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Erin Brock Carlson

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"I Have Always Loved West Virginia, But…": How Archival Projects Can Complicate, Build, and Reimagine Place-Based Literacies

Erin Brock Carlson

Abstract

This article shares the outcomes of a collaborative project between multimedia writing students and a local history center in which students created online exhibits about an important event in labor history: the Battle of Blair Mountain. The main outcome discussed is the enhancement of place-based literacy, including complication of simplistic narratives about place, illumination of less visible stakeholders, deeper understanding of hidden identity markers, and contextualization of relationships between artifacts and personal histories. Ultimately, this article demonstrates the value of archival research and the stories such research unveils as a means to re-imagine places and their people in more ethical, nuanced representations.

Keywords: Place-based literacy, archive, digital, storytelling, narrative, Blair Mountain

Place matters. This might seem like an obvious statement, but place is one of those factors that fades into the background seemingly just as often as it takes center stage. What might be less obvious is that when a place *does* receive attention, that place is oftentimes presented in one dimension. Overly simplistic renderings of places oftentimes reify monolithic narratives that perpetuate negative and inaccurate stereotypes that directly affect community members and their attitudes toward their own places. We see this dynamic unfold through vast generalizations about the differences between urban or rural communities, red or blue states, coastal or middle American regions, and so on—generalizations often crafted at the hands of media, entertainment, and political actors that don't reside in the areas being described.

One example of such a place is the state of West Virginia. From the much-embellished Hatfield-McCoy feud of the 1800s that paints West Virginians as territorial clans living in the backwoods to more recent cable news representations of West Virginia as the headquarters of "Trump Country," West Virginia has long been defined by those outside of the state. Stock stories (Martinez) and master narratives (Lyotard), or accounts that lack nuance in favor of clean, simplistic roles and actions, are powerful because we tend to lean on those narratives to quickly understand the world around us; however, clinging to those narratives obscures the presence of oth-

er stories that illuminate the complexities of places and people. These other, more complicated stories, or "little narratives…offer valuable insights…by providing alternatives to the dominant narratives often emphasized" (Alexander 612). Little narratives demonstrate the paucity of dominant narratives and offer people the capacity to challenge those dominant narratives in ways that complicate their understandings of themselves and their places.

Very rarely do stories embedded in pop culture and news media cast West Virginia in a positive light, but the state's history is filled with stories that paint a vastly different picture. One story is that of the Battle of Blair Mountain, which is, to date, the largest labor uprising in United States history. In the 1920s, a diverse coalition of coal miners—immigrants from Eastern Europe, Black workers who immigrated from the South, and white West Virginians—organized to demand better working conditions and subsequently faced violence from coal company forces. Though the miners lost that specific conflict, the event is seen as a significant event in labor history because it demonstrated the power of diverse coalitions across identity groups, and it ultimately led to major industry reforms. Blair Mountain challenges monolithic representations of West Virginia that cast it as backwards and overly conservative, offering a more complex portrayal of a place and its people that reaches back to the early 20th century. Such a portrayal is a direct confrontation against much of the discourse that circulates about West Virginians' home communities, as it signifies the power of seeking out little narratives.

In my role at a land-grant institution in West Virginia, I work with students from the state and surrounding areas, and one-dimensional narratives often find surface in our classrooms. In my work, I often witness students' perspectives on their places shift as they move from accepting dominant narratives to rejecting those stories to seeking ways to articulate *their* experiences in their own words–experiences that paint a vastly different picture of West Virginia from the stereotypes depicted in media. In writing classrooms, we can design assignments that help students make sense of these conflicting narratives and even to uncover previously unknown-to-them narratives that ultimately encourage students to craft more nuanced understandings of their places and of themselves. Because place both holds significant cultural meaning and is inherently relational (Fagerjord), place offers an important entry point into larger conversations about other issues in our writing classes, including power and privilege. And while this piece focuses on West Virginia, I want to note that many places are framed by external forces according to perceived deficits or weaknesses and I call on others to consider how their own place-based literacy work engages these tensions.

In Spring 2021, in anticipation of the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Blair Mountain, students in both sections of a course I teach entitled "Multimedia Writing" partnered with the West Virginia and Regional History Center to create online exhibits about the battle and events leading up to it. This organization is dedicated to preserving and sharing the history and culture of West Virginia and surrounding areas. Building on previous collaborations between myself and the Center (discussed later in this piece), students were tasked with building narratives to contextualize archi-

val materials that document the battle, including photographs, journal entries, pamphlets, and physical objects, and then to share those narratives through online exhibits featured on the organization's website celebrating the anniversary. In their digital storytelling projects, students assembled intriguing counternarratives about the state even as they grappled with the complexities of displaying century-old, localized artifacts on 21st-century digital platforms.

In this piece, I demonstrate that digital storytelling projects that incorporate archival materials can support students as they develop deep understandings of place that might potentially empower students from often marginalized and misrepresented places. First, I draw on current discussions in literacy and writing studies to articulate the ways that working with place-based artifacts can help students reimagine the places they inhabit in meaningful ways, and I provide background on the Battle of Blair Mountain. This is followed by a description of the institutional context of the pedagogical project described in this piece. Next, I analyze the project's outcomes, including the ways that narratives about place were disrupted and reimagined as students built online exhibits about one of the most significant events in U.S. labor history. Finally, I conclude by arguing that archival, digital projects can lead students to place-based narratives that could be a source for increased levels of critical literacy and in turn, sustained political and material change.

Diving into place in the writing classroom with Blair Mountain

Place is simultaneously a shared and deeply personal phenomenon: we find kinship with those who share our places, embracing similarities and forming attachments in our hometowns and beyond; at the same time, the ways that we perceive a place depend on our own individual identities and past experiences. In the project described in this article, for example, students originally from West Virginia had different perceptions of the state and its history than their peers from surrounding states, as well as different levels of attachment to the events we discussed; however, this project provided everyone, regardless of background, with a more nuanced understanding of the state and its history. Writing teachers are no stranger to bringing narratives about place into the classroom, as illustrated by work surrounding ecocomposition (see Weisser and Dobrin), location-based digital media (see McNely; Rivers), and experiences in both urban and rural settings (see Donehower, Hogg, and Schell; Flower; and Long, respectively).

Carlo emphatically claims that "place is central to literacy practices and our theories about those practices" (68); again, place matters. And since place is a constant presence that shapes our experiences, incorporating attention to place in our writing classrooms can help us to better understand "how spaces impact upon learning, reading, and writing" and in turn, to better understand "difference, otherness, and the politics of exclusion—topics that define the causes of critical literacy, social justice, and liberatory education" (Reynolds 3). Gruenewald similarly links place to critical literacy, arguing that place-based methods of education require us to "explicitly examine the place-specific nexus between environment, culture, and education" (10). Do-

nehower, Hogg, and Schell write that literacy skills are material in nature, and these skills can help people in particular areas "sustain life" when those skills are developed with that specific place in mind (4). An awareness of place fosters action by illuminating the complexities of place. In this piece, I describe place-based literacy as the skills that allow us to closely read texts that present differing or even conflicting narratives about a place, and then, to put those narratives into conversation with one another in meaningful and nuanced ways.

As such, place-based literacy requires an openness towards multiple accounts in order to avoid privileging one-dimensional master narratives over a "contextualized little narrative that challenges, contradicts, or even confirms" the overarching narrative (Alexander 623). Attention to place invites nuanced understandings of how we see not only our surroundings, but ourselves and those around us. By illuminating different stories, a place-based approach in the writing classroom offers students the opportunity to reimagine their surroundings. Gruenwald argues that pedagogies infused with place "ultimately encourage teachers and students to reinhabit their places, that is, to pursue the kind of social action that improves the social and ecological life of places, near and far, now and in the future" (7). In our classrooms, we can use writing to reinhabit places, whether that writing is used to redefine our own feelings towards a place or to foster change in our surrounding communities. Carlo explicitly links writing pedagogy and place-based literacy through the act of revision: "...when places are being revised, there is an impulse…to *conserve*–the land, the culture, the local businesses, the local residents–and there is an impulse…to *transform*, to make social reality better for those who have been traditionally marginalized or displaced (whether we are considering place as institution, place as neighborhood, place as city, or place as region)" (60). This act of revision can bring about deeply felt changes in students, especially those with roots in or connections to places that have been largely stereotyped by popular narratives.

Notions of place, then, are dynamic, not static; because place can harbor deep emotional or affectual meanings, our orientations toward them can change. Reynolds describes these meanings as "a swirling combination of metaphor and materiality" that we "carry…around with us in every encounter with a place" (175). Herndl et al. echo this understanding of how place and feeling intertwine, writing that a place has "a material and affective reality that can be seen, felt, and loved" (71). To tap into or to disrupt this reality is a way that writing instructors can encourage students to seek out multiple stories, to interrogate those narratives and their impacts, and to go forth with more nuanced understandings of place that they can then leverage in their own communities. This increased sense of place-based literacy can be especially powerful for students from marginalized places, rural and urban alike. In the introduction to their edited collection on Appalachian literacies, Webb-Sunderhaus and Donehower explicitly note the value of "uses of literacy that resist internal as well as external cultural forces…that continually resist and reshape the local, the nonlocal, and the relationships between the two" (8). Seeking out little narratives (Alexander) offers students the opportunity to reimagine their places in empowering ways.

The Appalachian region, which includes all of West Virginia, has a long history of stereotypical representation. These representations are rooted deeply in the national imagination, starting in the 1800s with "local color" newspaper articles and book bindings that depicted the region "as an undiscovered country filled to the brim with exotic creatures" (Plein 104). More recent examples, bolstered by J.D. Vance's popular memoir *Hillbilly Elegy* and a Netflix film of the same name, reify those perceptions that cast Appalachian people as backwards and lazy. But scholars in rhetoric and literacy studies have confronted these stereotypes. Webb-Sunderhaus notes the gap between stories of "hillbillies, rednecks, and white trash" and her own experiences as an Appalachian (5). Kurlinkus and Kurlinkus point to rhetorical appeals to a cultural nostalgia that paints the region in a monolithic and inaccurate light (88). And Hayes challenges the region's link to "illiteracy or outright hostility toward education" (72) by illuminating Appalachians' keen understanding of place and its impact on cultural knowledge.

Furthermore, as with any place, the dominant narrative is not the only narrative—and there are many stories of West Virginia that challenge stereotypes that seem so tightly held, including the Battle of Blair Mountain. As part of the Mine Wars (a series of conflicts between coal miners and coal companies in the early 20th century), Blair Mountain represents the culmination of decades of exploitation and intimidation in the West Virginia coal fields. One often-overlooked aspect of this time is the diversity of the workforce in the coal fields. In addition to born-and-bred West Virginians, European immigrants and African Americans from the South moved to the state for employment. Once they arrived, miners lived in company housing and shopped at company stores (with inflated prices) even as they received company wages, resulting in severe economic exploitation. This dynamic, combined with unsafe working environments, racial segregation forced by company representatives, and measures put in place to prevent workers from unionizing, led to unrest. Regarding central and southern West Virginia in the early 20th century, Humphreys et al. write:

> As local miners saw the growing economic disparity between the increasingly rich mine owners, the better paid miners in other parts of the state and themselves, tempers rose over both economic and civil rights issues. Not only did the miners demand to be paid more, but they wanted the freedom of speech and congregation to which they were entitled under the US Constitution (307).

A series of skirmishes across southern West Virginia led to the eventual Battle of Blair Mountain. In this battle, over 10,000 miners fought around 3,000 better-armed mercenaries. After the conflict, coal operators used federal and state-sponsored legal actions to destroy the coal miners' union and prosecute its leaders. For most of history, the event has been seen as a loss for organized labor, but recent recoveries have emphasized the watershed nature of Blair Mountain, as it captured powerful stories "about people no longer willing to be controlled, exploited, and violently abused from above" (Harris 91).

Especially significant were the coalitions that miners built across race and ethnicity. In Matewan, West Virginia, a hub for organizing activity, Black and white families lived near one another, a rare social dynamic for many American communities in the early 1900s. While company overseers tried to keep workers apart to prevent unionization, this strategy didn't work; one story to emerge in multiple primary sources documents Black and white miners holding cafeteria workers at gunpoint so that they would be served together, rather than separately, showing that they understood that they had to work together to improve their conditions (Hood, n.p.). This history challenges representations of Appalachia's workers as monolithically white and intolerant of others and illuminates the often-unrecognized role that workers from different backgrounds played in the state's history.

Despite its importance to state and national history, by many accounts, Blair Mountain is grossly overlooked. Shogan writes, "Among labor's many costly defeats, the Battle of Blair Mountain arguably ranks as the most neglected" due to our country's cultural attachment to the "middle-class ethos" (ix-x). However, in recent years, there have been efforts to recover Blair Mountain's importance—including by archival and educational organizations like the West Virginia Regional and History Center that have worked to preserve these under-recognized aspects of history.

Archival research in the writing classroom demonstrates the dynamic nature of archives where text, collaboration, and activism come together (Hayden and Graban), rather than simply serving as repositories of knowledge (Kirsch and Rohan). Broadly, Douglas describes archival research as a practice that "builds solidarity through reciprocal relationships around a central idea" (38). More specifically, others theorize the relationship between perceptions of place and archival research. Proszak and Cushman write that an archive is "both a repository grounded in place and a place of ever-shifting perspectives that continuously reorients its participants" (199), and archival projects allow students to "generate new knowledges about themselves and the places they reside in relation to history" (209).

Because archives present artifacts that interpreters then place into narratives, students must examine the relationship between those artifacts and the histories they know—or don't—and highlight the little narratives that often go unnoticed. Mastrangelo writes that archival projects require students to "grapple with the fact that local history has been reframed in ways that benefit the institution but are not necessarily respectful of or even directly connected" to marginalized figures (42). In our project, students examined their own interpretations of West Virginia, finding firsthand accounts of life in mining camps that challenged monolithic representations of the state and its people. Students found that the historical realities of West Virginia and its people are much more complex than any headline can capture, and in fact, offer a very different portrait of a place that one might initially expect—an outcome of increased place-based literacy.

Institutional Context

As outlined above, West Virginia is often represented in ways that are oversimplified (at best) and grossly stereotyped (at worst). The land grant institution at which I teach is deeply intertwined with these representations, making it a generative space for designing projects that address West Virginia as a whole. A project that addresses an underacknowledged element of the state's history, especially one that demonstrates how progressive its residents can be, is a powerful way to engage students in work that can shape their feelings towards the place in which they find themselves living–especially at a time when students constantly see their place ridiculed via popular narratives.

Multimedia Writing is an upper-level course taught within our department's English program. It enrolls upper-level students within a range of majors, including English, Journalism, Communications, Graphic Design, and Multidisciplinary Studies. While course projects vary according to instructor, as with many upper-level courses, the class is typically designed around writing and designing texts for online environments, usually culminating in a web design project.

During the semester that I taught this course synchronously online, there were students from branch campuses that were not located in the city in which I teach. This is unusual, since there are normally only synchronous in-person sections and asynchronous online sections; however, this COVID-era anomaly allowed for a more meaningful experience for all students. The presence of students from around the state contributed to the power of this project, as students collaborated across geographic distance to learn more about the state's often-hidden histories. Additionally, students at branch campuses are often nontraditional students who work full-time. Those students offer different perspectives on labor politics to more traditional college-aged students on our main campus, which enriched our classroom discussions and illuminated the importance of coalition-building across different groups—one of the key factors in the story of Blair Mountain.

In Spring 2021, I taught two sections of Multimedia Writing and collaborated with the West Virginia and Regional History Center's (WVRHC) Instruction and Public Services Archivist, Miriam Cady. The WVRHC was preparing to celebrate West Virginia Day, an annual celebration of state history and culture that marks the state's admission to the Union in 1863 after seceding from Virginia during the Civil War. Since 2021 marked the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Blair Mountain, the WVRHC wanted their programming to amplify their collections related to the Mine Wars. Part of the WVRHC's mission is to engage undergraduate and graduate students in their programming, oftentimes by introducing students to archival research. As a result, planning and executing this project involved more collaboration with Miriam than any other client-based project I had taken on before, resulting in a robust experience for students as they engaged with our partner throughout the semester, rather than just at the end.

I first met Miriam and learned more about the WVRHC while serving on a university-level committee planning a Wikipedia Edit-a-thon focused on amplifying stories about Appalachian artists and creators from marginalized groups in Fall 2020.

We worked together to plan an asynchronous event where students would be working with secondary research as well as digitized collections from the archives in their efforts to contribute to Wikipedia pages about underrepresented Appalachians. Over the course of working on this project, Miriam and I began to discuss possibilities for more direct collaboration between my courses and the WVRHC, specifically through a client-based project that would serve the needs of that organization while also providing students with a valuable experience. Miriam felt that there was significant value in tying the project into programming for the Blair Mountain anniversary, both in terms of sharing an often-overlooked aspect of West Virginia history with students and providing students with a clear exigency for their work.

She proposed that the final project in the course be a series of online exhibits built around holdings from the WVRHC's archives. Given Multimedia Writing's focus on designing digital texts for public audiences, these exhibits were an appropriate way to meet course goals. Because this promised to be a challenging project, due to the assignment's requirements that pushed students to learn about a historical event (in an English course, no less), to conduct secondary and archival research about that event, and to design online exhibits using a software platform that was entirely new for them, we knew that scaffolding the course at large would be key for any sort of success. Together, we developed a preliminary schedule, which included class visits from Miriam for instruction about archives and team meetings between her and students.

At the start of the semester, I began class with general principles of multimedia and digital writing, asking students to consider the rhetorical elements of texts that go viral. The second unit asked students to participate in the aforementioned Wikipedia Edit-a-thon sponsored by the university libraries, in which students contributed to pages about underrepresented Appalachian creators, including writers, poets, musicians, artists, and other creative minds. Then, students would take what they had learned about narrative and underrepresentation in digital spaces and apply that in the final project—the exhibits about Blair Mountain.

The final project itself was divided into smaller sections to both make the project feel more manageable for students and to allow myself and Miriam opportunities to check in with teams to ensure that they were on track to complete the project successfully. Miriam visited class several times to provide archival instruction and to teach us about the Battle itself. To get students started, Miriam and I brainstormed possible topics that students could use as initial steps for inquiry, and we used these topics to allow students to self-select into teams based on their interest and working style. Topics included organizing tactics, roles of women and children, union perspectives, and company histories. Several times throughout this last unit, usually in conjunction with a deliverable, we met with project teams (sometimes together and sometimes individually) to provide further guidance and support.

The assignment was divided into the smaller following sections:

- Digital Exhibit User Experience Analysis, a short assignment that asked students to look at examples of online exhibits to consider what elements they might want to incorporate in their own work;

- Exhibit Proposal, a general statement about the team's overall approach, strategy, and project planning;
- Exhibit Storyboard, a visual representation of what artifacts they planned to use and how pages would be organized;
- Reading & Research Log, an ongoing assignment that asked students to summarize and analyze sources they were finding about their topic;
- Digital Exhibit, the final deliverable, which displayed archival artifacts contextualized through secondary research and writing (created with Omeka, a platform often used by libraries and archives to display collections);
- Exhibit Rationale, a short document detailing the decisions teams made in creating their exhibit, which served as a sort of "read me" document for the WVRHC; and
- Postmortem Write-Up, a report that gave students the opportunity to reflect on the project and the teamwork they engaged in.

Because of the daunting nature of this project we felt that it was important to make the sections feel reasonable and achievable for students. Breaking the project into (many) steps gave us opportunities to engage with teams throughout the process and to troubleshoot any issues. Further, each smaller assignment helped to boost students' confidence as they learned more about their topics and increased their familiarity with archival research, digital design, and Blair Mountain as a whole.

One very important note before I move on: This was an ambitious project, and only possible because I had one prep that semester, since I was teaching two sections of the same course on my 2/2 teaching load. Because this project is so tied up with labor politics, I want to acknowledge my privilege in terms of being a tenure-track faculty member at a large research institution with much more institutional support than many of my peers. I point this out not only to encourage others in similar positions to take on these labor-intensive projects, but also to point to the structural elements that simultaneously enable some people to take these projects on while preventing others from doing the same. As advocated by the CCCC Statement on Community-Engaged Projects in Rhetoric and Composition, rich, in-depth, vibrant community-engaged teaching should be supported by institutional policies across ranks and positions—it should be a widely-accepted use of our time in the academy rather than an extraordinary feat or an outcome of an individual's privilege.

Student Outcomes

Students created 9 online exhibits dedicated to different topics related to the Battle of Blair Mountain; the exhibits can be viewed here: https://wvrhc.lib.wvu.edu/events/west-virginia-day/exhibits/2021/engl-303-student-exhibits. Each group had significant freedom in their approach, visible in the exhibits that offer multiple points of view and showcase a range of archival materials. While some groups chose to examine stakeholders who are often not included in stories that do circulate about Blair

Mountain, like women and children, others opted to focus on the experiences of miners themselves.

At the end of the semester, I asked students to complete a survey about the project, including aspects such as archival research, history content, client work, and digital storytelling (see Appendix). This survey was approved by my institution's IRB (#2104286435). The outcomes described in this section come from that survey, as well as reflective writing that students completed as part of the course. Twenty-seven out of forty-eight enrolled students responded to the survey. Any student names used are pseudonyms.

Students generally agreed that the project was useful in preparing them for work beyond college classrooms through its focus on learning new technologies, conducting research, and managing a client-based project. They also reported strengthening their information literacy skills due to their evaluation of primary texts as they conducted secondary research to better understand the contexts shaping those primary sources, and in their cataloging of archival sources on their pages using the appropriate metadata practices for the WVRHC. However, another finding emerged: students found themselves thinking *a lot* about place. Because archival collections are oftentimes organized around particular events, people, or places, holdings often point to place in significant ways. As students perused pictures, maps, newspaper articles, and other artifacts that referenced place in perhaps unanticipated ways, they began to understand different perspectives about West Virginia, some of which surprised them. Sixty five percent of student survey respondents said they had never done archival research before, but at the end of the project, most students stated that they were more comfortable with archival work. This is a significant outcome for a project that took place over roughly eight weeks, and, matched with the outcomes below, this result suggests that place-based archival projects offer a host of benefits for writing courses. Most importantly, such projects encourage students to find those little narratives that often go unheeded, which in can in turn reshape their own perceptions and communications about that place.

Outcome 1: Place-based archival projects complicated overarching, dominant narratives about place

Overall, most students stated that they had very little or no knowledge of the Battle of Blair Mountain. Only one student out of thirty-eight enrolled, a double major in English and History, reported more than a passing knowledge of the Mine Wars. Many of the students in these sections had attended high school in West Virginia or (obviously) had lived in West Virginia for several years as they attended college, resulting in both a more nuanced perception of the state and for many, frustration with stereotypical media narratives. Throughout these projects, students encountered primary artifacts and secondary research pointing towards a progressive history that challenged negative stereotypes. As a result, this project was transformative for us as a group, even if it was incredibly challenging to teach what was essentially a crash course in history even as we worked to develop exhibits in an English class.

When asked how much their knowledge of West Virginia history had changed because of this project, the twenty-seven survey respondents responded with a mean of 4.52 on a scale of 0-5 (with 0 being no change at all and 5 being a significant change). Several students noted that they had never even heard of the Battle of Blair Mountain before this project: their development over the course of the project was perhaps the most dramatic. Another common theme of responses was the respect that students had gained for working-class Appalachians who had challenged corporate interests and, by extension, one-dimensional stereotypes about the region. Macy, who grew up in West Virginia, wrote in her post-project reflection that she was "very passionate about how underrepresented West Virginia is in our media and society, so this project was a great way for me to show the WVRHC audience something about West Virginia's labor and mining culture, which is a huge part of West Virginia's culture in general."

One team focused specifically on media accounts of the Battle of Blair Mountain. In their research, this team combed databases and archival materials for articles from local, national, and even international newspapers. Among their findings was that the further away a newspaper was located from the conflict, the more sympathetic that account would be; more specifically, articles in local and state newspapers typically presented company interests as the righteous party, while national and international outlets suggested support for the miners with headlines such as, "Plot to hang miners' secretary in West Virginia halted but coal kings boast convictions of four" (*The Daily Worker,* Chicago, Illinois). They also discovered that when newspapers in West Virginia failed to fall in line with the company's narrative, those newspapers were often mysteriously shut down. This lack of local reporting resulted in "secrecy around the battle" (Hannah, post-project reflection). Drawing from their own surprise at this outcome, students felt it was important to emphasize this for their audience, who would presumably be made up of people interested in West Virginia and its history but perhaps not familiar with the complexities of Blair Mountain. This team chose to juxtapose the two divergent narratives perpetuated by different types of media outlets and to provide context for why those narratives were so wildly different, drawing connections to modern controversies that intertwine media and politics. In this way, students shared multiple little narratives that exhibit viewers could interpret themselves.

In their exhibit rationale, the media team wrote: "Our final exhibit brings attention to the many discrepancies that came with a battle fueled by greed on the part of coal company owners and desperation on the part of West Virginia coal miners. It is always important to inspect and critique media coverage of large events and the Battle of Blair Mountain is no exception." This team chose to emphasize how media sources are powerful actors in how places and people are perceived because of students' own realizations within the project. Their skepticism—and that of their classmates—toward reliable secondary sources heightened their valuing of primary archival research and fostered the development of a more critical view towards the powers that document a place's history and tell its stories.

Outcome 2: Place-based archival projects illuminated the presence of less visible stakeholders

Another significant outcome of our project was attention to new actors in the stories that shaped student perceptions of West Virginia. Students emerged from their work more familiar with people that they had not initially considered to be part of the story of the event, including women, children, and Black and immigrant coal miners. This new knowledge was reflected in their exhibits, as they chose to emphasize not just the presence of these groups but their contributions to the events, offering audience members little narratives of the state's history that have largely been lost.

Out of nine student teams, three teams chose to research the role of women or families in coal camps. Most groups mentioned Mother Jones, a labor activist not unknown to labor histories; however, because labor histories tend to focus on the struggles of male workers, especially in physically intensive jobs like coal mining, students were intrigued to learn that women (beyond Mother Jones) were significant contributors to labor struggles in Appalachia throughout the last century (see Wilkerson). As one student wrote in her post-project reflection, "The common narrative (though uncommon itself) about the Battle of Blair Mountain usually regards the histories of the male laborers and the men on the front lines of the battle. In our research, we discovered an entire other realm of participation in the battle from an at-home or female perspective that is very valuable" (Allison). This value, however, was not easily found for these teams as they ran into archival silences, or "[gaps] in the historical record resulting from the unintentional or purposeful absence or distortion of documentation" ("Archival Silences", n.p.).

Since women were not viewed as central to the struggles by most documentarians of the Mine Wars, primary artifacts like photographs and journal entries showing their involvement were not as readily available. As a result, students relied heavily on oral histories and brief newspaper accounts to illuminate the importance of women in this specific series of events. One artifact that appeared in multiple student exhibits was a newspaper article titled "Logan County bristles with machine guns," with the following opening line: "Its men, gaunt and hollow-eyed from long periods without sleep, are commanding the ridges. Its women and children have manned field kitchens back of the front while big army trucks are rushing food and ammunition to the defenders in the front line" (*The Washington Times*, Washington, D.C.). Teams that included this article pointed to the material necessity of women and children in providing food and support to the miners and allies involved in the conflict—a necessity that is not reflected in many primary or secondary accounts of the Mine Wars. This example demonstrated to students the value of multi-faceted research approaches that might bring into focus previously unnoticed actors due to archival silences.

In addition to gender, race and ethnicity were other identity factors that led students to unexpected findings throughout their research. As Smith argues, whiteness dominates representations of Appalachia, including West Virginia, and that whiteness shapes widespread perceptions of rural occupations like coal mining. As a result, many historical accounts emphasize the plight of poor white workers—a group that has received a lot of attention in recent years in popular narratives about Appalachia

discussed earlier in this piece. Students working on this project, however, read primary accounts from miners that had recently immigrated from Eastern Europe and Italy as well as Black miners originally from the Deep South, complicating their perceptions of who might have been a coal miner in the 1920s.

One team that focused specifically on miners' organizing activities leading up to the Battle wrote in their exhibit rationale that to exclude background information about how the miners built connections across identity groups "risks boiling the Battle down to nothing more than a spontaneous fight involving men and rifles, when in reality, it was a conflict that consisted of years of struggle, and included high levels of organization and cooperation between different races, genders, and classes of people." That same group showcased photographs that showed Black and white miners posing together, as well as the lyrics to a song entitled "Solidarity Forever." This song was sung to the tune of "John Brown's Body," a song about abolitionist John Brown who incited a rebellion of enslaved people at Harper's Ferry, West Virginia in 1859. Including these specific artifacts that tie the Battle of Blair Mountain to larger historical narratives more well-known to exhibit audiences is a particular strategy that several student groups took on: assembling little stories and connecting them to cultural narratives through juxtaposition or refutation was a common approach across exhibits. Students made these choices, I believe, to foster the same surprise in audiences that they themselves had experienced after learning more about the diversity of coal towns in the early 20th century and to suggest that this historical event could offer a model for coalition-building today.

Outcome 3: Place-based archival projects invited deeper understanding of latent identity factors such as socioeconomic class

Because Blair Mountain is explicitly categorized as a labor uprising, socioeconomic class was an important concept from the start of this project; however, it soon became clear that many students were not initially familiar or even comfortable with conversations about class. Over the course of the project each team addressed class in some way in their exhibits, revealing a more nuanced understanding of how socioeconomic inequality shaped events related to Blair Mountain and ultimately served as a basis for coalition-building across multiple identity groups. Throughout their projects, students considered how dominant narratives tend to collapse different identities and in turn, sought out narratives that illuminate how identity shapes experience.

Part of this focus on socioeconomic class might be due to the readings we completed as a group, as many texts highlighted the role of class consciousness in building movements. A particular favorite among students was Abby Lee Hood's piece "The Battle of Blair Mountain was the largest labor uprising in U.S. History," part of *Teen Vogue*'s OG History series. Additionally, archival materials referenced the importance of class identity consistently. Many newspaper articles described the miners as "poor" or as "workers" and many physical materials were tied to class as well. Students were intrigued by the WVRHC's collection of scrip, or company-issued currency that miners could only redeem in company-owned stores. Students working on the "Life in

Company Towns" exhibit provided pictures of scrip and company stores juxtaposed with excerpts from oral histories from miners explaining how everything they bought was from a company store, at company-set prices. The team wrote on their page titled "Economic Control":

> Miners and their families were forced to be entirely dependent on coal companies. Living in company-owned housing and being paid in company-specific currency prevented many from being able to quit their jobs or move to another town (Wagner, 2011). They were forced to stay in the company town, where coal operators could continue making a profit.

This model, vastly different from the world-wide commerce that students today experience, illuminated the material impacts of class-based struggle. Students' framing of the model directly challenges romantic narratives about hardworking coal miners and benevolent companies—narratives that continue to circulate today.

For many students, the exploitation that miners faced demonstrated the links between place and class. One student wrote in their final reflection, "We knew that the miners were being taken advantage of from the mining companies, but we didn't know to what extent. We felt that we needed to give our audience a feel of how big and impactful this event was to West Virginia" (Cassidy). Echoing this sentiment, another student wrote in their survey response that they "gained a lot of respect for working-class Appalachia and got a better understanding of how the state got to where it is now." Instead of relying on simplistic narratives about West Virginia and surrounding areas that have a rich history of coal mining—a history that glorifies coal mining and other manual occupations—students gained a more critical understanding of that history. They emerged from the project with a deeper understanding of how corporate forces have historically disenfranchised the working class, troubling one-dimensional narratives that glorify capitalism and ignore corporate exploitation.

Outcome 4: Place-based archival projects encouraged students to contextualize relationships between artifacts, research, and their own histories

Providing students with the opportunity to wade through archival sources documenting events that took place near them offered new perspectives on their own connections to the project's subject matter. In this way, archival research helped students to position themselves in larger cultural narratives, including those that challenged dominant stereotypes. Repeatedly, students commented on their lack of familiarity with archival research and how they were learning to put archival materials into conversation with other sources, which was a different form of analysis than most had previously encountered.

As noted earlier, students ran into a number of archival silences that forced them to reconsider their plans as they developed their exhibits; but even as they found themselves wishing for certain artifacts that they couldn't access or that hadn't even been preserved, they embraced the challenge of contextualizing those materials via secondary research. As they sought to better understand the significance of the ar-

tifacts they *did* have access to, they found greater value in secondary accounts of the Battle as well. One survey respondent commented on the "wealth of artifacts out there that, while still remaining preserved, are beneficial to no one because they are not discovered and placed into the context of a narrative." Another student echoed this sentiment, saying that alone, the artifacts didn't initially mean much, "but after careful research I began to discover a lot of information." The storytelling lens of the project helped students to consider the relationships between different artifacts as they tried to create cohesive narratives that would guide audience members through their exhibits.

For several students, including many who had been born and raised in West Virginia, this project offered them the opportunity to reflect on their own identities and experiences and even to "revise" their sense of place, to use Carlo's words. Many students, either in their post-project reflections or in their survey responses, commented on how much they learned about West Virginia throughout the project. One response read, "It taught me a ton more information about my ancestors and relatives than I would have ever learned," signifying that students were thinking about their own personal connections to the events surrounding Blair Mountain. At the start of the project, one student asked if she could contribute primary sources to the WVRHC's archival collections, since her family possessed letters from her great grandfather (who was a child during the Mine Wars) talking about what he remembered from that period.

Some students shared very specific details in their feedback that referenced their own histories. One survey response read:

> I come from a small town in WV that was right by a lumber town (Lumberport, WV). There are also old coal mines boarded up randomly all over. Many of the places are on people's farm properties and they call them "the old mines"…I live within 15 minutes of an actual mine and can drive under the coal moving belts that extend across the roads. My grandfather also worked in the mines in and around my hometown.

Though this student's family history didn't necessarily connect with the Battle of Blair Mountain itself, their project had encouraged them to consider the connections between their familial histories and the photographs and other artifacts they were working with, finding parallels between what they were learning about and their own identities. Another student learned that their family lived on land associated with the Battle: "In fact, my Grandma currently lives on the Lens Creek Mountain, which I learned was part of the geography involved in the Battle of Blair Mountain. I have always loved West Virginia but learning about the richness of the history here always makes me love it more." This project urged students to learn more about not only the state's history, but their own, as well. They were able to identify little narratives—those in their own familiar histories as well as those hidden in the archives—and put them into conversation with larger, more dominant cultural narratives in ways that required exhibit audiences to reassess their own knowledge about labor histories.

Conclusion

This project was a huge undertaking that resulted in an incredibly valuable shared experience as students, myself, and the WVRHC worked toward a more nuanced understanding of West Virginia and its rich history—together. Our place-based archival project urged students to consider the importance of ethical storytelling as they sorted through primary artifacts in their quest to assemble accurate, nuanced narratives about the Battle of Blair Mountain and its legacy on labor history in West Virginia and beyond. Throughout the project, students reconsidered previously held notions about the state and reimagined their own connections to West Virginia and its history. They sought out little narratives that challenged dominant stories, laying them out beside one another and even weaving them together; they revised their sense of place as they recovered stories that presented a very different image of West Virginia than they were used to seeing and reimagined their own relationships to the state and its stories.

Many students originally from West Virginia commented on the fact that they had not been taught much about this labor history in primary or secondary school. Several student survey responses stated that while they knew that the coal mining industry had shaped the state's history, they did not know details of that history including "the poor conditions created by the coal mining industry." Some student responses stated explicitly that they had not previously received any instruction on these topics: "This project taught me a lot about the history of my state where high school education classes did not succeed in doing so" and "The amount of history and information that is archived shows to me how much rich history we have that isn't taught in schools." Interestingly, the comparison between what we discussed in class and their educational experiences in high school was a common refrain, presumably because of units that focused on West Virginia history in West Virginia high schools—albeit a sanitized, simplified version of the state's history.

Though it was not initially a stated outcome of this project, students' critical literacies—or awareness of the sociopolitical systems through which we live our lives and subsequent questioning of those systems (Vasquez, Janks, and Comber)—seemed to develop as well. As they read firsthand accounts of the Battle and examined newspaper articles detailing the ways that coal companies exploited miners and their families, students began to question their previously held beliefs about West Virginia and the region. For example, many West Virginians have connections to coal mining through family members or because of where they grew up, resulting in a shared sense of pride for coal communities. The coal industry has capitalized on that pride, framing it as pride for the industry as a whole—despite the realities of exploitation embedded in the industry's history. Two teams connected the historical events we learned about to the 2016 teacher's strikes in the state, noting the continued importance of collective action in the face of institutional power—especially in areas that are largely defined through one-dimensional narratives. Place-based archival projects are one method that writing instructors might consider in helping students to develop these literacy skills.

This increase in critical literacy resulted in not only a more nuanced understanding, but a greater sense of connection to place. Nearly every student who responded to the survey expressed feeling a greater emotional investment in West Virginia because of the project. One student wrote:

> It taught me so much, actually. I was a little shocked by how much I learned. It was so personally impactful too because I feel now that I am more proud of this silent past of our state more than anything I've read in the history books. It's also tremendously upsetting to me that most West Virginians know nothing about this truth.

While our client-based project could very easily have remained a project students completed in a classroom to practice skills they would need in their eventual careers, it seems to have had a deeper impact. Student work and responses suggested not only a re-imagination of their sense of connection to West Virginia, but a desire to educate others about the history—especially people in the state that have been affected by negative stereotypes, demonstrating an increased awareness of the material impacts that stories can have on communities.

By delving more deeply into a particular event with connections to local, state, and even national history, students honed their place-based literacy and related skills as they thought critically about the ways that storytelling shapes a place and its people. By recovering the stories of Blair Mountain, students reconsidered their own feelings towards the state and narratives that they had heard, revising their senses of place. Providing opportunities for students to sit with place through research and writing while simultaneously drawing on student knowledge about our shared places can be a transformative classroom experience. Ultimately, place matters—especially as we seek to build coalitions across our communities that embrace values of justice, equality, and care.

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Appendix

ENGL 303 Digital Storytelling Study Survey

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1 You are invited to participate in this research study related to the digital storytelling project in ENGL 303. The following information is provided in order to help you to make an informed decision whether or not to participate. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

You are eligible to participate because you are at least 18 years old and you are enrolled in a section of ENGL 303 in Spring 2021. Again, you must be 18 years old to be eligible for this study.

The purpose of this study is to better understand how digital storytelling projects can help students meet learning outcomes in multimedia writing. If you agree to participate, you will complete a brief survey. The information gained from this study may help us better understand how projects like this can serve as sites of learning.

Participation in this study will require approximately 5-10 minutes of your time. Your response will be anonymous, as your name will not be collected. All data will be held in confidence by the researcher in a secure file. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigators or the institution.

Once you have started the survey, even after you consent to participate, you may withdraw from the study by exiting the survey if you decide you no longer wish to participate. However, once you submit your survey, you cannot withdraw, as your responses are anonymous, and so the researcher would not be able to identify and delete your response. Your decision to respond to the survey or not will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Potential benefits of your participation may include a more thoughtful realization about learning outcomes and participatory experience related to digital storytelling and client projects. The risks associated with participating in this study are no greater than those experienced in everyday life.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please click "yes." Saying yes will take you to the first survey question.

Primary Investigator:
[Removed for peer review]

This project has been approved by the [institution's] Institutional Review Board.

- ○ Yes, I consent to participate in this survey.
- ○ No, I do not consent to participate in this survey.

Q2 Did this project help you meet the following objectives of the course? (Check all that apply.)

- ☐ Discuss key elements of multimedia writing, including document design, user experience, interface and platform politics, and distribution/circulation
- ☐ Articulate connections between different types of multimedia and different elements of their past and current uses
- ☐ Reflect thoughtfully on the ethical questions that living in a networked, digital world invites (i.e. intellectual property, credibility, aggression in online spaces, etc.)
- ☐ Create effective documents in a range of multimedia formats and on a variety of platforms
- ☐ Manage research and analysis-focused projects in order to produce projects ready for public circulation, individually and collaboratively

Q3 Have you done team/collaborative projects before?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Display This Question:

If Have you done team/collaborative projects before? = Yes

Q3A How was this project similar or different?

_____

Q4 Have you done remote projects before?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Display This Question:

If Have you done remote projects before? = Yes

Q4A How was this project similar or different?

_____

Q5 Have you done client-based projects before?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

Display This Question:

If Have you done client-based projects before? = Yes

Q5A How was this project similar or different?

_____

Q6 Have you done archival research before?

- ○ Yes
- ○ No

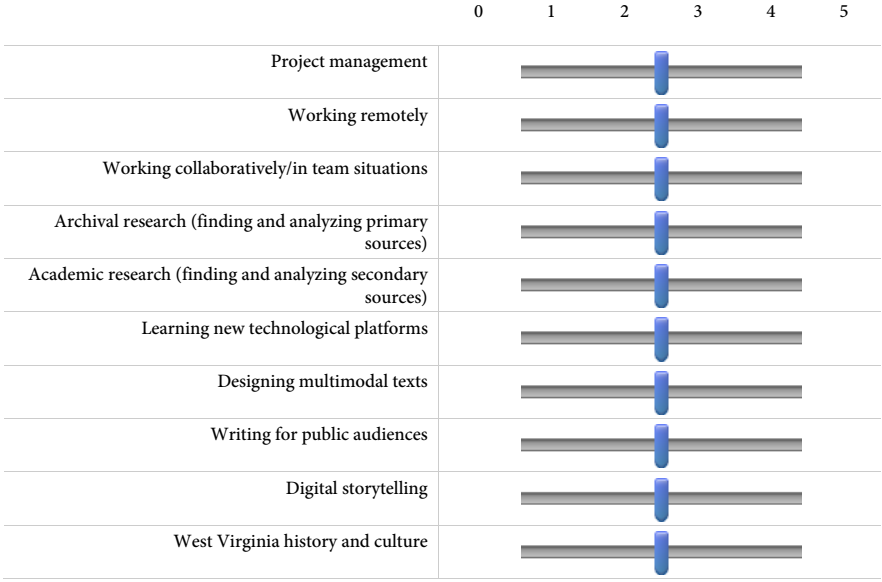
Display This Question:

If Have you done archival research before? = Yes

Q6A How was this project similar or different?

_____

Q7 Please indicate how you feel that your skills or knowledges in the areas noted below have changed as a result of this project, with 0 being no change at all and 5 being a significant amount of development.



Q8 Are there other skills or knowledges that you feel you have developed as a part of this project? If so, please note those below.

_____

Q9 Do you think other client-based projects, similar to this one, would be useful to implement in other Professional Writing and Editing courses?

- ○ Extremely useful
- ○ Very useful
- ○ Moderately useful
- ○ Slightly useful
- ○ Not at all useful

Q10 Please elaborate on your answer above.

_____

Q11 Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with this project?

_____

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Author Bio

Erin Brock Carlson is an assistant professor in the Department of English at West Virginia University, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in Writing Studies. Her current research uses participatory approaches to study the relationships between place, technology, and community, specifically in rural areas.