways to guide students through a reading of the text that addresses ecocritical questions and simultaneously helps them read their own places more critically.

In the *Place (Writing) Unit Plan*, pre-service teachers read their places and identify which parts of those places that need protection, encouragement, or guidance. They narrow in on a particular focus and construct a 3-6-week earthen unit around that
topic. As they create this unit, teacher candidates offer texts and activities that both frame the issue and help students understand the strength of words and the unique ability of language to change places. The units that emerge from this assignment include numerous activities and several writing assignments (brief and long, informal and formal) that help students address important issues within their local community and act (in various ways) to create a healthier, more cohesive place.

**Exploring Place**

*Earthen English Literacy* thinks critically about the classroom as a place, but it also encourages teacher candidates to place teaching and learning within the abundant opportunities that exist outside the classroom. As the *Places of Learning Narratives* reveal, learning happens in formal places, but it also happens – oftentimes more frequently and more powerfully – in the hallway, on the front steps, or in the grass on the other side of campus. When we get outside, look around, and experience our place “in the open air [and] under the sun, [we ask] a different set of questions” (Conlogue, 2013, p. 45). Taking learning outside offers an opportunity to see our place, texts, and selves from new angles. As our perception changes, our questions change, and our understanding changes.

To model this type of teaching and learning, we go outside the classroom. We begin by critically analyzing our building and we discuss how the design of the structure and the features within it make arguments about the purpose of education. We read Frost’s “Mending Wall” in the woods alongside a stone wall; Dickinson’s “I Died for Beauty” in a cemetery adjacent to campus; and Merwin’s “The Miner” 300 feet below the earth’s surface at a local coal mine tour. We participate in walking explorations and
spend time outside sketching our surroundings. We visit a local dairy farm and think about its possible place in earthen English curriculum. Reading (in) places always leads to rich conversations – both in place and upon our return to the classroom. All of these activities are part of the explicit *Earthen English Literacy* curriculum because they show us that places matter – places shape our learning and thinking, and they are much more detailed and complex than they appear.

The *Fields of Learning Tour* reminds pre-service teachers that we exist within an abundance of resources. For this assignment, students look beyond the covers of their texts, past the four walls of the classroom, and (perhaps) outside; from there they shine light on the living teaching opportunities that surround them. The activity begins with individual walk arounds. As students explore their place on foot, they ask questions, conduct research, make observations, unleash their imagination, and think critically about what’s happening or what could happen in this place. They compile sensory details and each narrows in on a particular place of learning. Once identified, they settle into the place and reflect on what that place teaches us and how that place fits into the earthen English curriculum.

The entire class visits each of the places. Along the way and once we arrive, students explain the places they’ve discovered and make a case for weaving those particular places of learning into the curriculum. In doing so, they demonstrate that these places of learning are important and how, often, the places they’ve discovered will facilitate deeper learning than that which would have happened had we remained in the classroom.
From Here

Wendell Berry (1987) writes that the proper purpose of education is “to bring young people into responsible maturity, to help them to be good caretakers of what they have been given, to help them to be charitable toward fellow creatures” (p. 52). To achieve this noble end, we need to prepare teachers for place-responsive teaching that underscores our responsibility as members of living (human and more-than-human) communities. Bringing teacher education back to earth underscores this responsibility by demonstrating that everything is connected – our lives and our places are part of a larger mosaic. Maintaining this delicate and life-sustaining pattern requires attention and care which flow naturally from the earthen curriculum.
What I Know and What I Hope (for You)
In “Birding Lessons and the Teachings of Cicadas,” David Jardine (1998) stories his return to the “southern Ontario…forests where [he] was raised” for a birding trip with old friends (p. 92). Walking through the woods, everything becomes familiar once more and the sound of the cicadas reminds him “of the life [he’d] forgotten [he’d] lived,” one of “deep, fleshy, familiar relations” (p. 92). The conversation among the birders reveal their “discipline, attention, and rich interpretative joy” in seeing, hearing, gathering, and understanding the world through the life they’ve studied in this place over a long period of time (p. 93). This reminds Jardine of a “type of learning that [he] had once known but…long since forgotten” (p. 93). He compiles a list of the things he had forgotten while he was away from these woods:

I had forgotten the pleasure to be had in simply standing in the presence of people who are practiced in what they know and listening, feeling, watching them work.
I had forgotten the learning to be had from standing alongside and imitating, practicing, repeating, refining the bodily gestures of knowing. I had forgotten how they could show me things, not just about this place, but about how you might carry yourself, what might become of you, when you know this place well.

( pp. 93-94)

But the “great teachers” of the forest continue to remind him to remember what he’s forgotten; they repeat “the calls to attention required to know well of this place and its ways” (p. 94). Knowing here grows through “happenstance arrivals” and requires “settling, slowing, returning, listening, and looking anew” (p. 94). But there’s more to it; “coming to know…is never just a matter of learning the ways of a place, but learning how to carry oneself in such a way that the ways of this place might show themselves” (p.
This, of course, requires patience, commitment, attention, gathering, sorting, and composing; it involves “the living, ongoing work of coming to a place, learning its ways, and living with the unforeseeable consequences that you inevitably become someone in such efforts” (p. 95). Jardine writes that “there is something about such gathering that is deeply personal, deeply formative, deeply pedagogical” (p. 94). In gathering the place, he, himself, is gathered; as he composes the place, he, too, is composed. Jardine’s first birding lesson: “I become someone through what I know” (p. 94).

Here I linger. Who am I becoming? What do I know?

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I know the kinship of the sugar maple in my backyard. Rising before the forest line and climbing over a hundred feet, it is the closest tree to the house. It continues to stand – likely a result of my mom’s insistence – where many others fell during the clearing of the land. It teaches reciprocity – accepting only what it needs from the soil, the sun, the water, and the air; in return, giving shade, stability, oxygen, and life. When the chaos of the world has consumed me and left me fragmented and disoriented, I gently rub my hand across the fissures and creases of its sturdy bark. I feel, once more, our common flesh; I discover my place and wholeness again.

I know the whistle of the black-capped chickadee, the repetitions of the tufted titmouse; and the coo of the mourning dove. I know that sometimes the noisiest animal rustling through the undergrowth is, in fact, one of the smallest – the chipmunk. I treasure this utterly useless information. I know that I am “surrounded by a singing, mating, howling commotion of other species, all of which love their lives as much as we do ours, and none of which could possibly care less about our economic status or our
running day calendar” (Kingsolver, 2002, p. 40). Hearing their calls and knowing their names reminds me that I’m not alone. And “isn’t that what we long for, a reassurance that we aren’t alone in this feverish business of breeding and dying” (Sanders, 2000, p. 148)? We are here together. I learn how to live and how to carry myself by paying attention to my more-than-human neighbors; I follow their lead. They are worthy of my “compassion and care”; I hope I am worthy of theirs (p. 149).

I know the maternal, life-giving, sacrificial offerings of this place. I know about the migrations of the monarchs and the adaptations of the flying squirrels. I know that whether I see her or not, the opossum walks across the front-yard during the night. I know where the deer sleep, the squirrels bury their nuts, and the garter sheds his skin. I know the morning dew always betrays the webs diligently strung through the grass. I know the resilience of the Mountain Laurel and the faithfulness of the ferns. I know the patience of the wolf spider. And I know the dedication and the courage of the robin. I know that each of those blue eggs might not have the chance to hatch, and, even if they do, not all the fledglings will successfully leave the nest. I know the red-tail circles and has a family, too. I know the alarm sound, the chase, the regrouping, the composure, and the ultimate return home. There are other mouths to feed – more life to nourish; the robin must carry on. I know that the seeds I plant will eventually blossom into food that the groundhog and I will share; it will nourish us both. I know that we’re all in this together – you, me, and the red fox yipping in the night. I know that in early April the woods begins to awaken; I know the smell of new life pushing through the soil and spreading through the branches. This place – all of it – is webbed into my living character; I am webbed into the living character of this place.
Gary Snyder (1980) admits that he holds “the most archaic values of earth…the fertility of the soil, the magic of animals, the power-vision in solitude, the terrifying initiation and rebirth, the love and ecstasy of the dance, [and] the common work of the tribe” (p. 3). He points out that “these concerns are basic to everyone, but most don’t think about them, aren’t aware of them” (p. 3). I want to think about them; I want to be aware of them. To do so means digging into the soil; recognizing the intelligence that pierces through the eyes of all beings; finding strength in knowing myself; seeking balance and harmony; and remembering that the work I do is not just for me – I work in honor of the life that came before me, in gratitude for the life that accompanies me, and in hope for the life that will continue after me. Snyder says that all of this requires love, “not the humanistic love of the West – but a love that extends to animals, rocks, dirt, all of it” (p. 3). Aldo Leopold (1949) agrees; he writes that it is inconceivable to think that “an ethical relation to the land can exist without love, respect and admiration” (p. 261). Love is where our attention to and affection for nature begins; it will lead us to responsible stewardship of and membership within our common home. Without this love, we will end “with an uninhabitable place” (Snyder, 1980, p. 3).

I know that the knowing I’m striving for – the urge to connect with, learn from, and even love other forms of life – is what biologist E.O. Wilson (1984) terms “biophilia” (p. 84). I know that the fertile black earth of which I speak is not eagerly welcomed into the sterile ivory tower where I work. I know that, for many, what I know may seem parochial or be written off as rudimentary. But this is what I value; this is what I know, and this is what has created the creature who writes to you today. And I know that this curiosity, this attention, this consideration, “if carried far enough…enlarges our sense of
who we are, where we are, and how we might live” (Sanders, 2000, p. 149). And this is what I seek.

I write to you from my back deck on an unseasonably warm afternoon in early November. I’m surrounded by unclad maples and birches. The soaring oaks continue to hold their leaves, even as the days get shorter and the grass fills with smatterings of red, and yellow, and brown. I go unnoticed as three white-tails, two does and a buck, browse the understory in the back woods about 25 yards from where I’m sitting. It’s rut season, but the ladies don’t seem impressed by the six-pointer’s advances. For now, the deer can eat in peace because Shaggy is asleep; her long, lean body is draped over my right foot. I feel her move rhythmically with every inhalation and exhalation; occasionally her paws twitch as she races towards the cheese, or steak, or maybe me in her dreams. A gentle breeze dances through her long golden hair and reawakens the earthen smell of the decomposition that surrounds us.

As I compose my story in and of this sacred woods, I know that I don’t really know much of anything, but I do know that I hope you – Johnny, Tommy, and Danny – inherit a loved earth. I hope you watch lightning bugs, listen for crickets, hold slugs, drink what you draw from the well, smell the decay of autumn, and feel the rebirth of spring. I hope you see honey bees work and listen to owls talk. I hope you savor what you pull from the soil and that it settles into your bellies. I hope you remember that the earth is present in every breath you take and in every word you speak. I hope you carry the earth on the soles of your feet and on the tips of your fingers. I hope you don’t wash it off; I hope you remember it’s always a part of you.
I hope you explore your backyard. I hope you can name the trees, your sturdy and loyal neighbors. I hope you watch the woodpecker eat, the hawk swoop, and the bugs on the back-wall bounce. I hope you always follow the trail of the ant with as much curiosity and amazement as you did when you each hovered above the one speed-walking along my back deck. I hope you imagine the world from its perspective. I hope you plant daisies and also appreciate the wild flowers and native blooms. I hope you make wishes on dandelions and spread their seeds. I hope you eat tomatoes off the vine. I hope you always remember not to scare the birds and to protect the penguins and look out for the turtles. I hope you know that the crows gather to recount the adventures of the day, not to frighten you with their cawing. I hope you pay attention to the diverse, interdependent, harmonious life flying, crawling, walking, slithering, hopping, swimming, and growing all around you. I hope you don’t forget that these beings are just like you – trying their best to make their contributions and get safely back home. I hope you let them go about their work.
Johnny,

I hope you always remember your reaction to Shaggy digging in my backyard. You and Tommy were playing in the Fort Frontier; Tommy manned the gates and you sought entrance. Shaggy was excited to be with you and she began digging by the back door. At first, you looked at her confusingly; this was the first time you witnessed Shaggy pawing through the earth. Your confusion led to delight when you watched the piles of dirt flying. But when Shaggy backed up and you noticed the hole she had opened, your happiness turned to concern. “The ground,” you said, was “broken.” This may have been the first time you realized there was something below the green surface of the grass, because this was likely the first time you had seen the soil from which the grass sprouts. You were not overcome by your worry, and you did not blame Shaggy for doing what comes naturally to her; instead, you immediately acted to “fix” the wound – you patched the opening with loose dirt and grass. *You healed the earth.*
Tommy,

I hope you always remember your joy when you danced with the sugar maple that hangs low in my backyard. It was a late May afternoon. Earlier you had been discussing Anthracite coal and calling on the eagles with Grandpa. You had presented several conferences with Erin; sitting atop the front porch railing, you explained the MBTA, the differences between the old and new Green Line cars, and how it’s possible to “sneak over to the D” from the C. You called out, “Last stop. Thank you for riding the T.”

Later, you searched for frogs in the backyard and it was there that you embraced the beauty of nature in its truest form. Decades ago, the maple extended a branch into the clearing made when our house was built. Each year, the branch reaches a little farther, stretching for sun. On this day, that branch served as your partner. You imagined it as ribbons streaming down from the sky and you rhythmically glided amidst the flickering leaves. You celebrated the earth.
Danny,

I hope you always remember the love you extended to the earthworms. On April 20, 2018 when you came to visit Nana, you sat alongside her in your sky dive blue camp chair. It was a cold day and the mountainside breeze swept through our bones. You surveyed your surroundings and intently waited for movement near your feet. You discovered two earthworms exposed on some nearby rocks. Knowing the danger of them remaining uncovered, you picked them up and brought them back to where we had gathered. It was our job, you explained, to “keep them safe” and shield them from birds that would grab them as a snack. We watched as you found a moist spot and gently returned them to the ground. To insure their safety, you collected three leaves and placed them over the earthworms providing them shelter and time to crawl back into the soil. Later you checked on them and delighted in knowing they had made their way back home. You protected the earth.
I hope you each always protect, celebrate, and heal the earth, the place of our genesis and the place of our ultimate return.

I hope you wade in the ocean, descend into canyons, taste the sand of the desert, and climb to the top of mountains. And when you’ve reached each of those places, when your hearts are pounding and your lungs are burning, I hope you realize that you’re strong and brave, but I also hope you feel the energy pulsing around you and understand that you’re part of something greater – something ancient and continuous. I hope you appreciate your ability to bring things together and realize the power of your actions. Deep down, at the core of your beings, I hope you always feel wonder and gratitude and love.

When you return to your ancestral woods on Ann Lane (also known as Ann-Johnny Lane, Ann-Tommy Lane, and Ann-Danny Lane), I hope you find walking sticks and explore the paths that cut through the forest. Of course, I hope you go off the trails, too, and eventually carve your own paths – but always check for ticks. I hope you see the white pines – saplings now just barely reaching your knees – grow to be towering members of this community. I hope you pause, look around, and realize how much this place has to teach you. I hope you read all the stories written by all the beings who came before you here. I hope you write your own stories of love and care for all the life that surrounds you. And when the day fades into night and darkness gathers, I hope you look up and see Orion with his club and his shield, and I hope you always remember to look for Sirius, the Dog Star, Orion’s faithful companion.
Time has passed since I composed the preceding hopes, but I’m again sitting on my back deck. Instead of an autumn afternoon, it’s now a summer evening and my place is illuminated by the Full Buck Moon. This is an appropriate name for the mid-year moon; recently a bachelor party with growing antlers has been making its way through these woods. At times, the bucks are accompanied by a few does. When the ladies arrive, they are joined by a fawn – spotted and still learning how to gracefully control her long legs. Bounding around in puppy-like fashion, she is the offspring of the buck and the doe I watched browsing last fall; she is the promise of the next generation and the continuation of the herd.

As I linger here, I think of that fawn and I think of you. And I think of all I hope for each of you. For you to live those hopes, I know there is work to do – here, now.
Homecoming
Old dog syndrome, they explained.
No discomfort, just a tilted head –
sometimes a stumble.

Peanut was gentle – and determined.
At thirteen, her hips weakened,
but it was only noticeable when she climbed stairs.

Unfazed, she carried on
for three more years –
even in an inaccessible house.

The path of least resistance was through the greatroom porch.
One step.
Easy out. An assist to get back in.

When she was younger, she went out with a string and a human.
The deer were tempting; energy was bounding.
But now her pace was slower, her attention nearer; she ventured out unencumbered.

Her paws wore a path around the house.
Always counterclockwise –
ever stopping.

Turning wasn’t easy – or necessary.
If you were there when she rounded the front, great.
If not, she would just loop around again,

and again,
and again,
and again,

until you were there.
Patiently, she’d lift her front paws onto the step
and wait for human hands to scoop up her back legs.

Peanut taught me how to live
close to home.
My mom died on April 20, 2017 at 4:31 in the afternoon.

Her earthly life ended here, at her home in the woods.

She was surrounded by those she held most dear, in the place she felt most secure. For some of us, the vigil began a few days earlier. By Thursday afternoon, all her people gathered around her bed. There were thirteen of us huddled close. Two dogs patiently stood guard on the back porch. Over the course of the preceding month, my mom’s body had gracefully and carefully shut down. There was no visible pain, just systematic closure.

Even as her breaths became shallow and less rhythmic, she embodied grace. Her long, skinny fingers wrapped around her well-loved, well-worn plush Winnie the Pooh. Her bones, so prominent now, emphasized her length and slightness. Her clearly pronounced facial structure highlighted the beauty of her natural features. Her eyelids were open slightly, but her irises penetrated at something far beyond our comprehension. The pigment in her lips was fading; her mouth open to the last bits of oxygen. In a moment, using what must have been an enormous amount of strength, my mom closed her eyes. She inhaled and her shoulders rose gently. Simultaneously, her lips came together and reflexively they turned outward and upward into a smile. Her iconic smile. No teeth showing this time. But a smile that managed to light up her face and bring reassurance to the room. In these last moments, it was still she who comforted us – just as she always had. She released a deep exhale through her nose. Her shoulders loosened. The sigh and the smile of a job well done, a journey complete. Satisfaction. Gratitude. Peace.
The sun shone through the canopy, kissing the newly awakened buds. The dogs barked. The wind blew. Danny and Tommy valiantly hummed *The Imperial March* down the hallway. Johnny sat on his uncle’s lap – diligently watching.

We gathered closer.
We said a prayer.

I love you.
It’s ok.
You’ve done good.
Thank you.

We touched.

And in a moment – in a peaceful, beautiful moment – my mom drew her last breath.

We waited.

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I’ve never experienced something so deeply sad, and, yet, so profoundly beautiful. The transition from one life to another, from here to there, from ephemeral to eternal. The final, long-awaited, well-deserved homecoming.

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My mom was admitted to hospice care on January 10, 2011. Ten days shy of my twenty-sixth birthday, I welcomed a competent, yet blunt, in-take specialist into our home. Before any pleasantries were exchanged, the specialist asked me, “Do you have a funeral home?” I was taken aback. I knew what hospice was, and I understood the inevitable conclusion of the disease my mom was battling. The funeral home conversation and the one about the cemetery were both eventually necessary, but there
were more important questions to ask and more important stories to tell here, now. I assured the specialist that I was sure my dad had a funeral home in mind and I’d get her that information in time. And then I shifted the conversation to my mom – a person, a being sitting in the room directly above us, a love that permeated every inch of the home the specialist so effusively complimented.

In this interaction, I unconsciously developed a pattern that I would follow each time a new medical professional came to the house to meet my mom. I was the gatekeeper and before I granted anyone access to my mom, I walked them through her home, I pointed out her pictures, and I told her stories. In this place, those things – and that person – matter.

To remain in hospice care, insurance companies require re-certification every ninety-days. When the case manager handed me the first re-certification papers, I read a clinical narrative. I didn’t have much familiarity with health-care documents, but I quickly understood that re-certification was granted based on quantitative measurements. The paperwork listed my mom’s age, labeled the disease as late-stage, and documented all the things she could no longer do unassisted; there was a category for life-expectancy: “< six months.”

It was late-April 2011 when I read the first comprehensive assessment report. At that moment, I began to (deliberately) tell my mom’s stories louder, longer, and more often. I wove a fleshy living narrative to counter the sterile medical narrative. The stories I shared were about a valedictory speech and a year-long service commitment, about a new teacher who brought her guitar to school and sang “Jerimiah was a bullfrog”
to an audience of 2nd graders, about a mother who took her young children with her to protest the construction of a nearby nuclear powerplant, about Electromagnetic Field detectors, pianos, and Snoopy, about blueprints and strawberry cheesecake, about basketball games and deeply rooted faith, about joy and laughter, dignity and compassion, and, most importantly, about a mom who profoundly cherished being a mom.

On a gloriously sunny Monday morning, a long line of vehicles paraded behind the hearse. Fittingly, my mom led us once more. We gathered at Our Lady of Victory to witness the final blessings and commend her spirit to God’s heavenly home.

A few days earlier, we had selected readings and hymns. And now Father Toomey stood at the pulpit and proclaimed the Gospel:

Do not let your hearts be troubled.  
Have faith in God and faith in me.

In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places;  
otherwise, how could I have told you  
that I was going to prepare a place for you?

I am indeed going to prepare a place for you,  
and then I shall come back to take you with me,  
that where I am you also may be. (John 14:1-3)

A faithful and frequent visitor to Ann Lane, Father Toomey narrowed in on the concept of home – a prepared place, a loved place. Of course, this passage speaks of a heavenly dwelling place, but Father Toomey brought it back to earth and directed our attention to Ann Lane. He asked the congregation that filled the pews to think about the home my mom designed and my parents built – a white colonial at the end of a dirt driveway. He
prompted us to remember particular individual and shared experiences in that place. He
encouraged us to think about any of the windows that frame the towering trees. Looking
out or looking in, Father Toomey explained, my mom was (and is) there (and here).

He continued by storying his experiences in our home. He described how the
place grew and shifted to fit my mom’s needs. Never finished, it was always
becoming…

In the months preceding my mom’s admittance to hospice, her ambulation
decreased and her fatigue increased. The stairs were eventually too dangerous for her to
climb. Over time, we re-imagined the second-floor of the house. Five bedrooms became
two. Beds and dressers were put in storage and the other three rooms became a sitting
room, a living room, and a dining room. Our lives moved upstairs with my mom. We ate
dinner together, as we always had. In the day, we listened to music, stayed hydrated, sat
outside, and laughed; I read aloud. In the evening, we lounged in matching leather club
chairs; I graded papers, she uttered sounds, dozed, and Sixers games hummed in the
background. I spent most nights waking and waiting until I heard her breathing or talking
in the next room over.

In the beginning, my mom’s legs were strong. She needed assistance getting up,
but once I leaned down, hugged her, and lifted her, her legs could withhold the weight of
her body. Still, I never let go; my hands remained holding her, ready to catch her if she
began to sway. Walking wasn’t so much walking as dancing. At the end of the night,
we’d stand facing each other – her arms on my shoulders, mine on her hips; I’d sing
Show Me the Way to Go Home. And eventually a leg would lift and we’d rhythmically
move down the hallway to her bedroom. Gradually we progressed to a point where she
needed more assistance; sometimes that meant one of her feet on one of mine. And,
eventually, when walking ceased, I carried her.

My mom graduated from hospice twice; in medical terminology, these were
d deemed “live discharges.” Despite the progression of the disease, my mom was
otherwise healthy. Her body healed itself. Her appetite remained strong. And I rejoiced
every morning when she put her lips around the straw, instinctively sucked, and safely
swallowed. I celebrated these moments – these tiny miracles.

Her overall health and ability to continue eating certainly contributed to my
mom’s longevity, but when the medical professionals visited, they speculated there was
something else going on. Patients like my mom simply weren’t expected to continue
living – certainly not when they were diagnosed as “7D,” “completely disabled” on one
scale, and “severely disabled” on another. No medication; no mechanical support. And
yet she carried on – peacefully and gracefully. The professionals who cared for my mom
closed the medical textbooks – this case wasn’t standard. This wasn’t a surprise; we had
always relied on instinct anyway. Eventually those experienced professionals pointed
here; perhaps this place, this home, had something to do with how this story unfolded.
There isn’t research to support it, but they noted that inside the house my mom was
protected from germs and illnesses that were prevalent in more congested areas. In
addition, she had around-the-clock care. But they went further and implied something I
always believed; maybe she couldn’t articulate it, but perhaps she knew she was home –
maybe she felt secure and, certainly, I know, she felt love.
In the months following my mom’s death, my dad and I traveled near and far to attend masses that friends and family had offered in my mom’s memory. We wanted to show our appreciation for these thoughtful gifts. In addition, they were good excuses for us to go out. Unknown places became familiar when my mom’s name was spoken in the Prayers of the Faithful.

In late-May, we attended an inter-faith service at St. Ann’s Basilica in Scranton, Pennsylvania. The church sits at the top of a steep incline; as my car climbed, I thought of all the years my mom had brought us here for the novena that culminated on St. Ann’s Feast Day – July 26th. We typically attended the weekday masses, and we regularly arrived late. In good weather, mass was celebrated outside. We listened from the food-tent located at the bottom of the hill. We drank RC Cola and ate hot dogs and then hoofed up the rise to have our foreheads touched with a relic.

On this day, my dad and I returned for a service of remembrance. There were readings, songs, and reflections that aimed to help heal those who remained, those who mourned. In wicker-baskets at the back of the church, there were small tokens that we were encouraged to take – a smooth rock, a prayer card, and a magnet. We left with a couple of each. The magnet is 4X6 inches, landscape layout. The background is an image of a sunset; the left foreground includes the silhouette of an older man alongside a woman; they’re heading towards the outline of mountains that mark the distant horizon; they’re walking into the sunset. At the top center of the magnet – in the lingering gray-blue of the sky – a Ram Dass quote: “WE ARE ALL JUST WALKING EACH OTHER HOME.”
In my freshman composition course, I ask my students to think about their concept of home and to consider what is necessary for place – space made meaningful – to take on the privileged title of home. Our understanding of home often rests outside of language; to point to the essence of home, we turn to stories. Many of the stories my students share suggest that home is:

- love and understanding
- acceptance
- a feeling
- a warm embrace –
- of both our gifts and our flaws
- encouragement and guidance
- memory
- living
- our beginning and our end
- flesh and bones
- spirit and soul
- the place we long for
- a sanctuary
- the place where one lies –
- safely, securely, lovingly
I believe that we are all just walking each other home. And while I conceive of home as an eternal dwelling place, my envisioning of home, like that of my students, is more complex than that. Home is a spiritual place, a physical place, and an emotional place. It is a gathering and the center through which life emanates. It is belonging. It is external and internal. Home is peace and connection and balance. Never static, always living and becoming.

The journey home is always unique and constantly changing, but a common thread woven throughout is the attempt to find oneself – here, now. In this writing, I have endeavored to do just that – to come home, make home, and be home.

Monsignor Jordan concelebrated my mom’s funeral mass. In the eulogy he shared, he told stories about the time he worked with my mom when she chaired the Catholic School Board; he emphasized her commitment to her faith and her love for her family. Then he turned back to the scriptures and told the story of Enoch. He explained that Enoch was old – 365 years old, to be exact. Throughout his life, Enoch regularly received God. They cultivated a friendship; they walked together. One evening, God came to Enoch and said, you look tired; it’s getting late… let me take you to my home. Enoch agreed; Enoch was “no longer here [on earth] for God took him” (Genesis 5:24). “By faith Enoch was taken away without dying” (Hebrews 11:5). Enoch lives.

Monsignor Jordan used this story to remind us that in our faith we know that Ann lives, too. In each of us; in our stories, our experiences, our places, and our beings, she lives.
So, too, do we live in each other. Mothers and daughters, teachers and students, writers and readers, humans and more-than-humans. None of us live in isolation; we live in collaboration and in conversation. The story, then, is never finished. It lives on… in you.
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Curriculum Vita

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