The Virtual Writing Marathon Ecosystem: Writing, Community, and Emotion

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This empirical study of a virtual writing marathon (Write Across America) theorizes a dynamic online ecosystem in which the five realms—virtual place, design, writing, sharing, and emotion—interact in the process of writing. The study has implications for students and for the professional development of writing instructors.

The coronavirus pandemic prompted more than a shift to online teaching—it caused many of us to think about existential questions: Who am I online? Can I still achieve my purposes as a writing instructor when I’m not face-to-face with my students? What does it mean to be a teacher of writing in virtual space? What is writing and what can it be? For us, three college writing instructors in three states—Michigan, Missouri, and Louisiana—the pandemic prompted research on a new, virtual iteration of a phenomenon that has not been empirically studied in the twenty-five years of its existence: the writing marathon.

So, what is a writing marathon? Like a 26.2-mile running marathon, a writing marathon brings people together to do something difficult that they usually do alone: write. There is tremendous energy in undertaking...
this challenge en masse. Runners are often able to exceed their previous capabilities because they are carried along by the crowd. That’s akin to what tens of thousands of teachers of writing have been doing through writing marathons hosted by National Writing Project sites across the country in the last twenty-five years. For those not familiar with it, the National Writing Project is a network of 175 local sites housed at universities. These sites “prepare 2,500 new teacher-leaders each year. These new leaders join a dynamic and active network of leaders who work with 95,000 colleagues annually in classrooms, libraries, museums, national parks—virtually any space where young people learn, read, and write—ultimately strengthening the writing and thinking of 6 million students, pre-K through college, each year” (National Writing Project).

How did the National Writing Project (NWP) get involved with writing marathons, and what has been written about them thus far?

The concept of the writing marathon originated with a chapter entitled “Writing Marathons” in Natalie Goldberg’s 1986 book, Writing Down the Bones. Goldberg describes the writing marathon as a four-hour, intense, Zen-like writing session at the end of an eight-week writing workshop where writers sit around a table writing spontaneously to prompts pulled from a box. Her major contribution to the writing marathon as we now know it is her protocol for writing and response:

So for the first session we all write for ten minutes and then go around the room and read what we’ve written with no comments by anyone. . . . A pause naturally happens after each reader, but we do not say “That was great” or even “I know what you mean.” There is no good or bad, no praise or criticism. . . . What usually happens is you stop thinking: you write; you become less and less self-conscious. Everyone is in the same boat, and because no comments are made, you feel freer and freer to write anything you want. (150)

Her protocol is built on three factors that have been essential to writing marathons ever since: extended length of time, multiple rounds of writing and sharing to build introspection and community, and lack of criticism at the end of each round.

The “New Orleans Writing Marathon” (NOWM) and subsequent NWP writing marathons began when Goldberg’s protocol was taken to the streets of New Orleans in 1994 by Richard Louth.
The success of that writing marathon led to a four-hour version for a larger audience the next year. Soon, NWP Summer Institutes and Advanced Institutes held by the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project (SLWP) were visiting New Orleans for day-long writing marathons. These face-to-face writing marathons begin thus:

After getting situated and receiving an introductory handout . . . map, and list of good writing spots, writers shake hands and say “I’m a writer” to each other. . . . The ritual of identifying oneself as a writer in this communal space is usually followed by everyone writing silently together for about 10 minutes before departing as writers. Beyond handling logistics, the opening place helps set the tone, start the writing, and create the marathon community’s magic. (Louth, “Writing in the World.”)

Using Goldberg’s protocol for writing and sharing, self-determined groups would then “hit the streets” as a community of writers in search of that magic created when external and internal places combine:

One group might start at a café for their first round of writing/sharing, then move to St. Louis Cathedral, then to the riverfront, and finally to an Irish pub to finish their writing journey. Another group might start writing on benches in Jackson Square surrounded by Tarot card readers and brass bands, then browse Faulkner House Books (where Faulkner wrote his first novel), settle in Muriel’s Restaurant for lunch and to write in their haunted Séance Room, and finish at the Antieau art gallery on Royal Street, where the manager was known to welcome writers with chairs and wine. (Louth, “Coming Full Circle” 17)

Magic is not a term often used in writing studies, but writing marathon participants “use the term ‘magic’ as shorthand for such powerful and complex experiences” (Martens, “Finding My Nonfiction Pedagogy Muse”). Peter Elbow associates it with voice that has power, or “juice,” that “combines the qualities of magic potion, mother’s milk, and electricity” (286). Because writing marathons are social events, this magic could be related to what psychologists call “collective effervescence.” According to Adam Grant, “We find our greatest bliss in moments of collective effervescence. It’s a concept coined in the early 20th century by the pioneering sociologist Emile Durkheim to describe the sense of energy and harmony people feel when they come together in a group around a shared purpose.” In the case of the writing marathon, the shared purpose is writing.
The way the event spread so rapidly across the NWP network seemed magical, too, when one considers how challenging it can be to disseminate “best practices” in writing across institutions. NWP sites began learning the “New Orleans Writing Marathon” approach through Richard Louth’s widely shared 2002 article in the *NWP Quarterly*, the presence of marathons at NWP directors’ retreats and annual meetings from 2002 to 2018, a range of radio shows and publications, and growing attendance at New Orleans Writing Marathons and Retreats hosted by the SLWP for three to five days each summer from 2003 on. As writing marathons spread across the NWP network, sites adapted the model for professional development programs and K–16 classrooms, and the technique continued to spread. It is notable that the practice was never mandated by the NWP as part of any professional development or Summer Institute schedule. Individual sites adopted it on their own as teacher-consultants experienced it or read about it through their interactions within the network. The basic features of the original New Orleans Writing Marathon still underlie many adaptations:

It is based upon these concepts essential to writers as well as educators: identity (using writing to explore one’s personal as well as professional lives, and taking time to write just for oneself); choice (in location, group, writing topics); diversity (difference in personality, background, writing ability, interest); spontaneity (writing in and for the moment, not worrying about revision and publication); risk (putting yourself out there, taking a chance with where you go and what you write); and trust (in the writing process, in other writers, yourself, the world). Plus, there seems to be a fair amount of pleasure, which comes from the act of writing itself, from being in the company of other writers, and from exploring new and old places as a writer. (Louth, *The Writing Marathon: “In Good Company Revealed”* ix)

In 2006, shortly after Hurricane Katrina, the first known virtual writing marathon occurred when NWP teacher-writers from across the country were invited to join SLWP writers remotely in the devastated French Quarter by emailing their own writing from across the country. Tasha Whitton’s “Writing Without Borders: The Changing Landscape of the Virtual Marathon,” is the first analysis of a virtual writing marathon (VWM).

Kim Stafford further defined the role of the marathon writer—to become “a professional eavesdropper” who listens to the muses among us (*The Muses Among Us*, 14) and writes for pleasure alone. Stafford was also
the first to characterize the writing done during marathons as taking place in ecosystems. He identified four ecosystems that are salient in a writing marathon: the neighborhood, the landscape, the studio of stories, and the text itself.

Stafford believes the following:

Every student deserves to “own a place in mind,” as Thoreau said, and write it into being. In my own experience, the opportunity to write under the spell of a place begins with local practice, but may reach forward into the digital age and outward to the global village. (“Writers Reading Local Places” 223)

Stafford situates the magic (spell) in place-based writing, but what about when the place is virtual? We take up Stafford’s call to reach forward and outward in our study of the VWM.

Writing teachers who are interested in taking up the writing marathon in their own classrooms might wonder what kinds of writing are produced. Our review of the writing published from writing marathons finds a great variety. Some of the collections are *I’m a Writer: Essays on the Writing Marathon and Why We Write*, edited by Kathryn E. Lane in 2010 and *The Writing Marathon: In Good Company Revealed*, edited by Richard Louth in 2011. Between 2011 and 2021, Louth also edited seven collections of NOWM writing for *Louisiana Literature*, a literary journal.

In addition to laying out the origin and development of writing marathons and pointing to their proliferation across the NWP network, our study extends the conversation about writing marathons established in previous literature. For example, in a special 2014 *CCC* issue on “Locations of Composition,” Martens’s “On the New Orleans Writing Marathon” provides a brief overview of writing marathons along with scenes composed at four New Orleans locations.

In 2015, a “Writing Marathon Roundtable” in *Assay: A Journal of Nonfiction Studies*, featured articles by Richard Louth, Kelly Lock-McMillen, Jeff Grinvalds, and Susan Martens. Louth’s “Writing in the World: The New Orleans Writing Marathon” looks at the principles underlying the NOWM, describes the very first NOWM in 1994, and focuses on how place affects writers. Lock-McMillen’s “Journey to the Center of a Writer’s Block” describes her experience at the 2010 NOWM and how filling a seventy-page spiral notebook with new writing rejuvenated her as a teacher of writing. Grinvalds’s “Bringing It Back Home: The NOWM in My Classroom” describes
how his experience in 2014 impacted his teaching of creative writing in Omaha, where he was able to use what he terms a writing marathon’s three main ingredients—place, motion, and sharing—to inspire a new respect for writing in his students. Martens’s “Finding My Nonfiction Pedagogy Muse at the NOWM” examines how writing marathons—through time, a supportive community, and place—can serve as muses that teach writers, like herself and her students, of their own sacred purpose in the world.

Throughout the pandemic, we longed for the time when we could be reunited with our colleagues and students, but we also wondered as the months wore on what it would be like to leave behind the social isolation we had grown accustomed to. How would we entice back the students we lost during the pandemic? In reviewing the literature on writing marathons, we found some hope that the writing marathon might offer a bridge back to campus or a way of maintaining some social connection through digital space. For example, Rich A. Radcliffe and Liz C. Stephens’s long-term study on the effects of writing marathons as college recruiting tools for middle school students found that writing marathons made college visit experiences more meaningful for students. Martens’s essay “Move the Writer, Move the Mind, Move the Pen—Change the World,” examines the use of writing marathons within place-based writing in kindergarten through college classrooms in suburban and exurban settings. Most recently, “A Thousand Teens Writing Across America: A Virtual Writing Marathon” (Sassi et al.) examines how a VWM for teens—cohosted by the NWP and the Alliance for Young Artists and Writers in the summer of 2021—used writing marathon protocols and place-based writing approaches to create supportive teen-led writing communities. The pedagogical potential of the writing marathon has also been documented in Ellen Steigman’s 2018 manual, *Writing a Marathon: A Hands-on Guide to Creating and Implementing Successful Writing Marathons in Schools and Communities.* Writing marathons are also included in the chapter, “Writing with Others” in the most recent edition of Rosenwasser and Stephen’s college composition textbook, *Writing Analytically.*

This review of the literature about writing marathons shows that they are a widespread literacy phenomenon worthy of systematic study and attention. Although much has been written from organizers’ perspectives
about how they are designed, and much writing accomplished during
marathons has been published, our work contributes to the field by being
the first empirical study using grounded theory to describe and analyze a
writing marathon. Furthermore, the pandemic-inspired writing marathon
we studied was different from past marathons in that it was entirely virtual,
Zoom based, supported by NWP, and involved multiple sites. This virtual
writing marathon, dubbed Write Across America, is the object of study.

**Launching Write Across America**

In 2020, nine writing project site directors hosted weekly VWM stops of
seventy-five to one hundred minutes via Zoom from June to August in
Wisconsin, Central Arizona, South Mississippi, Kentucky, North Dakota,
New York, Minnesota, New Hampshire, and Southeastern Louisiana. Al-
though every site followed the basic structure explained on the Write Across
America website—orientation to place, inspiration, time to write, time to
share writing aloud in randomly assigned breakout rooms of three to five
people, and a sense of community—individual sites made modifications to
how much time was spent on each part of this and/or how they delivered
each part of the experience (“#Write Across America”). For example, in Ap-
pendix D, one can see how the Greater Madison Writing Project planned
the agenda for their stop on the writing marathon. The VWM was “open to
anyone,” welcoming “all kinds of writing and writers” (National Writing Proj-
ect), in the spirit of the extracurriculum as theorized by Anne Ruggles Gere.

Our study focused on this research question: What are the essential
elements of a VWM? We wondered if the oft-referenced “magic” would still
happen in a digital setting. For the purposes of this study, we are defining
the elusive sense of “magic” as an experience of writing that combines Dur-
kheim’s “social effervescence” with Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of “flow.” Our
definition of writing marathon “magic” also aligns with the kind of emotional
power at the heart of Yagelski’s conception of “writing as a way of being”
(Yagelski 192). As writing marathon leaders, practitioners, and researchers,
we wondered if VWM participants, by entering an ecosystem connecting
place, writing, and community, would experience “magic.” Would they
become more aware of themselves and of the world and feel an intensified
“sense of being” even as they sat at their phones and at their computers?
Methods

In this section, we describe the participants, instruments, and procedure of this institutional review board (IRB)–approved study. A chart of participants and instruments is provided in Table 1.

Registrants were from forty-one states within the United States, as well as Indonesia, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Saudi Arabia. Eighty-four percent of registrants identified themselves as affiliated with an NWP site, while 16 percent were not affiliated. On the final survey, we asked participants to identify their roles (note that some participants identified with more than one role). See Table 2.

The participants were overwhelmingly composed of educators, with the third most common group being college educators. Throughout the summer, individual sites created exit slips where they collected anonymous feedback from participants about their experience. The exit slips were shared as a link in the chat function of Zoom. The $n$ varied from 28 to 57 (see Table 1). Sometimes the number of exit slips corresponded closely to the number of participants. The greatest discrepancy was with the first stop, which had a 50 percent return rate. There were three basic questions in these exit slips, which were designed to support facilitation of Write Across America and not for this research project (which came later):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instruments</th>
<th>Instrument 1: End-of-summer online participant survey (Appendix A) ($n = 62$)</th>
<th>Instrument 2: Host survey (Appendix B) ($n = 8$)</th>
<th>Instrument 3: Anonymous exit slips from individual sites ($n = 7$)</th>
<th>Instrument 4: Writing completed during the virtual writing marathon ($n = 40$)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Anyone who participated in any of the virtual writing marathon stops in summer ($n = 381$)</td>
<td>Hosts, who are usually the site directors, but could include any site leaders who helped with facilitating the stop ($n = 9$)</td>
<td>Participants who filled out an exit slip at each weekly stop ($n1 = 28$, $n2 = 50$, $n3 = 55$, $n4 = 57$, $n5 = 50$, $n6 = 33$, $n7 = 46$)</td>
<td>Anyone who wrote during the virtual writing marathon and elected to participate</td>
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1. What worked well for you in today’s writing stop?

2. What changes should we consider as we continue the Write Across America series?

3. Is there anything else you want us to know?

We received permission from seven of the nine sites to analyze their anonymous exit slips.

Our approach to analyzing data followed Strauss and Corbin’s model of grounded theory, with one notable variation: we engaged traditions of the writing marathon itself in doing this work. Specifically, rather than write research memos separately, the authors engaged in synchronous rounds of writing about the data and sharing. We began with each researcher reading responses to one question from the host surveys (Appendix B); then we wrote about what we read and shared our writing with each other. Satisfied with this process, we then turned to working systematically through the exit slips. First, we each read another site’s exit slips and began open coding, allowing codes to emerge emically. After another round of writing and sharing, we discussed the category labels we might assign to groups of codes.
For example, there were many responses about the breakout rooms, so we labeled this group of responses as such, which was natural for us as facilitator-researchers, but then we began to ask what this repetition might mean. That is, what concept did this category point to in our quest to formulate a theory about VWMs? As we looked at the properties of this category—the way the breakout room was organized, the way it was led, the people in the breakout room, the amount of time spent in breakout rooms, the emotions people felt in the room, the comments about listening, the socializing or sense of community—we decided that the concept represented by these properties was sharing writing. Similarly, we discussed the codes (such as sense of community and affirmation), grouped them into categories, asked what concepts the categories suggested, and experimented with how to represent them. We also moved some categories into subcategories and recognized that some codes had a relationship to more than one category. By the time we had worked through all of the exit slips (319 total across the seven sites), we were no longer finding new codes, so we felt we had reached a point of saturation. Our main categories in studying the VWM at this point were design, sense of virtual place, inspiring writing, sharing writing, community-building, transfer to teaching, pleasure, and self-development.

The participant surveys (Appendix A), unlike the exit slips, were specifically designed to address our research study, and analyzing them resulted in new codes and categories. Writing, which—unexpectedly—had not appeared as a strong code in the exit slips, now appeared with greater frequency and new properties. When analyzing the writing itself, we decided to look at the genres and themes of the writing. A new code emerged—literature—as many participants were inspired to write in response to literature, which we saw as a subcategory of the code prompting writing. Our analysis resulted in a matrix of six categories and forty-four codes (Appendix E).

After coding, writing about, and discussing all of the data, we identified the major categories in our working model: 1) sense of virtual place, 2) design, 3) writing, 4) sharing writing, and 5) emotion. We broke our codes and categories out of a linear matrix so we could move them around. We did another round of writing and sharing, which led to conceptualizing our model as an ecosystem made up of five realms. In this ecosystem, it became clear that the codes related to emotion—pleasure/enjoyment, surprise, renewal/catharsis, sense of community, affirmation, gratitude, well-being, relief from
pandemic, mindfulness, and social justice—were at the heart and interconnected to all the other realms through lines that we could draw to show the relations between them. For example, a sense of community was both an emotion and a feature of sharing writing in breakout rooms. In the next section, we discuss our findings, realm by realm, building toward a theory that is reflected by Figure 1.

Findings: The Five Realms
Before diving into our findings, we wish to share a piece of writing written by Shuli Lamden, one of the participants in the VWM (Louth, “Voices”). Within this piece, one can see many of the themes that arose through our data analysis.

Figure 1. The virtual writing marathon ecosystem
Looking at Goldsworthy’s Storm King Wall: What We Built Together

The river was here first, and then the trees, and then human hands lifted stones from the land (which was truly here first), and then we writers wound our wall of words around and through the synapses of what we each see—(From Christine to Everyone: 03:03pm) “I’m loving it!” is a stone set in place somewhere on the continent, and next Kelly Sassi in North Dakota places her stone, then Kevin Hodgson/Western Mass Writing Project to Everyone: (03:05 PM) and even (153260 to Everyone: 03:06 PM) says “Regular and irregular lines” as our thoughts fiber-optic themselves from here to there, from one to many—including, excluding, seasonal, eternally building wall, mending wall, stacking so firmly (From Michelle Grant to Everyone 03:06 PM: “Changes”) (From Carrie Deahl to Everyone: 03:06 PM “The s curve of the wall around trees”) (From Liz Mehls to Everyone: 03:06 PM “Ribbon”) (From Maya to Everyone: 03:06 PM “Serpentine”) And our stones, our ribbon threads Arizona to Kentucky, ties a bow in Mississippi, elaborates history, voices, teaches and learns, links language and people in shared time, shared space, shared screens—our own serpentine wall of community, we follow these so purposefully stacked stones with our own intentions, our own voices down to and into the river, the shapeless dark we can’t yet know, all in the shadow of a mountain that sweeps smoke through the sky.

Sense of Virtual Place

Sense of virtual place was a large category with many responses from participants. While some elements of virtual place could be considered a subcategory of design, we considered it as its own category because so many codes emerged from it, but also because, conceptually, this is what distinguishes the VWM from the traditional writing marathon. Place is multiplied in the VWM in that not only are all participants in a single virtual space together
(the Zoom meeting), but they are also in individual places—the writing project site they belong to, as well as the physical space (e.g., home, park, office) where their connecting device is located. Additionally, the host writing project site created a virtual experience of place through its StoryMap. The complexity of these multiple physical and virtual spaces (through the media of the meeting platform, individual computer interfaces translating sound and image, and the competition of real places for the writer’s attention) made for an intense experience. Some comments indicated that people felt as if they had actually “traveled” elsewhere. For example, “This is a delightful way to virtually road trip!”

The codes that emerged in this category were where writers are coming from, StoryMap, visual elements, audio elements, state or site—history/culture/politics, a sense of variety in place, and, finally, inspiration. We focus on three key codes: StoryMap, state or site—history/culture/politics, and inspiration.

All sites used some form of StoryMapJS, a program created by Northwestern University Knight Lab “to help you connect the places of your story into a media-rich narrative” using text, photos, videos, sound, tweets, etc. (Germuska). (See Appendix C for examples.) Sites didn’t have to use a StoryMap, but perhaps most chose to because the exit slips were always filled with positive comments about them, such as this comment about Kentucky’s: “I loved the map, so carefully prepared, rich with opportunities for writing, and deeply connected to the place in a profound and meaningful way.” Many emotions were expressed in regard to the virtual travel in the StoryMap, perhaps because the VWM took place at a time when people could not travel due to the pandemic.

Creating a virtual visit gave writing project sites opportunities to tell a certain story about their state or site and emphasize different facets of their history, culture, and politics. After one of the earlier stops, a participant expressed concern “about the lack of acknowledgement of the land we are discussing (and the original inhabitants) as well as the lack of acknowledgement for the civil rights movement taking place right now all over the country.” Later stops addressed this concern. In North Dakota, where the Mandan, Hidatsa, Arikara, Lakota, Ojibwe, Nakota, Cree, and Dakota peoples together make up the largest group of people who are not white, the site

“I loved the map, so carefully prepared, rich with opportunities for writing, and deeply connected to the place in a profound and meaningful way.”
director turned to Native American teachers to create stops at Standing Rock and Turtle Mountain reservations. Participants appreciated the “inclusion of Indigenous sites and language,” and one said, “The opening with the greeting in Dakota and the land acknowledgement really touched my heart.” By nature of being virtual, the marathon was more accessible to educators without the means to travel to New Orleans to participate in the face-to-face marathon. By acknowledging settler colonization, the marathon was also more welcoming to Indigenous teachers.

In the Minnesota StoryMap, the very first stop featured a mural of George Floyd with a detailed description of the location and artwork. Including a text description of the mural made this StoryMap more accessible to writers. (See Appendix C.) Participants appreciated the expanded social context: “The MN team did a nice job in the current climate of balancing the more present and volatile social challenges with the land characteristics. I didn't realize until this overview, how Minneapolis stands at the center of so much present and historical discord.” By encouraging teachers to write about George Floyd, the host raised consciousness about Floyd’s particular case and about the larger issue of police violence against Black and Brown people in our country, a move characteristic of critical expressivists, who seek to make social change through writing (Roeder and Gatto).

Another code within the category of place was inspiration. A first-timer wrote, “I truly enjoyed this medium of inspiring writing through ‘locations’ and ‘sites.’” This word came up over and over again: “Beautiful StoryMap and lots of good inspiration.” The StoryMaps, with their visual, audio, and textual features, served as prompts to write but also as inspiration to write. People reacted emotionally to this opportunity: “After too much remote learning and isolation, this feels so good and is inspiring me to think about what communal writing and sharing feels like using a virtual platform.” These are just a few representative quotes from the data.

**Engaging with Design**

Within the category of design, several key codes emerged: technology, time, structure, and the balance between the familiar and the new. The design of the VWM was intentional, drawing on the writing marathon tradition de-
scribed in our introduction and review of literature, but also experimental; organizers debriefed each week in the spirit of “shared inquiry,” discussing the exit slips and making changes to the design based on those discussions.

Technology was a large factor in designing the VWM. Participants met via Zoom, using the NWP’s account to accommodate the large numbers of participants. Participants experienced many of these common technological glitches: lagging as internet access waxed and waned, people losing contact with their breakout room and having to re-enter, confusion about when to mute and unmute, etc.

Time was perhaps the largest challenge for VWM designers and one of the most frequently cited issues in participants’ surveys. There are two areas to consider when analyzing time in the VWM: the overall length of the VWM (nine weeks) and the use of time within any individual site’s stop within the VWM. Extending the VWM over nine weeks had a lengthy, “marathon” feel to it for those who participated over several stops, though many attended only sporadically. Of the 381 registrants, an average of 45 attended each stop.

Each week, site leaders experimented with how to allocate their seventy-five minutes. The design evolved over the course of the nine weeks. Because time was a frequent code in our data, we will first discuss the allocation of time and how it changed over the course of the summer. The basic allocation is represented in Table 3.

At the first stop (Madison, Wisconsin), much of the introductory time was devoted to the story of how the VWM came to be and an overview of the concept for the summer. Participants appreciated the freedom they had in how to use their writing time: “Letting folks sample the virtual tour at their own speed is like moving through the gardens at your own speed—you can take from it what you want and then start writing.” The concluding time not only introduced future stops but also included time for people to share “golden lines,” the lines that breakout group members shared in the chat that they most appreciated while listening. Participants were divided

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<th>Table 3. Allocation of Time</th>
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<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
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<td>15 min.</td>
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on the use of golden lines. Some felt this detracted from time that could have been spent writing; others liked it. One participant wrote, “To repeat another’s words, that person’s thoughts, seems to me to forge and nurture a kind of soul-relationship—to build into my own body something sacred that was also part of that person.”

Starting with the fourth stop (Kentucky), site leaders began sharing their StoryMap ahead of time, which helped participants “focus on one or two places and spend more time thinking and writing.” The Morehead Writing Project director in Kentucky used this extra time to “ground” everyone in the site. This was done by having a native of Kentucky read a Wendell Berry poem and inviting everyone to write in response to the poem (Figure 2).

This invitation was mentioned so much by participants that it became a code in our analysis of data: grounding. Another innovation at this stop was the reading of a few works during the closure.

The final stop, in Louisiana, was one hundred minutes long instead of seventy-five, which allowed for a grounding writing activity as well as a whole hour in small groups to do three full rounds of writing/sharing.

The balance between the familiar and the new is not a surprising code,
since the majority of participants had experienced a face-to-face writing marathon: “I like how it is standardized (that is, it follows a basic model like the NWP itself does), but that it can be adapted slightly by each site depending on its needs.” In one sense, the VWM was returning to its roots with Natalie Goldberg in that people were not physically moving during the marathon, but new in that they “moved” from virtual place to virtual place.

**Writing**

Like all writing marathons, the primary focus of the VWM was writing, and each stop along the VWM was an opportunity for participants to see themselves as writers and to join a virtual community of writers. Our analysis of data showed that this was happening, and more. As with the other categories, our findings include a strong theme of emotion connected to writing. Confidence, joy, surprise, inspiration (again), and even shock (at what was produced) were common. As one respondent noted, “I had a feeling of anticipation before, a sense of purpose during, and a sense of calm and accomplishment after.” *Invention*, through prompts and choice, was an important function of the VWM. In this section, we will describe invention as well as the routines of writing, the sense of writerly identity, the kind of writing produced, and other writing features of the VWM. *Sharing writing*, a related category within the category of *writing*, includes a discussion of *breakout groups, facilitation/leadership*, and most important, the *sense of community* created in the VWM.

Within the category of *writing*, data related to *invention* rose to the surface. *Prompts* and *choice* were two key elements of invention, though participants also found each other to be part of invention, especially in the final stop that allowed for multiple rounds of writing on the same day.

Prompts, also called “invitations to write,” varied considerably throughout the nine weeks. All sites depended on photos to prompt writing, and most sites also depended on texts (shorter and longer) by authors from their area. Some sites used videos and audio prompts as well. The first site, with the fewest photos in its StoryMap, used no actual prompts, while later sites used phrases such as “Prompts/Phrases to Generate Writing” or “Invitation to Write” at the bottom of pages containing photos and/or texts. Two sites created themed paths of pages for participants to follow as a kind of streamed prompt (one urban/rural, the other more diverse). The prompts and invitations ranged considerably as well. Some prompts
asked for specific genres (such as tall tale or ballad); some, more academic in nature, asked specific questions related to specific photos; others asked a group of broader location-based questions (ending usually with the option, “Write about whatever comes to mind.”).

Choice and diversity have always been underlying tenets of the NWP and the writing marathon, so it is no surprise that the VWM offered writers a variety of topics and genres. A typical comment in this category: “Having a choice of writing prompts helped me to re-engage my creative thinking and actually write.” While the Louisiana stop gave everyone the prompt “I’m a writer” to begin, this “grounding” prompt produced incredibly diverse responses. A consistent reaction expressed by participants in their exit surveys was how surprised they were with what they produced. For example, “All of my writing surprised me. That’s the fun of a writing marathon!” Another said, “I was really shocked each week by what would come out!”

Many writers felt supported by the routine of the VWM, “Just taking the time out of my day to stop everything else.” Another participant wrote, “Even though it is a week between each stop on the VWM, I am really beginning to sense a continuity between them, and a sense of community building up. Plus, I find myself looking forward each week to a guaranteed opportunity to write.” One participant elaborated on the importance of routine among other needs a writer has:

There are two things I need most to develop my writing: regular practice and experimentation in order to find my writer’s voice. The VWM offered an opportunity to carve out a regular time and place to write during the summer weeks. Knowing how hard people worked on the StoryMaps increased the level of responsibility I felt to attend and participate. The variety of prompts invited flexibility in writing.

In addition to the routine supporting writers, writers commented on how participating in the VWM made them feel like writers. Furthermore, they liked being in the company of other writers: “It was energizing to have other writers to listen to,” commented one participant. Another said, “Gathering in small groups was a great opportunity to meet other writers and to learn from different cultures.” This participant elaborated further on both routine and sense of self as writer:

I looked forward every week to the Virtual Writing Marathon stops. It provided a needed carved-out space to focus on writing. It also helped to nurture my
writing soul by being with a community of people who are self-identified writers, generous in their sharing of writing and resources, and supportive of each other. It also fed my imagination about what is possible in an online writing space.

Elements of routine contributed to community. While hearing introductory remarks and investigating StoryMaps, participants made ample usage of Zoom's "Chat" feature to write personal and general messages during each VWM stop. After the composing experience and breakout group experience was completed, two post-writing routines included capturing and sharing "golden lines" from one's own writing or one's group and hearing several selected writers during a closing "Author's Chair" activity. These activities, modeled on those often used in NWP sites' Summer Institutes and sometimes used in physical writing marathons, offered a feeling of closure and "publication" (or "making public" through performance). Samples of writing produced during the VWM can be seen in Appendix F.

Sharing Writing

Sharing writing started as a category within writing, and because it was a powerful one, we moved it into its own realm. The key codes were breakout rooms, facilitation/leadership, and sense of community.

The code breakout room didn't have strong conceptual value, so we decided that facilitation/leadership was a more apt term for this group of comments, which were often about the facilitators of the breakout rooms (a traditional writing marathon rarely has a facilitator) and their leadership skills. Comments grouped under facilitation could be cross-listed under leading and emotion. In the breakout rooms, participants felt "warm and supported," naming the rooms "a safe space . . . to share my writing." The preponderance of data in this area points to a significant difference between the traditional writing marathon and the VWM—with facilitation skills being highly regarded in creating a positive online experience for participants.

Breakout groups were led by facilitators, who followed a protocol developed by the leadership team of the VWM. Groups included three to six participants. In these breakout groups, participants usually briefly introduced themselves, and then they voluntarily read their work aloud to the group (with the option of "passing"). Over the course of the nine weeks, variations developed in the use of breakout groups. More emphasis was given to breakout group participants offering only a "thank you" as a
response to others’ writing (adhering to Natalie Goldberg’s original theory of no response). This practice is also consonant with Anne Whitney’s finding that teachers who had a transformative experience through writing valued “the kind of response [that] often included little, if any, direct suggestion for revision; they asked for and received [an] initial ‘no response’ response (in which the writing itself was not responded to explicitly, just heard and validated)” (160). One outlier preferred a response: “People should be encouraged to say at least one thing they liked about our writing. To read them and have them fall like a rock into a pond without any comment is disconcerting.”

In the last two VWM stops, breakout groups met three times rather than one in an effort to build stronger community. At the final stop, the protocol emphasized not only sharing one’s writing but also general conversation when the sharing was done to allow writers to socialize and to better “riff” off one another. There were many positive comments about these changes; here is one representative response: “Being in a small group for a majority of the time added an inviting level of intimacy to the writing experience and really forced me to generate different pieces in this short period of time.”

With participants from forty-one states and six countries meeting after a spring semester of stressful online teaching, it might have seemed that building a sense of community would be impossible. The data told a different story, as this representative quote demonstrates:

“This is the first time I have felt a strong sense of community virtually. I have grown to resent zoom and other virtual meetings from a school year when they were only used to emulate the same ineffective style of announcements in the guise of faculty meetings. This, however, felt special. Over the weeks I began to recognize faces, sometimes I would be in the same groups as someone from a previous week which felt familiar and fun.

Participants responded that they “really liked meeting other writers from across the U.S. and hearing their stories and listening to their writing.”

Within the subcategory sense of community, the following codes emerged: networking, sharing expertise, grounding/attempts to connect with others, sensitizing others to their perspectives, and engaging.

“Being in a small group for a majority of the time added an inviting level of intimacy to the writing experience and really forced me to generate different pieces in this short period of time.”
In the host surveys, respondents named building community, connecting to the NWP community, and supporting online communities as primary goals for the VWM events at individual sites. Responses coded as networking, for instance, referenced the chance to get to know other NWP sites as well as other teachers. One participant described being “grateful for this time to be in community with inspiring teachers.”

One of the hosts saw the VWM as “an opportunity to live out organizational commitments to creating space in all of our programming for naming and addressing racism, police brutality, and white supremacy.” This assertion connects to a tension noted earlier, between hosts’ desires to provide relief from pandemic isolation and to provide space to process feelings of stress, anxiety, and anger over issues such as police brutality. One participant said, “I’ve been very upset and stressed and distressed throughout the summer and at the state of things in this country. ‘Moving’ around, even if virtual, was important in terms of helping center my feelings of compassion and empathy for what we are all living through together.” Another representative comment about the importance of community during the summer of 2020 was: “The Virtual Writing Marathon experience has transported me across geographic boundaries as well as emotional ones. It has provided me time to write, gather with colleagues and educators who have been so generous and thoughtful.”

**Emotion**

As mentioned in the literature review, pleasure is an emotion integral to the design of writing marathons. The new feature of virtual place was connected to a new emotion—relief, specifically, relief from the pandemic. A sense of social justice was also a new emotion, again, specifically tied to the protests and social unrest of the summer of 2020. In the realm of writing, emotions were a sense of affirmation as writers, a renewal of one’s writing practice, and feelings of catharsis. Sharing writing was also imbued with emotions such as surprise and gratitude—probably the most prevalent code in the entire data set. People were grateful for many things, but primarily the sense of community felt when sharing writing in the breakout rooms. Like Shah’s work with community partnerships, emotional dynamics were a significant finding “not often featured in scholarship” (84).
Writing marathons are well known within the NWP network for their ability to evoke strong feelings. As one participant asked, “Is it even a writing marathon if no one cries?” Many VWM facilitators and participants, especially during the early stops, no doubt wondered if the writing marathon’s emotional power—its “capacity to intensify our sense of being” (Yagelski, 192)—would be lost in translation through the physical distances separating each writer and the technological barriers inherent to Zoom.

What we found, however, is that the emotional power of the writing marathon did translate to the VWM experience, with many respondents commenting on how emotional the experience was and offering extended answers detailing the rich and nuanced varieties of emotions they felt. Emotion thus emerged quickly as a robust category across all of our research instruments, particularly in the exit slips. We were surprised that so many respondents referred so emotionally to the VWMs’ effect on their personal well-being, by providing either a break from the stresses of their lives as “a great escape from the pressures of the outside world” or a place for processing them: “Writing often helps me with negative emotions, and this experience certainly did that.”

Positive emotions of gratitude, enjoyment, and affirmation appeared frequently in participant responses. People often expressed gratitude for the opportunity to write together weekly. Enjoyment was expressed through words like “fun,” “joy,” and “pleasure.” For example, “This has been such a welcome joy especially after so long of feeling so disconnected from the WP community. The time to write and listen and to share is such a gift.” More specific than enjoyment, several people expressed an emotion we coded as affirmation, noting that the experience of the VWM made them feel solidified in their commitment to themselves as writers and teachers. One respondent said that the VWM “reassured me that work we had done in the past was as valuable as I have always believed it was,” while another described the experiences as “affirming my sense of creating, not just teaching.” Several facilitators noted a sense of fulfillment, such as one who said, “It was very fulfilling to experience the excellent work our teachers and students produced, particularly the students, and to collaborate with other leaders to plan the event.” Comments such as these represent many similar responses that led to the naming of this code.

“Moving’ around, even if virtual, was important in terms of helping center my feelings of compassion and empathy for what we are all living through together.”
In planning team meetings, we often encouraged one another with reminders of how important we knew a VWM could be in helping to provide opportunities for meaningful human contact and to process anxiety, fear, and grief—especially in a summer dominated by pandemic lockdowns, acts of police brutality, and tense social protests. We saw those efforts reflected in emotional comments referring to these kairotic contexts. Coded as *pandemic relief* were responses which referred positively to the VWM's ability to help people “escape” and “unplug” from pressures and negative news. One participant said, “I needed something to remind myself this world wasn’t all COVID, riots, and death.” The VWM was not only an escape, however. Some sites, like Minnesota, centered police brutality by having writers virtually visit the site of George Floyd’s murder, view the mural in his honor, and read writing about the tragedy, with the goal of helping people process what was happening. Not all participants were willing to engage with this: “It felt to me that some stops made their whole StoryMap about social issues. I would have liked a broader choice of writing options.” Most participants, however, indicated a willingness to engage with “the pandemic, the land, and the racial justice movements," as one put it. As reasoning for this choice of prompts, one host commented, "I felt that it was vitally important to acknowledge the racial justice uprisings, global pandemic, and the impact of the new school year on teachers because ignoring any of those felt like a practice of privilege that I didn't want to partake in.” The tension between these two contrasting responses to the stressful social contexts of the VWM—to provide relief and escape but also acknowledgment and space to confront current issues—points to yet another pair of codes observed within the category of emotion: those of *mindfulness* and *renewal/catharsis*. Some participants noted that the VWM helped them “reflect and be present,” with one commenting that the VWM, like traditional writing marathons, allows writers to “write with a different mindfulness than all that came before.” Many people offered poignant and detailed accounts of specific ways that the VWM provided not just relief but a kind of rejuvenation. Just attending the VWM, for many, was seen as a form of necessary self-care, especially at a time when remote teaching had caused so many educators’ jobs to become even more difficult. One respondent wrote, “This truly was the kindest thing I have done for
myself in a long time. Making the time and space to value writing, sharing, and listening.” The social distancing required by the times did not equate with emotional distancing among participants, and the lack of physical motion in the traditional writing marathon was replaced by abundant (e) motion in the experience of Write Across America. As Kia Jane Richmond has asserted, “Emotions are a vital component of the social fabric that we create through conversations and nonverbal exchanges in and out of the classroom” (75).

Emotion has long been a concern in writing studies. T.R. Johnson, in *A Rhetoric of Pleasure* (2003), wrote that “authorial pleasure” is “an entirely legitimate, even crucial concern for the teacher of writing today” (ix), but also acknowledged that as a field, “we’re suspicious of such pleasure because we associate it with sheer whimsy and self-indulgence and because we assume that it necessarily gets in the way of teaching and learning the public conventions that enable clear, communicative prose” (ix). These suspicions have fallen away as more and more studies explore the role of emotion in writing. In 2016, Belli analyzed the influences that led to our field’s “turn to emotion,” primarily positive psychology and positive education, which emphasize happiness and well-being. However, unlike much of the professional literature that seems to focus on how to include emotion, well-being, happiness, and “positive education” as topics, content, or goals in a course, the VWM sees these things as the heart of an ecosystem. Emotion is integral to the VWM’s actual operation, and then it is also a by-product of the marathon. It’s how the marathon runs, and the marathon comprises choice, diversity, surprise, and risk, as well as writing on anything for an immediate audience, without criticism and sharing. Emotion is the “magic” that makes the VWM work. What we’ve learned from current literature on pedagogy, emotion, and writing and from our own study of the VWM is how we—as teachers and researchers—need to be more intentional in our use and study of emotion as it relates to the teaching of writing.

**Conclusion**

The 2020 VWM was an innovation on a writing marathon tradition that has spread throughout and beyond the NWP over the last twenty-five years. This robust example of the extracurriculum previously received only brief attention in *CCC* (Peary), and other publications on it tended to be expository and/or anecdotal. Our qualitative study, using grounded theory, contributes
something new—a model of Write Across America as a complex ecosystem created by writing project leaders engaging with design that provided participants with a sense of virtual place, opportunities for writing, and an experience of sharing writing that engendered a wide range of emotions. In addition, the VWM allowed local sites to ground participants in their places, provided leadership opportunities within and between sites, made innovative use of virtual platforms (such as Zoom and StoryMapJS), and grew a sense of community.

One NWP central principle has always been to put “writing at the center.” In accordance with this idea, the writing marathons—traditional and virtual—have also put writing at the center. Surprisingly, our study found that emotion is also at the center of the marathon experience and connects to all four realms we identified. The “magic” of the writing marathon is not a single activity or approach, but the dynamic experience of being in an ecosystem where place, writing inspiration, and community are present. Our study shows that this magic exists not just in magical places like New Orleans but also in virtual spaces. A writing marathon, traditional or virtual, takes an expansive view of writing as a solitary/collaborative, spontaneous/recursive, internal/external, cognitive/emotive, creative/critical rhetorical process that connects a writer to the world and to others through language. Our model, in the spirit of expressivists like Wendy Bishop and Will Banks, embraces a both/and approach to writing, rejecting the personal/professional binary set up as a false critique of expressivism. Within the ecosystem of the VWM that emerged from our grounded theory approach to our data, participants write about George Floyd, a parent’s death, and how they can leverage the national network of the NWP to mentor writing leaders in their local site. They also write across geographical and institutional boundaries about the racial issues in our country, exploring the power of writing to heal not just personal wounds but societal ones as well.

Our study found that the VWM is about more than the moments when writers put pens to paper or fingers to keyboard; it is about the ecosystem in which writing takes place. To be a good facilitator of writing, one should not only be a writer but one who participates fully and equally in one’s writing community through writing, sharing, and listening. It also means understanding the whole ecosystem and nurturing every part of it. The elements of such an online ecosystem of writing are interdependent and
in motion; the (e)motion keeps moving and holds the tensions necessary for productive writing. Some tensions included how much time to allocate for writing and how much to acknowledge the times we are living in, but after studying participants’ responses in depth, we have come to realize that providing space for people to be writers turned out to be the most important concept behind the model, and this has implications for teaching. If we have already changed our thinking from being teachers of writing to being teachers of writers, then what the VWM has to offer is that perhaps we should change our thinking to being participant-stewards of dynamic ecosystems in which writers and their writing can thrive.

We found, overall, that the VWM supported the development of writing and writers by doing the following:

- Asking participants to identify as writers and to join a community of other writers
- Positioning facilitators as fellow writers
- Giving substantial time to writing
- Giving writers both inspiration and choice in their subjects and genres
- Creating a sense of place and movement through virtual connections to physical landscapes
- Providing an immediate audience in small groups
- Avoiding criticism and evaluation through the simple “thank you” response
- Connecting one’s writing to others through conversation
- “Publishing” the writing through reading aloud and anthologies

Given the decreasing enrollments in higher education and the disconnected feeling many college students are experiencing during the pandemic, we suggest that the VWM has the potential to engender a sense of belonging, either to a place like a college campus or to a community in a space like a Zoom meeting. The VWM, like traditional writing marathons, connects us to each other around the act of writing, which our study has shown is more complex and interconnected in this nontraditional model
than might be expected from such a simple protocol: writing in a space we explore together, reading our writing aloud, and listening to one another. But, as one participant wrote, “Connection, at times, is enough to sustain us.”

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our deepest thanks to the many people who contributed to the National Writing Project’s 2020 Write Across America virtual writing marathon and who so generously assisted with our research. This group includes all of the participants throughout the summer, National Writing Project Executive Director Elyse Eidman-Aadahl, the NWP staff, and the leadership team members and facilitators from each of the VWM stops: the Greater Madison Writing Project in Wisconsin and Director Mark Dziedzic; the Central Arizona Writing Project and Director Jessica Early; the South Mississippi Writing Project and Director Robin Atwood; the Morehead Writing Project in Kentucky and Director Deanna Mascle; the Red River Valley Writing Project in North Dakota; the Hudson Valley Writing Project in New York and Director Tom Meyer; the Minnesota Writing Project and Director Lee Fisher; the New Hampshire Writing Project and Director Meg Petersen; and the Southeastern Louisiana Writing Project and Co-Director Tracy Cunningham.

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Appendix A: Participant Surveys

Part A—Participant Experience

1. What role best describes you? (click all that apply: WP Site Director, WP Site leader, TC, K-elementary educator, middle school educator, high school educator, college educator, community member, other)

2. Have you previously participated in a virtual writing marathon?

3. Have you previously participated in a face-to-face writing marathon?

4. Which stops did you attend on the 2020 Virtual Writing Marathon? (add list for them to just check off)

5. Why did you choose to participate and what expectations did you have?

6. What's your reaction to the statement "I'm a writer," which participants say out loud? Were you surprised by having to say this? Did it affect you or your writing on the marathon? Has it made you think more about what it means to be a writer? Or writing teacher?

Part B—The Virtual Experience

7. What are some ways that the VWM experience supported you as a writer? As a teacher? As a site leader? As a member of a professional community?

8. For those who have been on a face-to-face marathon previously, how was this different? How was it the same? What elements of the marathon "magic" are lost, heightened, or changed?

9. What did you like most about the experience?

10. Is there anything you wish had been different about the VWM?

11. Has your sense of yourself changed as a: community member, as a writer, NWP member, person, teacher? (If you attended multiple stops on the Virtual Writing Marathon this year, please answer the next question. If not skip to question #13.)

12. Please tell us what you have looked forward to the most/why you keep coming back? Were there changes over the course of the summer that you liked/didn't like?

13. What was your experience in the breakout room? What was your comfort level in sharing? How was feedback handled and how did you feel about it?
Part C—The Writing

14. What was the impetus for your writing? (Multiple-choice questions: Being part of a VWM community? A prompt? A place at the virtual site? Pressure to perform? Something already on your mind?)

15. What kinds of writing did you do and why? Did anything surprise you about the writing you did? Did you go back to any of the pieces you wrote and develop them further?

16. How did you feel before you began writing? During? At the end of the writing?

Part D—Teaching

17. If you are a teacher, how did this experience affect your teaching?

18. Are you considering a VWM for your own classroom or teaching community during the next school year? If so, what are you envisioning for goals and formats?

19. What meaning did this experience hold for you at this particular time in your life?

20. If the program is offered next summer, would you be likely to participate? Invite others?

Part E—Site Leadership

21. How did you use the VWM to build site leadership? Site capacity? Continuity (a basic NWP principle) and how it plays out in a VWM?

22. How might you use the materials created during the VWM stop at your site for future programs?

23. Is there anything else about the Virtual Writing Marathon you would like to tell us?
Appendix B: Host Surveys

1. What was your process for designing your site's stop?

2. What were your goals in designing and implementing the VWM? To what degree were those goals met?

3. Were there unexpected responses/ways of using the virtual space/ideas that arose?

4. What did you learn from the sites who hosted before you?

5. How were challenges discussed and overcome?

6. What were the most important changes made as the VWM progressed each week?

7. In what ways do you see this program as extending the NWP community? In what ways do you see this program representing NWP core values?

8. People have been saying that the overall experience of planning and implementing a Virtual Writing Marathon has been "so typical of THE writing project"? Can you help us articulate how that is so?

9. How do you organize feedback in groups on a marathon? Do your writing groups go on marathons together?

10. Is there anything else about the Virtual Writing Marathon you would like to tell us?

Appendix C: Screenshots of StoryMaps with Prompts
George Floyd memorial in Minneapolis. Photo by Lee Fisher. Used with permission.

Invitation to Write: What is the connection between place and healing?
Appendix D: Sample Agenda from the Virtual Writing Marathon

Join Zoom Meeting
First Stop: Madison, WI
June 16, 2020
4:00–5:15 PM

4:00 Welcome to #WriteAcrossAmerica
- Introduce the concept of writing marathon and the plans for the summer
  - Response to writing groups during pandemic. So much more has happened since then and we can continue to use writing and sharing to process and understand our world.
  - Broaden the reach of the writing community.
  - Be in community to write and celebrate writing.
- Today’s Stop – Olbrich Botanical Gardens in Madison, WI
  - Today’s structure
  - Writing Marathon at Greater Madison Writing Project
  - Intentions for today
  - Group reading of Hellen Keller’s *Three Days to See*

4:15 Writing and Virtual Exploration of the Gardens and Readings

4:35 Small Group Breakout Rooms
- Sharing & responding protocol

5:05 Thank Yous, Celebrations, Future Opportunities
- Thank you to the sites that have seeded this work, NWP for supporting all of us making this possible, all of you for joining us, and future host
- Next Stop: June 23rd with Central Arizona - Director, Jessica Early
- RSVP for upcoming #WriteAcrossAmerica stops
- Exit Ticket
## Appendix E: Matrix of Categories and Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Sense of virtual place</th>
<th>Engaging with design</th>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Sub-category: sense of community</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Sub-category: sharing writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Codes</td>
<td>Where writers are coming from</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>Networking</td>
<td>Prompting writing: content, responding to place, visuals, literature</td>
<td>Sharing writing in small groups (breakout rooms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pleasure/ enjoyment</td>
<td>Engaging</td>
<td>Prompting writing: getting started</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relief from pandemic</td>
<td>Initializing</td>
<td>Prompting writing: choice and variety</td>
<td>The way it was organized</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>StoryMap</td>
<td>Facilitation</td>
<td>Affirmation</td>
<td>Grounding/ attempts to connect with others</td>
<td>Connecting writing to teaching</td>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiration</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Social justice</td>
<td>Sharing expertise</td>
<td>Protecting writing time</td>
<td>Being lead/ leaders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visuals</td>
<td>Balance between familiar and new</td>
<td>Affirmation</td>
<td>Grounding/ attempts to connect with others</td>
<td>Connecting writing to teaching</td>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio</td>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>Social justice</td>
<td>Sharing expertise</td>
<td>Protecting writing time</td>
<td>Being lead/ leaders</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History/ culture/ politics/ current times</td>
<td>New ideas</td>
<td>Mindfulness</td>
<td>Sensitizing others to their perspectives</td>
<td>Developing writerly identity</td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The state or site structure</td>
<td>Renewal/ catharsis</td>
<td>Developing as a leader</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variety</td>
<td>Personal well-being</td>
<td>Surprise</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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Appendix F: Writing Samples from a Virtual Writing Marathon

In the nine weeks of the VWM, more than six thousand pieces of writing were produced and shared. Here are four of the almost two hundred writings shared during the New Orleans stop of the VWM. Notice differences in subject, genre, length, voice, and purpose.

**The Taste of New Orleans** *(Gay DiGiovanni)*

Summer in New Orleans is like spicy food. Of course, the initial heat makes the timid shy away. The practical, logical, planning people think of all the consequences beforehand. The daring dive in. “Let’s try it!”

Moving past the sweltering heat is the wonder and surprise of something not quite tangible. Quizzical, magical, not yet clear. Take another taste, perhaps chase it with cool white wine.

What is that flavor? It’s something familiar but mixed with other things. The combination stumps me. Like something new and fresh mixed with old world scenes. I try to separate the tone, the colors, and smells. Hmmm, I will have to come back for another taste. Again, and again, until I really taste New Orleans.

**Muses** *(Margaret Simon)*

Muses have a lost sense of time. They live in the back of Napoleon’s Bar drinking Pimm’s Cups. I’ve asked them to visit me here on the bayou steeped in cafe au lait brown buzzing with cicada song. They come in the long shadows of a summer afternoon. or in the fractal face of a sunflower in bloom. Muses mock me with their silver linings, here then there, then nowhere, hiding in plain sight.

Sometimes, I step on them by mistake. Give me that mess again. My pen is waiting.

**Ode to Bucket Man** *(Danielle Mari Filas)*

Sometimes it takes that Doesn’t it?
Put a bucket on your head and
Running up to strangers to ask
What do you think?
What have you learned?
Have you put yourself in danger?
Because that’s what the world needs.

If you put people in a room and tell them to start walking around
In five minutes they start walking in the same direction
In six minutes they start walking at the same pace
Until one person puts a bucket on their head
And shakes up the etch-a-sketch of your soul

You do that
You walk in the same direction
You walk at the same pace

*What do you think?*
And you at that moment have to face the fact
That you have not and you do not and you will not
Think
You will walk in a circle
Until some guy in a bucket challenges you
*What do you think?*
You think . . . I don’t have to walk this way
What if I take tiny steps
Or huge steps
Or sliding and gliding steps
Or what if I hop or crawl or slither
Or grab that guy and just start rocking out?

*What have you learned?*
And you at that moment have to face the fact
That you have not and you did not and you will not
Learn
You will walk in a circle
Until Bucket Man.
*What have you learned?*
You learn . . . I don’t have to even stay in this room
What if I leave this place
And go over there
And build myself a new life there
And stop saying ok to people when I don’t want to
And become a designer of my own life and just get to it?
Have you put yourself in danger?
And you at that moment have to face the fact
That you have not and did not and you will not put yourself in Danger
You will walk in a circle
Have you put yourself in danger?
Well, I will now, Bucket Man. I will now.
So I put the bucket on my own head
And I run out into the street
And I grab you by the hand
And I ask
What do you see?
How have you grown?
Have you ever run so hard you fell down?

Something Like Magic (Marley Stuart)
The day we left New Orleans, a man I'd seen in the neighborhood over the years passed by the front of our house. He was a gentle, lumbering Asian man who usually walked a huge white dog. If we were walking our own dog when we ran into him, he'd give her a treat from a little bag he carried with him. This day, though, our last day in town, he was walking alone. I didn't know the man's name, but I recognized him immediately, although it had been over a year since we'd seen him. We were extremely busy packing the last of our things into the enormous moving truck parked illegally on the corner, which I'd somehow have to drive all the way to New York, but the man was such a vivid reminder of the world before the pandemic, and I wanted to say hello.

We got to talking. His big dog had died. We told him how sorry we were. "It's always hard," he said. Then he apologized for not having a treat to give our dog, who waited on the porch. He still carried the bag of treats, he told us, for neighborhood dogs. But today he did not have it. He did have, though, a camera, and he asked if he could take our picture. We stood in front of the house that would soon no longer be ours and smiled. He clicked the shutter. We exchanged email addresses. His name was Daniel Yiu. He shook my hand, which made me nervous because of the virus. Then he lumbered off. Passing the moving truck, he stopped. "Wow! Good luck!" Then he was gone.

I thought that would be it—and it was enough. I felt such joy that a satellite character from the neighborhood had become known to us, right before we left. It was something like magic. A stranger. But now I knew his name. We'd spoken. Then I forgot about him. We moved. Our new life took hold.

This morning, I saw an email in my inbox, with the subject line, "Better Late Than Never." It was Daniel, apologizing for the delay and attaching the photos he'd taken. I clicked them open. There we were, smiling from a life that seems long behind us. He asked for pictures of our new hometown. I wrote him back and told him what
a pleasure it was to be reminded of the city we love the most and the people in it. And I sent some pictures. I think of him now, moving slowly through the neighborhood we called home for six lovely years. Hopefully he’ll write back. I think he will.


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