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"but for those of us who live here": Performance of work and community by women employed in rural, predominantly white, small-town schools

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"but for those of us who live here":

Performance of Work and Community by Women Employed in Rural, Predominantly

White, Small-town Schools

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Abstract

Rural, small towns are incredibly complex cultural centers. Although rural places are consistently portrayed as unchanging, the operation of cultural and identity within these locations is consistently on the move. Using reflexive interviewing, poetic transcription, autoethnographic writing, this project (re)presents poems on community and identity from five women employed in schools in rural, mostly White, small towns in the Central Appalachian region. Analyzing the poems through concepts in performance studies and work on space and place, this project positions movement and change at the center of small towns and examines how notions of rural place and community are performed through representations of experience and identity.

Keywords: performance studies, space, place, rurality, Appalachia, cultural performance

Chapter One:

Introduction

Mom sits, shoulders slightly rounded, her freckled arms extended to the steering

wheel. Her brown hair, with its blonde highlights, is twigged up on the back of her head.

She has hair that is curly like mine when she gets out of the shower, but she always

denies it. Her hair is almost always twigged up: washed, blow-dried, straightened, curled,

collected, twigged-up. She dresses and goes to work. She has to go in early this morning,

be there by 6 o'clock—

What, Sis?

> Nothin', Mom. Just looking at you.   *Silence. Curve. Sway.*
> How was work today, Mom?

It was good. We were short-staffed. Had a delivery truck come, so I worked all
day in freezers. I'm tired, Sissy. You try lifting fifty-pound boxes for eight hours.

> I'm sorry you had a hard day, Mom.

No, it's fine. Ain't nothing you can do about it. One thing's for sure, you don't do
this job for the money. You do it for them kids.

When I first proposed writing this thesis, I introduced it this way. I wanted to explore

how my mother made meaning of her work as a school employee in a small, mostly

White, Central Appalachian town. I wanted to tell the story of her cracked hands, scarred

forearms, sore muscles, and tired feet. I wanted to unpack the sometime-somewhere

words she said to me. In the past year, I have received a lot of advice and encouragement

in pursuit of this thesis project, and I look back knowing that it could have touched on

many different concepts from rhetoric and organizational communication to gender

studies and more.

Work, family, and community are bound up in the movement of my mother's body. Following advice to slow down and open up to the possibilities of the stories around me, this thesis offers me an opportunity to talk about my home and places like it. Mom. Mountains. Work. Curvy roads. Phone calls. All of these images constitute a larger story that I am learning and telling as I go. This work tells a piece of that story by exploring the performance of rural community and identity through poetic transcriptions with Appalachian women employed in small-town schools.

<p align="center">*****</p>

Lunch with university alumni—I am excited and nervous! I walk to the dining hall in the midday sun: bright, cold, and windy. People dot the sidewalks, and I walk among them while holding hands with the thoughts in my head.

> Good! I'm not gonna be late. I wonder if any other graduate students will be here. First, lunch. Then, bookstore. Then, write. Work. *You need to write*. I bet my hair looks a mess. I need to find a bathroom when I get up there. Am I underdressed?

> *It's probably fine.*

I reach the bottom entrance of the dining hall where a masculine voice advertises free donut holes and cold brew under a brightly colored tent. I ignore the voice, open the door, float up to the third floor in the elevator, and emerge in the spacious foyer of the hall. The large, rectangular room has dark carpet with beige chairs and wooden tables dotted around its middle. The right side opens up to another event space, and the other two sides are framed by large windows and a concrete balcony that overlooks the University's football stadium. A group of students huddles around the central chairs and coffee table. While two of them stand to set up a reception table, the others continue talking to the

people in the circle. I sit in a chair distanced from the group, facing the concrete balcony.

I check my email as I wait for more people to arrive.

Just under twenty-four hours ago, I had sat in a chair near the room's coffee table

and introduced myself to the woman who had taken the adjacent seat. She opened the

conversation.

Where are you from?

> From a small town in Southwestern Virginia. (I purposefully added the -
> *ern* to southwest so she does not think I'm from south West Virginia. I
> never had to make that distinction until I moved to the middle of the state.
> However, at the University, I picked that distinction up quickly.)

Is that anywhere near Daisyville?

> Yeah, it's close actually! About two hours away. Most people don't know
> the area.

I used to get down that way as a journalist. It's beautiful down there. I used to
love going down there. Just farmers standing in their fields, with their muddy
boots. (I know that is not what she *actually* said, but in my mind, it is pretty close
with sentiment she expressed.)

> Yeah, it is really something.

I like your accent.

> Thanks. (I meant it when I said it.)

Flashback to the current scene. More people enter the foyer and I pull away from my

email. We enter the event space through double doors on the right wall, and seat

ourselves at round dinner tables—two alumni at each table of students. I am surprised

and overjoyed to meet an alumna from close to my hometown. She's a small-town-girl-

turned-New-Yorker, and it feels enthralling to meet her! It's even more exciting to learn

that her career journey started with connections from *home*.

I eat and talk with the table until the event coordinators encourage us to switch. I use the opportunity to grab dessert and walk to the back of the room, where I sit down beside another alumnus and introduce myself. He asks about my future plans, and I tell him I'm looking for work closer to home. He learns I'm in an advocacy focused program and asks the question:

> I know you want to do some kind of advocacy work, but what would be your ideal cause?

>> Well, I'm really not sure! I would love to do advocacy work that's Appalachia-focused because it's my home. You know?

> Yeah, I remember when I was in college, there was a lot about the poverty down there and now with the drug situation, you know. I'm sure there's a lot to be done.

>> Yeah. (I half mean it when I say it.)

We talk as awkward strangers, unsure what to say to each other. The event ends, and I leave the hall to continue on to the next task in my day. However, the words I exchanged about myself and my home stick with me. I replay them in my mind. When I talk about home, I am met with replies about the beauty of the area, the niceness of the people, the poverty, the drugs. I never know which narrative they will use to story me.

<div align="center">*****</div>

I was raised in a rural, predominantly White, small town in the Central Appalachian (pronounced *App-uh-latch-an*) region. Many of the people who I am close to work in coal or the school system or healthcare. I graduated from a newly consolidated county high school in a class of just under two hundred students. When I graduated, I knew I would go to college because I was a good student and because my parents, especially my mother, stressed the importance of getting my education. I was the first in my immediate family to earn a college degree.

I attended a small, regional college close to home and had a dream, undergraduate experience. College introduced me to my first class in Appalachian literature, which was one of the first times I read published literature with characters who spoke and lived like people I knew, and it was where I first adopted the label *Appalachian*. College taught me how to embrace my home. It also taught me words like first-generation and underserved—how to talk about myself in ways that were attached to funding.

College led to the opportunity to attend graduate school. Although I only relocated to central Virginia, I found myself in a much bigger and very different place. Often, I found myself challenged and homesick. I missed the mountains. My graduate coursework presented me with an opportunity to dive back into them from hours away— to grow more curious and critical of my identities and the culture in which I grew up. I have conversed with people who love the mountains, people who pity them, and people who roll their eyes at the mention of rural, small towns. I am saddened and intrigued by the multitude of these reactions and the stories they elicit, all different and fragmented.

Rural, predominantly White, small towns are increasingly mentioned in political discourse. In 2021, Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin campaigned on statements that promised to "ban critical race theory, invest in our teachers and schools, and empower parents with real choices" (Youngkin for Governor Inc, n.d., para. 4). Youngkin's victory is attributed to rural areas with mostly White populations, which sources also connect to the victory of former president Donald Trump (Todd et al., 2021; Chinni, 2021, Associated Press, 2021). Albrecht (2022) confirms that many of the people who voted for Donald Trump were White and held less than a college degree.

The narratives that surface from these recent elections join in with past analyses and critiques of conservative, working-class, White communities. Cross (2018) examines how Donald Trump's presidential campaign drew attention to the issues of rural communities, which won favor among rural voters because of the storied divide between rural and urban communities. In an online article for *Vox*, Illing (2018) interviews Sociologist Robert Wuthnow about his book that explores and makes sense of rural Americans' anger at the federal government's disregard for their communities. Responding to Wuthnow's explanation of the connection between rural Americans' fears and their increasing expression of racist and xenophobic beliefs, Illing (2018) remarks "that many of these people haven't been left behind; they've chosen not to keep up" (para. 14). Wuthnow agrees and reminds of the complexity of rural communities and the importance of studying the operation of rural narratives (Illing, 2018). These assertions follow similar critiques, such as an editorial from *The Roanoke Times* that headlines with the question "Should we just let Appalachia go?" (Anonymous, 2017). Exemplified by online sources like these, rural, small towns are incredibly complex cultural hubs. They are stereotyped and justly critiqued, overlooked and controversial. Engaging rural, small towns in social and scholarly conversation continues to matter for people inside and outside of rural communities.

In this thesis project, I explore the complexity of culture, community, and identity in rural, mostly White, small towns through interview performance with White women school employees in rural, mostly White, small towns in Central Appalachia. I present the interviews using poetic transcription and make sense of them through autoethnographic exploration of my own experiences growing up in a small town in Central Appalachia

and conversation with scholarly literature on performance, identity, space, and place.

Following this introduction, chapter two introduces the theoretical concepts of space,

place, and performance. Chapter three explains how I utilized the methodologies of

interviewing, poetic transcription, and autoethnography. Chapter four presents poetry on

place. Chapter five presents poetry on identity. Finally, chapter six offers a brief

conclusion and explanation of the project's contributions to scholarly literature.

Chapter Two:

Place, Space, and Performance

How do women employed in schools in rural, predominantly White, small towns use communication to make sense of their work?

To focus my entry into planning, researching, writing, and reflecting, I began with a general research question. This question was inspired by the memory that got me thinking about this project and it was meant to help me focus on three ideas: 1) place (rural, small towns), 2) identity (predominantly White, women), and 3) communication (use communication to make sense). I wanted to know how living in a rural, mostly White, small town influences how people perceive themselves and the activities of their daily lives. I also wanted to know the inverse: how perceptions of self (as influenced by life in rural, mostly White, small towns) influence the way people perceive the place and culture they live in. Central to the theory and method that I use, this project advances an understanding that is emic and iterative (Tracy, 2020). I move in and out of myself, my own understanding, and questions. I move in and out of conversation and questions with others. I learn as I go. My questions have a lot of moving parts.

My research question guided me through planning and interviewing, but it wasn't until I presented a first draft of poetry that the question was reframed, and two other central concepts emerged: place and space. It makes sense to say that all along my question was really about place, space, performance, and self. I was interested in how I, my mother, and others move through places like my rural, small town. I was interested in the consequences and possibilities of that movement. Understanding place, space, identity, and performance provides a useful entry into the project and to the poetic

(re)presentations that are presented in chapters three and four. In this chapter, I overview

the centrality of place in discourse about Appalachian, rural, small towns, distinguish

between place and space in communication studies, and briefly explore how performance

studies and intercultural communication lenses generate new possibilities for

understanding identities in place and space.

Place in Appalachian Studies

In the words of Nardella (2022), "Without place, we would not be grounded, nor

connected to others. When we are attached to place, we are connected to each other, to

our communities" (p. 186). Nardella (2022) traces how the exploitation of West Virginia

land and communities by coal companies has forced many people to leave the area, so

that "[t]he decision to stay and to develop/redevelop communities into places that

empower others to stay is resistance to the paradigm of leaving, the stigma that follows

negative Appalachian stereotypes, and the political structure that led to these unequal

dynamics" (p. 192-193). For Nardella (2022), living within rural, small Appalachian

towns means advocating for self through advocating for place in all its physical and non-

physical meanings. Stemming from this logic, place-based understandings of small towns

within the Appalachian region are well-represented. Nardella (2022) cites Smith et al.

(2010), a collection of essays that reflect on and challenge Appalachian identity.

Obermiller, one of the authors featured in Smith et al. (2010, see p. 62-64), states that

"Being from Appalachia does not necessarily make people Appalachians, but being in or

from the region can definitely affect the quality of their lives" (p. 63). Obermiller gives

agency to place while reckoning with the ways in which people interact with it, whether

in or outside of its geographical boundaries. This idea is furthered by Fisher, also cited in

Smith et al. (2010, see p. 58-61) who evidences that many people and organizations

operate through legitimizing place-based understandings of Appalachia. Still, both Smith

(in Smith et al., 2010, see p. 56-57) and Satterwhite (in Smith et al., 2010, see p. 68-73)

focus on how understandings of Appalachia and identity are used to perpetuate harm and

injustice. In her introduction to the collection, Smith reminds:

> Even as regional identity emerges as a potent counter-force, its boundary-marking
>
> distinction between those who belong to this place and those who do not can also
>
> have ominous, albeit unintended, overtones and consequences in the militarized,
>
> fear-mongering culture of the contemporary United States. Defense of the
>
> embattled region slides all too easily and unconsciously into xenophobic
>
> condemnation of that which is foreign. (Smith et. al, 2010, p. 57)

Smith (in Smith et al., 2010) underscores the idea that while place-based identity and

advocacy movements in Appalachia are popular and full of potential, they can also limit

non-physical growth and change within the region. These voices foreground the

importance of place in understanding rural, small towns within the Appalachian region.

Yet, they also show the messiness that comes from defining place, organizing within

place, and living within place.

In addition to voices in Appalachian studies, scholarship in rural education offers

another avenue with which to explore the complexity of place in rural, small towns and

similar areas within the Appalachian region. Comber (2013) frames schools as more-or-

less intentional community centers because of the many different people that interact

before, during, and after the school day. Following this frame, Comber (2013) discusses

the impacts of place-based education strategies in low-income Australian neighborhoods

to show how talking about and considering place in school assignments can open

opportunities for growing and changing the communities in which the school is involved.

Moffa and McHenry-Sorber (2018) also deal with the importance of place by noting how

many teacher education programs fail to prepare graduates to be teachers in rural areas

because of the often non-existent or monolithic discussion of rurality. They interview five

first-year teachers who were raised in Appalachia about their upbringing, program, and

teaching experiences to show the influence, and diversity, of rural experience (Moffa &

McHenry-Sorber, 2018). Moffa and McHenry-Sorber (2018) conclude that the "stories

highlight an interconnectivity of place and self that is more nuanced than many place-

based foci in current teacher education programs – particularly, ones that emphasize

deficit understandings of rural life" (p. 36). Moffa and McHenry-Sorber (2018) position

their research in response to the work of Burton et al. (2013) who show that discussion of

rural education and educators is often limited to ways that sustain deficit-based

understandings of rurality and publication avenues that are regional or rural-specific.

These sources in rural education ultimately parallel a larger discussion. Rurality is often

mis- and understudied, so having rich, place-based understandings of rural life and

communities is essential. However, when rich, place-based understandings are explored

and discussed only within rural communities, they may further close-off rural places, and

to the points of Smith (in Smith et al., 2010, see p. 56-57) and Satterwhite (in Smith et al.,

2010, see p. 68-73) reinforce uncritical positive stereotypes that exacerbate

misunderstandings of rurality within Appalachia and reify systemic forms of injustice

rooted in whiteness.

Place and Space

Discussions of the importance of place in understanding rural, mostly White, small towns in Appalachia reveal tension between the ideas of place and space. de Certeau (1984) offers a distinction between space and place. He writes:

> In short, *space is a practiced place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by
> urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of
> reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text,
> i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs. (de Certeau, 1984, p. 117)

According to de Certeau (1984), place refers to physical locations, and space is movement through places. Place and space are fundamentally interrelated; structures of place affect how people move in space, and established norms of space affect how place is lived in. Shome and Hegde (2002) contend that globalization has changed how critical communication scholars should study culture and difference because it is fueled by an amorphous network that decentralizes physical boundaries and identities. Shome (2003) furthers this idea by envisioning critical communication studies that "emphasize the complex spatialized processes and multiple, heterogeneous ways in which our identities are pushed and pulled, routed and rerouted, in the enactments of various modernities of our seemingly cosmopolitan times" (p. 55). These perspectives in critical communication echo the questions Smith (2002) raises about Appalachian identity in the face of globalization. Smith (2002) favors organization around "geographies of solidarity" (see p. 46), where people come together over shared concerns and visions of change. Orienting to space instead of place emphasizes on people's actions and relationships in and across places. Space emerges as a way to work with the importance and complexity of place.

Space and Performance

There are many ways to orient to space in communication studies. In this project, I use performance studies to explore notions of place and space within the context of a rural, mostly White, Appalachian small town. Because layers of complexity in motion define rural, small towns and schools, writing and knowing within these spaces requires theory and method to come to life. This matches with Conquergood's (1995) conception of performance as "a heterogeneous ensemble of ideas and methods on the move" (p. 140). Conquergood (1995) writes of the ability of performance studies to (re)create and challenge, to inscribe the lives of people who are continually in and out of contradicting social systems and identities. In its theoretical and methodological fluidity, performance exists in the realm of space.

Movement, physically and discursively through space and place, as well as a concept—the promise of instability and the possibility of change—enables advocacy. Writing about Ghanian activists' efforts to liberate women with the Troxovi/Trokosi community, Madison (2008) outlines five stimulants of cultural change. Madison (2008) writes that cultural progression starts when a person engages in a period of "serious reflection" (p. 12) on their life before moving to have unfamiliar experiences that create "lingering and substantial discontent" (p. 12) with their reality. When people become motivated by dissatisfaction, they learn new ways to describe their world and envision its future while seeking out like-minded others to take action (Madison, 2008). Madison's (2008) description of cultural change is a performance that is made up of smaller performances: reflecting, searching, engaging with new people and practices. de Certeau (1984) states that "everyday, [stories] traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them" (p. 115). Pollock (2006)

captures this vision of change in discussing a classroom practice of having students listen to and perform the stories of others. She teaches that performing enables change in every step: when people are listening to another's stories, when people are involved in the process of embodying another's story for performance, and when the story is told and becomes part of a larger project of memory and social change. In these ways, stories serve as a type of performance that illustrates the power and potential of performance as theory and method to study space.

Performance studies' ontological commitment to critique and change simultaneously presents epistemological opportunities and challenges. Conquergood (1992) describes performance as "the nexus between the playful and the political" (p. 80). The roots of performance studies lie in opposition to Enlightenment ideals of reason and written scholarship (Conquergood 2002; Conquergood, 1998). Instead, performance empowers individuals by locating knowledge within the body (Littlejohn et al., 2017; Conquergood, 2002; Madison, 2008). In the words of Conquergood (2002), "For many people throughout the world, however, particularly subaltern groups, texts are often inaccessible, or threatening, charged with the regulatory powers of the state" (p. 147). Performance studies foregrounds how people enact change in their everyday lives, often researching and learning about performances by producing them. Movement in and through performance facilitates Madison's (2008) vision of critical performance ethnography as theory that is "relevant, useful, interesting, and generative" (p. 15). Using performance allows me to describe the complexity of the rural, small town and school—settings that are alive, moving, progressive, conservative, resistant, and struggling all at

once. In the next chapter, I discuss how I do performance within this project through

reflexive interviewing, poetic transcription, and autoethnographic writing.

Chapter Three:

Interviews, Poetic Transcription, and Autoethnography

Interviewees

> *Good Morning/Good Afternoon/Hello [name],*
> *I hope this [message] finds you well! Would you be willing to sit down for an*
> *interview with me?*

After receiving approval from James Madison University's Institutional Review

Board, I contacted four women who met the inclusion criteria of the project. In this

section, I describe my recruitment processes and interview timeline. While I (re)introduce

each participant in connection with her voice in the following chapters, I also provide

some basic demographic and experiential information about the participant group in this

section because I recognize that a description of the group as a whole may be helpful for

contextualizing the project.

All of the women I interviewed met the inclusion criteria of the project. All

participants: 1) were at least eighteen years old, 2) identified as a woman, and 3) were or

had been employed in a school system in the Central Appalachian Region for at least one

year. Although not an official inclusion criterion, I sought to recruit a sample of women

that represented a range of different positions, and I gave preference to women employed

in non-teaching positions. I messaged three of the initial four women on Facebook

Messenger and asked the fourth person in-person. Of the four participants I first

contacted, three consented to an interview, and I worked with each of them individually

to determine a date, time, and location for the interview. About two weeks after

interviewing the first three participants, I reached out to two additional women about

sitting down with me for an interview. Similar to the first three participants, I contacted

the fifth participant through Facebook Messenger. The fourth woman was recruited

through snowball sampling (Tracy, 2020), where I invited my participants to pass my

contact information along to any person they knew that might be interested in

participating in the project. Both of these women consented to an interview, and I worked

with each of them individually to schedule a date, time, and location for the interview.

Interviews took place either in January or February 2022, and of the five interviews, two

of them occurred at in-person locations, two occurred synchronously over Zoom, and one

occurred synchronously over Facetime. All interviews were audio-recorded. The in-

person interviews were arranged in accordance with COVID-19 safety guidelines, and

masks and hand sanitizer were available at each meeting. Participants were told that the

interviews would take about an hour, and the average duration of the five interviews was

around one hour and twenty minutes. All participants identified as White, heterosexual,

Christian women. Four out of the five participants were married, and three out of the five

had children. All women were or had been employed in a school system in the Central

Appalachian Region for at least one year, and all had childhood experiences in the region.

Two participants worked in school nutrition. One participant worked in an administrative

position, with prior experience in an instructional role. One participant served in an

instructional role, and one participant was retired from a position in school healthcare.

Most participants also had parental or other family figures who were or had been

employed in a public school system within the region.

      Learning about place, space, and community through interviews with rural

women employed in the school constitutes a significant theoretical and methodological

position within this project. According to the National Center for Education Statistics

(2020), as reported in a 2017-2018 survey, over three-fourths of public and private school

teachers in America are women. In this way, schools represent physical locations where

the significance and impact of the work of women can be clearly seen. Moreover, the

gendering of educational work in public and private American schools illustrates Acker's

(1990) fundamental discussion of gender as a constitutive element of institutions, where

gender is used to make decisions about who can do work and what work is valued, in

addition to reifying patriarchal hierarchy and class structures. Ashcraft and Simonson

(2016) draw upon the work of Acker (1990) and others to advance a consideration of the

ways in which the study of communication is gendered. Summarizing perspectives on

gender in organizations, they state that "Research in this vein treats gender, work, and

organization as entangled verbs—ongoing and interwoven accomplishments achieved,

sustained, and transformed in everyday *practice*" (Ashcraft & Simonson, 2016, p. 54-55).

Attuning to gender as constitutive provides a means for situating the necessity of

foregrounding women's voices and ways of knowing. Hesse-Biber (2007) cites Reinharz

(1992) to underscore that women's perspectives are often undervalued in a patriarchal

system, so feminist interviews seek to know priviledge their voices and experiences as

way of challenging hegemony. Moreover, Hesse-Biber (2007) explains how feminism's

embrace of subjective and gendered knowledge creation works to expose the function of

power, so that it may be consciously operationalized in ways that promote equity, justice,

and moving representations of experience. Learning with and through women's voices is

especially important when studying rural, Appalachian communities. Smith (1998) shows

how gender relations in Appalachia are essential to the working-class narrative that often

defines the region, and she argues for the ability of feminist research to challenge and

change perceptions of the Appalachian region. Smith (1999) shows the ways in which the

Appalachian region and work within it are often told through male perspectives, writing:

> Fashioned from Adam's rib, "mountain women" are secondary, entirely
>
> compatible with the "mountain men" from whom they are derived. Female agency
>
> (other than active support for her mountain community or her mountaineer),
>
> sexism, gender trouble—all the basic stuff of women's history—are literally
>
> inconceivable. Writing women into the history of Appalachia, then, is a
>
> contradiction in terms. Either our constructs of the region or women themselves
>
> must succumb, one to the other. (p. 2)

By attuning to women's work and life experiences to understand community and culture,

I wish to honor the lived experience of rural, Appalachian women, which often gets

overlooked, and to join in the feminist tradition of acknowledging gendered relations to

reveal and upset hegemonic power relations in cultural performance.

Interviewing

I would love to talk to you if you are interested!

The italicized sentences that precede my participant and procedure sections come

from the sample message to participants that I used as a guide for reaching out to

potential interviewees. I include them at the beginning of these sections for two reasons:

1) they provide a small glimpse into some of the behind-the-scenes work of the project

that might otherwise be relegated to a post-document attachment or the discussion of a

conference presentation, and 2) they showcase the choices I made to frame interviewing

within the project for myself and my participants. Interviewing is an unassuming, and yet,

loaded concept. I felt the weight of this load almost the moment I decided to use

interviews for this project, and it was an awareness that grew as I read, prepared, and

reflected. In this section, I define what I mean by interviewing and overview the

interview environment I sought to create. I also describe the content of interviews and the

general procedure I followed before, during, and after each one.

When I reached out to participants, the words of my initial invitation were simple,

friendly, and direct. They accomplished their goal with a courteous smile and a nervous,

hopeful heartbeat. Yet, still, they simultaneously showcase and conceal debates about

research and interviewing as a method. My decision to describe interviews as talk

intentionally focuses on the relational goals and possibilities of interviewing as a method,

even as doing so fails to acknowledge the always-less-than altruistic goals of researching

and learning from them (Lindlof and Taylor, 2019). Lindlof and Taylor (2019) describe

interviews as settings that are "as much art as science" (p. 221), allowing researchers to

learn and confirm past and present information and to understand participants'

perceptions, memories, rationales, experiences, and language, all in accordance with the

choices researchers make about how to design and do them. The multiplicity and

flexibility of interviews makes them simultaneously useful, easy, difficult, and

dangerous.

Because I wanted to do and be in conversation with performance studies, I sought

to understand what performance could tell me about how to design and do interviews.

The answer emerged as semi-structured reflexive interviews. Semi-structured interviews

are interviews that use a list of topics, questions, or prompts to begin and guide

discussion but that remain flexible enough to deviate from scripted questions so that the

interviewer can prioritize listening and responding to participant responses and stories

(Tracy, 2020). Tracy (2020) writes that semi-structured interviews allow researchers to

find balance between specificity and abstraction, simplicity and complexity, and

information and emotion. She also notes that the absence of structure in an interview

places more weight upon the interviewer to be able to engage and guide discussion

(Tracy, 2020). I used a semi-structured format because it allowed me to intentionally

think through the atmosphere and flow of the interviews I sought to do, and the practice

of brainstorming and writing questions for the guide ensured that I would be prepared to

engage with participants in the interview. As a budding qualitative researcher, the

preparation of a guide for semi-structured interviewing helped me to prioritize listening

to and following up with participants during the interview instead of being incredibly

distracted while thinking of ways to respond to their ideas.

    Following the interview flow and question types outlined by Tracy (2020, see p.

164-173), the interview guide prepared questions across six areas, in addition to

providing reminders for beginning and ending the interviews. I wrote the guide in two

phases. First, I brainstormed a list of possible questions. Then, in consultation with a

committee member, I divided the questions into six topic areas, chose a guiding question

for each area, and listed a few potential follow-up questions below each guiding question.

The six topic areas were: rurality and identity, rurality and work, rurality, identity, and

work, experiential highs and lows, imagining the future of rurality and education, and

advice and follow-up questions. Generally, through the topic areas, I was interested in

having conversation with interviewees about how they described themselves and the area

they lived in, how they described their work, how they discussed and made meaning of

their work in the context of the school and a rural small town, what positive, negative,

and memorable experiences they had experienced living and working in a rural small

town, how they envisioned the future of their small town and the school within it, what

parts of the conversation stood out in the interview, and what advice they may offer to

create positive change in rural, small towns. I generally began and ended each interview

with the same question, but I did not rigidly adhere to the guide. Instead, I expressed to

each interviewee that I had a few questions but nothing that was too planned out and that

what I really wanted was to sit with them for a time and learn from them and their stories.

I asked follow-up questions, introduced new topics, reacted to and shared personal stories

or experiences as felt appropriate in each interview. Each interview took on a different

rhythm; some more-or-less casual, formal, collaborative, guided, some more-or-less in

time, depth, and specificity.

Acknowledging interviewing as performing and embracing the unique rhythm of

each interview were challenges and opportunities afforded to me through reflexive

interviewing. I learned what reflexive interviewing was from the work of performance

scholar Norman K. Denzin, and I predominantly rely on two publications, "The

Cinematic Society and the Reflexive Interview" (Denzin, 2001a) and "The Reflexive

Interview and a Performative Social Science" (Denzin, 2001b) to define and situate the

use of them within my project. Denzin (2001b) positions the reflexive interview in

conversation with "an interpretive social science" (p. 43) as a way of interviewing to

explore and create performances. He contextualizes this approach to interviewing in the

rise of the cinematic and interview societies, which foregrounds the ubiquity of watching

interviews and performances of everyday life through digital media; and in turn, makes

the concepts of interviewing and performance both more and less visible as explicit

discussion of them as ways of understanding disappears in the commonplace nature of

their use (Denzin, 2001a; 2001b). Living in a cinematic interview society means that

people perform popular performances to construct their realities (Denzin, 2001a), and

interviews function as (space for) performances, not spaces where people meet to talk

about them (Denzin, 2001a; 2001b). According to Denzin (2001a):

> In the *reflexive interview format*, two speakers enter into a dialogic relationship
>
> with one another. In this relationship, a tiny drama is played out. Each person
>
> becomes a party to the utterances of the other. Together, the two speakers create a
>
> small dialogic world of unique meaning and experience. (p. 9)

The creational possibilities of interviewing in a reflexive interview are mediated through

the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. Although Denzin (2001b)

describes the reflexive interview as post-postmodern, he describes its grounding in

postmodernism. Fontana (2001) explains that postmodernism's rejection of complete and

objective truth led scholars to question how knowledge was created, and in the interview,

that meant questioning and reimagining the authority of the interviewer, the relationship

between the interviewer and interviewee, and the presentation of interview material. The

relationship is *the stuff* of a reflexive interview, and this orientation to person requires

that the interview feel and flow differently than a more traditional interview. Denzin's

(2001a) definition of reflexive interviewing echoes the way Calafell (2004) frames

Conquergood's (1985) concept of dialogical performance. Calafell (2004) writes, "A

dialogic approach to ethnography attempts to account for reflexivity and to negotiate the

politics of voice through its denial of authority to any one voice" (p. 179). For Denzin

(2001a; 2001b), using reflexive interviewing in a cinematic, interview society allows

researchers to expose and unhinge the operation of them in the (re)presentation of culture. Embracing the namesake of reflexivity, reflexive interviewing creates possibility by looking back to, through, and within the performances to which it gives space. The end goal of reflexive interviewing is to create a performance text (Denzin, 2001a; 2001b). Denzin (2001b) writes that reflexive interviewing "uses narrated words and stories to fashion performance texts that imagine new worlds, worlds where humans can become who they wish to be, free of prejudice, repression and discrimination" (p. 43). Roulston (2010) acknowledges these goals of reflexive interviewing and distinguishes two types of interviews: postmodern interviews and transformative interviews (see pp. 219-222). For Roulston (2010), both of these interviews have transformative goals, and the difference between them lies in the actualization of critique and change within the relationships and communities in which the researcher is involved. I sought to use reflexive interviewing in the way that Roulston (2010) describes postmodern interviewing, as a way "to open up spaces for new ways of thinking, being, and doing. As a result, judgments about the quality of the work are in large part determined by readers and audience members" (p. 220). Given the importance of interviewer and interviewee relationships and researcher and audience relationships in this space, Roulston (2010) suggests that the quality of postmodern interviews can be evaluated by the performance text and the space generated from it.

Citing Minh-Ha (1991), Denzin (2001a; 2001b) presents ten distinct qualities of (re)presentations from reflexive interviews, which can be summarized across three ideas: 1) reflexive interviews are speak with contextual multiplicity, 2) reflexive interviews are political and resistant, and 3) reflexive interviews pay attention to words and ways that

accompany them. In the same way that Pollock (1998) argues that writing is a

performance, Denzin (2001a; 2001b) uses reflexive interviewing to advance interviewing

as a performance. In this way, the qualities of reflexive interviewing are compatible with

the six qualities of performative writing outlined by Della Pollock (1998). While the last

section of my methods discussion focuses on poetic transcription, which was the way I

chose to represent the interviews of my project, here, I want to briefly describe how I

reflected upon each of Pollock's (1998) six qualities of performative writing in

interviewing and writing. Pollock (1998) writes that performative writing should be

evocative (see p. 80), metonymic (see p. 82), subjective (see p. 86), nervous (see p. 90),

citational (see p. 92), and consequential (see p. 94). According to Pollock (1998),

evocative writing is writing that uses descriptive language to create vivid representations

of lived experiences. In line with generative interview questions modeled by Tracy

(2020), I prepared and asked questions about interviewee experiences living in a small

town and working in the school. Many of my questions focused on asking them to

describe their lives and work, and I asked follow-up questions to dive deeper into their

descriptions and learn more stories. Metonymic writing is writing that uses language to

present itself and the topics it communicates without them being present (Pollock, 1998).

Pollock (1998) says that it "invokes the presence of what it isn't, ironically, by

elaborating what it is—by either camping on its own forms or running them to the limit

or hyperbolizing the symbol-signifier as the figment of print and punctuation" (p. 85). In

addition to the varying levels of abstraction that are inherent in descriptions of

experience, memory, and perceptions, I also chose to enter into conversations about rural,

mostly White, small towns through the stories of women, public school employees. The

roles of the school and the senses of community and place that the women discussed are

complex and abstract. In addition, to the ends of metonymic writing, Richardson (2003)

advises people who want to write poetry to look and ask for metaphors that describe

subjects and their stories. Although I did not write specific questions that asked

participants to name come up with metaphors because I did not encounter this advice

until later in the interviewing period, I kept it in mind as I created poetic representations

from the interview transcripts and looked for places where metaphors and other figurative

language was used by participants. The third quality is subjectivity, which refers to the

ways in which performative writing acknowledges and writes through multiple senses of

self (Pollock, 1998). Relatedly, Pollock (1998) describes nervous writing as writing that

represents reality as broken and always moving. The fifth dimension, citational writing,

recognizes that performances are continuously redone and referenced (Pollock, 1998).

These considerations offered both guidance and relief as I interviewed. I went in the

mindset that I was only hearing a part of the women's stories and experiences. While I

often left the interviews wondering if I had shared too much or asked leading questions, I

reminded myself that my body in the space of the interview was a leading question—that

no neutral questions existed. In congruence with the idea of interviewing as performance,

the purpose of the interviews was not to obtain any kind of truth but to build a

relationship with my participants and to learn and listen in that relational space. Finally,

Pollock (1998) frames performative writing as consequential, meaning that it always

seeks to do something beyond exist on the page, often through its grounding in practices

such as reflexivity, vulnerability, and positionality. I approached interviewing in a similar

way. I reflected as I interviewed each interviewee and I spent time replaying their words

in my mind, meditating on the consequences of what I had learned from each. I went into

the interview aware of my position as someone who has a stake within the communities I

am interested in and as a researcher who was (and is) asked to think and write outside of

the performances of which I lived, observed, and created.

Poetic Transcription

When I was first conceptualizing this project and thinking about how to show

what I learned from interviewing and what I wanted—or even just imagined—this project

to look like, an epiphanous thought entered my mind: *poetry*. I thought I could write

poetry! (*Could I* write poetry?) In addition to the inspirational work of many Appalachian

authors, I primarily owe this thought to the inspiration of three scholars: Audre Lorde, D.

Soyini Madison, and bell hooks. In this section, I define poetic transcription, overview its

uses and goals, and describe the process I followed to create poetry from the project

interviews.

While I first encountered the term poetic transcription in Madison (2008, see p.

4), she does not provide an explicit definition of the concept or an overview of the

process she followed to represent and organize her interviews in poetic form. Glesne

(2010) defines poetic transcription as the process of creating poem-like representations of

interview transcripts by focusing on the words that are most important to speakers'

stories. Glesne (1997) holds firm to the idea that poetic transcription does not always

produce poetry. Rather, she writes that it "approximates poetry through the concentrated

language of interviewee, shaped by researcher to give pleasure and truth" (Glesne, 1997,

p. 213). Poetic transcription is a creative method of representation and interpretation that

recognizes the power of poetry without divorcing itself from associations with research.

In recognizing the capability of poetry as a medium of representation, there are many reasons why scholars choose to use poetic transcription in research. Audre Lorde (2007) defines poetry as "a revelatory distillation of experience" that "forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (p. 37). Lorde's (2007) definition illuminates poetry as a teaching tool, a call to action, and means of life. Madison (2008) writes that using poetic transcription allowed her to describe the content and form of the interviews, in addition to preserving the bodily and spatial contexts in which they occurred. By embracing performance and using poetry to represent interviews with Ghanian activists working to free young women from repressive religious communities, Madison's (2008) poetry showcases the stories of the activists' work and echoes Lorde's (2007) depiction of poetry as a force of actualization. It moves, builds, and inspires to honor the activists' work and Madison's (2008) commitment to critical performance and change. In *Appalachian Elegy: Poetry and Place,* bell hooks's (2012) poetry moves and builds with a different tone. hooks (2012) writes of her connection to the Appalachian mountains while also reckoning with the racial exploitation that is inscribed in, and yet often erased from, its story. She frames her poetry as "lamentation[s]" that "call us to remember and mourn, to know again that as we work for change our struggle is also a struggle of memory against forgetting" (hooks, 2012, p. 8). Like Madison (2008), hooks's (2012) work realizes Lorde's (2007) definition of poetry as a way to name and change. While reading these works, I simultaneously wanted to savor the words and absorb them whole.

They inspired me to envision how poetry could be a fitting method of representation and interpretation for this project. The research that enables and grows with poetic transcription often ascribes to interpretivist and critical ways of thought and offers a challenge to traditional conceptions of social science research. Richardson (1993), a scholar and poet whose work Glesne (1997; 2010) cites as inspiration for her poetry, argues that poetry and other postmodern styles of writing challenge validity and objectivity in social science research. According to Richardson (1993):

> Poetic representation reveals the process of self-construction, deferrals and transformations, the reflexive basis of self-knowledge, the inconsistencies and contradictions of a life spoken as a meaningful whole. . . By settling words together in new configurations, the relations created through echo, repetition, rhythm, rhyme let us hear and see the world in a new dimension. (p. 704-705)

Richardson (1993) argues for a "feminist-postmodernist practice" (p. 706) that centers around emotional and relational attunement and foregrounds the invention of knowledge that is embodied, contextual, and subjective, and always unfinished. This type of research, enabled through poetry, calls forth Lorde's (2007) definition of poetry. It offers a way to deeply experience versions of lived experience as it is and to imagine how it might be different, all at the same time. In this sense, poetic transcription foregrounds the possibility of transformation of the people and experiences that are represented in the writing and researching process. Glesne (2010) and Richardson (1993) both write about how constructing poetry affected them as researchers and writers; and beyond self and subject, Glesne (1997) adds that the speaker who emerges in poetry produced by poetic transcription is an ultimately a combination of the interviewer and interviewees voices

and experiences. In addition, it creates an immersive experience for readers through

language (Glesne, 2010). The way that poetic transcription allows researchers,

participants, and readers to come together realizes the highest form of interaction that

Lindlof and Taylor (2019, see p. 220) associate with the method of interviewing.

I welcome the method of poetic transcription as my older sister; it invites me into

and guides me through writing this project and navigating my own lived experience.

Poetic transcription appears as epistemologically aligned with the goals of reflexive

interviewing and performance. It allows me to vividly represent the words and

experiences of my interviewees, to simultaneously acknowledge their words and

experiences as partial, and yet, to honor them—the voices of Appalachian women—as a

legitimate entry into the cultural experience that I seek to explore. It also allows me to

create a space that foregrounds transformation of culture and lived experience through the

possibilities opened by (re)presentation and critique.

While I had paper and a writing utensil with me during each interview, I seldomly

took notes during most of the interviews. I wrote down interviewee answers to

descriptive demographic and follow-up questions at the end of the interviews, but in the

meat of our conversations, I typically only took notes on words, moments, or

nonverbals—gestures, movements, and tones—that I wanted to remember and revisit

when listening to and writing about the interviews later. After each interview, typically

within an hour of finishing conversation, I wrote fuller, more descriptive notes. Inspired

by the advice of Willink and Shukri (2018), I paid attention to affect within the

interviews. Willink and Shukri (2018) introduce the concept of reflective affective

analysis in interviewing, which they describe as "a form of retrospective sense-making

where researchers reflect on the ways in which affects, rhythms, and intensities animated the interview" (p. 189). Willink and Shukri (2018) position reflective affective analyses as descriptions and interpretations of emotion-laden and nonverbal moments of interviews inserted between quotations to inform and further representations of interview text. In my post-interview notes, I wrote descriptions of what I was doing before the interviews and how I entered into the interview spaces, descriptions of the interview spaces and the interviewees, notes on colors, emotions, styles, or tones that shaded the interviews, notes on moments or topics that stood out during the interviews, and descriptions of what I did after the interview and on next steps for the project.

Audio-recordings from the interviews were sent to Rev. com, and verbatim transcriptions were produced. I downloaded each transcript and followed along as I listened to the recordings. During this initial listening, I marked language to de-identify and corrected errors, as I caught them. In addition, keeping in mind the affects and moments that I wrote about as standing out in my post-interview notes, I marked and made comments on stories and moments in the transcripts to pull into poems. Glesne (1997) offers a rich description of her process for poetic transcription of interviews (see p. 205-206). Glesne (1997) explains that she started by reading and familiarizing herself with the interview text; then she sorted the interview text across themes represented in her interviewee's life and stories. Next, she re-read the information in each theme to make decisions about the central ideas in the data (Glesne, 1997). Then, she describes that she wrote poems around the ideas she gleaned from the process of re-reading (Glesne, 1997). In writing, Glesne (1997) explained that she used the interviewee's words but allowed herself to mix, repeat, and change the tenses of words within the poems.

In creating the poems, I mostly followed Glesne's (1997) process. I also drew inspiration from Richardson's (2003) descriptions of short poems, which she bases on her earlier work in poetic transcription (see Richardson, 1994). Richardson (2003) explains that short poems focus on episodic moments instead of cohesive narratives and that they "focus and concretize emotions, feelings, and moods—the most private kind of feelings—in order to recreate moments of experience" (p. 5). I drew the stories and moments I marked in the transcripts into separate documents and organized them into rough poetic form. Most of the poems at this stage revolved around four different ideas: life in small towns, work in the school, changes in work and place, and advice for or visions of the future. After I fashioned rough poems from each interview, I brought the poems into a single document and viewed them altogether. Then, I regrouped the poems across two different categories, contemplating the message of each poem and how it fit with the others I had drawn from the interviews. At this stage, in consultation with my committee chair, the poems were roughly divided into poems of place, focusing on small towns and the role of the school within them, and poems of identity, focusing on articulations of self and values through stories of purpose, experiences in small towns and at work in the school, and articulations of hopes and fears for the future.

Once the rough poems were divided across these two documents, rudimentary chapters for the analysis section of this thesis project, I went through and edited each poem into a more contained form. Following Glesne (2010), I reduced the words of the transcript in each rough poem to the most essential parts, often removing verbal fillers, false starts, and repeated explanations or asides. However, I did keep some verbal fillers, false starts, and asides as they appeared relevant to the message of the poem or the voice

of the speaker. Following Glesne (1997), I allowed myself to mix different parts of the interview; however, I did not repeat lines or change the tenses of verbs. I did not mix parts of the transcripts between different speakers, only within a single interview transcript. Richardson (2003) cites Tedlock (1983) who reminds that people's natural speech patterns are more poetic than prosaic, and I internalized this reminder as an orientation to guide me when reading and re-reading the interview transcripts. I looked for natural refrains, repetitions, movements, breaks and of central importance to Richardson (2003), pauses. Checking each poem against the audio-recording of its content helped me to make decisions about device usage, word inclusion and positioning, and line division.

There were also several other processes and tips that helped me to do poetic transcription of the project interviews. Although she does not discuss it in great detail, Richardson (1993) mentions keeping a process journal (see p. 696) of her reflections and thoughts as she was working through writing. I did not keep a formal journal, but I did work in multiple documents drafts as I progressed through each step of listening and writing, so that I could retain my comments and trace the progression of my work. In addition, I regularly reflected on the interviews throughout the process of doing and writing them. I have held on to mental notes of the epiphanies and reflections that have joined me throughout the process of completing this project. In a later publication, Richardson (2003) also advises aspiring writers of poetry to seek opportunities to read, hear, and learn poetry, and to pay attention to the dimensions of expression, rhythm, detail, and placement while writing and revising their work. Glesne (2010) echoes this advice with complementary reminders to pay attention to words, narratives, and emotions

in poetic constructions, among other dimensions. Throughout my time working on this

project, I have sought out opportunities, although few in number, to hear from poets and

to practice writing poems. I also shared some of the initial drafts of my poetry with my

committee chair and a few trusted peers. In choosing how to present the poems on the

page, I most closely follow the models of Calafell (2004), Madison (2008), and Glesne

(1997), where they embed their poems between narrative and description, often following

them with analysis and reflection. Glesne (1997) provides a title for each poem at its

introduction, and I have chosen to number the poems as they appear in the project. I

chose numbers instead of names to help distinguish my reflections and narratives, some

of which occur in poetic form, from the poetic representations of my interviewees' words

and to honor the collaborative goal of poetic transcription. I cannot name the poetic

representations because I do not own them, and I do not want to limit their lessons

through titling them. Finally, while I have tried to create rich depictions of the moments I

write about, I acknowledge that these are only partial representations, shaped the interests

and failings of my memory and impressions as much as by my notes and the words of

interviewees. The names of people and places in the project are fictional, and I have

omitted or fictionalized some details, such as job titles, to maintain the confidentiality of

my participants.

Autoethnography

        In addition to poetic representation, a lot of the writing in this project is

autoethnographic. Madison (2020) defines autoethnography as a way of research where

people learn about cultural groups in which they are a part, often through writing about

experiences and reflections. Madison (2020) frames autoethnography as an approach to

research which privileges a unique set of methods and concepts, and this conception is

similar to Bochner's (2017) description of autoethnography as a practice and a genre that

foregrounds subjectivity, ethical and just research goals, and reflexivity through working

with experiences, memories, and stories. According to Bochner (2017), it "focuses on the

fullness of living and . . . is a genre of doubt, a vehicle for exercising, embodying, and

enacting doubt" (p. 77) that works to continually open space for improving the lives of

others and the communities in which they live. In her discussion of autoethnography,

Madison (2020, see p. 172) highlights Spry's (2006, see p. 340) concept of the

performative-I to acknowledge the relationship between performance and ethnography.

Spry (2006) contends that acknowledging how a researcher's sense of self and depictions

of experience are implicated in their performances of culture "may offer a researcher

positionality with the ears to listen within the silences of hegemony and the heart to

engage a critical empathetic epistemology" (p. 345). I write about my own experiences

growing up and being educated in a rural, mostly White, small town in Central

Appalachia to reflect on and work through the lessons of the poetic transcriptions. By

acknowledging the complex position I have in this project—as a member of a small town

community, a performer in the interviews and the constructions of the poetic performance

texts, and as a researcher who is attempting to make sense of the performances through

analysis and conversation with scholarly literature, I aspire to work towards a more

complex representation of rural life that advocates through honoring the experiences of

my interviewees while exposing the restricting operation of hegemonic norms.

Chapter Four:

Poems of Place

Oh no. The interview! I gotta go.

I hurriedly scoop up my things—laptop, notebook, iPad, backpack—and leave the windowless, upstairs room of the academic hall. Pacing down the long, white cinderblock hallway to the wood door at the end of the hall, I turn the key and fumble my laptop down onto a desk at the front of the room, simultaneously tossing my gray backpack into the one next to it. I am in the first classroom I taught in as a graduate assistant. Laptop down, then iPad on top. Laptop plugged in. iPad plugged in. Desk pulled closer and notebook opened. Blank page. I scribble the guiding questions of my interview guide down like I have for every other interview I have done. This one is the fifth.

After troubleshooting some technology and sending some messages back-and-forth, we join facetime, and I am transported to a windowpane view of her living room—robin's egg blue with a window draped in brown curtains and white shears held by black curtain rod. Summer holds her phone low and angles it back up to her face—an oval face with bright pink cheeks, brown eyes, and long burgundy hair pulled up into a bun. She wears a bright teal t-shirt. The phone signal is shaky. It freezes and lags at times, so we find ourselves having to repeat phrases and wait with anticipation for each other's responses. She spins her phone around to her teenage daughter sitting in a chair next to her. Her daughter waives, and as Summer recenters the phone, her youngest daughter jumps in the frame too. The television runs in the background as we talk, and she speaks in short sentences.

I start the way I normally start.

So, my first question is, where do you live and what is it like to live here   or there?

My voice slips. It's not the first interview where this has happened. *Here* feels right, and

there slips out. I realize that I am caught between here and there. Here in this dim

classroom and there in her living room. Here by myself and there with her. Here at the

university and there at home. The tone of her voice mirrors this amorphous distance. She

responds to my question. She speaks in short sentences—short, matter-of-fact sentences.

It is weird to play the interviewer at this moment. Probably, just as weird as it feels to be

the interviewee. I find myself longing for talk—the kind of talk that colors the memories

of campfires and living room visits that I have with Summer. I smile and nod,

surrendering to the distance and the silence that carries unsaid things. I follow-up.

How might you describe the area to someone who's not from there?

I.

It's good to live here, um, I enjoy living here.
    Other than being so far away from everything, from the store,
    and bad internet.

I would describe this area as being in the mountains.
Very beautiful scenery.
Very quiet life.
And if you're expecting more than that then you're in the wrong place.
Other than beautiful scenery.

    Yeah, that's about all we got.

II.

Just memories made really
growing up with my family and friends down there.

It was great.
There was always other kids my age to play with.
We—like all the kids down there,
we all had each other's backs.
We were all close.
There was always something to do, somebody to play with,

versus now,
there's not as many kids down there,
and I don't think that they are as close like we were when I—
like within the generation when I was growing up.
So it has changed a lot, but it,
back when I was growing up down there,
it was great.

There was also—

                                                    let me throw this in there
—there was a little store on the lick too,
and, I mean we never had to leave the creek.
It was on down the road, past my mom and dad's, past the church.
It's on the left down there,
like right before you get to the lick carwash.

The lick carwash is
it's cliffs on the side of the road where
mountain water
rainwater
is always coming out
it's always coming out
and you're always able to go in there and get yourself a quick little carwash.

Just memories made growing up,
like, you know being able to walk down to the store that I was telling you about,
and going to the lick carwash,
that was always a huge thing in my family,
and I once lost a flip flop down there.
It's still there.
        I know it's still down there.

                                    *****

        Summer's words echo the ones I heard from Dawn. Dawn is one of my best

friends, and most of what I know about home, I credit to her. It was late at night when I

interviewed Dawn. I was visiting from winter break, and we were both confronting the

idea that I would have to leave soon. Our interview hummed like a sort of drowsy

goodbye. It was a bonding moment and a reminder that I would once again leave home

and zoom up the interstate to the University. Dawn fixed supper that night: oven baked

freezer meal manicotti, a pan of Sister Schubert's rolls, peas, fresh strawberries, red,

seedless grapes, and keto-friendly fruit dip. We ate at the table together, instead of

joining the rest of the house in the living room. After dinner, she looked at me from her

recliner and said:

We better go do that interview if we're going to. I feel sleep coming on.

I agreed, and we decided to go into the back bedroom in the house. She headed

that way and told me to bring her blanket. I grabbed it and headed down the painted,

wood paneled hallway into the office to jot down my interview questions and grab my

materials. Then, I walked into the bedroom and lightly tossed my things onto the bed,

throwing Dawn's gray and white fleece blanket to her. Both of us were in pajamas with

our blankets, half reclining on pillows across the checkered black and tan quilt of the bed.

The bedroom is a square with burgundy and beige walls and a small walk-in

closet on one wall and bathroom of about the same size on an adjacent wall. It's

decorated with primitive stars, black and white photos, dark wood, and wire berry vines.

It's night. There's an air of sleepiness and introspection in the way we talk with each

other, and I internally squirm with the awareness that our words function as a physical

energy exchange. After a long, busy day, every word brings Dawn—and me—closer to

sleep. We joke back-and-forth as I get settled and she asks me questions about the

interview process—some serious, others not. With her permission I press the record

button on my iPhone. Nervous intimacy creeps into the scene, and I find that I am

surprised by the distance that the width of a recording device puts between us. Dawn

speaks slowly, exhaustedly. She speaks with a sense of curated transparency; she talks

with me honestly but with an awareness that she is being recorded. I learn things about

her and her experiences that I did not know and that I might not have been able to learn in

our usual conversations. I worry I'm leading too much with my questions, so I try to

focus on her. I see my fuchsia, long-sleeved t-shirt hanging on the hook outside the closet

door just over Dawn's shoulder. It has an image of a mason jar with the saying *preserve*

small town America on it. We talk for a long time, ending when Dawn drifts off to sleep.

I notice the dainty veins in her cheeks and the wrinkles around her eyes, and I smile. This

is what it's like to live here.

III.

Um. . . uh, it's . . .
a *very* small town. Everybody knows everybody.
We—
We don't have any stop lights or anything,
so like I mean we're about as small as you can get.

I grew up here, um, I moved away for a very brief period of time, for about nine years,
and I come back and
found it to be almost exactly the same as it was when I left.
Same people,
and the people who had grown up who had aged
were still recognizable and,
and their children were recognizable because *they*
looked exactly like their parents did, and so, you know,
I mean, it's like the generation carry over here to be exactly like the generation was
before,
as far as even right down almost to the looks of people. You know?

Your kids are going to look like you,
and their kids are going to look like them,
and you will know five generations down the line that those were John and Sarah's
children
because that's exactly who they look like.

I mean, it's just that small.
You are forever tied to
your family. Everybody *knows* everybody.
Literally, that small. Our population's that small.

*****

Flash back. Renewable Energy!

Sure. Nice, but it doesn't feed you.

Your daddy has worked himself to the bone providing for this family.

Those coal trucks put food on the table. Don't complain when you're behind one.

You don't know what hard work is. Dad's on the hoot owl shift.

Early morning shift. Day shift. Saturday training.

Stepdad's been under that truck all day. Brakes went out. Something in the transmission's

down. Gear is slipping. VDOT. Over Calibration. Parts run.

Your daddy work over at the plant?

I saw your mama over at the schoolhouse today.

You look just like her.

*****

When I went into interviewing, I anticipated responses like some of the ones I

received from Summer and Dawn. There's not much here. There's not much going on.

To my surprise, one of the first times I heard it so directly was while talking to Summer,

in the very last interview I had for the project. Those statements make me smile and let

out a light laugh. I love to meet family and people who know my family. I love that I

look like my mom, and I love hearing tales of work banter over the CB radios of a coal

truck and memories on the farm or in the garden or at the creek. They are part of the lore

that enchant home. But, sometimes, and especially as I dove into this project, these

sentiments led me to ask myself the question: Is that really all we got? There's more. I

know there's more. But the simplicity of small town mountain life is part of what makes

it feel like home. Retrospective images and memories establish a sense of place, a

memory realized and perpetuated through stories and people.

<div align="center">*****</div>

I agree to meet Sarah on the fifth floor of the campus library, which is a place we

both know well. When I arrive on campus, I follow the sandstone sidewalk to the bottom

floor entrance of the library. It opens to 24-hour study rooms and a hallway to the central

elevator of the building. The lights are dim. My footsteps echo with a familiar light and

anxious cadence. When I reach the fifth floor, the elevator opens to a spacious room of

gray and white framed in windows and dotted with square café tables and chairs and

booths in bright blue and scarlet. It's a social space, but it's evening and most people are

gone. I think about all the times I've been in this room before, and there is a sort of joyful

melancholy that floats in with the descending sun.

Sarah's sitting at a table directly across from the elevator, and when the doors

open, she waves at me. I wave back with both hands and walk to her. She's wearing a

gray blue sweater and navy pants, paired with white sneakers. Her outfit is accented by a

dainty, gold cross necklace that peeks over the neckline of her sweater, gold rings layered

on her fingers, and medium, coffin-shaped nails that almost match the color of her shirt.

Sarah has bright eyes and long, thick, wavy hair that ombres from brown to blonde over

her shoulders. We sit across from each other, and as I settle in, we talk and catch-up. I

share grad school stories, and she tells me about what's going on in her life too. It feels so

good to see her, and I'm quickly reminded of how easy it is to overshare in her presence.

She's not much older than I am, and Sarah is an inviting conversationalist. She moves a

lot when she speaks. She plants her elbows on the table and gestures with her hands and

shoulders. Sometimes, she brings her hands to her face and pauses with phrases like *let me think*; and other times, she follows open-palmed gestures with energetic and half-apologetic reminders that she *loves the talk*. She uses that phrase as a refrain as we dive in and out of questions, responses, stories, and talk.

IV.

My whole life, I have lived here,
and if I could describe living here—

When I was young,
I feel like everyone knew everyone.
I could walk into the grocery store,
and everyone already knew my business
when I walked in.
That was good and bad, you know?

That was good in the sense that I felt a sense of community,
and everyone was looking out for me,
and random people
that my grandparents knew
had my back.

But also at the same time,
it was overwhelming
because when the slightest mishap happens,
it feels like the world knows.

The difference between bigger cities and here is
no one's really a stranger.
If I was stuck on the side of the road,
and I couldn't get a hold of my dad,
someone else's dad would be there to help me.
You know what I mean?

Even at school, no one's really a stranger.
Like, I can remember being young,
both my parents worked at the same school,
and I knew every single teacher in that school.
And I actually was so close with one of the teachers in seventh grade
that I went home with her one evening
and swam in her swimming pool.

People are willing to help out and help me out.

Somehow
through the grapevine
everyone knows you
and everyone's supporting you.
And if anything major happens—
I have a friend from high school
that is sick right now,
and she just found out she has a bad—
it's a bad diagnosis,
and there are people,
there are hundreds and hundreds and hundreds
of people
that are flooding her messages—
people that I went to high school with,
but people also that I don't even know.

You don't get that when you're not
when you're not living right next to each other,
when things aren't as close as they are here.

I guess I would just say that, like, living here is very comfortable.
It feels very comfortable.
there's a lot of security in knowing that you're going to be...
Like, like,
when I was young,
we didn't even have to lock our front doors.
Like, I lived, like, in the middle of nowhere in my mind,
and we didn't even have to lock our front doors,
or lock our cars
So, I mean, it was really just a sense of security,
and I love it.
I would definitely want to raise children here.

For a long time, I thought I would leave,
but as I've grown older
and matured,
I realized just how special it is to be here in such a small area
where everyone knows everyone,
and there's a sense of community,
whether you really know people or not,
whether they're actually your family or not.

V.

I didn't learn that no one was a stranger,
and it was my generation that learned that.
Like, my parents knew that, and

their parents knew that, and
their parents knew that, and
I think it all started with people who lived close to each other
who really had no one else to rely on
but their next-door neighbor, and so we've just started to
embrace that sense of closeness.

> And, but then again, I'm thinking, is that true?
> Because like people in New York City live right
> next to each other. You know what I mean? Like,
> they live like sardines compared to us.
>
> I don't know.

Like, I say we never meet a stranger, but it's because my aunt or
my, like, third or fourth or fifth
cousin knew them one time at a softball game.

Proximity for sure. I don't know. I think a big part of it is we live in the Bible Belt.

> Like I would like to add that
> Like let's just add that little part in too.

If there's a church on every corner,
most people have either been there
or their grandmas
or grandpas have been there
and they pick something up from that
because we live in the Bible Belt,
everybody piggybacks off of their grandparents' faith
that our idea of what a good Christian person is
is not being a stranger
to people.
I feel like that's somewhere in there.

That sounds bad but we're piggybacking off of
our grandparents' and
great grandparents' faith,
and I think that idea of being a good person has just been instilled in us.

*****

Dawn adds:

*****

VI.
Reliable's not the best word for it. It's just, hmm. . .

Yeah, dependable, you know?
That's what I mean, I guess, is like
close.

Um . . .
I talk to my sisters every day,   pretty much,
and I know family m- I know people, like away from here and stuff, who haven't seen or
talked to their family members in years.
Um. . .
I have cousins whom I speak to and see nearly daily or weekly.
Um, we're just very—

So when I think about being from a small area like this,
I think about closeness.
Um, I think about dependability
and   safety, I guess. You know?

Obviously, there is struggle in all communities and areas now.
That's an unfortunate part of life, that there's tragedies everywhere,
but, um, you don't think that there's—
it's where you're at, and for the most part of where *we* live,
there's not a whole, whole lot of
things
that really go on.
So, I think of safety.
I feel pretty safe in our community.

*****

As Sarah talks about her experiences growing up in her small town, and I find

myself questioning, again. What is it? What is it that drives a special sense of community

in small towns? I pose this question directly to Sarah: Is it just size and proximity or

something else? Sarah and I practically work through that last poem almost together. The

answer: Yes, kinda, I don't know. In the in-between, we dive into metaphors and

memories, which serve as a way to understand small towns and life within them. Several

sentiments repeat throughout these poems: family, familiarity, safety, closeness, unlocked

front doors, simplicity, and kind neighbors, to name a few. Schneider (2006) writes that

"[t]he banal detail of the everyday props the whole, bit by bit composing the whole, and

yet (in Proustian and Barthesian logic) the detail simultaneously serves as the hole . . .

through which the edificial could be completely reorganized" (p. 29). Schneider (2006)

converses with the work of de Certeau (1984) to argue that focusing on the everyday

images that constitute a person's perception of reality helps to deconstruct the stability of

that reality and reveals movement as "the condition of any myth of stasis" (p. 29).

Schneider (2006) answers my question. *Yes, that is all that's going on.* However, the idea

of small towns and life within them as simple and stable is enabled by the everyday

experiences of unlocked front doors and church potlucks, and the citation of these events

in representations of home. Following Schneider (2006) and her reading of de Certeau

(1984), these memories and metaphors are consequential, spatial performances that

(re)produce the community of a small town. When navigated, more-or-less

unconsciously, in the everyday, space can be taken for granted as place. In this conflation

of space and place, the practice and experience of small-town is rendered as a quality of

place, so that naming why and how it exists appears as a difficult, or at least abstract,

task.

The minimization of space in the performance of rural space also marks space and

place as White, without the explicit acknowledgement of it as so in descriptions. Ahmed

(2007) argues that spaces are often marked as White through the congregation of White

bodies, and that, while White people often do not acknowledge the Whiteness of a space,

they do acknowledge their similarity, and thus belonging, to community members.

According to Ahmed (2007), "Race in this model 'extends' the family form; other

members of the race are 'like a family'" (p. 154). This metaphor speaks to Dawn's

assertions that every generation looks the same and that individuals are tethered to their

families. This metaphor also captures Sarah and Dawn's descriptions of feelings of closeness and safety. The safety and closeness of place functions as a euphemism for the Whiteness of space.

Moreover, emotional affinity to ideas of community closeness function to maintain the Whiteness of space and the possibility of disrupting it. Ahmed (2007) explains that "To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins . . . White bodies are comfortable *as they inhabit spaces that extend their shape*" (p. 158). Ahmed (2007) shows how the visibility of Whiteness can disappear in its ubiquity within White spaces, and yet, how it directs perception and possibility. Clements and Stutelberg (2020) cite Thandeka (2000) to explain that White people are often socialized into maintaining Whiteness using strategies of shame or fear of ostracization from family and community. The Whiteness of rural space and place within the poetry enables and is disguised as feelings of closeness and safety within the community. To celebrate place as small, intimate, and safe is bound up in associations with its Whiteness.

<center>*****</center>

My interview journey starts with Hope. I am home in my parent's doublewide by the creek, and the day gifts the area with snow. The public schools gift the area with a snow day. Due to the unexpected weather, Hope messages me to ask if we can move the interview up, and I oblige with a nervous excitement that can never be captured by the cool words of my text. Preparing for the interview consumes the hours of my afternoon. I am excited and nervous and underprepared. I put makeup on and pick out a brand new

shirt. I scribble the guiding questions of my interview guide down in my notepad for the very first time. At this moment, my research seems real.

I join Hope on Zoom in the small office room of the doublewide, decorated with a large cube organizer of washed gray wood and teal curtains. She joins me from a room in her home, framed in colors of yellow, white, and black. There is a wooden desk of medium color, a large safe in the background, files stacked high against the wall and around the safe. I hear a dog bark in the background, and just after we exchange greetings, she excuses herself to let the dog out. She returns, and we continue to talk casually about life and school. Hope has bright red hair of medium length pulled into a high bun and deep brown eyes surrounded by black, cat-eyeglasses frames. She has a small and slender frame. Her voice is gentle and confident, passionate, nervous, and cautious, all at the same time. I learn about the trip she's arranging for her students in the honor society. I learn about how the pandemic has affected work and class at the school. There is a sense of distance prolonged by Zoom, the busyness of the times, the uncertainty I feel in the first interview and my concern with doing it *right,* and the intrusion of the concepts of interviewing and a recording device on our talk. Yet, in spite of these, there is also a sense of warmth and rekindling, only enhanced by the rising heat of the office space. Talking to Hope is like traveling and recentering. I'm traveling and revisiting places through her stories—the beginning, the now, and a lot of the middle. I'm walking and pausing with her and her words, listening, questioning, and reflecting.

VII.

I've been very, very blessed
to have the opportunity to travel several different places,   different areas.
been to several big cities, you know,
New York
Chicago,

Atlanta,
New Orleans.
Also, abroad to
Mexico City,
Monterey, Mexico.   All over Spain.

And while I love those places
and I love being surrounded by all the culture and the convenience of life,
this is just always home and always has been home, and

I love, I love the people here because it's just—
Like there's just something different about the people around here.
Even though we have our differences and, you know, people don't always get along,
somebody's got your back,
and somebody's gonna be here and support you and help you.

You don't necessarily see that everywhere else.
Our community is like, it's part of our identity.
You know, in bigger areas that that community is kind of lost.
You've got the smaller groups everywhere that kind of have their own identity.
You look at New York City and you've got all the boroughs.
Inside those boroughs, there are specific identities.

With us, that community is part of who we are.

Like our high school teams, that's
our team. We live and die by that team.
You get on the field, on the court to compete whatever for,
for that short amount of time,
the opposing team is your worst enemy.
But when the game's over,
they're your best friends again.

You know when you walk out the door—
say something happened and your vehicle breaks down,
someone is gonna pull over and help you out.
They're not just gonna drive on by.

People would ask me all the time, *Well, where, where'd you grow up?*
And I could say, *Oh, up the ridge past the fairgrounds*.
And like they knew exactly where I was talking about.
We know exactly where because we have that community.

I could just say, *You know Donny Edwards?*
And everybody would be like, *Yeah, I know him.*
And I'd be like, *That's my dad.*

Oh, okay!

And if they didn't know him, they knew my mom.
And if they didn't know my mom, they knew one of my mom's siblings. You know?
We're just always connected somehow.
Everybody knows who you are
who your parents are,
who your grandparents are,
aunts and uncles,
just because they've taken the time to build those relationships.

We take it for granted, too.
We don't really appreciate it until we go somewhere else,
and see how life can be elsewhere because,
community to us is so ingrained into our culture   into who we are as people
that our communities,
whether it be a school team,
or even the holler that you grew up in,
your neighborhoods you grew up in
we identify ourselves by that.

It's there from the smallest aspect to the biggest aspect of it.
Like I said, it's just, it's who we are.
It's our identity.

<div align="center">*****</div>

Sarah reflects:

<div align="center">*****</div>

VIII.

Well,
I would've said that the role of the school in the community
is nothing more than to teach the kids.
It's like a
glorified babysitting service.   That's kind of how I felt.

But—
I see things from a completely different point of view,
and now I would say that the school system in our community is the stable.

It is the stability within our community because
I deal with families every day, who, their schedule runs 8:30 to 3:30
when our schedule runs.
They know that come rain, snow, sleet, hail,

someone—
the school might not be open—
but someone from the school
will be there
to answer questions,
to support,
to help with virtual learning. The teachers are gonna be there
to answer any questions that the kids may have,

so I feel like . . .
and I guess looking back, I've always known this because
I've always been at school, and it's always been stable for me because my parents have
always been there,
but without the elementary school,
the town is really almost nothing. It is a very
small town.
It's a very small area,
and there's a few things to do.
I mean, they have a grocery store,
And a couple of, a couple of, like, restaurants.

But if your child is in the elementary school,
you know that they're taken care of,
you know that that is the hub of the town.

The school is the hub.

That's where the parents come at 1:50 to gossip about what's happening.
That's where parents come when they can't afford to pay their light bill.
They come to us.

That's where they come when their kids don't have clothes, and they need clothes.
That's where parents come when they know they're not gonna be able to give their kids
enough for Christmas.
We provide that.

It's stability within our community.

<center>*****</center>

Hope remembers:

<center>*****</center>

IX.

When I was in the seventh or eighth grade, um,

I think it was the eighth grade.
Because this was another county, so different but like,
we all knew that consolidation was going to happen for the county at some point,
but when I was in the eighth grade,
the superintendent at that time just straight up announced
next year the high school be consolidated with another high school, and
there will be no more of the high school,
and you should have seen the outrage from the town community.
They were so just like no, you know,
you're taking the one thing that is keeping our community alive away from us
because since the high school has closed,
the town has definitely gone downhill.

I mean, which, you know, breaks my heart
because that, you know I went to the high school,
and I hate to see it because those,
a lot of those people are people I know,
people that were my friends and
just to see the town be in the shape it's in,

and, while the school wasn't keeping the town alive,
it was definitely helping keep the community together,
and giving the people in town something to be hopeful about.

I don't know if you've, you've paid attention to
any of the news or anything about the town but like if you read
about the town council meetings, it's a mess.

It's a mess.

<div align="center">*****</div>

School consolidation felt like a natural topic to bring up in the interviews. It was

an experience that I shared with many of my interviewees. My home county rolled out its

new consolidation plan when I was just entering high school, and maybe slightly before.

Because my mother worked in the school, I got to go with her to participate in the early

planning meetings. Attendees debated intensely over colors and mascots. I remember

sitting at a table in a large room of people, being handed markers, and asked to draw a

concept for how the new school should look and what it should have in it. I was young, and it was exciting.

The promise of new growth shepherded by the building of the new school was enough for me to overlook the concerns many community members voiced about the loss of community history in the closing of the schools. The last football seasons of the old high schools were electric and widely attended. Family members found jobs constructing the new school. I was young, and it was exciting.

Then, the new school opened. It was a shiny new building on acres of land forming a new campus dozed flat for athletic fields. School students had new facilities, new spaces for classes, new potential to form teams and clubs. But largely, things remained the same. I remember walking down the long hallway that connected the east and west wings of the new high school. The hallway allowed entry to the gyms, and more importantly, the art, band, and choir rooms. Massive, orange letters on the wall announced the space: A-R-T. The space was defined by an air of promise. But, halfway down the hall, I glanced up to where two wall panels met and saw the hole left by a missing bolt. I let out a light chuckle.

Brand new and broken.

Incomplete?

<div align="center">*****</div>

Dawn reflects:

<div align="center">*****</div>

<div align="center">**X.**</div>

Well, from a person who has worked in the school system now for almost,
going on 18 years,
I've been in a school that has shut down due to consolidations,

and obviously getting ready to go through it again,
and have watched my *own* hometown high school
get shut down and consolidated
to that it's no longer there,
I graduated from that high school in 1997, and it's no longer there.
I feel like did I even graduate?

You know, there's not a day that I don't drive by where the high school was that I don't think
that's where the high school was,
and it still hurts.
As I drive by where the rescue squad building is,
and I see where the steps to the catwalk went up the bank,
I see it every day.
I remember how cool I thought it was
to come off the backside of the bank at the high school
down to the parking lot where everybody parked their
jalopy junk
cars.
You know, meanwhile, at the new high school, now,
it looks like a nice used car lot up there.

So, I feel like that almost,
and I know this sounds crazy but
what is a community without a school?
What is such a small community like ours without its little school?
Does it even exist without its little school?   No.
Because once you take that school away,
if there is any little grocery stores or businesses away,
any traffic that was there
will surely fade,
which is what we have seen happen.

When the elementary school shut down, the vocational school was there behind it,
and the town obviously, in my opinion, had a bigger population then
because there was so many—well, it just had a bigger population.
I have seen population decline from the town since the elementary school
closed,
and they moved the career center from down there.

And then, with the high school closing,
I feel like the town has obviously lost business,
but it has had an ongoing, rejuvenation going for a few years,
so they're trying to bring business back to town through the efforts of their ATV project
that has worked well for them,
and I think it'll continue to work well for them,

but what I really see
that's going to struggle
is going to be our little local grocery store which is right beside of our elementary school.
I think that once that school closes,
within five years that grocery store will probably close.
Because they'll pretty much be no traffic through there.
Because that's where everybody shops from school.
That's where all the parents shop from picking up their kids.

Who's gonna be by there after that?

When they finish with this consolidation project,
everyone will attend the same elementary, middle, and high school,
which is something I can honestly say that I never thought I would see this county do,
and I get what they're trying to do,
and in a lot of ways,
I feel like that they were trying to make our county
larger by expanding the school
but in so many ways, I feel like rather than making our county larger,
they've only made the county seat more predominant,
while pretty much making two other little towns pretty nonexistent.

It's caused hurt feelings,
and it's not really so much about school consolidation.

I mean, I know that that's not what this interview's about. I know that it's about how, you
know, the school system has impacted—

But obviously the transition
of my position
into this new school
is going to affect me.
I do not feel like that—
and this is not stepping foot into the school yet—
It's obviously a bigger facility,
and they will be more students.
I don't feel like I will have an as close relationship with the students obviously,
and I worry a little bit about having an as close relationship with my coworkers
in such a bigger facility
as what I do now.
It's changed more I think than people
actually want to realize,
but for those of us who live here,
it's just more apparent.

******

An ode to that little gas station

on the road between towns

When I was little you were called by one name,

and then you were renamed,

and now,

they call you something else.

What's its name? the new owner asks my mother.

Her smile curls into a playful grin.

What's its name, now?

Which community would I like to call forth in choosing your name?

I pass your neon green lights

and think of pavement,

potholes,

a metal rooster,

a stack of tires,

creeping kudzu,

and the trailer on an island

across the bridge.

I hear the train coming out the tunnel

behind the river

and racing cars on the highway,

up and around the curve

until the little gas station is gone

another memory

that I will see again

soon.

*****

Contrary to invoking a stable notion of place, these poems reveal a community

that is changing, in physical and intangible ways, visibly marked by changes within the

school system. In an ethnographic exploration, Alexander (2003) presents the Black

barbershop as a "cultural site," which he defines as "not only as the chosen geo-social

locale of the ethnographic gaze but also as a centralized occasion within a cultural

community that serves at the confluence of banal ritualized activity and the exchange of

cultural currency" (p. 106). Alexander's (2003) definition allows for a referential

understanding of place, where material sites within physical locations can signify, teach,

and re-present culture in themselves and through the movement of bodies in those spaces.

Within the rural communities of the interviewees, the school functions as a cultural site.

The school provides a place for people to gather and talk. The school, as an institution

within the community, is charged with educating youth and providing a place of

employment for community members. The school signifies, and sometimes causes,

changes within the community. Similar to the way in which Pezzullo (2003)

conceptualizes the bus in mobile tours of polluted neighborhoods in Louisiana, as a unique space that allows for participation in and reflection on cultural drama, exploring performance through and in connection with the school in my rural community and the communities of my interviewees allows performers to observe and deconstruct monolithic, place-based understanding.

In reflecting on their experiences with school consolidation, myself and my interviewees regularly invoke feelings of loss and displacement. Pezzullo (2003) writes that the tours of polluted neighborhoods in Louisiana function as "cultural performances negotiating the politics of memory, of presence and absence, of play and politics, and of remembering and forgetting" (p. 246). Performing memories of the rural school and retelling stories of school consolidation brings community loss to the forefront, and loss becomes a means for orienting to place and space. Santoro (2015) explores the manifestation of loss as navigated by the body's connection to the places it inhabits. Santoro (2015) writes that "physical ruin becomes a metaphorical mirror for human ruin—a tangible manifestation of life's accumulated losses" (p. 236). I recall Hope's description of the school and community as a source of identity in locating the significance of loss within descriptions of place. Place, navigated and reinforced through memory, is personal and political. Acknowledging loss while rendering place as stable reinforces a need to defend place—or at least a retroactive sense of place, while also hiding the everyday performances (in space) that constitute a sense of place. Hartzell (2020) analyzes the rhetoric of an online White nationalist group to argue that emotion is a critical motivator of engagement with race. Hartzell (2020) shows how White nationalist discourse works to reframe racism as love and concern for White

communities, emboldening a need to protect White communities. Taken with the

comfortability of Whiteness (Ahmed, 2007) in rural place, upholding notions of stability

in performances of community loss may work to reify the existence and operation of

Whiteness. While myself and my interviewees are speaking to physical community loss

and the effects of the loss of small-town schools, it is important that rural places and

people do not only get read as sites of loss because doing so reasserts Whiteness as a

foundation of community.

   Instead, attuning to performances of loss through experiences with schools in

rural communities is a practice that reveals spatial movement and community change.

Spatial performance recognizes loss and foregrounds change. Mitra (2012) cites the work

of Warren and Fassett (2002) to assert that hegemonic ideals and identities are often

performed in ways that make notions of community seem stable but that people can do

things to also normalize the notion of instability. In understanding the function of the

tours, Pezzullo (2003) points out that they allow marginalized community members to

assert presence and question absence within the community. Pezzullo's (2003) tours work

to create what Ahmed (2007) would describe as discomfort, which helps people to

perceive and move differently. Ahmed (2007) writes that "Discomfort, in other words,

allows things to move by bringing what is in the background, what gets over-looked as

furniture, back to life" (p. 163). Discomfort acknowledges community change without

reading loss as final, and it allows people and communities entrenched within hegemonic

identities to attune to performances like Whiteness that limit spatial potential for people

inside and outside of rural community. To examine performance in connection with place

in rural community is to understand the complex operation of navigating physical

community loss and change through invoking tellings that stabilize place and senses of

self, the two of which share a close relationship. Stabilizing place undermines its

constitution through spatial movement and marks rural places and bodies as sites of loss

instead of sites of movement.

Chapter Five:

Poetry on Identity

Every part of me freezes at the thought of talking on the phone—not calling for

appointments or ordering food, but *real* talking. Yet, it had been a few weeks, and I really

needed to talk to Susan—to introduce myself and ask her to interview with me. I inhaled

and dialed the number.

> Hi. Is this Susan?

Yes, who is this?

> This is Telena. I believe your daughter gave you my contact. I emailed,
> but I never heard back, so I thought I would call. I'm interviewing women
> who worked in the school for my thesis project. Would you still be
> interested in talking to me?

Uh, well I can't right now. I have to get my husband off to work.

> Yes, of course. When would work best for you?

I have some time this evening   or Saturday.

> Which would work better for you?

How about this evening?

We exchange a few more details and hang up. The call is over almost as quickly as it

began, and I still recall the way my heart beat through the entire conversation. A few

hours later, I leave campus for home and run down the hours until we talk. At five

minutes until the time, I find myself frantically preparing. I change my shirt, throw

clothes from the desk chair to the bed, and close the bedroom doors. I set up my iPad, and

ready some paper to scribble down the questions from my guide. Red ink, hurried

handwriting. I log into Zoom and wait.

When we connect, Susan leads with a joyous hello. She wears a tie-dye t-shirt:

blue at the shoulders and pink at the collarbone, deepened in a purple swirl at the center.

Her brown and silver hair fades into its burgundy ends, pulled up off her face to reveal

rosy cheeks and warm smile. Susan wears glasses: square lenses girded by black, metal

frames. I apologize for the awkward phone call and thank her for talking with me. I find

myself hung-up *(again)* on the concept of talk. I hesitate to say the word interview.

We dive in with casual conversation: the weather, compliments, daily activities. As we

talk, Susan sits on her couch and holds her phone at face level. The back of the frame is

filled by a wooden bookshelf with open ends. Susan has lots of stories, and she's an

energetic story-teller. She speaks with an inviting and gentle authority, and many of her

stories are punctuated by casual laughter. I laugh with her and find myself pulled into the

stories she tells, intimate conversation among strangers.

XI.

Actually, I moved to the area after I got married, when—
I got married when I was 19, so, that, you know,
I was young, but,
—and I was still in college in the nursing program at the community college.
and, you know, I got married while I was there.

It lasted 36 years so it was a good,
good choice, you know?

We were married 36 years. He, uh, developed liver cancer, and, uh, I mean had, had lived
a clean life, so I don't know, you know, why. But, you know, he never really took any
medication except prescriptions, maybe occasionally a Tylenol or whatever, but hardly
ever even that. But he developed liver cancer, and, and within three months of his
diagnosis he passed away.

He was an elementary school principal for about 15, 16 years,
and he loved kids. Loved kids.
and his, I mean—even today, if I post his—
Somebody posted his picture the other day on Facebook,
and there was like 15 replies under that,
　　　Oh! He was such a great teacher.

       He was such a great principal.
and there was one guy said,
      He sure could use a paddle.

                                    That was back in the day when you
                                    still could paddle, you know?

And, you know, just people commenting about him because, because he,
he was always, he tried to be fair.

                                  and he was not from this area. He
                                  was from just south of upstate. I
                                  don't know if you're familiar with it
                                  or not.

But he came here, and he just fit so well with the community,
and everybody knew him and loved him,
and when he died, or when he was sick, there was such a community outpouring of
just love and prayers and everything,
and, you know, that's one of the good things about living in a small community, too.
That's one of the best things about living in a small community—
is that people love each other and care for each other.

And they know, when there's sickness or something like that,
people step up and help, you know?
I mean, like, I was still working while he was sick,
and he was doing some chemo and stuff,
and, you know, all I had to do was call and ask if people would go with him to chemo for
me.

You know?
Um. . . You know?
because I couldn't be there,
and you know, people would bring us, brought us food,
and, you know, just
loved on us and took care of us during that time,
and it's so good to have that—
I mean,
because in a big city you—
nobody knows who you are. You know, if you're going through a hard time
then you're going through it by yourself.

XII.

We get students from all over the county,
students that are at-risk for dropping out
for whatever reason that might be.

It might be lack of attendance.
It might be they're in court because of drugs or alcohol
or even smoking cigarettes on school grounds, or
they're not able to pass their standardized test or whatever.

They are sent there because they get
more academic attention from the teachers,
and the classroom sizes are smaller.
The teachers are used to dealing with those students.
We had usually around anywhere from 80 to 120 students there at any one time, and
they would cycle through because these students could
graduate whenever they finish the coursework,
As soon as one graduated, we'd usually have
another one to come in to fill that spot.

We networked pretty well to do for the kids
what needed to be done,
whatever that might be,
whatever that looked like
to make them know that we care about them,
that they were special,
that we wanted the best for them.
We did lots of things at the school,
just supportive type things.

We had the special needs students at the Center,
and we had a Christmas party for them
with gifts and things like that.
At prom time, a lot of the students didn't have the money
to buy a gown or tux or whatever,
so we tried to arrange to get what they needed.
Some of the students
when they graduated didn't have the money
to buy a tie or a suit or a proper dress to wear,
so we would help them get those things.
There were students that I would take out myself,
personally,
and take Christmas shopping and do things like that with.

We had a lot of those kids that had failed at
regular school that graduate with us
or got their GED with us.
That made their life look better from there on out.

The girls who had babies there while I was there,
for the most part, the majority of them were good mothers.

Having the baby made them a better person.
I know it's not the best choices.
They didn't make the best choices.
But, still, they made the best of it.
It really was a family there.

   A.
   There was one student that,
   I can't even remember, I mean
   as far as physical problems go.
   This student was a special needs student, and he—
         Um, ah,   sorry.
         I'll probably cry.

   The first day he walked in
   my office was facing the front of the building,
   so I saw him walking in.
   I knew him because he'd been in the special needs classes,
   and he walked in
   and he came in
   and he was limping,
   and he had a pair of cowboy boots on.

   I thought maybe the boots are tight,
   so when he came around the corner
   after he came in, I called him in,
   and I said *Are you okay? Why are you limping?*
   and he said *Oh, I fell at home.*
   And he had scraped his knee,
   so I bandaged his knee and everything,
   and I kept noticing that he was progressively getting worse
   as far as his ability to walk.

   His high school nurse and I were able to get him to the doctor.
   He had, his dad had Medicaid.   His dad started working again.
   He lost Medicaid.
   So he didn't have any insurance,
   but we finally got him to the doctor.

   Shortly after they discovered he had ALS,
   they discovered his sister also had ALS,
   and she was in the hospital   in intensive care.
   So his dad would . . . he's a single dad.
   His dad was with his sister, and
   this student of mine was with his grandmother.

He would come to school every day.
The second semester they put him at my school full-time.
Somebody in the community donated a little one of those little wheelchairs that—
a little speedy thing—
and he was like we'll use that.
His bus driver said *You know, I can't . . .*
He lived like on a road that was real bumpy and stuff.
She said *He's losing muscular control in his leg.*
I'm afraid he's gonna flip out of his chair.
So we eventually were able to get him a fitted wheelchair.
But he came to school every day.

And eventually he got to the point that he was actually in hospice care.
We tried to get him in Make a Wish,
and his wish was for his grandmother to have a new house.

I ended up taking care of him at school.
I had to use a lift to get him up to go to the bathroom or do anything
I would take him in a special room we had,
and let him rest part of the day because
he was wearing him out being at school.
We had to get a purée treat for him
because he couldn't chew.
And I kept telling everybody *Hey, y'all. You know, this may not end well*
here at school because, you know, we . . . he really . . .
Ah, you know, something can happen.

Two weeks after school let out, he passed away in his sleep at home.
I was just so glad to be there for him, and
to be able to take care of him
because he needed somebody and he did—
I mean his family couldn't
because of the situation with their, his sister.

A month or two before school was out,
he was put in hospice,
and he was like *Now, tell those nurses*
they can't come to me if they're crying and all that business.
He would tell jokes.
Going out the door he would be telling jokes.
I mean that's just one of—   I mean if what I did for him was
all I ever did while I was there
it was enough.
If I was just there for him, that was good.

                    and, um, I don't know how you believe. . .

One day he asked me,
he said *Do you think I'll go to heaven? I've done some really bad things.*
and I said *Honey, we've all done bad things. But all you have to do is ask Jesus to come into your heart. Just talk to him like you would a friend.*
and he said *Okay*.
So the next day I thought maybe I outta offer to let—
because we had some pastors that were teachers and staff and in the building.
and I said to him *You remember what we talked about yesterday?*
and he said *Yeah*.
I said *If you want somebody to pray with you,*
I'll get one of the pastors here to come in and talk to you and pray with you.
He said *It's okay. I already did.*
I said *Okay. That's good.*
And that's the last thing he ever said about it.

But you know, it made a difference.
It made me know that God had me there,
and it was what I needed to be doing.

B.
I remember one fight.
This was when President Obama was running for his second term,
and someone on the buses, some of the boys were making comments
that they shouldn't have been making,
and there was an African American, Black girl on the bus,
and she got really offended,
so one of the boys,
the boy who was not primarily responsible for it though
was like You know, I really shouldn't have been saying, saying that.
So he got off the bus,
and she was in front of him.
He called her name,
and told her *If you want to, you can hit me because of what I said.*

And she laid him out.
Usually, they would press charges for that, but
because he had given her permission,
they couldn't.
That girl had a punch, now. I'm telling you.

C.
At one time we had pre-carpentry at our school.   They cut that out later on.
One of the students in carpentry had his ears pierced,
and he wanted to gage them up,
so he stuck
a ten penny nail through his ear to gage it up.

They're about the size of your little finger.
Anyway, so he comes to me,
and he's like— of course I made him take them out,
He wouldn't take them—take those nails
and put them back in the box.
and I was *like No!*
I said Do you not realize that you can get a disease from these nails that,
an infection or Tetanus or—
and he was like *Oh, but, it was a clean box of nails. It was a new box.*

I was like   *geez!*
Ah, anyway.

D.
I had another student who said that he was a member of the KKK.
He carved a swastika in his hair, and
he came to school,
and the principal told me,
he said *He has to get that out. Either try to fix it for him or . . .*
I ended up being the jack of all trades because stuff
that was different I had to take care of it.
He had said *He can't stay here. Either he has to go home or*
we have to do something with it.
So I said *Let's see what we can do.*
I tried to maybe make a decoration out of it.
That didn't work.
I ended up shaving his head.

Sometimes I would ask them *What do you want to be doing five years from now?*
They have no idea because
they don't even know what they're gonna be doing tomorrow.
They're long-term planning for what their life would look like is
not there because they've never been taught to do that.

We were part of their lives because we cared.
So, it made us feel like family. You know?
They knew that they got a place that people were on their side, and
would take up for them and would help them if they needed anything.
When you get a job like that
it's not really a job.
It's what you do because you enjoy it.

<div align="center">*****</div>

Dawn:

*****

XIII.

Wonderful and heartbreaking.
What you say, do, and think, act, and feel
toward a child
will impact it for the rest of its life,
and I mean that.

When I see the kids, the
first thing, I wanna make sure that they're eating.
Second, I wanna make sure that they're happy, and
thirdly, I wanna make sure that I've greeted them by name, if I know their name.
If I call you by your name, then you know I've seen you today.
But if you get their name wrong look out.
That's my sister's name.
        I'm so sorry, baby. I'll get it right next time.

Out of the 400 plus students that we have,
there's probably not 20 of them that I don't know their names,
I run one of the breakfast lines.
That's my way of making sure that I stay in touch with my kiddos.
I enjoy seeing them, and I can tell when they come in,
I can tell if they're not happy.
I can tell if they're happy to be there,
if they're not having a good day, or
if something's off.
I'll say *Baby, are you okay?   Where you been?   Are you glad to be back?*
You learn so much about children.

I worry about our children. People don't realize what
a issue that hunger is in your community.
I worry especially when one of them
says, I don't like that.
Why don't you like that?   Well, have you tried it?
Children can't learn if they're hungry,
and how many times have children been sitting and they're—
you're hungry and you just can't say anything. You don't have anything to eat,
but you can't say anything about it.
In a minute you might get something,
but right then your belly's growling,
but you don't have anything to put in it.
And that bothers me to think that a child would have to go
throughout their day feeling that way,
so when they come through and tell me that they don't like something,

I'm asking *Well, what will you eat?*

I tell you,
this is my personal experience from
my daily struggles with choosing the right foods,
is that healthy eating habits start when they're young.
If you don't encourage it,
it will not happen.
You would be surprised
at how many elementary school children
do not even know what most of your basic fresh fruit and veggies are,
Most of them have never had pomegranate.
A lot of them have never seen mango outside of a can of tropical fruit.
A lot of them did not know what a pineapple looked like by itself
A lot of them did not know that coconut do not come in a bag.
Turnips*.   Hot.*
They do not like the hot potatoes.
They don't know it's a—*It was a turnip.*
They don't want nothing to do with it.
        You couldn't even put ranch on that
        and get them to eat it.

We're a awesome little school.
Nothing aggravates me more than for a cafeteria to have that label
that I know you've seen so many times,
of that grumpy old lunch lady slapping that spaghetti
or that goulash or whatever it is
on that tray and says   *Next*.
I can't stand that.
We have come so far from solid white shirt and pants and hairnets
to our fun, screen printed, lunch lady saying t-shirts,
and our food dude.
We have come so far in lunch lady land, it ain't even funny.

Out of all the jobs that I've ever had—
and I don't just mean now in the kitchen—
out of all the jobs that I have ever had,
this one in the school system has truly been the most rewarding
I love it.
I do plan to retire at it,   not for some several years down the road.
I hope to
this could be far out there,
but I do hope to have my own grandchildren.
See my own grand babies in the school.
I hope to at least feed them through their early years in the school system,
before I retire.

That would be a blessing.

<div align="center">*****</div>

At the end of the interview, Dawn flips the script on me. She asks me what memories stick out when I think about her as a woman in a small town. The audio-recording is rolling, and she's giving me something to keep, something that will stick. I tell her I remember her work ethic. I tell her I think about getting my first job as a hostess in a restaurant. Our shifts ran in two blocks: 7 AM to 2 PM or 2 PM to 8 PM. I worked mornings most often, so almost every day I found myself confronted with the reality that I had to roll out of bed at 6 AM and dress in my pale blue polo and khakis and slick my curly hair into a bun and—on some days—put makeup on to make myself into a charming hostess for the front desk. Dawn was never sympathetic to my dread. She always reminded me that I had to go to work—that was just what people did. She reminded me that she did it every day—that getting yourself up and putting your makeup on was part of being a woman and part of readying for the day. I tell her I remember when I got my first period at school, and I ran to her office to leave a sticky note with the announcement and big dot drawn in the center instead of the word. I remember her support and her presence.

<div align="center">*****</div>

Women, Christian, working class, school employees: these identities appear throughout the poetry, often woven into stories of purpose. Writing in the context of intercultural family communication, Alemán and Alemán (2013) write that "both the *content* of stories and the *performance* of storytelling create parameters regarding what constitutes family and the appropriate behaviors therein" (p. 37). Similarly, Alemán and

Helfrich (2010) evidence that collaborative intergenerational storytelling allows family

members to develop awareness of their storied existences, which inform the perceptions

of expectations, reality, and choice. Although I only share a familial connection with one

of my interviewees, all of them are people who I look up to and admire. I am an

individual who identifies in many of the same ways as my interviewees. Their stories of

purpose reach and inspire me. I find myself dreaming through their stories. I want to

make a difference in my community like they do in theirs. I want to be a woman who

teaches, leads, and serves, who can take care of her family, who can speak confidently

about her faith. In performance, I recognize how these stories serve as models of how I

have been taught to live and practice rurality and gender. Their stories of work, identity,

and purpose are stories of space—they are cultural performances that teach me what is

possible. In the space of the interview, I lean into the intimacy that is created in

storytelling. I share my hope, fears, motives, understandings, and they share theirs. We

support and create (with) each other.

<div align="center">*****</div>

As we wrap up the interview—not quite sure of how to depart—Susan says:

> You know you're one of my girls now, right?

> You have to keep in touch. Let me know how this goes.

I'm honored, I say.

I will.

<div align="center">*****</div>

> *If community is identity, what happens when you find yourself without*

community? This question rode in the passenger seat as I drove down the road and

chewed on Hope's insight that small town community is small town identity. *What happens when the community doesn't accept your identity?* In that moment, visions of the words of anger, disdain, and hurt that I have witnessed people express at small towns popped into my mind. I found myself feeling—not just thinking—through those words. I feel: *I get it. It makes sense.* Throughout planning, interviewing, and writing this project, I have returned to questions and doubts about my representational choices. I want to honor the voices and experiences of my participants—Appalachian people, women, and school employees whose voices are incredibly important but often underrepresented. However, I also want to critique culture by exploring place and space. I want to call attention to the restriction of space and join in the work of opening it up, of striving towards the vision of freeing and welcoming communities that Denzin (2001a; 2001b) outlines his work on reflexive interviewing, and that many critical, cultural, and communication scholars profess. I know that these are not mutually exclusive goals, but as I write, I find myself asking if it is even *right* for me to celebrate a sense of home—if the only reason why I can celebrate a sense of home is because my identities align with it. I find myself reckoning with the narrowness of the identities presented in this project, partially intentional to allow me to dive deeper into performances of whiteness and other dominant identities that are implicated in life within rural, mostly White, small towns, and partially unintentional because I have best learned to story my hometown—and myself—through largely unreflexive narratives of (White) people who work hard and have faith. In writing, I find myself asking if part of the reason why I want to go home— in writing and in life—is because I want to fit, without question and reckoning. evening

conversations, I tell my mom about all that I have learned in graduate school—the

readings, projects, discussions. Hours away, her voice cuts through the distance:

I can't wait until you come home.

My reflections about home as a place of fit recall Ahmed's (2007) discussion

of Whiteness as comfortability for White bodies. It calls me to recognize my comfort

with Whiteness, and in that recognition, I learn that celebrating home means celebrating

its spatial potential. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) conclude that paying attention to

performances of Whiteness in space reveal the ways that it is carried out in the lives and

actions of people. Celebrating place as spatial potential means unapologetically learning,

naming, and changing performances, starting with my own.

*****

Hobson (2017) works through her search for community to mourn the nightclub

shooting at Pulse in Orlando, Florida in a small town in central Virginia. She writes:

"Although never secretive about my queerness, for the most part, the apathy of a 'good,

simple, quiet life' keeps me cloistered, rather than closeted" (Hobson, 2017, p. 557). For

Hobson (2017), the solution to her isolation in her small town is to disrupt the stable

narrative of the small town and the identities of dominance it relies on by building

intercultural communities and challenging hegemonic performances. This is similar to the

strategy Mitra (2012) offers of decentering dominant identities by showing the discourses

and performances of their construction, while also embracing how difference (for Mitra

(2012), specifically "foreignness" (see p. 288)) generates community. Shome (2000)

summarizes work in critical race theory that works to show how whiteness often operates

as an invisible norm, and she argues for the importance of studying how whiteness

functions within social and cultural systems. McIntosh and Hobson (2013) argue that

doing critical and just work requires scholars, especially those with dominant identities,

to be reflexive, acknowledge failure, and recognize how power operates in naming and

performing difference. In service to their last recommendation, they write:

> Moving beyond categorical differences acknowledges our commitments to one
>
> another by recognizing our differences to build alliances. Before white women
>
> can come to recognize our failures productively, we must first truly embody
>
> reflexivity and understand differences relationally. (McIntosh & Hobson, 2013, p.
>
> 20)

Cultural and qualitative work is constituted in relational ethics, where researchers have to

listen closely and tell other's stories with care (Ellis, 2007). In my theoretical and

methodological choices in this project, I seek to meaningfully engage with relationality. I

share a relationship with my interviewees, the scholars I seek to learn from and write *with*

(an orientation suggested by McIntosh and Hobson (2013), see p. 3), and with many other

people who are implicated in this project. I embrace relationality through researching and

writing through performance, deeply engaging with the multiple lived experiences that

enable and influence this project. In the poetry, I realize privileging immobile

conceptions of place relies on privileging immobile portrayals of identity, reified as

stable through retroactive stories of purpose. Learning to story communities in one way

limits who appears in the story and how people move through their lives. Attuning to the

presence and enactment of identity in small town life and work showcases identity as

performance and foregrounds the powerful connections between how senses of self and

senses of community are (re)made at work, in conversation, in education, in reflection,

and in memory.

*****

Susan:

*****

XIV.

When I'm speaking to someone that's not from the area
I tell them I'm from the middle of the Appalachian mountains,
and it's very rural.
Mountainous.
Economically, we're a very needy place.
But it's also a great place live.
It's a great place to raise your kids and
a great place to be from.
The people here are strong, and
self-sufficient, and
good people.
Very devout as far as their beliefs go.

Usually that's the description I give
people are like *Ah, do you have a bathroom or running water?*
they're like *Why, you got shoes on.*
Because that the narrative that's been sold.

We are in the middle of the Bible Belt, and
we are Christians and believers, and
that has impacted the way we treat other people, and
the way our communities are developed, and
how we honor each other, and we honor each other's lives, and
we honor life in general, and
it's important to us that we be good neighbors and good friends, and
that treat each other the way we want to be treated.
That Christian ethic
is so much a part of our communities that it makes us different
than maybe out in the Midwest or wherever.

To the degree that we have lost that,
you see the changes in the school systems.
In the administration and in the teachers and in the students.
It's sad that our little mountain community
that the mountains

have protected us
for so long that
maybe because of Facebook and social groups on that
we're not still protected and isolated from the bad things
like we used to be.

Family's changed a lot, and I mean in a way,
in some ways it's good,
but in a lot of ways it's not good.

XV.

Our principal made a rule.
You cannot wear pajamas to school.
So, at least they had to get up and get out of
whatever they slept in the night before.
Some of them didn't look like they did but, you know,
At least they had a new pair of jeans on or sweatpants or something.
Rather than a pair of pajamas and
house shoes.

Just teaching them that to get up and get out into
the world you have to do
certain things and reflect yourself in a certain way.

I think the school's just
a small microcosm
of what's going on in the total community.
What you see from the students are the lessons they learn
outside school and
the things that they're, that are going on outside school,
so they bring those with them,

Now, the microcosm I had was much—
It was skewed because those students were the ones who were at risk.
The reflection of the community that I saw was,
was the ones who in the community who were struggling.
And it was the whole county. It was not just one community.

There are a lot of those students like that
they would come into me,
and then they were sick or whatever,
and it'd be one o'clock,
and I'd say *Well, I need to call your mom to come after you,*
and they'd say *Oh, she's not awake yet.*

As far as that goes, they had

no concept of how the world functions.
And I don't know if you've ever read
the book by Ruby Payne or not?
Ah, it's about how being poor affects your life, I guess,
ah, your culture, ah, about how you relate to other people,
and I can't remember,
I can't remember right now the name of the book,
but the lady's name is Ruby Payne,
and a lot of education classes use it to teach,
especially about if you're from a poor,
a rural, poor, poorer area, about how students perceive
the world around them.

It's um even things like language skills
Because if a child's not taught proper language use early,
they don't have that that voice, that
ability to communicate in that way.
So, one of the things that we really worked with the kids about there,
was being able to present yourself in a more professional   learned manner,
not only as in the way we dress,
but the way we talk,
and the way we act.
Because these kids had no, for the most part,
had no concept of it.
So, to move from lower class to middle class, you have to learn those things.
They didn't learn it at home.
They didn't learn it at school.

Well, like I said, I think the schools especially
before consolidation were more, a more of a community hub than
than they were just a school.
They were the places where things were happening in the community because
that's where the community came together for ball games and
et cetera and et cetera.
Now with consolidation,
I think that the schools are less, less a part of the community hub,
and more, probably a reflection of the area as a whole
because the students do come from different smaller
communities.
And whatever problems there are between the students
or localities
it's reflected in that too.

*****

I saved this question for almost last in every interview: What does someone who wants to work in the area—who wants to be an advocate and create positive change— need to know? Sometimes, I asked slightly differently: What does someone, *like me,* need to know? Or, the inverse: What does someone, *from outside the area*, need to know? At their core, these poems articulate visions, hopes, and fears of movement.

*****

Summer imagines a future:

*****

XVI.

Everyone's still shopping in those same areas as they were before, and
just nothing affecting any businesses
to make them lose business, and
just everything still going like it is,
maybe a little something more to do for the kids
or for families to do, cause there's not a lot down there.
Maybe like a fun game room that people can go to and
not have to worry about other bad things going on the
outside are being brought on the inside.

They are building the new school,
a new elementary school, and
I think that if they combine the three elementary schools together eventually,
I feel like it's gonna get a little more hectic.
I feel like it's gonna just be a whole different environment because
I'm sure it'll be more than just the six of us down there.
I hope it'll be like it is now.
I hope that we all get along.
I hope that we're all still together.
I hope that only—
like it could only get better because it's really good right now.
So if it can get better than it is now,
then it'll be pretty good.

I worry a little about our little area because—
I worry especially about some little local businesses in town,
like say when the elementary school does close down,
the grocery store that's beside the school,
They're gonna lose a lot of business because

it's so convenient to run over there after school and
get whatever you need from the grocery store.
And the gas station.
A lot of people stop there for biscuits of the morning, and
stuff after school
Where everything's gonna be in a new location,
I feel like it's gonna affect differently.

There's not a lot going on here.
Something needs to be brought in to only make it better
as far as businesses or even a restaurant,
something besides pizza in town,
just even a little sit down restaurant that you can go to,
and just growing it,
maybe making it better for people to want to come and visit.
They could go right down the road.
Stay in their hometown.
Give their money back to their hometown
That would be more opportunities for everybody.

I wouldn't want to live anywhere else,
like even if we go on vacation or something
it's great and it's fun but after so many days,

I'm ready to get back to the mountains.
it's like no other place.
Only helping the town would only make it better.

<div align="center">*****</div>

Sarah adds:

<div align="center">*****</div>

<div align="center">

XVII.

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I would say, my best advice would be,
be gentle
because the people here
change – change
can be overwhelming.

You have to take a gentle
yet firm approach
in order for anything to happen.

But

keeping people's feelings in mind
and their ideas that
I'm doing this
   because Grandpa did this
      because Great Grandpa did this
        because Great Grandpa did this

Keeping that
heritage and generational
pride
alive
while still revitalizing our area.
That's super important.
So be gentle.

XVIII.

I would love to see me
be able to go from elementary school and
be able to go all the way to a doctoral program here.
Right here.

And if you do that, fingers crossed,
hopefully that would allow more people
to be able to stay here,
so if you come here for a master's degree
then jobs will
open for a master's degree.
If you come here for a doctorate,
jobs will open for a doctorate.

That's what I think. That's what I hope.
That's the hopes. I hope it works.

That will help us to shift from the generational idea that
once you leave high school
you have no other options but to go into a coal mine.
That's a very necessary job,
but I also think that there are probably hundreds of people—
I'm sure there are thousands of people who only have a high school degree because
no one encouraged them to get anything
higher than a high school degree, And
when you only have a high school degree,
you have very limited options.

it's hard to imagine going and becoming
a doctor if you're from here

because you have to leave to do that.
But if you could stay here and be,
be a doctor,
become a doctor, and
then there were jobs around you
and you could do that here,
that would be amazing,
and I feel like people would stay more.

it would probably change the dynamic a lot
because we wouldn't be small anymore.
Like, really and truly,
not everybody wouldn't be a stranger.
People would be strangers at that point.

<div align="center">*****</div>

For Victor Turner (1987), human performance allows people to come to know themselves. He claims that when people participate in or observe social dramas and cultural performances, they are able to gain insight into the reasons for their actions (Turner, 1987). Cultural performances refer to specific events, ceremonies, or processes within a community that carry significance and influence (Turner, 1987). On the other hand, social dramas refer to larger cycles of social change characterized by four phases (Turner, 1987). They begin when community members go against social norms by interrupting cultural performances, and the violation of norms leads to increased disorder in the community (Turner, 1987). Community members begin to question values, motivations, and rituals, before they come together to deal with crisis and reconcile the results of disorder, which may be successful and lead to the establishment of new norms or result in continued crisis (Turner, 1987). Social dramas are marked by periods of uncertainty where the community is not the same and is not yet new, which Turner (1987) refers to as liminality. Madison (2020) cites Turner (1982) in describing how liminality is a negotiation between preserving and destroying social order.

Reading school and community change through the lens of social drama underscores the fluidity of community and showcases the relationship between performances of community and identity. Through their performances of social and cultural identities, the women make sense of the ways they are connected to their communities and articulations of their futures. In explicating the concept of performativity, Butler (1990) writes "that *woman* itself is a term in process . . . Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the 'congealing' is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means" (p. 33). Madison and Hamera (2006) clarify the relationship, writing "It is in cultural performances where performativities are doubled with a difference: they are re-presented, re-located and re-materialized for the possibility of a substantial re-consideration and re-examination" (xix). Examining cultural performance becomes easier when they are disrupted and enacted in social drama. When Susan explains that Christianity is an important cultural value of her community, she invokes it in a way that buffers against the invasion of social change within the area. Her description focuses on the unfailing Christian values of the community, which frame change within the community (and the school) as loss within, and risk to, Christian community. In turn, the operation of this performance appears eerily similar to the performance of White nationalism that Hartzell (2020) identifies, where protecting Whiteness is rationalized through the defense that White people face discrimination. Susan acknowledges the effects of change within the community as good and bad, which underscores the uncertainty that marks liminality. Likewise, when Sarah reckons with the impact that increased educational and employment opportunities would have for her community, she comes to the realization

that they would change the nature of community in the area and how she relates to others. She works through a social drama that introduces new spatial potential to the area, which simultaneously undoes conceptions of the area as unchanging and closed. Mease and Terry (2012) combine performance studies with scholarship on the communicative constitution of organization to evidence how performance creates organizational space in a North Carolina school board meeting. They show how White school board members use language, physical space, and policy invocations to reinforce Whiteness and minimize consideration of difference on the board and in the community (Mease & Terry, 2012). While the face-value assertions of White school board members speak to the importance of respecting the meeting's rules and processes and the need of the board to operate smoothly, Mease and Terry (2012) show how the practices are used to disparage and silence alternative visions of community, in addition to showing how board and community members of color subvert the rules to call attention to and challenge Whiteness. Just as Mease and Terry (2012) show how expressions of personal and social identities are used to invent and organize the school board, many of the poems on identity interweave self and community, each impacting the other. Turner's (1987) framework of social drama provides a framework for peering into the personal and political stakes of identity expression through cultural performances. Moreover, reading hopes for community change through the lens of social drama contextualizes the multiplicity of reactions—defense, loss, and transformation—by recognizing the operation of liminality in rural, small towns. Turner's (1987; 1982) work on liminality positions loss and uncertainty as products of community change and movement, instead of the end results, which disrupts stable performances of community and self.

Chapter 6:

Implications

Take a drive through my small town with me. We'll enter town on the main road and turn left at the bridge. The hill the high school used to sit on will be on the right, but you probably won't notice it because the high school's not there anymore. As we bump across the railroad tracks, you'll see the grocery-store-turned-new-doctor's-office and the bank and one of the pizza places. We'll turn right at the stop sign and I'll point out the church I went to when I was young, the carwash, the pharmacy, the library, the other church, the gas station and Subway, and the funeral home, all before we start snaking up the curves of the mountain. At the top of the mountain, you'll see where the ATV trail cuts across the main road, and we'll slow to drift down the spiral-shaped piece of road that follows. That stretch of curve comes with its own warning: Rain or snow, take it slow! We'll zoom down the straight stretch of road that follows, and one left turn, five houses, and three coal trucks later, we'll pull into the gravel driveway of my family home.

That's it.

We have passed a little and a lot,

all at once.

<div align="center">*****</div>

This description was one of the first paragraphs I wrote while working on this project, and at one point, I saw it fit near the beginning of the project. Now, I see it as the beginning of an invitation. Glesne (1997) writes that the goal of poetry and other creative forms of representation is to create "*openings*" (p. 218) that invite others to engage with

and reflect on representations of experience, and she uses this device to frame the end of her work. Mitra (2012) and Madison (2008) embrace similar frames, devoting the ends of their scholarship to writing about the implications of their work and visions of the future to which they ascribe. I adopt this frame in my conclusion because, in the words of Madison (1999), theory "makes you feel and see differently. You speak differently and more. The recognition is not unrecognized" (p. 109). For me, this project is a written entry into the process of understanding my rural, small town. Life and work continue beyond the manuscript.

In descriptions of space and place, de Certeau (1984) distinguishes between maps and tours. de Certeau (1984) explains that maps are descriptions of a place centered around objects, while tours are sets of instructions centered around actions. Tours tell people to pay attention to particular sets of things, and the things that they direct people to (or inversely, away from) shapes peoples' understanding of a place (de Certeau, 1984). When I first wrote the beginning paragraph, I saw it as a sort of map—a neutral set of descriptions to help readers situate themselves in my small town. It was a map to help readers enter place. However, I now realize that I created a tour that storied my small town in a way that perpetuates the idea of rural, small towns, as stable entities. When I drove by the sights in my writing and invited readers to do it with me, I put myself in motion, not the place where I lived.

Yet, the purpose of this project is to upset and deepen representations of rural, small towns through looking at the performances that (re)shape life and culture within them. When I reflect on this thesis project—on imagining, planning, interviewing, reading, and writing—I remind myself that this project is not about what I have learned

or found; rather, it is about what I have created. Performance studies departs from the way the universities and institutions typically view knowledge (Conquergood, 2002). Writing on her relationship with performance studies, Madison (1999) contends: "Now, I enter a truth, a piece of the world, discovered. What is not here is an answer or a resolve but something more . . . I know I am a un/learning body in the process of feeling" (p. 108-109). This work matters because it attempts to understand performance in rural, small, Appalachian towns, and to engage with the work of critical and communication scholars that can show how to perform for the better—how to story the fullness and the complexity of lived experience in rural, mostly White, Appalachian small towns in fluid space, which upsets the constricting power of hegemony and opens room for multiple and disparate performances in place.

In this project, I have (re)presented poetic transcriptions of five performance interviews with women who work(ed) in schools in rural, mostly White, small towns in the Central Appalachian region. As scholarship in performance and communication, this work seeks to join voices such as Burton et al. (2013), Moffa and McHenry-Sorber (2018), and Smith et al. (2010) in expanding the depth and reach of work on rural (Appalachian) communities. In communication studies, this work also seeks to contribute to work on space and place. McAlister (2016) challenges communication scholars to focus on ten ideas in advancing work on space and place. This work responds to several of McAlister's (2016) suggestions through focusing on and challenging discourses surrounding rural places and looking at how senses of self are connected to senses of place.

Finally, this work is valuable for scholars who seek to approach interviewing as performance. I relied upon Denzin's (2001a; 2001b) writing on reflexive interviews, coupled with Pollock's (1998) work on writing performance and Willink and Shukri's (2018) work on paying attention to affect in performance interviews, to guide me through interviewing. These sources allowed me to (re)understand the relationship between myself and my interviewees in interviewing and how that relationship enables knowing, especially since I was unable to find many pieces of scholarship that claim and explain their use of reflexive interviewing. Contrary to using interviews as a way to learn information, reflexive interviews use interviews as spaces to perform with another person (Denzin, 2001a; 2001b). Reflexive interviews attempt to realize Conquergood's (1985) notion of dialogical performance, which foregrounds forming a genuine relationship with another person to have transformative intercultural conversation. Going beyond autoethnography, which can over privilege the position and authority of oneself (Jackson & Mazzei, 2008), reflexive interviewing acknowledges the active role of the interviewer and the interviewee in performing experience. By using reflexive interviewing, I learn about myself through performing with others. The interviews and the performance texts that result from them are rich with representational and methodological considerations and opportunities for doing and drawing implications from performance work.

Through poetry of place and identity, I examined how rural life and community is often discussed as unchanging, although the lived experiences of my interviewees (and myself), especially through the lens of the school, point to an awareness of community change that is often storied through/as loss. Performances of rurality within the poetry emphasize place by minimizing space, legitimizing hegemonic practice while hiding the

conditions of its existence. Foucault (1984) argues, "Space is fundamental in any form of

communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power" (p. 252). Denying spatial

practice in understandings of community and identity denies them as practices of power.

It minimizes community members' self-efficacy and accountability in practicing power.

Performance as movement (see Conquergood, 1995), repositions space at the center of

conceptualizations of rural communities and (re)opens possibilities for understanding and

advocating in rural, small towns.

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