

Intertwining stories in place:
mine, theirs, ours

by

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(B.A., Berry College, 2001)

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I dedicate this work to my family.

*It is with you that I began this journey,
from you that I learned to be me,
and to you I will always return,
with love and gratitude.*

*Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace.
Jabez.*

*There was a s/t/a/r that danced,
through her, this was born.*

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Prologue:

When I began graduate school, I involved myself in a classroom outside the university as soon as possible to stay in touch with practice while I learned theory. Being a “show, don’t tell” tactile learner, I knew I needed to have contact with real students in real classrooms in order to keep myself grounded and focused. What started as one volunteer opportunity turned into two years of working with two very different alternative schools in Athens, Georgia.

One school is the punitive alternative school in Oconee County, Oconee Community School. Students are sent there for nine weeks to one semester, depending upon their offenses. The other school is a Performance Learning Center (P.L.C.), Classic City High School. Students who are accepted into the program can work at their own paces and catch up on credits if they have dropped out or fallen behind in traditional high schools. During the semester covered by this Applied Project, I taught art once a week, for thirty minutes, at each school.

While working, I realized that though the environments were different, the students and our interactions had much in common. I also realized that much of my teaching philosophy was right on when working with these students, who are commonly categorized as “at-risk.” I saw potential in the theories and practices of place-based educators for connecting at-risk students to curriculum and art-making. Most importantly, I recognized that my roles of student, teacher, artist, and researcher, and the activities and experiences therein, intertwine and influence each other.

As I moved forward in my graduate research and my volunteer teaching, I felt that I could not report on these experiences in my Applied Project in a purely linear, expository, academic format. I needed to do something more. As I negotiated my evolving roles -- a graduate student in art education, a volunteer art teacher at two alternative schools, an artist trying to find time to work, and a researcher trying to make sense of it all -- I wanted to more artfully render my “intertwining identity markers” (Gosse, 2008, p. 183). I also wanted the students, their school environments, and our interactions therein to come to life in stories that would engage the reader. When I read arts-based and narrative research (Barone, 2001; Behar, 2007; Hankins, 2003) I saw a potential format that would help me tell the stories more authentically. This handmade book tells some of those stories.

I received approval from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Georgia for research with human subjects for Fall semester of 2008. I continued to read theory, taught each week, wrote extensively, and gathered visual and verbal evidence of the projects. I included a good deal of this “data” in this final book presentation. The writing in the book progressed from a formal, expository style into a more narrative, lyrical style, as the content shifted from theory to practice to reflection. I wanted most of the book to show, not tell, how I tried to put a little theory into practice, investigated self and relationships with my students, and interwove text and image throughout my evolving inquiry. This inquiry is guided by the following questions:

- How might art education grounded in place help at-risk students better connect with themselves, others, their community, and the process of making art?
- In thirty-minute class periods, with limited supplies, what projects can we try that begin to investigate our relationships to place?
- What can I learn about myself, my teaching, and my relationships with students by writing as inquiry?
- If I allow that writing process to interact with my visual practice as an artist, what then might I learn?

The following quote also guided me:

Be tough, yet gentle; humble, yet bold; swayed always by beauty and truth.

–Kurt Hahn, founder of Outward Bound

I lovingly wrote these words into my quote book sometime during high school. I return to them often when I thumb through my overflowing, now tattered quote book for insight. The qualities Hahn espoused were expected in both his staff and their students, who learned by doing. These qualities continue to guide me, especially now, in my journey as a student, teacher, artist, and researcher. In telling the stories that follow, I hope to give voice to the experience of teaching boldly and humbly; trying to gently connect with tough students; and seeing my life beautifully and truthfully intertwined with my teaching.

trans_par_en_cy [trans-pair-uhn-see]

-noun, plural -cies.

1. Also, **trans_par_ence**. the quality or state of being transparent.
2. something transparent, esp. a picture, design, or the like on glass or some translucent substance, made visible by light shining through from behind (Random House, 2009).

Process Transparency:

Due to the non-traditional format of this Applied Project, I felt it necessary to give the reader a guide beyond the listed *Contents*. I wanted my process as a student, teacher, artist, and researcher to be clear for the reader, which in turn helped make it clearer to me. The section that follows gives an overview of each part of the book and the purposes and motivations therein.

Why a handmade book?

Books are the only kind of art you can sit in bed with in your pajamas.

– JoAnne Paschall, book artist and educator

There is an intimacy created between artist, book, and reader when one sits (or lies) down to engage with a handmade book. A book is not an art object that can be quickly or haphazardly created or consumed. Time must be taken by the reader to hold it close, turn the pages, and absorb the material within. This reflects the time taken by the artist to fold and sew paper, place text and image, and bind the book. Attention and care must be given, by both artist and reader, to the interrelationships among text and image, texture and movement, form and content. Though a book can sit stationary and be viewed and admired as a beautiful object, its full purpose and impact cannot be understood until one spends time inside and with it. This is similar to the way I feel about living, writing, and presenting the experiences that make up this Applied Project. This feeling is more than “don’t judge a book by its cover.” Rather, it is a desire to tell the story artfully and engage the reader in a more tactile, intimate, caring, aesthetic encounter with the story. I hope that by “artistically crafting the description of the situation so that it can be seen from another angle” (Eisner, 2008, p. 22), I can engage the reader in this journey.

How the book flows:

This book tells a story of inquiry that I have been engaged in specifically during the past year. However, it is part of a *living* inquiry and my “repetitive pattern of searching, not-

knowing, and re-searching” (Jeffers, 2005, p. 23) over the past several years. Thus, it presents intertwined stories of my teaching and learning experiences as a student, teacher, artist, and researcher examining “the elusive, the unsaid, places without names or coordinates” (Jeffers, 2005, p. 23). While the process of creating this work and the stories therein are nowhere near linear, I tried to present them to the reader as a progression from theory into practice into reflection. Thus, the book progresses from more academic, expository writing to more creative, lyrical writing. The beginning of the story is grounded in theory, in my reading and researching. It demonstrates the theories I discovered and then followed in the literature, which then fed into the teaching situations of which I was already a part. By reviewing influential literature and explaining my writing process first, I hope to set the stage for my teaching stories and reflections to unfold. The teaching stories transition from descriptions of the school environments into narrative accounts of actual classroom events. Following the teaching stories are vignettes about individual students, narrative glimpses into our classroom interactions and things I learned from them. Lastly, I present texts and images created in reflection time months after the actual classroom experiences. These *synchronicity works* aim to artfully render realizations I have as I let experiences in and out of the classroom interweave, respond to each other, and open up spaces for my mind to leap. These are not conclusions or results, but rather openings, spaces suggesting current understandings and future possibilities.

Positioning my work:

Although this is a non-traditional Applied Project, I felt it was important to include a review of pertinent literature to situate my work among place-based art educators. The review included here points out three main qualities that place-based education cultivates: a refocusing of attention, a re-thinking of relationships, and a merging of criticality and reflection. These qualities are among the things I learned not only from the literature, but also from my teaching experiences. The review also addresses possibilities for art education grounded in place, many of which inspired the projects related later in this book. Throughout the review, educators and theorists from several fields are represented to reflect the increasingly similar and intertwined discussions surrounding place.

Writing to understand:

After teaching each week, I sat down at my computer and wrote in my reflection journal. Knowing that this Applied Project would be an investigation of my experiences in both schools, I felt it was important that I make time to write shortly after teaching. Mostly, I wrote field notes, recorded the classroom activities, my plans, students' actions, my reactions and adjustments. I made "notes to self" for the next week and tried to reflect on my evolving understandings of my students and myself. Sometimes the writing led me into memories, and on especially serendipitous days, into "aha" moments. Often these "aha" moments were the result of striking resemblances between my memories of adolescence, and my current experiences teaching adolescents. Sometimes, they were the result of "collisions" (Behar, 2008, p. 63) between my life and work, in which personal memories, artistic struggles, and current teaching experiences joined and leapt into new realizations. I began to realize that writing more could help me wrestle with and try to understand more. I was beginning to write to find things out (Richardson, 1997).

Through writing, I realized that my experiences will inevitably intersect, intertwine, and collide, regardless of my efforts to keep "school" and "life" stories separate. I decided to boldly and humbly commit to "truth telling" (Jones/Olomo, 2008, p. 197), describing the places of collision to see what I could learn. The truth was that, despite my best intentions, my teaching and writing were not neat, tidy, logical progressions through well-planned steps. Rather, they were erratic, bouncing, leaping experiences that emerged, intertwined, and responded to each other. It felt messy, frustrating, and exhilarating at the same time. However, this was almost exactly the way I felt making art. I remembered that "lingering in moments of chaos and disorder" (Irwin, 2003, n.p.) worked well for me in the studio. Maybe it would continue to work in my writing if I let myself linger in the difficult moments. I decided that I couldn't expect my students to share themselves through their artwork if I wasn't willing to do the same. For a little while, this writing would be my art.

As I wrote in the "aha" moments, I remembered questions that Jenoure (2008) asked in her teaching process: "How can we tell those stories? Who do we want to tell them to? How will they be heard? What will happen to these stories once we tell them? Once we hear them ourselves?" (p. 160). The teaching stories unfolded, and so did personal memories. Hankins' (2003) words guided me as I wrote: "We will be able to hear the multiple voices of our children

only as well as how we listen to and give voice to our own lives” (p. 156). For me, that meant going back through my life and my educational journey to see places I’ve been and things I learned. Throughout my graduate program, I reflected upon and referenced events from my childhood, gaining insight about my teaching and learning. My perspective is shaped by my experiences. I will always be shaped by my childhood experiences and previous education, just as each individual classroom experience will be shaped by those before it. Thus, the section entitled, “My Story” is included to give the reader a brief overview of my educational influences, both in and out of the classroom. My story also outlines the path I traveled to reach the teaching experiences related in this book.

Additionally, if “what we see depends upon our angle of repose” (Richardson, 1997, p. 92), then the stories here describe my evolving insights shaped by my shifting viewpoints. As I conclude this project, I feel most dramatically shaped by my recent experience as both a student and teacher in Cortona, Italy. While living there, my angle of repose provided distance from theories and teaching stories, giving me space to write and make artworks anew. Some of the text and artworks presented here were created from leaps into that space. Thus, Cortona appears throughout the book as an additional interwoven experience.

Living inquiry is research that breathes;

it is in continuous movement and will not settle, certainly not into a linear pattern.

-Carol Jeffers (2005, p. 24)

Artifacts:

As art teachers, we are trained to document our students’ work on slides, film, and scanners. These images become artifacts of our teaching, proof that our students can produce work that we assign. When I was in my undergraduate program, I thought I might scream if I heard the word “artifact” one more time. Every artifact in my teaching portfolio had to be accompanied by an explanation and a reflection. Document, explain, reflect, repeat. It was not until I noticed that artifacts of my teaching experiences could, and often did, resemble mementos from my personal life that inspired artworks. As a collage-maker, I already saved travel memorabilia, postcards, concert tickets, ribbons, pieces of fabric, broken jewelry, and other

treasures to make art. Now I collected photographs of student work, sketches, notes jotted on various paper scraps, journal entries, and quotes. I had to shift my thinking about documenting my teaching experiences from a scientific task to be checked off the to-do list to a memory-saving artistic practice. Thus, there are many photographs in this work. I hope that they not only document the students' work and illustrate certain points that I make in the text, but I also hope that they might evoke memories or ideas in the reader, and bring him or her closer to my experiences.

This work also contains isolated quotes that are both my students' and mine, pulled from my journal, papers, interviews, and conversations. While I was writing this work, I re-read my teaching journal innumerable times and listened to taped interviews and conversations just as many times. While reviewing these resources, I halted several times at especially poignant lines, stopping to ponder the weight of the few words standing alone. I started compiling these quotes into a list, referring back to them periodically to see how they stood next to each other as well as alone. I realized that the sentiments expressed in the list of quotes covered a wide range of feelings I had and experiences I shared with my students. Some of the student quotes mirrored thoughts I had, but maybe didn't say as clearly, or at all. I also felt some of my quotes potentially mirrored student experiences. I wrote them on note cards without names, shuffled and re-read them. I delighted in the ambiguity and thought any of us could have said or written any of the lines. Thus, the quotes are presented anonymously, floated on single pages in between sections of text. These pages are intended to be resting places, moments for the reader to pause in reflection. They are distillations of complex and intertwined relationships, in which our words reflect each other's experiences, whether we know it or not when we say or write them.

Context: Two schools

There is a section in which the two school environments where I worked are described. This is to allow the reader to better understand the unique elements and parameters of each environment as well as the interaction of my experiences in both. Because there are as many similarities between the two as there are drastic differences, I felt it important for the reader to be given a chance to encounter them separately. However, I also wanted the reader to move through the stories of and reflections upon my experiences as intertwined, because they were.

The two schools, two groups of students, and me in my various roles, related in messily-interwoven layers of experience that influenced each other. Therefore, the two schools are not identified directly for the remainder of the work. Additionally, all student and faculty names have been changed. I did not want the reader to categorize or judge my experiences or the students based upon the locations. I wanted to break patterns and disrupt assumptions about the nature of alternative schools and students. Most importantly, I wanted the students' voices to be heard without labels and categories. I wanted their voices and mine to intermingle, giving the reader a collage of learning interactions.

Teaching stories: Place-based projects

This section recounts ways in which I attempted to bring place-based educational theory into practice in my teaching. Three teaching stories are presented in this section: projects based on postcards, maps, and photography. Included in each story are my inspirations, with support from related literature, my intentions and reflections, and narrative accounts of classroom interactions. My writing was influenced by the way Hankins (2003) relates her classroom stories to theory and her evolving understandings, as illuminated by her clear writing process. I admire the way in which she leads the reader through the entire book, explaining her teaching, learning, writing, and researching in clear, vivid detail. As Hankins did, I relied heavily on my teaching journal, pulling most information directly from it. Many sections were written very closely to the way in which they were written the day of the experience. The dialogue was written as close to direct quotes as possible, with some quotes pulled from taped conversations. To give the students' authentic voice, spelling and grammar were not corrected. In the narrative sections, I shifted the verb tense to present tense to bring the reader into the moment of classroom interaction. The narratives also begin the transition from a largely expository writing style into a more lyrical style, setting the stage for the works to follow.

Vignettes:

Moving beyond the teaching stories to illuminate interactions and relationships with specific students, this section presents five vignettes. The writing of these vignettes was inspired

by various sources (Barone, 2001; Behar, 2007) but specifically by Beattie (2007) and Kim (2006), both wrote of experiences in alternative schools. Both authors note a lack of presence of the voices of at-risk students from alternative schools in educational research. To begin to remedy this, they present vignettes, lengthy direct quotes, and narratives from the students to truly amplify their voices in the literature. The vignettes in this section are glimpses of individual students I knew and lessons I learned from my relationships with them. These stories are mined from small moments in which I felt connected to the students through our interactions and their artworks. The writing is accompanied by images of the students' artworks, bringing the artwork into dialogue with my memories. Again, I wrote back into my "aha" moments, reminded by Hankins (2003) that the telling of moments makes them important.

Synchronicity works:

*Chance is always powerful. Let your hook always be cast;
in the pool where you least expect it, there will be a fish. - Ovid*

I realize that my life and work are inextricably intertwined. Telling the stories in this Applied Project was part research, part experience, and part synchronicity, which tends to leap across the various roles that I have as a student, teacher, artist, and researcher. Jung theorized synchronicity as "an acausal connecting principle" (Jung, 1973), an ineffable, personally meaningful coincidence. For as long as I can remember, I have been attentive and open to insights made possible through juxtaposed occurrences. Like many artists, I keep books, images, music and other inspirations around me, allowing and even encouraging them to influence and resound off each other in my work. Though trusting and following insight revealed through synchronicity is a process I engaged with as an artist, I didn't have a name for it until I read *The Artist's Way*. Author Julia Cameron suggests that openness to synchronicity is an essential behavior for artists. She insists that we more readily believe in an unresponsive universe than a responsive one that reflects back our experiences and supports our creativity (Cameron, 2002). First in my studio practice, then in my teaching and reflection, and now in my research and writing, I opened up to the possibilities and insights offered by juxtaposed occurrences and the feelings therein.

Thus, this section of works is a reflection of that opening, as I allowed my interwoven experiences over the past year to render new artworks of image and text. Sometimes these openings were shockers, big “aha’s” that seemed to come out of the blue. It is only upon following a trail of clues or cues that I began to understand where the connection may have occurred. Other times, I purposefully revisited a visual or literary cue to see how it interacted with my experience at the moment. I sought new insight through reexamining and reweaving past and present. Thomas (2004) similarly relates her arts-based research process to her poet’s positioning and artist’s stance in the world, which require her to negotiate the interplay of text and image in her work. The “double imaging” (Springgay & Irwin, 2005) presented here follows the lead of *a/r/tography* in that it is not intended to illustrate static meanings, but rather to interconnect and grow new meanings. In *a/r/tography* the / mark represents contiguity (Irwin & Springgay, 2008) or a closeness and touching of the roles of artist/researcher/teacher. The interplay of image and text presented here is similarly an exploration of the in-between spaces, the synchronous spaces that are opened when my various roles share and relate experiences.

To clarify, while I am influenced by theoretical *a/r/tography*, I do not claim to be doing *a/r/tography* here, for several reasons. First, the roles of artist/researcher/teacher represented in the term *a/r/tography* lack the significant role of student, which I will always claim to be, first and foremost. Second, one of the stated goals of *a/r/tography* is to “open up conversations and relationships” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. 118) as well as possibilities. However, these openings are usually discussed as losses, shifts, tears, and ruptures (Springgay, et. al, 2005), all of which connote emptiness and negativity to me. I prefer to think of the / spaces as openings full of positive potential. In my experiences with at-risk students and the writing that results, I am more successful working in prosperity, rather than scarcity, focusing on the possibilities in small moments.

After much research, reading, recording, and drafting, I worked these past two years into a pile of material and myself into a frenzy. After months of time and thousands of miles of distance from these teaching experiences, I found space in my mind to reflect. It was then that I revisited moments of synchronicity to see what I could make of them. Like Thomas, “I am stilled in the silence of reflection” (2004, p. 183).

I need to do this, but I don't know how.

po_si_tion [puh-zish-uhn]

–verb (*used with object*)

1. to put in a particular or appropriate position; place.
2. to determine the position of; locate (Random House, 2009).

Introduction: I went to the woods

My father is an environmental scientist in his career and a spiritual, curious naturalist in his life. With him, I spent much of my youth learning about the world around me, learning about the bigger picture of life through the intimate processes of, and relationships amongst living things. I was fortunate to have many diverse outdoor educational experiences throughout my schooling, both formal and informal. Rappelling a rock face for the first time changed my life by showing me that I need not fear, but respect and listen to the natural environment in which I found myself. As they say in *Outward Bound*, I had more in me than I thought. In addition to my personal moments of accomplishment and clarity, I witnessed many others changed dramatically through challenging and humbling outdoor experiences. A dear friend from middle school gained sobriety and a new life path through a rehabilitation program grounded in a relationship with the natural world. To this day, nearly fifteen years later, his experiences there resonate outward to others, as his life exemplifies a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all things. To be humbled and empowered in the same moment is a constant in my understanding of human relationships with the natural world.

As an art teacher of at-risk high school students, I currently wrestle with ways to teach so that my students feel that their experiences matter. I would like for them to feel that they can view and participate in their environments in many ways. I would like to teach art in a way that investigates and illuminates the interconnectedness of all things, helping my students gain new visions of their place in the world, in both its physical location and their multiple roles within it.

I have a hunch that place matters deeply to human identity, growth, and relationship. My students continue to demonstrate the vital importance of place through their work. In their artwork, I see not only the places they inhabit by choice or rule, but the power relationships inherent in those places. Some students inhabit an alternative school by choice, to work at their own paces, receive support, and graduate. Others inhabit an alternative school by rule, serving a sentence as punishment, going through the motions of the school day within a confined space and stringent regulations. I see expressions of both freedom and powerlessness in relation to place in my students' work. Combining my experiences, the perceived needs of my students, and an interest in the possibilities of art education grounded in theories of place, I undertook the investigation that follows with this general question in mind:

What can an art teacher who is concerned with interconnectedness learn from place-based education?

Place-based Education: Theorized Globally, Defined Locally

Place-based education has emerged in the past ten years as a new framework for theorizing and implementing educational strategies that promote consciousness of, attention to, and relationship with place. What is a *place*? A place is a space with meaning, or “a piece of the whole environment which has been claimed by feelings” (Gussow, in Gruenewald & Smith, 2008, p. 5). Place-based education is theorized within a global context, embraces a holistic worldview, and recognizes complex ecological relationships amongst living and non-living things. The concepts of interconnectedness and interdependence are at the heart of place-based educational theory and practice. In their most recent work, Gruenewald and Smith (2008) insist that human decisions in this century must come to be based upon knowledge of interdependence, “a lived experience of all people in all places” (p. xxi).

Most place-based literature discusses with urgency a need for ecological knowledge and action guided by an understanding of interdependence. Since the early 1990’s, the literature has discussed growing ecological crises, economic globalization, technological dependence, and homogenization of both places and people through standards-based education (Gruenewald, 2003; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Orr, 1992; Sobel, 1996). These immense trends are interconnected from the local to the global level, and for the purpose of this discussion, considered within the context of American schooling practices. David Orr made clear the need to examine education’s role in local and global well-being when he wrote, “the ecological crisis represents, in large measure, a failure of education” (1992, p. x). Through education, all of which is environmental, students learn their relationship to the natural world by what is included or excluded, explicitly or implicitly taught.

Place-based educators recognize the power of schools and communities to enculturate students into ways of thinking and being in the world through the very structure of school spaces, curriculum, teaching practices, and connections (or lack thereof) to the community. Place-based educators suggest a new paradigm for education based in interconnectedness and interdependence, and seek practices that link schools and their inhabitants to the larger

community, both locally and globally. As Gruenewald and Smith (2008) state, place-based education is part of a larger social movement called “the new localism” (p. xiii) in its efforts to “reconnect the process of education, enculturation, and human development to the well-being of community life” (p. xvi). The world crises that Orr and others discuss can begin to be addressed through education that is grounded here on the earth, in diverse local places, that can cultivate attentive, caring relationships among communities.

Common threads: Weaving theories together

For the purpose of this discussion, I will attempt to pull out certain common threads that are essential to place-based education as a whole, and pertinent to my particular area of interest – teaching art to at-risk adolescent students.

Place-based education is grounded in the local. Thus it cannot be practiced or researched in a sweeping, standardized manner, completely opposite of the educational culture in which Americans currently find themselves. In an often-cited article, Smith (2002a) explains, “because place-based education is by its nature specific to particular locales, generic curricular models are inappropriate” (p. 587). However, Smith identifies common elements amongst place-based educational models, including:

- Immediate phenomena grounds the curriculum
- Students create rather than consume knowledge
- Students’ questions and concerns are central
- Teachers are co-learners and guides
- Walls between school and community are permeable (Smith, 2002a, p. 593).

Smith’s elements echo themes that are present throughout the literature and point toward three major shifts in education. First, these elements suggest a refocusing of *attention* – to places, to students, and to the communities of which they are a part. Second, these elements suggest a serious re-thinking of *relationships* in schooling – among students, between students and teachers, between classrooms and communities, and among ways of learning and kinds of knowledge. Third, they suggest the cultivation of *critical reflectiveness*, as we attend to our surroundings and relationships.

Examining these elements within the current standards-based testing culture of American schooling, it is easy to see how vastly different, even radical, place-based education might be. There is some discussion in the literature on the possibility of place-based education within the current educational climate (see Gruenewald, 2005; Jennings, et al, 2005). However, a shift toward place-based education requires a shift in thinking about the nature of schooling and learning that challenges the current paradigm. Orr (1992) illustrates this:

Schooling has to do with the ability to master basic functions that can be measured by tests. Learning has to do with matters of judgment, and with living responsibly and artfully, which cannot be measured so easily...Postmodern education has to do with the integration of schooling and active learning. (p. xi)

What could students learn if we cultivated attention, relationships, and critical reflectiveness?
Might place-based education help us all live more responsibly and artfully?

Attention: Sensitivity to our surroundings

The seasons and all their changes are in me.

– Henry David Thoreau

Thoreau, a favorite writer among outdoor educators of all kinds, went to the woods to live *deliberately* (Thoreau, 1854), to pay close attention to his surroundings and his place in the world. *Walden* is an experiment in attention to place. When place-based educators like Gruenewald (2002) and Orr (1992) reference Thoreau, they are not only using his beautiful prose to call attention to place, they are making a statement about the power of our unique, local surroundings to teach us, if we pay attention. Schools can feel diametrically opposed to “unique” or worthy of careful attention. In schools, we often find ourselves surrounded by concrete, tile, steel and windows (if we’re lucky) that geometrically enclose rows of classrooms and rows of desks. We are apt to become indifferent to place when everything looks the same. As Orr (1992) states, “Indifference to place is a matter of attention” (p. 104).

Paying attention to our surroundings, be they man-made or natural, is the first step toward more conscious living in the places we inhabit. Hutchison (2004) states, “Our sense of place

both empowers and constrains how we approach, utilize, and value the spaces that surround us” (p. 17). If we begin by attending not only to the physical places around us, but our interactions within them, we may be able to move beyond the assumption that our environment is uninteresting or separate from learning. Attending to our environment and each other can begin to open our understanding of interconnectedness. Kemp (2006) makes a case for *curriculum as environment*, defining environment as “the interconnectedness of communication, physical place, sociality of individuals, and culture” (p. 129). He posits, “a curriculum that starts with a place and expands to the world would enable students to understand each better” (p. 140). In agreement with Kemp, I will use the word *environment* as he does for the remainder of this document.

Gruenewald (2008) urges educators to “inspire in learners an appreciation of beauty and wonder, for it is through the experience of beauty and wonder that we risk opening ourselves to others and the world” (p. xx). Art educators are familiar with this dynamic, in which aesthetic experiences can be deeply moving, challenging, and inspiring. Outdoor educator Knowles (1992) calls this *geopiety*, or reverence for sacred natural places. Graham (2008) and his students investigate the nature of sacred places by going out into their community to document, through sketches and photographs, both beauty and filth, harmonious and harmful relationships. The students’ visual assignments required them to attend to their everyday surroundings in an entirely new way. Similarly, environmental educator Auer (2008) and his students use sensory awareness and intense observation when they visit sites to “read the landscape” (p. 8) for human interaction. Auer suggests that these interactions break down boundaries between observer and observed and “awaken long dormant sensory experiences of nature” (p. 11) which are used to learn environmental concepts in a more embodied manner. Auer (2008) notes the importance of sensory perception in child development and the acuity with which young children engage in their world. Auer and Graham both seek a re-awakening of this attention in older students, which is pertinent to my work with high school age students.

Inside and outside our classrooms, there is a wealth of knowledge to be discovered if we pay attention. If we begin to attend to our surroundings and read the landscape for its unique qualities, we may inspire a sense of *geopiety*. We may begin to cultivate sensitivity toward both our environment and its inhabitants. By relating to places, *both* sacred and everyday, we may come to relate more openly to others.

Relationship: Ways of knowing place and each other

Place-based education “seeks to extend learning beyond the walls of the school...strengthen children’s connection to others, to their region, to the land” (Graham, 2007, p. 377). This sense of connection runs throughout the literature and seeks to engage students and communities in authentic learning relationships in the places they inhabit. Smith (2002a) points out that schools often seem to separate students from their communities and their roles in them. He states, “Alienation is often the consequence of the absence of experiences that confirm our value to the people with whom we share our lives” (Smith, 2002a, p. 593). This potential alienation is a reality for many at-risk students who, through various circumstances (among them family instability and responsibilities, economic hardship, addiction, and discipline issues) find themselves at odds with traditional schooling, estranged from the place where they should be most accepted and supported. Swaminathan (2004) discusses this placeless feeling in at-risk students at length in her study of an alternative school setting. The author discusses “school membership” (as theorized by Wehlage) and its lack of validity with at-risk students. According to Swaminathan, “place attachment” (p. 39) is a more powerful framework for investigating this population. This case study is especially pertinent to my work and provides many helpful insights as well as an exemplary use of vignettes to illuminate emerging themes.

Similarly, Kemp (2006), a high school teacher in Florida, notes the displacement of students’ actual lived knowledge from schools driven to teach to the standardized tests. He urges educators to reflect on what students actually know:

We need to make education relevant to the students. We need to help them connect to something beyond themselves. We need them to be active members of the community. Only then can we say that we have educated them. (p. 140)

It is absolutely necessary in our current educational culture to re-think the importance of relationships in school -- among students, between students and teachers, between classrooms and communities, and amongst ways of learning and kinds of knowledge -- by examining our relationships to place.

Orr (1992) makes the distinction between *residing* in and *inhabiting* a place. Residents stay close to manmade environments, invest little and know less about the place in which they

live. They need only “cash and a map” (p. 130). Inhabitants, however, know a place intimately, wear evidence of it, and maintain a “mutually nurturing relationship” (p. 130) with it. Inhabiting a place or remaining “a local” could be criticized for limiting one’s scope of experience. However, place-based educators insist that valuing the *local* teaches invaluable lessons about relationship and interconnectedness that can extend into larger contexts (Ball & Lai, 2006; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Orr, 1992). Developing relationships to unique local places may help students recover from the standardized testing culture that urges them to “participate in a global economy that is often individualistic, unsustainable, and inequitable” (Graham, 2007, p. 376).

In addition to the testing culture, Smith (2002a) discusses other challenges facing place-based educators. He points out that teachers must become *creators* rather than *dispensers* of curriculum, view students as valuable members of a community, and become co-learners with them. These shifts challenge traditional relationships amongst the members of a classroom or school. Several examples of teacher-student co-learning are described at length by Gruenewald and Smith (2008) and Sobel (2004). Most of the place-based endeavors discussed are the result of partnerships, teams, and community collaboratives, which bring students into close relationships with the places and people around them. Investigating and addressing local issues together, students and teachers can form strong relationships to place and each other.

Throughout Gruenewald and Smith’s (2008) book, *Place-Based Education in the Global Age*, most of the contributors write as practitioner inquirers, writing in a narrative style about their experiences as place-based educators. Throughout their stories, these authors and practitioners use first person voice and collective pronouns like “we” and “us” to indicate that they are learning alongside their students (See Graham, Sorensen, Senechal, in Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). The community featured within each chapter is given a voice, as each author relates the story of a project and provides a local definition of place-based education. From Arizona to Alaska to Massachusetts, the book provides diverse examples of place-based education working within and for marginalized communities. The narrative style of these works, and the clear voices of co-learners, inspired much of the writing that follows in this Applied Project.

Knapp (2005) encourages educators to seek and teach for an *I-Thou* (as theorized by Buber) connection to the land in which they work. According to Knapp, outdoor educator Aldo

Leopold's life and writing are exemplary of an *I-Thou* relationship to the land. Analyzing Leopold's seminal work, *A Sand County Almanac and sketches here and there* (1949), Knapp creates a list of ten "ways of knowing nature" (p. 281-2). These include:

wondering and questioning, knowing local history, observing seasonal changes, listening intently, counting and measuring, empathizing with and personifying nature, connecting elements in cycles, finding beauty, seeking solitude for reflection, and improving land health. (p. 281-3)

Most of these "ways of knowing" have in common a purposeful, close attention to one's surroundings and an effort to record and reflect upon one's relationship to them. Together, Leopold and Knapp present useful guides for educators beginning to co-learn with students ways of attending to and being in relationship with place. By investigating place and re-thinking our relationship to it and others, we can begin to ask questions of the larger contexts of which we are a part.

Critical Reflectiveness: What Then?

When we are "ecologically literate", that is, when we observe nature carefully and are conscious of our actions therein, we must always ask, "What then?" (Orr, 1992). A final theme throughout the literature on place-based education is the cultivation of criticality and reflection, which I combine to critical reflectiveness. This mode of thinking requires us to move beyond critical deconstruction and lamenting the problems of the world, to reflection upon our places, relationships, and possibilities. We can and should question the way things are, but also ask, *what then?*

By attending to the very structure of schooling environments, we can begin to question how we are being shaped by the places in which we spend our days. Smith (2002a) points out, "In fundamental ways, our instructional and curricular decisions and practices violate the way our species learned how to negotiate the world prior to the Industrial Revolution" (p. 586). Does this mean we should completely scrap the school building and sit outside in the dirt? Not necessarily, but we can critically reflect with our students upon the spaces, man-made and natural, with which we interact. Hutchison (2004) presents an extensive discussion of

technology in schools, urging educators to examine the role schools are being asked to take in the “massive change from firsthand contact to virtual worlds” (p. 10). Technology provides levels of interface between individuals and places, potentially creating layers of separation. However, technology also provides for access to information and interactions that might not otherwise be possible in the “real world.” As Hutchison (2004) points out, the lexicon of the Internet has always used concepts of place to “make the new familiar and connect emerging technologies to place constructions in the physical world” (p. 119). Examples include: *navigation, cyberspace, information superhighway, web sites, chat rooms, travel, surf*, and more recently, *Myspace*. While the virtual world does pose a threat to human interaction and relationship with the real world (Louv, 2005), it too may be worthy of consideration as a place through critical reflection upon its growing role in our lives.

Gruenewald has contributed greatly to discussion of criticality in place-based education (2003a, 2003b; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008). His article, “The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place”, clearly delineates the discourses of critical pedagogy and place-based theory, while making clear the ways in which they can support and expand each other. This work moves place-based education into the folds of critical postmodern discourse that blurs boundaries and interweaves disciplines. In another piece, Gruenewald (2003a) discusses “marginality” as a “metaphorical/material concept” (p. 631) and suggests learners “become more conscious of the spatial dimensions of social relationships” (p. 633). He invites educators to engage students in investigations of the margins, both literal and figurative. Through practices such as natural history and cultural journalism (see also Graham, 2007, 2008), learners should ask: *Where are the margins? How have they been constructed? Who made them? Is the margin a viewpoint I can choose?* This type of critically reflective activity is especially pertinent in work with at-risk populations who often exist at the margins of schools. As Smith (2002a) indicates, “such students remain on the margins of school in part because of their unwillingness to accept the pronouncements of teachers about what is or is not valuable knowledge” (p. 587). By questioning places, including the margins, we may empower students to define their own places.

Of particular interest to educators at all levels, Gruenewald (2008) critically examines cultural studies and the concept of diversity with reference to place. In our current school culture it seems “cultural diversity” mandates are often plugged into curriculum with little reference to local knowledge or issues. Gruenewald (2008) notes any and all cultural developments are

imbedded in the environment, which consists of “all the diverse ecological places that make possible any cultural formation, any identity, and any idea” (p. 144). However, the environment may be marginalized within the current trends of discourse and teaching in cultural studies, which focuses on *difference*. Ecological studies, on the other hand, focuses on *relationships* and *interdependence*. Gruenewald (2008) refers to place as “ground zero – where culture and environment come together” (p. 147) and suggests place-based education can expand the discourse of both cultural studies and ecological studies, moving toward a balance between the concepts of *difference* and *relationship*. By being critically reflective upon our own teaching, we can examine the various educational agendas, hidden or not, that we have and that may be influencing our students’ understanding of interconnectedness. We should always ask ourselves: If I teach *this*, in this *way*, *what then?* In 1992, Orr eloquently urged educators to move toward a postmodern educational agenda:

Education in the modern world was designed to further the conquest of nature and the industrialization of the planet. It tended to produce unbalanced, underdimensioned people tailored to fit the modern economy. Postmodern education must have a different agenda, one designed to heal, connect, liberate, empower, create, and celebrate. Postmodern education must be life-centered. (p. x)

Central to place-based education are the elements of attention, relationships, and critical reflectiveness as we consider our interconnected lives and the nature of the places we inhabit.

Art Education in Place: Toward Interconnectedness

Gruenewald (2003a) notes, “People are capable of perceiving places and learning from that direct experience...[but] our ability to perceive places can be either *thwarted or fostered by educational experience*” (p. 625, emphasis mine). While intended for a discussion of place-based education in general, this statement feels particularly potent for art educators. We work in perception and attention, knowing that what we see and experience in the world becomes part of our visual memory, from which we draw resources to make art. Eisner (2002) explains that work **in the arts teaches** “attention to relationships” (p. 75) as well as ways to perceive and experience the world aesthetically.

Art educators are most likely familiar with the student lament, “I don’t have any *ideas!*” Could it be that students are lacking in ideas partially because their supply of sensory experiences is sparse? How can students learn to perceive and experience the world aesthetically if they are otherwise not taught to even consider it? Scrutinizing current educational practice in attention to the outside world, Gruenewald (2003a) states:

If, as educators, we continue to keep ourselves and our students from [natural] experiences, we will remain complicit in constructing our own impoverishment by contributing to perceptual, cultural, and biological extinctions that we may already lack the observational skills to notice. (p. 638)

Considering the dubious status of arts education in schools, art educators may be hesitant to consider another theoretical framework, what might look like a new “movement” called place-based education. However, the concerns and central themes of place-based education align with important central principles in art education – perception and attention, relationships and interconnectedness, and critical reflectiveness. By attending to our surroundings, to place, more purposefully, we may further our work in the arts. As Graham (2007) explains, “[When] teaching becomes responsive to ecology and local culture...artmaking becomes socially aware, reflective, and transformational” (p. 376).

For over twenty years, art critic and theorist Suzi Gablik (1984, 1991; see also Lacy, 1995) has urged the art world toward a new paradigm, one that embraces interconnectedness and works for societal improvement. In *The Reenchantment of Art* (1991), she elaborates on this paradigm shift:

I don’t think that either art or artists are what will save the world. Only a new way of being can do that – one that knits people together through an inspired ethos of generosity and caring, and a return to the root idea of what it means to make value-centered, moral choices...the fundamental problem in the West today is the illusion of autonomy. It fails to recognize the interconnectedness of everyone and everything. And it ignores the well-being of the whole. (p. 17)

It is no coincidence that many art educators advocating for place cite Gablik in their work (Blandy & Hoffman, 1993; Garoian, 1998; Graham, 2007, 2008). By deconstructing modernism’s hold on the art world and proposing an entirely new way to think about and make

art, Gablik's work has paved the way for art educators to make place central to the curriculum. The following are examples from the field of art education, in which place is central to investigations of art-making and meaning making.

Blandy and Hoffmann (1993) suggest that art educators should expand their notions of community to "include a bioregional perspective...[and] to teach students about art in a way that promotes an understanding of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all things" (p. 28). Echoing the sentiments of many place-based educators, Blandy and Hoffman also request a shift to a "holistic worldview" (p. 28) and suggest that art-making can be central to breaking down human/nature dichotomies and understanding interconnectedness.

Similarly, Gradle (2007) also asks art educators to "expand and deepen all areas of concern" and help students "conceptualize patterns of relating" (p. 407). She stresses the importance of relationship, or "relational knowing" (p. 396) in understanding place and identity through an ecological lens. Utilizing performance art as a medium, Gradle's students investigate their definitions of and relationships to place through their "lived understandings" (p. 396). Vignettes of several students are presented to illustrate evolving meaning making within the context of the performance project. A performance approach to art-making as research is promising for other art educators seeking to utilize various art forms in exploring place meanings. As place is an embodied understanding, and art-making is a embodied activity, performance art could be an especially insightful method.

Graham (2008) utilizes an engaging and accessible narrative style that illuminates theory through his students' stories. Graham begins with his personal journey as an artist and moves through philosophy of "sacred places" (p. 33) to set the stage for his project: exploring "landscape, wildness, personal dialogue with nature, and our connections to the community" (p. 35). What follows is a thorough description of plans, activities, student reflections and work, and the evolving understandings of both teacher and students. Graham's writing makes place-based education in the art room feel very real and very possible. This piece, in combination with his 2007 article in *Studies in Art Education*, inspire me to strive for my own engaging approach to place through art education that is relevant to my students' needs. Drawing on sentiments expressed by Gablik (1991), Graham (2007) posits:

Art education can move from the important, but limited, notion of art being solely about personal expression toward a vision of teaching that engages students in a reflective social process with the larger community. (pp. 387-8)

While acknowledging the challenges of contemporary culture, Graham insists that attention to students' interests and local concerns can engage them in authentic learning that "blur[s] boundaries between artmaking, social critique, scientific inquiry, and activism" (p. 379). Acknowledging this blurring of boundaries may be a first step in engaging students in the kind of challenging, multi-disciplinary inquiry that critical, place-based art education suggests. Especially useful for teachers, Graham (2007, 2008) suggests several methods of inquiry including natural history, cultural journalism, and visual culture – which manifest themselves in projects like observational drawing, map-making, photo collage, reflective writing, and art criticism. The examples provided in Graham's work make the somewhat abstract theories of place-based education more concrete for classroom teachers.

Presenting a more critical view, Garoian (1998) and Lai and Ball (2002) discuss forms of objectification and marginalization of place, as explored through art forms in the classroom and community. Garoian (1998) identifies five landscape metaphors that have been inherited from the Western canon and continue to objectify the natural world. These are: pictorial space, the system of linear perspective, the sublime landscape, the mapping impulse, and the machine (p. 245). He notes that what we teach and how we teach it are "inextricably linked" (p. 254) and examines ecological theory to point art educators toward a more empathic, relational pedagogy, engaging students' experiences and environmental perspectives. By identifying and discussing these metaphors, teachers can help students see the potential objectification of the natural world in the most accepted and traditional art forms and lessons. Additionally, we can expand such inquiry to include critical reflection upon the teachings of mass media about the natural world.

Lai and Ball (2002) investigate a "socio-ecological theory of place" (p. 47) with relation to potential uses of visual culture and cultural studies in art education. Their ethnographic study of one family's yard art investigates issues of recycling, aesthetics, consumerism, social status, and the uniqueness of art made in place. Lai and Ball (2002) urge educators concerned with place to "not restrict considerations only to those works conventionally considered art proper" (p. 64). This work could provide a model for art educators seeking to investigate other unique,

local, and often marginalized art forms such as graffiti, gardening, or street performance. Most significantly, the ethnographic approach engages the reader in a story while illuminating larger issues pertinent to visual culture studies, art education, and place-based education. It is this ethnographic approach that leads me to the following examples of engaging, artful, literary works that explore intimate experiences of place.

Artful Writing: Attending to place and relationships

Though several researchers have begun to utilize narrative and personal reflections in their discussions of place-based education, (Gradle, 2007; Graham, 2008; Knapp, 2008; Knowles, 1992) the examples that follow move beyond vignettes or first-person accounts to more engaging uses of literary style that vividly explain the possibilities, challenges, and long-term effects of learning *in place*. Considering the organic, evolving, local nature of place-based education, the following examples fit, even expand, the paradigm in which place-based educators and researchers are working. If place-based education is about “learning to be where we are” (Smith, 2002), through attention to interconnectedness, building relationships, and engaging communities, the following authors demonstrate this learning through their vivid, fascinating stories of attention, relationships, and engagement with place.

Gruenewald (2002) interweaves his educational life story with the life and philosophy of his “first critical intellectual mentor” (p. 2), Henry David Thoreau. From his first encounter with *Walden* in high school, through his “current experiment” (p. 17) in place-based education, Gruenewald demonstrates the profound influence that Thoreau has in his life and the powerful lessons all educators can learn from his writings. Gruenewald illuminates three teaching themes in Thoreau’s work: experimentation, wholeness, and the primacy of place, connecting them to his own journey toward theorizing and implementing place-based education.

Starkly different from his other writing (Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008), this piece takes the reader on an emotional journey through the author’s educational explorations – both failures and successes – in a powerful and evocative voice. Similar in style to narrative, arts-based, and ethnographic research (Barone, 2001; Behar, 2007; Hankins, 2003), this piece strives to break out of traditional educational discourse and honestly recount a personal story. Gruenewald explains:

Educational discourse, I feel, is too often an impersonal, second-hand account of policies, practices, and outcomes that are far removed from anyone's actual life experience...When analyzing education and envisioning alternatives, it is important for me to name what I have actually lived. (p. 8)

Similarly naming what she has lived, Sullivan (2000) presents "poetry and stanzaic prose" (p. 1) to examine the nature of attention in education, through autobiographical accounts of her own learning, teaching, and researching. She states, "My autobiography is largely an autobiography of attention – learning it, teaching it, discovering its role in research. It's a story that began when I was very young" (p. 2). In several poems about her experiences with her mother, a marine biologist, Sullivan draws the reader into her deftly colored memories, thick with tactile descriptors and sensory rhythms. The poems juxtapose visceral memories - "sinks into an ooze," "she's looking under your skin," "creosote blisters" – with moments of wonder – "purple stars, and orange flame," "listen...the small collisions, claws and carapaces" – to examine the nature of attention.

While noting a need for research on student attention, Sullivan also questions the nature of the researcher's attention and his or her way of presenting work. Citing Barone and Eisner (1997), Sullivan extols aesthetic vision and discusses the use of poetry in both academia and secondary education, to hone attention and build relationships to people and places. While the author explicitly claims neither arts-based research nor place-based education labels, this piece provides a link between the two emerging fields by way of attending artfully to one's relationships to place.

These works provide examples of the possibilities of exploring place through artful, reflective writing. Considering the holistic worldview required by place-based education and the embodied experiences of place and art-making, arts-based approaches to research in this field would seem an appropriate avenue for researchers to explore. As Sullivan (2000) notes:

The artist is a researcher with his or her whole organism...We must not overlook the potential role of the artist, alongside that of the scientist and the traditional educational researcher, in our investigations of attention and other critical educational issues. (p. 13)

Conclusion: A place to be, room to move

Throughout this inquiry, I noted a common aesthetic, or tone, in much of the literature I reviewed. Quite possibly, I am drawn to the field of place-based education because its forebears and current leaders write passionately, honestly, and critically about issues central to our existence on this planet and our duty as educators to do something about it. I am also drawn to explore this field because I was given opportunities to explore and bond with the natural world, to see what it had to teach (Thoreau, 1854). I would not believe so whole-heartedly in the possibilities of place-based art education if it weren't for my own educational experiences, some inside, but mostly outside, the classroom. I know the power of both outdoor challenges and sacred places; of attention, relationships, and critical reflectiveness to teach ways of being in the world. Gruenewald (2003a) states, "What we know is, in large part, shaped by the kinds of places we experience and the quality of attention we give them" (p. 645).

So what have I learned? I have learned there is *much* to be considered in the relatively new field of place-based education, and even more when aligned with art education. I have learned that sometimes you start in one field and end up in another, but it is the intersections and interweavings that are truly sacred places. I have learned that the common threads in place-based and art education give voice to things I have always thought were true about the way I want to teach. I have learned that there is room for the type of work that I want to do. In fact, there is a great need for it. Not only does place-based education need more research, the stories of at-risk students need to be heard in that research, and artful approaches to research may lend the clearest voice to those students. What educators and students, like myself, need to remember is that our local practitioner inquiries can add to the discussion, grounding theory and generating new knowledge.

I'm still trying to adapt to my own skin,
and so is everyone else.

sto_ry [stawr-ee, stohr-ee] *noun, plural -ries, verb, -ried, -ry_ing.*

-noun

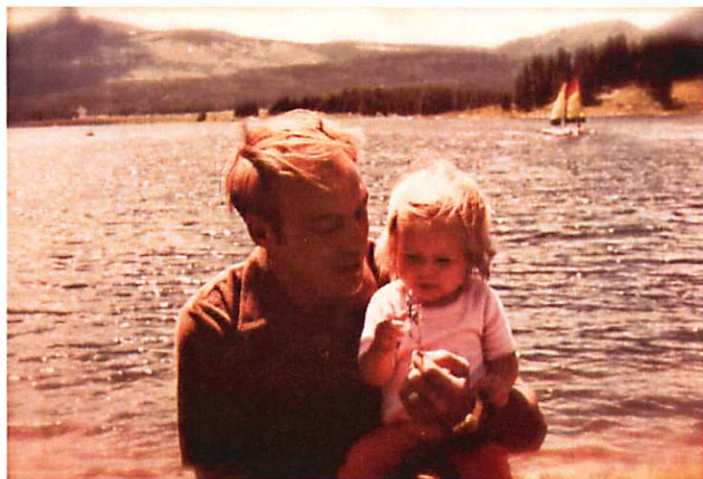
1. a narrative, either true or fictitious, in prose or verse, designed to interest, amuse, or instruct the hearer or reader; tale.
2. a fictitious tale, shorter and less elaborate than a novel.
3. such narratives or tales as a branch of literature: *song and story.*
4. the plot or succession of incidents of a novel, poem, drama, etc.: *The characterizations were good, but the story was weak.*
5. a narration of an incident or a series of events or an example of these that is or may be narrated, as an anecdote, joke, etc.
6. a narration of the events in the life of a person or the existence of a thing, or such events as a subject for narration: *the story of medicine; the story of his life.*
7. a report or account of a matter; statement or allegation: *The story goes that he rejected the offer.*
8. a news story
9. a lie or fabrication. *What he said about himself turned out to be a story.* (Random House, 2009).

My story: How I was educated and how I came to this work

The individual is both site and subject of discursive struggles for identity.

-Laurel Richardson (1997, p. 89)

I was born in Colorado and lived there until I was ten. My parents moved to Colorado from the east coast and spent many weekends exploring the various landscapes of their new home state. Some of my earliest memories involve rocky paths, prickly pines, golden Aspen, and giant skies. Both of my parents are eager learners and creative problem-solvers. Weekends not spent on the road were dedicated to do-it-yourself home improvements and gardening. Though I don't know exactly how much I actually helped, there are pictures of a tiny me assisting with some of these activities. I remember being taught to hold a paintbrush, a hammer, and a rake. I remember pulling vegetables from the garden, watching my mother can them, and painting my baby brother's new room.



In Colorado, I attended an open space elementary school, which meant we had no walls, we worked in mixed-age learning groups, and the media center was the heart of the school. Self-discipline and focus were naturally cultivated as a result of the open spaces, as were collaborative skills within the learning groups. We played outside everyday, even through the winter with its three-foot snowdrifts and freezing temperatures. I loved reading and art, and was

encouraged to follow my learning interests. I had freedom to move about and choose many of my activities. School was exciting and I felt welcomed and supported.

My father was transferred and our family moved to Georgia in July of 1988. The oppressive, sweltering heat of that summer quickly rolled into overwhelming shock as I entered my new school. Cinder block walls, closed doors, Southern accents and distinct social groups presented boundaries to me that I had not known existed in school. Slowly, my brother and I found our way into gifted classes, scouting, music and dance lessons. I think these activities, outside the Three R's and traditional categories of school, kept my curious, creative nature nourished. At home, the do-it-yourself spirit continued to grow as my parents worked on the new house and tamed the kudzu-covered garden. We explored our new home state through hiking, camping, and road trips to small interesting towns. Growing more comfortable in this new place, I progressed through school increasingly more involved in student government, scouting, and the arts, cutting a path towards college.

Supportive of my voracious appetite for achievement, my parents helped me look at colleges all over the country. Much to our surprise, I eventually chose the one closest to home. In north Georgia, Berry College offered me generous scholarships and I loved the art department from the first moment. The director, Dr. Mew, opened his studio door for me upon our first meeting and welcomed me in to a mentoring friendship that continues to this day. Thinking back now, I know I chose Berry because I liked the way it felt. It was beautiful, natural, and there was space, lots of space, to move, explore, think, and wonder.

As an Art Education major, basically a double major, I carried more than a full load of classes for four and half years. I worked furiously in my studio toward my senior exit show, building close friendships with my teachers and fellow artists. In between field experiences in rural North Georgia schools, I studied abroad in Italy and curated a show in Ireland. During this time, I also worked as a color guard coach at a local high school. Though I adored my students, and loved the workload, I think I burned myself out by the time I reached a bachelors degree. Despite accolades from both my departments, I left college with no intention of re-entering the education world for quite some time.

For a couple of years, I worked at restaurants and freelanced, trying to juggle financial independence with art-making. Frustrated with both, I read a lot, traveled, and did some serious soul-searching. Outside the constraints of a class, or assignment, I couldn't remember when I

made art just for me, just to think, through the process of making. After some time, I returned to the studio, slowly rebuilt a relationship with my artist self, and reaffirmed my belief in the power of making art to communicate experience.

Through a friend, I found a job as a secretary at a post-secondary art school in Atlanta. I was both apprehensive and excited to be back in the art education field, if only as a support staff member. I wondered if working in this environment would cause me to reconsider teaching, if it would motivate or further frustrate me. In the end it did both. As a Student Affairs & Career Services staff member, I helped a widely diverse student population with innumerable issues. I had to learn how to step outside the confines of my desk and listen. I learned to move beyond my programmed judgments and trust my instincts that each person carries a unique set of experiences. I can honor that experience or shun it, with each interaction each day. I grew increasingly motivated to help students, in any small way I could, and I started to think about teaching again.

While I worked as a secretary, I became a mentor for Communities in Schools, a national organization devoted to “Helping kids stay in school and prepare for life” (CIS, 2009). I was matched with a sophomore who was interested in art and attending a Performance Learning Center (P.L.C.), a school I had never heard of. At this school, students who had dropped out or fallen behind worked at their own paces to catch up on credits. While supported by mentors, counselors, and other services, these students did not have art or any other classes outside the basic core curriculum.

My mentee, Andrea, and I met once a week for nearly a year. While the main goal of our meetings was casual, open dialogue, as requested by the school counselor, I tried to include art-making in our conversations as much as possible. I am uncertain of what she may have learned from me, but I am certain I learned the value of consistency, humility and dialogue between two people. Opportunities for us to share our stories are opportunities for us to feel connected and relevant to others. The structure of the P.L.C. program gave Andrea and I those opportunities to meet each other and share our evolving stories.

After considering graduate school in the back of my mind for a couple of years, I decided it was time to refocus my direction, renew my curiosity for learning, and deepen my knowledge of art education. The following fall, I quit my job and began graduate school full time, driven to immerse myself once again in the world of education. From the beginning of my graduate

program, I expressed interest in working with at-risk high school students. I don't recall anyone asking me why, though I recall words of encouragement and appreciation for my boldness.

My first semester, I answered an ad for a volunteer art teacher and began working with students at Oconee Community School, the punitive alternative school for Oconee County. What started as a small volunteer opportunity in my new town turned into the most important thing I did while here in Athens. When I first started working with Oconee Community School, I didn't really know that what I was doing was "service-learning." I just wanted to somehow be involved in the community in which I was studying how to be a better teacher. It made perfect sense to me that I would move outside my graduate seminars into real classrooms and interact with real students during my time here. Later, I would read Jeffers book on service-learning, which she explains is "the project of living fully in inquiry" (2005, p. 15). Indeed I did.

Every other week, I taught during a thirty-minute period usually reserved for study hall. The principal, a former music teacher, wanted the students to have some exposure to the arts and opportunities to work creatively, even within the very structured punitive environment. My time and supplies were very limited. The students were silently crammed into traditional tablet-arm desks, exuding a defensive apprehension that was palpable in the classroom. I tried to engage their opinions about art, as well as their personal interests, to make small projects in which they could feel successful in a short amount of time. Though I was unsure we were making any progress, the students loosened up and enjoyed drawing, the principal found us an "art room" space and invited me back the next semester.

During my second semester, I also started volunteering at Classic City High School, a P.L.C. similar to the one in which I mentored in Atlanta. A service-learning class was planned, in which graduate students would partner with the school. Even though the class was cancelled, I met with the instructor and asked how I could get involved with the school. We designed a directed study for which I would teach art once a week. While the administrators at the school couldn't guarantee enrollment, they were enthusiastic and I was overjoyed for the opportunity.

For two glorious hours a week, I worked with three high school students in a seminar-type setting. The students were selected for the group due to their natural talents and interests in pursuing the arts. Inquiring together, we poured over books, spoke at length about ideas, and worked to develop individual artistic voices. We struggled with personal issues as often as we celebrated creative feats, but we met every week and made art about it. Once again, the

necessity of consistency and humility revealed itself to me. As I learned more about my students through their work, I realized what a centering force it could be for them in a chaotic period of life.

The following fall, I continued to work at both schools, teaching art once a week for thirty minutes at each school. I intended for this particular semester's inquiry to become my Applied Project. Thus, I wanted more time to work with the students but had to work within the time made available by the administrators. I was excited to continue teaching in both environments and full of theoretical knowledge gained in graduate classes. Based on my interactions with the students in the two semesters prior, I felt that the students wanted to be engaged in school, but that they needed to engage in something more than another task to be completed. Regardless of whether the students were in an alternative program for punishment or by choice, they existed on the margins of school, plugging away at tasks disconnected from their lives. They often seemed surprised when I wanted to know their interests and opinions, or when I shared artworks and poems and asked them to respond. They were full of ideas and experiences to share but seemed wary, uncertain of their abilities, and accustomed to rules.

As I planned, I considered these questions:

- How can I teach art so that my students feel that their experience matters, and that they are an essential part of a community?
- If they feel connected in school, might they engage in their community in a more thoughtful, caring, and responsible manner?

Through art-making, collaboration, and dialogue, I wanted to engage the students in thinking about themselves and their relationships, to others and the world around them. I wanted them to consider the places in which they lived on a daily basis and their roles and actions in and with those places.

We're just tryin' to get out.
We're not really thinkin' of much else.

con-text (k_n't_kst')

n.

1. The part of a text or statement that surrounds a particular word or passage and determines its meaning.
2. The circumstances in which an event occurs; a setting.

[Middle English, *composition*, from Latin *contextus*, from past participle of *contexere*, *to join together* : *com-*, *com-* + *texere*, *to weave*; see *teks-* in Indo-European roots.]

(American Heritage Dictionary, 2009).

Context: Two Schools

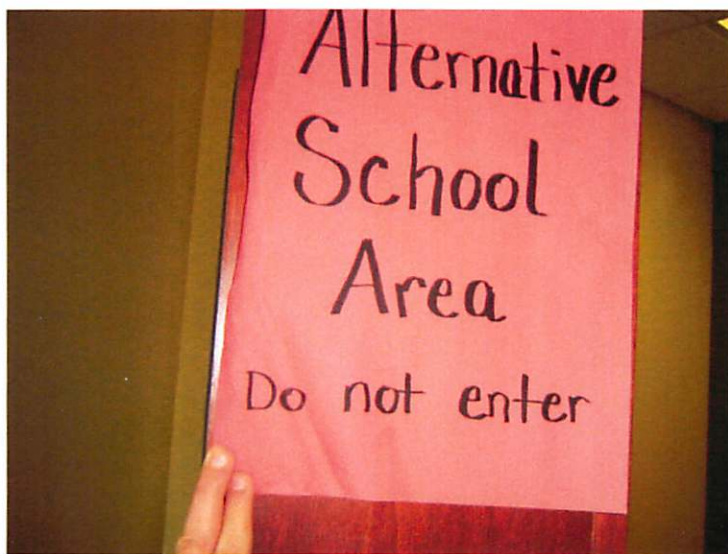
Oconee Community School

I drive down a flat rural road, lined with cotton fields, hay bales, and the occasional white farmhouse. Breathing deeply the aroma of freshly cut grass, hay and earth, I smile at the bright blue sky and turn into the parking lot, where a sign says “Visitors.” North Oconee High School houses Oconee Community School, the alternative school for the county. The high school is five years old, which means it still looks nearly brand new and the land surrounding it has yet to recover from being clear-cut. Tiny stick trees and low shrubs scattered in the Bermuda grass complete the landscaping. Burnt umber and ochre bricks rise in geometric patterns to form the various wings of this 1,030-student high school. I walk in the front doors, sign in at the front office for my Visitor name badge, and proceed down a long, window-lined hallway. As I reach the two-story commons area, I see hand-painted spirit banners for Homecoming and posters for club meetings. Turning down another sparkling hall, I pass classrooms filled with rows of desks and students listening to lectures. I go through double doors at the end of the hall, up the stairs, to more double doors. This set has a sign that says, “Alternative School Area: Do Not Enter.”

I go in to the four-classroom area, separated from the rest of the school by a rolling divider wall and handwritten signs. Three rooms are used for classes, and each is equipped with desks and four or five computer stations. The fourth classroom is principal Dr. Hanson’s office, which includes a conference table, storage cabinets, and a piano. There is one smaller office space used for an isolation room, and equipped with a desk, chair, and computer. At the end of the hall, a former storage/meeting space has been turned into a lunchroom/art room. A long skinny room at the end of the wing, it is lined with six-foot windows that overlook the parking lot, road, and fields in the distance. Three six-foot tables and a white board make it a classroom. The lingering odor of the day’s lunch selection reminds me it is also a lunchroom.

When I arrive, I usually drop off my bag of supplies in the classroom, go to Dr. Hanson’s office to get other supplies and check in with him. He fills me in on any absentees, students in isolation, or newcomers. The students are generally silent in their classrooms and I wince when my heels click too loudly on the tile. I set up supplies for the day and write directions and a quote on the board. The students not in isolation, testing, meetings, or other catch-up sessions

come to my art class. I usually have six to eight students, some who silently slink, others who bounce, strut, and clown their way in the door. They are accompanied by another teacher, who, after shushing them, usually sits in the corner and reads a magazine. She is there as a second adult, a school system employee, to be a second pair of eyes or a voice should any discipline problems occur. It is hot, uncomfortably so, no matter the season, as sun blazes in the large windows all day. I am thankful for the natural light and illusion of space, but I have to wear short sleeves and pin up my hair. Red-cheeked and squinting, I begin the class at 1:15pm as the students battle afternoon sleepiness.





Classic City High School

I drive down a hilly, tree-lined road that dips and crosses the Oconee river, past brick neighborhoods and townhomes. I admire the pine trees, tall and straight on one side, and the bending, amber-leafed oaks along the river. Nearly missing the tiny street sign, I turn in the driveway and face the large “Clarke County School District” sign. The school and the district offices nearby are housed in a white concrete building that was formerly a mental health treatment center. Dark windows sit on each side of the heavy glass door. I unload supplies from my car and teeter in the front door, signing the visitor log at the hexagonal front desk. The dark green lobby gives way to a turning hall and another hexagonal former nurses’ station. This one has been turned into a Jittery Joe’s coffee counter and is run by students in an entrepreneurship class. I smile at the boy behind the register and two students slumped at the counter, as they eye my colorful burdens.

Through a set of doors, I reach the media center, childcare facility, and Ms. Nina’s desk. Baking smells and baby cries mix to slightly distract me as I look for Nina, who is usually doing ten things at once. Today is no exception. It is Thursday: group day. I teach an art group that is part of a school-wide initiative to increase graduation rates through support services and groups to engage student interests. There are groups for Parents, Expecting Mothers, Graduation Test takers and re-takers, Seniors, Underclassmen, and Student Council members. As I understand it, students were placed into these groups based on their most pressing needs - for example, passing the Graduation test or developing parenting skills. My art students, however, volunteered for the Art Group and were allowed to participate based upon their good academic and behavioral records and interest in the arts.

Proceeding down the hall, I pass classrooms equipped with computer stations and SmartBoards, where students are talking and typing. When I reach the storage room/science lab/art room, I am greeted by dusty boxes, buckets, chemistry equipment, and other gadgets. However, I have two tables and a window. I carefully move the entomology class insect collection, recalling days spent with my father stalking illusive dragonflies and Luna moths. Some people find the bug boxes eerie. I lovingly inspect the stiff little thoraxes impaled on dissection pins, ephemeral wings spread and pinned to Styrofoam, painstakingly labeled with scientific and common names, *Speyeria Diana*, “Diana”. Next I scoot buckets of pungent

decomposing leaves under the table and wipe our work surface with standard-issue tree bark paper towels. I spend five minutes or so carefully sliding the tools of science over to make room for art.

Sometimes I get to check in with Nina and learn of absences, scheduling changes, or other issues. Each week the attendance in my class is a surprise, as the already small group of six dwindles. Absences, illnesses, testing, conflicting group schedules, and dropouts make up the variety of issues at hand. However, the students who come to group usually come in energetically chatting, though hunched and bundled in sweatshirts. The classrooms are kept uncomfortably cold to keep the computers and massive servers from overheating. I keep my jacket on, grab my coffee cup and sit down with the students. I answer questions and listen to their conversation, deciding how I will begin and adjust my plans based on who is present.





These are the two contexts in which I worked during the semester documented in this book. The teaching stories that follow occurred in these classrooms in Fall semester of 2008.

Put up a sign that says, "Trust yourself!"

prax_is [prak-sis]

-noun, plural prax_is_es, prax_es [prak-seez]

1. practice, as distinguished from theory; application or use, as of knowledge or skills.
2. convention, habit, or custom.
3. a set of examples for practice (Random House, 2009).

Teaching stories:

The following chapter includes three teaching stories from my experiences at both schools over one semester. The stories recount three particular projects in which I began to incorporate place-based educational theory into my classroom practice. The three projects described are postcards, maps, and photographs, each of which is separated into a smaller section for the reader. Each of the sections relates an actual teaching experience as expressed by the following: my inspirations, with support from related literature, my intentions and reflections, and narrative accounts of classroom interactions. I relied heavily on my teaching reflection journal to craft these narratives and the course of events, exchanges, and dialogue are written as closely as possible to actual events and direct quotes. The narratives are intended to provide richer descriptions of the projects and draw the reader into the school place and the relationships therein.

post-card(p_st'kärđ')

n.A commercially printed card with space on one side for an address and a postage stamp, used for sending a short message through the mail (American Heritage Dictionary, 2009).

Inspirations:

Over a year before planning and leading this particular project, I was inspired by a 1996 article by Alan Block, "This is Where I am Right Now." The author theorizes curriculum as a journey that students take, one that requires freedom to explore, connection to a home base, and a means of communicating progress and growth. Postcards are suggested as "visual announcements" (p. 23) to record the journey and maintain reflective dialogue between student and self, student and teacher. Advantages to using postcards include small size, portability, brevity of narrative, and flexibility. They are economical, brief reflections, notations of a journey continually in flux. I identified with the journey metaphor and felt my students would respond to it as well. After teaching at both schools for several months, I felt my students needed to acknowledge where they were at the moment, but within a much larger context. Also, considering my limited time frame and supplies, and my desire to help students feel successful with small projects, postcards seemed perfect for my classes.

I then borrowed the idea of sharing stories of place from Silverman (2007), who worked with graduate students in education. Silverman's students began this project by first engaging with a museum exhibition of postcards before partnering with classmates whom they did not know well. The students then interviewed one another about childhood memories of place, creating postcards to represent one another's stories. Silverman highlights four elements of "exemplary art education" (p. 18) experienced through this project: aesthetic inquiry, creative process, interdisciplinary dialogue, and empathy. For my students, I felt the cultivation of empathy most important, tying to my desire for connection between students and their individual concepts of place, as well as to each other. As a part of my constant effort to support self-trusting expression of ideas, I wanted the students to feel challenged, while safe, to tell their stories and interpret the stories of others. Silverman specifically points out the element of risk inherent in telling and re-telling personal stories. I wanted my students to know that I understood this risk, but knew they were capable of taking it, coming out of the challenge ever more attentive, empathic, and articulate.

Intentions:

On 8.5" x 5.5" cardstock, each student writes a descriptive note about a place he or she knows well or remembers vividly. I then collect the cards, shuffle them, and pass them back out to different students. Each student must then read the description on the card received, interpret it and draw the image on the reverse.

On the postcard, students are representing a place both in writing and visually, connecting inner experience to a physical location, personal, felt place to geographic place. In a small, intimate space, they can reveal a snapshot of experience. It may never actually go through the mail and be subjected to multiple readings by strangers, eventually ending in the hands of the addressee. However, the postcard format implies an undetermined audience of many, though created with one viewer in mind.

I intended to bring a form of communication that some might call archaic into dialogue in a contemporary classroom. With the multiple forms of digital communication available to students through digital cameras, cell phones, blogs, and networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, I felt it was important to acknowledge the now-familiar ways in which we communicate place to each other, while challenging my students to utilize an unfamiliar format. In the future, I might also utilize digital tools for this project, though with further discussion of how and why we communicate in "bytes."

Another source of inspiration is the PostSecret project, which gracefully and powerfully connects traditional postal communication with contemporary digital formats. Since 2004, creator Frank Warren has been receiving anonymous secrets revealed on postcards, painstakingly rendered pieces of mail art. Each Sunday, a selection of postcards is shared worldwide through his website, www.postsecretcommunity.com. Collections of postcards have been published in several books, made into short films, and presented at speaking engagements. The enormous and ongoing response to this project reflects not only a community ready to share life experiences artfully, but also the potential power of brevity in word and image.

One intention for this project is for students to briefly reflect upon a place they are, or have been, communicating concisely and artfully in a small space to be shared with others. In the particular instance covered below, an additional intention was to forge interaction through the

interpretation of others' experiences. Also, I hoped to demonstrate, to my often-uncertain students, that they can communicate verbally and visually places of importance in their lives.

In Action, 11/12/08:

I collect postcards, so I introduce this project by showing and discussing a variety of postcards from my collection: travel postcards, save-the-date cards, photo holiday cards, artist cards, show announcements, museum reproduction postcards, and advertisements. The students walk in to class and are greeted by piles of postcards on the center table. I ask them to gather around and start looking.

“Has anyone ever sent or received a postcard?” Two hands raise, one is mine.

I start asking more questions. “Is this an outdated form of communication? Why in the world would I collect postcards or teach with them? Why handwrite a note, pay for postage, and mail a piece of paper, when I can take a photograph with my cell phone and e-mail it to someone; or better yet, post it to Facebook or Twitter so everyone I know can see where I am at the moment?”

They seem to agree and wonder where I'm going with this, but are enraptured with the pile of cards. Hands dip into the piles, faces search the images, cards are passed and shared, whispers and then louder questions:

“Where is this? Did you *go* here?”

“What is this? Is this a painting?”

“Who is this? Is this your baby?”

“Didn't you *live* in Italy before?”

I posit that *maybe*, despite our increasingly efficient technological modes of communication, there is something special about an image and a handwritten note from another place. It's a little glimpse into our individual experience in a place, shared with another person in a different place. It may be brief, only a snapshot of an experience, but powerful because of the momentary perspective that it captures, that may never be re-lived.

I read the poem, “Where I'm From” by George Ella Lyon. I do this to give the students an example of a rich, multi-sensory description of a place in the poet's memory that influences

who she is today. I also read aloud to them to shift the feeling in the room. I want to move from teacher-led discussion into a place of shared encounter with poetic representation. As I read, the words take shape in my mouth and roll, tumble, teeter outward with a chosen, slowed breath. I perform a storyteller voice to both focus the students' attention upon the words and to draw them in to a rhythm, possibly reverie, that will allow their own ideas to flow outward more easily.

Where I'm From

I am from clothespins, _
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride. _
I am from the dirt under the back porch._
(Black, glistening, _
it tasted like beets.) _
I am from the forsythia bush_
the Dutch elm_
whose long-gone limbs I remember_
as if they were my own.
I'm from fudge and eyeglasses, _
from Imogene and Alafair. _
I'm from the know-it-alls_
and the pass-it-ons, _
from Perk up! and Pipe down! _
I'm from He restoreth my soul_
with a cottonball lamb_
and ten verses I can say myself.
I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch, _
fried corn and strong coffee. _
From the finger my grandfather lost _
to the auger, _
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.
Under my bed was a dress box_

spilling old pictures, _
a sift of lost faces_
to drift beneath my dreams. _
I am from those moments--_
snapped before I budded --_
leaf-fall from the family tree.
(Lyon, 1999).

The room is silent. Many chins are in hands, eyes diverted, faces softened as if deep in thought. After a quiet moment passes, I ask them what they remember about the poem. Looking pained, Alex remembers the forsythia bush and the elm tree. She says earnestly, “He felt like his own arm was cut off when they cut it down.” Yes.

I don’t know what it is scientifically, developmentally, academically, but something happens when you read to students. In my experience, especially when I read to high school students, something shifts in the room, in their approach to the work that follows. I truly believe that being read to, being enfolded in the magic of words and the rhythm of a caring human voice, can connect us not only to our rich inner resources of experience, but to each other.

I ask the students to spread out around the room with their postcards, in order to give them space and a little privacy to think and write in a place where they are not often afforded either. I ask them to face away from each other and work quietly, staying in their thoughts and moving them outward onto the page without questioning. I ask them to trust their memories and their ability to convey them in writing. Two students perch on sunlit windowsills, others bend intently over their desks, Alex leans on the windowsill and stares out into the distance.

The students write diligently for ten minutes. Always pressed for time in these thirty-minute classes, I am hesitant to stop their writing and move forward with the drawing. However, I want them to experience closure with this activity in which they seem so engrossed. After some gentle prodding to trust their writing and finish, I collect the cards and re-distribute them. Each student gets a card with another’s writing, and I ask them to read it and visually interpret it on the reverse.

There is an element of surprise inherent in this activity that I attempt to preserve by asking for quiet, thoughtful work time. While one goal of this activity is to connect students to

today, for these particular students. I want them to shift from verbal to visual storytelling, staying with their own thoughts as much as possible, without the outside influences of peer commentary. I've done this activity before without considering the need for quiet reflection and had students immediately begin reading out loud, with chiding remarks, the writing of their peers. Not only do I want them to feel safe in expressing their experiences, I want them to know that they are more than capable of communicating artfully in both words and images.

Tracy waves me over and whispers that she doesn't know what to do. She is mildly exasperated, understandably so, as she took great care with her writing and was the last to finish. There is both disappointment and concern on her face when she says,

"I mean, that's *not* a description. What am I supposed to draw?"

I read it and realize she has Luca's card. On it, he's written to his incarcerated father:

Dear Pa – I'm doing good in school better than you did but anyway. How's it going in there. I hope you get inouph to eat and other things. I've been doing what you tought me and better.

I ask her to do the best she can to interpret it, to see it from the writer's perspective. *Think of the place where the writer was when he or she penned these words.* Her face softens slightly, she nods and goes to work.



Hunched over the other table, face resting on his arm, Luca works diligently on his drawing. This is a rare occasion and I savor it from afar, wondering where his mind is. Normally Luca is *quite* challenging, mouthing off to anyone and everyone within earshot, drumming, bouncing, shoving, chiding classmates about their work and completing none of his own. Today he tapped into something. Maybe it's because he is at a table alone, maybe because he's just written to his father. I don't know. Today he carefully, gently, makes a beautiful drawing from Alex's description.



After waiting until the last possible moment, I call time on the drawings and ask everyone to bring their postcards to the center table and gather around it. I place all the postcards with the drawings facing up and ask everyone to look over them. I ask if anyone recognizes their place and three hands go up immediately. I go through each postcard, quickly looking at the drawing and writing and confirming the two with the students. Smiles all around. I remind the students that it can be difficult to render a memory or mental picture in writing or drawing, but that they can do it. Each person recognizes the place he or she described through the drawing of another, demonstrating that they are capable of articulating their thoughts in different ways, even when rushed. I aim to encourage them, not only pointing out the challenge of different forms of communication, but the knowledge that they can use those forms successfully. I thank them for their diligence just as another teacher loudly notes the time.

The students pile out of the room in high spirits and I gather the postcards close to me. Sitting on the table in a shaft of sunlight, I read through each one and study the drawings. I am

The students pile out of the room in high spirits and I gather the postcards close to me. Sitting on the table in a shaft of sunlight, I read through each one and study the drawings. I am moved by their honesty, the concentration on their faces that day, and the way they stood close to each other, smiling in recognition at the work accomplished. I think the postcards are beautiful. I realize that the technical quality of the drawings might disappoint expectations of high school students. Given more time and more training, I'm certain these students could produce more technically proficient drawings. However, I stand by my most important goals for the project and feel certain that they were accomplished.

Did the students quietly reflect upon a special place in their lives, communicating that place in writing? Did they visually interpret the writing of other students, re-visioning places sacred to others? Did they connect with each other, even if only for a moment, through memories tied to a place and success in communicating those memories? Did we do all this, in addition to viewing exemplar work and discussing an inspirational poem, in thirty minutes? Absolutely.

I still walk a line each day
between evolving identities.

map

n.

1. a representation, usually on a flat surface, as of the features of an area of the earth or a portion of the heavens, showing them in their respective forms, sizes, and relationships according to some convention of representation: *a map of Canada.*

2. a maplike delineation, representation, or reflection of anything: *The old man's face is a map of time.*

v. mapped, map_ping

6. to represent or delineate on or as if on a map.

7. to sketch or plan (often fol. by *out*): *to map out a new career.* (Random House, 2009).

Inspirations:

When I was growing up, we had a map on the dining room table covered in clear plastic that served as both our tablecloth and a conversation-starter. I also loved studying our globe, slowly spinning it and running my fingers over the bumpy mountain ranges. My childhood home in Colorado ran parallel to the front range of the Rockies, so I always knew which way West was, and where the sun would set and burn up the landscape in oranges and pinks. Now, if I'm going somewhere new, I don't want directions, I just need to look at a map. My entire life has been grounded in a very tactile and very visual sense of physical location.

I instantly connected with mapping ideas presented by Mark Graham (2007, 2008) based in natural history studies. From there, I went to his references (Lai & Ball, 2002; Sobel, 1996, 1998) and started thinking about the centrality of maps in outdoor education, social studies, and other fields I wanted to connect with in the art room. Graham's work connects map-making to ecology, art education, and a critical pedagogy of place in ways I had not explicitly considered in my teaching. The layered nature of maps, geographical, ecological, and cultural, as well as their intriguing visual representations of place, led me to consider further possibilities for their use.

Most significantly, Graham's work reminds me that diverse student groups make up our classes and their ideas of place are "often shaped by experiences of dislocation and estrangement" (2007, p. 381). These words echoed in my mind and gave voice to the experiences of many of my students and their shuffling amongst homes, schools, and relationships. All of a sudden, maps were no longer objects and diagrams implicitly about personal relationships to place. I saw potential to make explicit the layers inherent in maps and in our own journeys through and relationships to place. I saw potential to acknowledge dislocation and estrangement, as well as cultivate ownership of choices and steps along the journey. Artfully mapping an area, whether it is a physical location or an ephemeral experience, seemed like an excellent way to explore connections between the inner and outer selves, between the lone traveler and the larger community.

Intentions:

Working in a thirty-minute class period, I knew I couldn't tackle all the potential layers of maps and the project incarnations I saw in my head right away. However, I thought my students could start by examining the basics of their journey. Graham (2007) suggests the question "Where are you from?" as central to mapping activities that can connect "learning to the students' local reality" (p. 382). In my mapping projects with students, I expanded the questions to include, "Where are you now?" and "Where are you going?" to more fully examine both their life journeys and current experiences. This three-part series of questions was also an effort to acknowledge, describe, claim, and share life journeys as a way to shed light on both differences and commonalities amongst diverse student groups.

Where are you from? Where are you now? Where are you going?

These three questions have guided several different mapping projects over the past two years. At one school, I helped two different groups of students make map drawings to answer those three questions. In the first group, we tore and tea-stained paper to age it, drawing maps of the places that marked students' journeys and plotting paths between them. Due to time constraints, the second group did not age the paper, but went straight to drawing, interpreting the word "map" more broadly.

At another school, my students led a whole-school mapping project in which fellow students and teachers were provided with drawing supplies to answer those questions as they wished in image and text. The resulting drawings were then collaged by my students into a large wall display, demonstrating the variety of places in which their classmates had significant experiences. This collage became a map of the students at that school and a visual representation of their respective journeys. The story below relates one of these mapping incarnations.

In it, I posed three questions to the students: *Where are you from? Where are you now? Where are you going?* Interpreting the term "map" as they wished, students created drawings that visually represented answers to these questions. I provided drawing supplies as well as collage supplies and encouraged the students to layer images and text and to make connections amongst the answers.

In action, 11/19/08:

I ask the students to brainstorm for about five minutes in their sketchbooks on the three questions: *Where are you from? Where are you now? Where are you going?* I ask them to try to answer with words and pictures, to acknowledge their first response, and then push beyond it. I challenge them to try to think of ways to represent their answers using symbols, pictures, words, lines, and colors. I also pose questions like, “What does a map do? What is its purpose? Besides the style of your average road map, what are some other ways to visually represent places and the journey between them?”

Just as they quiet down and start working, the fire alarm goes off. Awful, deafening, buzzing splits the air and scatters thoughts. I remember a poster in my high school art room: “*Murphy’s law loves the art room.*”

A fire drill not only presents the opportunity to go outside, move around, and talk, but also the distinct pleasure of seeing other students. At this school, interaction is forbidden, but they try. I feel strange and out of place. I stand off to the side of the group, looking around absentmindedly and avoiding the herding behaviors and comments of other teachers.

Back inside, most of the students go back to work after the drill, if somewhat more restlessly. Ben bends over his drawing in deep concentration, eyes inches from where the pencil lead touches the fibers. Two of the other boys chide him a bit for being an “overachiever.” I remark, to no one in particular, that the people who have a lot of loud ideas certainly aren’t getting them down on paper.

Mike starts to stand up, then sits back down. Glancing at me somewhat timidly, he looks as though he forgot, then remembered, the rules strictly imposed on the students regarding where their bodies are in this space. I tell him he can stand if it helps him work on the large paper. He smiles and stands back up more confidently, setting straight to work on his drawing.

Then Jackie asks to work on the floor, so I give her the large pad of paper to lean on. She is full of questions all day, very excited and very creative. Her immediate ideas are to use emotions as her “locations” and she wants to know how to portray them. I ask her, “If those emotions were places, what would they look like?” I pause to consider what I thought some of my emotions might look like. How would I draw a map of my journey? I’ve never been

especially adept at landscapes, but if I thought I could do it some justice, I might paint Little Molas Pass in Colorado. That was the first place that I remember overwhelming me to tears.

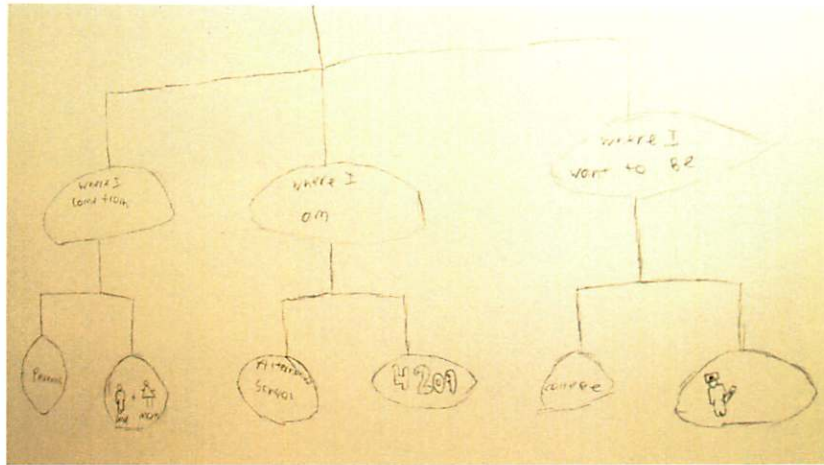
It is summer and the sun is trying to break through the clouds. After days of winding mountain roads in the family car, dad pulled off the highway and up into this clearing, somehow knowing the world would seem to open up just for us. I am in shorts and sandals, but buried in a giant sweatshirt, knees pulled to my chest. The rock I am sitting on is cold and the wind whips my face, chilling the two rivulets of tears on my sunburned cheeks. I am perched on the very edge of a gigantic crater in the upper Rockies. Purple mountains majesty rise up sharply, softened in the morning light and I am breathless. This place is glorious, peaceful, and humbling all at once. I am small here, but cradled by the hope of infinite possibility.

I am lucky that my journey has often been marked by possibility.

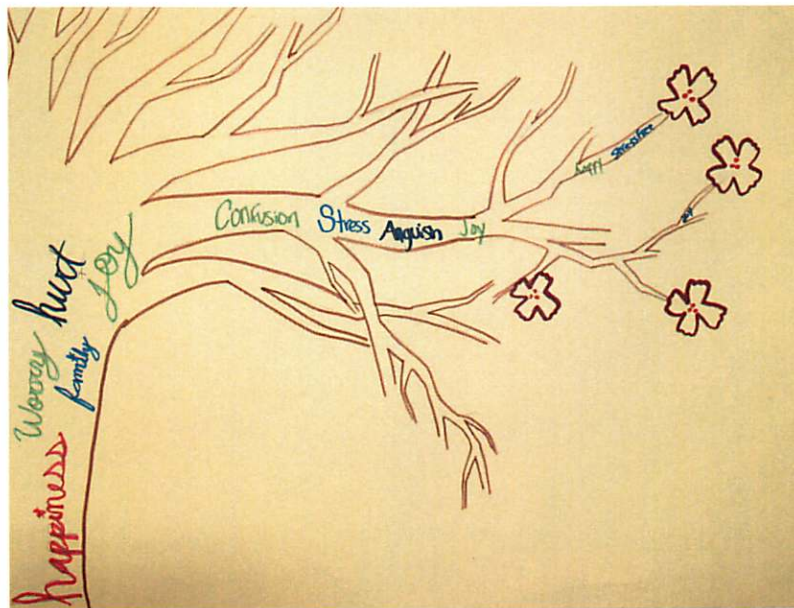
After a moment of quiet thinking together, I turn back to Jackie and she asks impatiently, “What do you mean?” She is often bouncingly full of ideas, chattering away with possibilities, but often unable to commit. Wanting her to move forward with her ideas, I give an example of a cave for sadness or loss and a sunny meadow for happiness. She is very excited and decides right then to draw a forest with a path leading through it. Once again, I am frustrated with our time constraints. How I would love to spend days on this project, discussing journeys, metaphors, and sacred places.

At the beginning of the semester we made webbed concept maps about the students’ conceptions of “art.” I intended for the students to add to them each week, expanding their definitions of art. Time often got away from me though. Today, Mike reminds me about them.

I notice he is drawing a concept map that is structured similar to a family tree and ask him what he’s doing. He explains his decision: “You said to take the *concept of map* and interpret how we want, so I thought, ‘concept’ and ‘map’.” Big smile.



After some consideration, Jackie zooms in on the forest concept and begins drawing part of a tree trunk branching out and flowering. Emotions are written boldly up the trunk and curve timidly along the branches, growing smaller toward the new growth and budding flowers.



Some of the other students answer the questions very literally and I am somewhat frustrated with stick figures, simplistic houses and arrows. However, looking back through the images from that day I see commonalities amongst the students and many possibilities for the future. Though the drawings are simplistic and often quite literal, they answer the questions that I asked and shed light on basic steps in the students' journeys. While the futures are uncertain

and varied, most students depicted their past and present places in similar ways. The question “Where are you from?” garnered images of homes, hometowns, parents, and hospitals. The question “Where are you now?” was answered the same by almost every student: alternative school. Those who did not specifically illustrate Alternative School showed places of sadness, heartbreak, and displacement.

Now that I can see where the students are at the moment, as evidenced by their drawings, some of my concerns are confirmed and I have a jumping-off place for future activities. I begin to think, “If we’re all here in this place, and not very pleased about it, what then?” *What then?*

This line of thinking and a bit of synchronicity led me to colleague and MFA student, Rob Peterson, who would become my collaborator in the next project.

It was kinda different being at school,
playing with a camera,
and not gettin' it taken up.

pho-to-graph (f_'t_-gr_f')

n. An image, especially a positive print, recorded by a camera and reproduced on a photosensitive surface.

v. **pho-to-graphed, pho-to-graph-ing, pho-to-graphs**

v. *tr.* To take a photograph of.

v. *intr.* To practice photography.

To be the subject for photographs: *She photographs well.*

re_vise [ri-vahyz] *verb*, -vised, -vis_ing, -vision

-verb (used with object)

1. to amend or alter: *to revise one's opinion.*

2. to alter something already written or printed, in order to make corrections, improve, or update:
to revise a manuscript.

3. *British.* to review (previously studied materials) in preparation for an examination.

1567, "to look at again," from M.Fr. *reviser*, from L. *revisere* "look at again, visit again," (American Heritage, 2009).

Inspirations:

Place can be defined here as more than location. It is sometimes a setting, but is most often married to memory, imagination, and our embodied experiences in such a way that words like emplaced, displaced, replaced or out-of-place conjure up meanings that are felt immediately and viscerally.

– Sally Gradle (2008, p. 7)

Place. Displace. Move. Remove.

After seeing the students at work and the results of the postcards and mapping projects, I saw potential for us to make more artwork specifically about the school place. Since the school environment and a general sense of unrest had figured so prominently in the previous work, I felt that we needed to try to address the students' relationship to the school place. Several of the students have moved many times, with family, between family members, or amongst various guardians and environments, often changing schools in the process. Though students at the PLC chose that particular environment, that choice was often made after many unsuccessful experiences in other environments. Alternately, within the punitive school, students have been removed from the general population for behavior. Should their behavior not improve, they may be removed further and placed in isolation or discharged from the school system completely. I sensed that many of my students had grown accustomed to not being trusted and thus did not seem to trust their own voices. I was concerned that many of my students felt stuck in the margins of the school place, were stuck in their thinking and yet seemed restless to express their experiences.

During this time, I met Rob Peterson, MFA candidate and sound sculpture artist interested in mapping. I heard him speak about his collaborative mapping project, Re:city (Peterson, 2008), and was immediately interested. Through a Tumblr blog site, Peterson posts photographs, videos, and sound pieces documenting solo and collaborative site-specific works in the Athens area. These works are an effort to explore, examine, and engage with the Athens cityscape and natural environment. This branch of Peterson's work is influenced by both land artists and filmmakers such as Robert Smithson, Richard Long, and Edgar Pedroza.

Rob and I met several times to discuss a potential collaboration in which he would be a guest artist and fellow instructor in a mapping project. To the discussion, I brought my concerns about my students' relationship with the school place and my desire to give them an opportunity to view it and engage with it in a new way. Rob brought his wide-open approach to art-making and a well-researched, philosophical conception of mapping. He also drew from personal experience wrestling with art-making on the margins of desirable places. Though our discussions meandered through a wide territory, we returned to the following premises for our collaboration with the students:

- Acknowledge where you are and try to look at your environment with fresh eyes.
- Create potential to interact with your environment in a new way.
- Shift your attitude by shifting your perspective and the way in which you engage with your environment.
- Re-vision this place: look carefully, use the camera to frame and capture what you see anew, and show the viewer your perspective so that he or she may also engage with the environment in a new way.

Conversations, personal experience, and literature were all equally intertwined in my thoughts, so a linear account of this process is difficult to write at this point in time. However, I was again inspired by Mark Graham's work recounting projects in which his students went out into their community with sketchbooks and cameras to "define a sacred place" (2008, p. 36). They created photo collages, as well as paintings and drawings made from their photographs, which reflected their relationships with places close by. As well as being an exercise in attention, these investigations of place spurred conversations on displacement, belonging, connections, consumerism, and responsibility. Not only were students carefully examining and artfully rendering sacred places, they were seeing connections between their local places and the larger world, engaging with issues of global proportion.

Similar to Rob Peterson, I have long been fascinated with environmental artists and the use of photography to capture human impacted environments and ephemeral artworks. While planning, Rob and I discussed the work of artists Edward Burtynsky and Chris Jordan, who capture large-scale human impact on the natural world. We also kept in mind the more meditative work of Andy Goldsworthy and Hamish Fulton. Having one, maybe two, days to

complete this project, I knew we would not be able to delve into too many global issues. However, I felt that we could utilize digital photography, a familiar medium to the students, to begin investigating places and issues close at hand. I wondered if, through the camera lens, students might begin to view their schools as sacred places, or at least find microcosms of interest. I wondered if, by placing a familiar and powerful tool in the hands of these students, we might help them feel more comfortable, trustworthy, and capable of articulating their experiences.

Intentions:

I intended to bring a guest artist to the school to expand the students' art experiences within our limited time frame. Any kind of art instruction in their school is already a unique circumstance. I wanted them to have the additional opportunity of interacting with a working local artist. I hoped a new artist in the group, accompanied by the new experience of working outside the building, would be catalysts for the students to examine and re-vision the school place in which they spent much of their time. I planed to use digital photography, a medium with which the students were very familiar, to tap into the instantaneous nature of contemporary forms of communication, while taking the time to carefully observe and interact with a limited natural space.

As a guest artist and collaborating teacher, Rob spoke to the students about his artistic journey, places he lived and worked, and the influences of place on his evolving perspective of art and the practice of art-making. Together, we challenged the students to see their school place in a new way and capture a vision of that place through digital photographs. Using digital cameras borrowed from the UGA Art Education department, students went outside the school building, into the surrounding grounds, and shot photographs of the school place. Rob and I were available for advising as needed, but gave the students space to work free from direct instruction.

I downloaded the photographs and reviewed them with Rob. Using a selection of student photographs, Rob and I collaborated to construct QuickTime movies, which were uploaded to the Re:city website. These are thirty-second clips that can be played individually or simultaneously on the website, giving the viewer a barrage of images covering the school places.

Each student was provided with the website address as well as a CD containing his or her photographs, a QuickTime version of said photographs, and a copy of the collaborative QuickTime movie.

In Action: 12/9/08

We are lucky today. Though the landscape is brown and crispy from the change of seasons, we'll be working under a shocking blue sky, warmed by the sun so that jackets are unnecessary. I'm actually sweating a little under my cardigan, but that's no surprise because I am nervous. Rob is with me today, and though we've discussed our ideas at length, we've never taught together before.

After meeting and discussing our ideas and the parameters of each school, we decided to take slightly different approaches at each school. For today, Rob is focusing more on the idea of being dissatisfied with one's surroundings and deciding to make art anyway, using it as a way to revision the place in which one finds oneself. After I introduce him, he begins by telling a bit of his story as a student and artist, moving from Shreveport to Savannah and Charleston, then back to Louisiana. Upon returning to his hometown after several years, he found it to be pretty deserted, run-down, and not very inspiring, at least initially. However, he noticed a lot of "space to do things," so he and several other artists and musicians started making use of the space as it was. He took photos and video, and made sound recordings of his travels in the Shreveport area, coming to see the place in a new way. He is using his personal story to address the idea of *choosing* one's perspective of a place with the students. They are silent as he speaks, engrossed with the tall, wiry man and his soft-spoken, yet passionate delivery.

We introduce the Re:city project and our intentions to post some of the students' pictures on the website. I explain that the students, Rob and I will be collaborators in a photography project to see the school in a new way. Once they are a part of the website, the photographs will be in dialogue with other site-specific works in the Athens area, literally putting the students' schools on the map.

I hand out cameras and we head outside to the yard just below. I have been given instructions to stay within a limited area close to the school building, and we are accompanied by another teacher. Once outside, the students take a few minutes to venture much further than the

door. Squinting in the bright sunlight, they look around as if strangers to the natural world literally right outside the school doors. There is some nervous giggling and sidelong glances at me as if to say, “What am I supposed to take pictures of here?” I encourage them to move outward from the building, to try to see this place in a new way, and I point to a pretty bush, a grasshopper, and the sky. Some start immediately snapping pictures, others take time to walk and look around.

I am also shooting pictures today, for many reasons. I want to engage in a similar process to the one I’ve challenged my students to do. I want to model a thoughtful, observant, and curious way of moving through the environment, bending to look for new angles, trying on new viewpoints. I hope to intertwine with my students as an artist searching for images that help tell my story. If only for a moment, I hope to truly feel as though I am working *with* them, journeying *with* them.

Trying to balance my roles as student, teacher, artist, and researcher, however, I am also observing, assisting, and remembering. I ponder, shoot, watch, listen, encourage, advise, discuss, notate, then repeat. At the same time, Rob is studying the students, offering assistance, asking questions, and conferring with me. The students are engrossed in the work: walking, looking, bending, pointing, and shooting. There are the occasional snickers, a few teasing exchanges, and several “Don’t take my picture!” groans. Conversation ebbs and flows, but what I hear most often are delighted exchanges of discovery, consultations on angle, compliments, suggestions and possibilities.

Toward the end of the class period, we gather together in a circle to reflect and bring some closure to the activity. Rob and I both compliment the students on their work ethic, noting the ways we saw them engaged with the environment and the creative process. I ask the students how they were thinking while working, what they noticed, and what decisions they made while shooting. Some students admit they shot somewhat randomly, moving the camera across the landscape and pressing the shutter. Others were more precise, carefully lining up foreground and background. Still others were fascinated with creating interesting shapes, textures, and compositions. All of the students say they enjoyed the time and were surprised at how much there was to see.

In Action: 12/11/08

Today it is raining, pouring, rather. It is still unseasonably warm, and the humidity fogs my windshield as I drive toward the school, laughing with Rob at our luck. This morning deluge does not bode well for our mostly outdoor photography project, but I try to remain upbeat as my mind bounces around variations of the activity. How should I shift the instructions if we have to stay inside? How will the dynamic amongst us change if we are stuck shooting institutional fixtures instead of the natural environment? Does it matter? I wonder how many students will be there today?

Working with a different, smaller group of students today, we continued to challenge them to see their school environment in new ways. However, we also decided to explore art-making as meditative practice, reflection upon artistic choices and the dialogue one's work has with the larger community. Rob showed the students the websites of Robert Long and Hamish Fulton, explaining their work and influence upon his artistic practice.

The downpour shifts to drizzle, and during this momentary break in the clouds we hurry outside. Once beyond the doors, the students moved quickly into their own spaces, exploring various corners of the fenced school property. Huddled under a fuchsia rain slicker, Kim walks to the very edge of the property and creeps along the fence. Summer wanders in the opposite direction, staring alternately at the soggy ground and dappled grey sky. Umbrella hoisted daintily, Elizabeth steps carefully, pondering details along the fence and in the trees. The students don't seem to need our encouragement and we mostly observe their movements through the landscape.

Slowly, the rainfall grows back to a near downpour and we begrudgingly trudge back inside. However, the creative flow is activated and the students continue to search the indoor school environment, hungrily shooting photographs. In contrast to their quiet, inquisitive searching outside, the students are now moving into more critical commentary on their school environment. They are collectively shooting the ugly places, the cold, awkward, and oppressive institutional fixtures: trashcans, bathrooms, exposed wiring, stained ceiling tiles, and warning signs. I hear some giggling and sarcastic tones as they show each other various awkwardly arranged objects and fixtures in what they know is a former mental health treatment facility. How interesting the shift from outside, to inside this school place.

Toward the end of the class period, we gather together around a circular table to discuss the day's work. During our conversation, I notice sunlight breaking through the clouds as a thrasher comes to rest on the birdfeeder outside the window. I point this out to the group and we share a laugh at our timing.

I ask the students for feedback about using photography to look at the school in a new way. Summer answers enthusiastically,

“When I start to think about doing things artistically, I start to look around and think, ‘*Where’s my camera, I need my camera!*’ Normally I wouldn’t be paying attention and would just be staring off. It helps me be aware of my surroundings.”

Elizabeth agrees and goes into a small tirade about the monotony of the traditional school schedule. Coming from home-schooling, she is incredibly frustrated with her days being segmented and feeling as though each day is a march toward the next and toward the end of the week, the end of the month. Lightly tripping through her sentences, she sighs, “It just sucks your life out! I hate living like that. It’s *awful!*” And then barely a breath later, “But when you have a camera in your hands and you’re shaken out of there...it makes you look at things very differently.”

Summer adds, “And you don’t really have a perception of time when you’re doing that either.”

Oh yes, the creative flow is activated. I am overjoyed. I can hardly wait to see the photographs.

Reflections:

Given the always-hovering constraints of time, this project is just in its infancy. I recognize the need for more preparation time, inclusion of more contemporary photography to contextualize the work, longer sessions of uninterrupted shooting, and student processing of images. There is a great deal of potential within this type of project to involve students in a deeper exploration of the school place as situated in their individual lives and in the larger community. Though my students didn’t get nearly as far as Graham’s did, we started something similar, yet specific to our situation. In the future, I would have students engaged in this type of

exploration for several weeks, if not longer. However, the work as it stands now provides me with rich insight into the students' perspectives of their school places.

I saw students, freed from the confines of desks in rows and cinderblock walls, deeply engaged in exploring the surrounding environment. I saw students consulting with each other, collectively documenting the entire place yet individually shaping their perspectives of it. I saw looks of disbelief and smiles of gratitude as students were trusted with cameras, and challenged to trust their ability to create artworks with them. Given the freedom to frame the world as they saw fit, the students showed me beautiful, poignant pieces of their perspective through the landscape of the school place. Even if just for a few moments, they saw the place with new eyes and shared that revision with me. Now I share it with you.









I have to wait, watch, and listen
for the openings.

vi·gnette (v_n-y_t')

n.

1. A decorative design placed at the beginning or end of a book or chapter of a book or along the border of a page.
2. An unbordered picture, often a portrait, that shades off into the surrounding color at the edges.
3. a. A short, usually descriptive literary sketch.
b. A short scene or incident, as from a movie.

tr.v. **vi·gnet·ted, vi·gnet·ting, vi·gnettes**

1. To soften the edges of (a picture) in vignette style.
2. To describe in a brief way.

[French, from Old French, diminutive of *vigne*, *vine* (*from the use of vine tendrils in decorative borders*); see **vine**.] (American Heritage Dictionary, 2009).

Vignettes:

The following chapter contains vignettes of some of my students. These are glimpses of the students through images of their artwork and brief narratives. The narratives are intended to illustrate an interaction and a piece of our relationship, and to demonstrate something that I learned from each student. I wrote these vignettes in a manner similar to the way in which I work as a visual artist: jumping off from “aha” moments, those places that instantly inspire me, strike me emotionally, and synchronize with half-conscious thought to bring lessons to the surface. I started writing about each student as things came to me. Moments in time, as represented by a photograph or a line of dialogue, are elaborated upon here. These are the moments I mine for insight. I realize how fleeting connections with students can be in the course of a class period. At the same time, I feel the reverberations of our interactions for quite some time.

Alex:

Always cloaked in baggy sweatshirts, she is loud, abrasive, and tends to spit her opinions in a deep drawl, with little caution for those within earshot. However, during our brief time together, I discovered that she also dropped pieces of incredible wisdom, when I was listening. There was a day I thought she was arguing with Mike, but they were actually talking about art and creativity. My journal says: *“They were going back and forth about who an ‘artist’ is, what’s ‘in your head’, and how ‘whatever’s in your head is good, so what you make of it on the paper is good.”* I’ve learned that sometimes as a teacher you get to hear things like this if you listen for a minute before shushing a chattering group of students.



Arms crossed over her face, Alex hides from the camera, her camera, in a purposeful shot. I don’t know who took the picture, but the image appeared when I uploaded her camera’s photos to my computer. As usual, she is shrouded in an extra-large gray sweatshirt, hands hidden in its voluminous sleeves. Only the top of her hair gives us any indication that there is a young woman hiding in the man-sized sweatshirt.

During the photography lesson, Alex spent most of her time away from the other students, an unusual occurrence for this fairly exuberant personality. I watched her stare

carefully at the display on her digital camera as she framed her shots. Crouching near the ground, head tilted at the awkward angle of one contemplating vision, she slowly, methodically moved her camera into position between eye and place.

Crunching on bone-dry, yellowed grass, we circled up at the end of the class to reflect upon our 're-visioning' photography assignment. I remember the astonished look on Rob's face, and the awed stillness of the conversation, when it was Alex's turn to talk about the photos she made. She explained that she tried to look at layers of images, to capture what was behind the things right in front of our faces: "*Go beyond the scenery to see what isn't seen very often.*"


Mike:

With about ten minutes to go in the class, Dr. Hanson came in and announced that he needed to introduce us to “someone you’ve never met.” In walked Mike, hands in his pockets, looking very dapper in a black suit, white shirt and black tie. His hair was combed, possibly just cut, and he stifled a proud but slightly embarrassed smile. Amidst “ooh’s” and “aww, hell’s” from the students, another teacher sharply smacked, “Whadja get?” I tried in vain to stifle my wide-eyed chagrin at their lack of tact and surprise at Mike’s appearance. Apparently he’d been to court earlier and received a very forgiving sentence: community service and probation. For what charges, I don’t know. I felt invisible during this spectacle and realized how much of a visitor I was in this place, so distant from the students’ daily lives.

During an interview, Mike explained to me that he often had a hard time coming up with ideas. Being creative at school seemed like more work, another task to be accomplished. He said, “*We’re just tryin’ to get out. We’re not really thinkin’ of much else.*”

Despite the poignancy of Mike’s words, I’m fairly certain that he thinks about a great deal more than that. His photographs, and more importantly, his process, show a young man intrigued by his surroundings and aware of his place on the fringe. After shooting several frames, he figured out that multiple still frames in a row create a visual similar to a stop-action animation. Some of the other students seemed to understand this concept as well and were taking multiple pictures of people walking by, standing in a group and clicking away paparazzi-style. Mike stood off to the side and took pictures of them taking pictures. He also turned the lens on himself.





Earlier in the semester, I gave the students quotes to ponder in their sketchbooks, including the following by Wallace Stevens: “The magnificent cause of being, the imagination: the one reality in this imagined world.” In his barely legible, childlike hand, Mike wrote,

Are we real? Or is it that we think we believe the truth of existence?

Later, as I reflected on the students’ shooting, I remembered most of the students vehemently avoided the camera pointed at them, but hungrily pointed the camera outward at others. I remembered how they followed strangers and each other in a voyeuristic consumption of disposable digital images, often erasing as they went. I thought, “This has got to be the influence of mass digital media” and I pondered the ease with which we can now look into each other’s lives, and the ease with which we can snap, edit, and erase. I am both amazed and appalled by the role of the lens in our lives now. I wonder how it will evolve in the future and how I can teach students to wield its power thoughtfully, artfully, and responsibly.

It's nice being told you're smart
when everyone else is like,
"Quit being crazy!"

Elizabeth:

Her photographs are well-framed, close investigations of institutional fixtures: bathroom sinks, fence hinges, a broken basketball goal. She often shot the same image more than once, trying it from different angles. I watched her creep toward things, head tilted under the umbrella, one eyebrow raised, examining details. Several of her photographs show the landscape both with and without the chain link fence that surrounds the school property; a stirring depiction of this place from different angles, both caged and free.



When I first met Elizabeth, I was struck by her elegant, dancer's frame and mannerisms, combined with a sharp, witty intellect. However, these qualities were juxtaposed with hasty speech and loud, grating laughter. I wondered why her volumes of intelligent commentary were often tempered by jokes and nervous giggling. My journal says, "*Elizabeth strikes me as a girl on the verge – of what I don't know – she seems both very tightly sewn together but also shaky and vulnerable.*"

Later, I learned from Elizabeth that she is part of an artistic family of eight, attended public school, an arts academy, and was home-schooled, prior to attending this school. Her father is a pastor and a photographer of nature. Her mother, a textile artist; her sisters, one photographer and one painter. Her education has been largely about choice and the *freedom* to

explore one's interests. During home-school, she was free and encouraged to fully explore a subject matter of interest and did, to exhaustion in many cases. She explains,

"I would just get interested in something then check out every book in the library...and read them all...then get interested in something else, and that's how I learned everything...I got really interested in Greek mythology, so I read every Greek myth I could find..."

She appreciates the freedom and flexibility of the P.L.C. school environment as opposed to the standard public school, which is "like, sit there and take notes, don't ask any questions, just learn." Genuinely curious and introspective, Elizabeth says,

"I had trouble in class because I was always like, 'why?', and they'd say, 'because we have to', and I was like, 'that's not a very good answer'".

I agree. The 'why' students like Elizabeth, remind me to question my motives and curriculum, and to examine the learning experiences of every student.

Luca:

Hood pulled up, arms folded defensively, Luca talked tough, chided classmates, and feigned innocent confusion to teachers. He performed a tough guy act that did not match his squat stature or his cherubic face topped by a mop of curly, dark hair. He was always being corrected, shushed, and disciplined by other teachers. I admit, he wore on my nerves a good part of the time and I've shushed him here and there. He was often absent from my class, having been placed in isolation for one offense or another. Hearing stories from other faculty, I knew he was dealing with a lot of upsetting life circumstances and had been shuffled back and forth between family members in North and South America. When he was in my class, and when he actually worked, his artwork also revealed a family struggling with violence and incarceration. I was frustrated with the distance I felt from him and the limited time available for him to explore his thoughts through art-making.

The day we shot photographs, I was especially concerned about his behavior. Not only was he disrespectful of other teachers, he had a way of drawing other students into the fray with him. He could pull attention away from schoolwork and into whatever entertained him that moment. I foresaw deleting inappropriate photographs from his camera, should he even choose to participate.

I was wrong. Rob told me not to worry about it, and he was right.

I was delighted as I downloaded the pictures from Luca's camera, clapping in excitement and relief. He captured some beautiful, sensitive images in which he carefully framed ephemeral arrangements of objects: a piece of twine stuck in the brick wall, the ghost of a spray painted line next to his shadow, an abandoned pencil in the detritus near the sidewalk. He'd been busy during our short time outside the school building with a concentration not usually evident in the classroom. Given space to work and trusted with a camera, Luca did not show his typical mockery. Instead, he showed me engagement with the lens and keen attention to overlooked schoolyard rubble. I couldn't help but see a parallel between his images and his sense of belonging in school.



I want to believe the oft-repeated mantra, “if you expect the best, you just might get it,” just as I know, “if you expect the worst, you will most certainly get it.” Luca reminded me that the first half of the axiom is much easier said than done. The second half is just too easy to do. I wonder what students like Luca could make given space, support, and faith that they will do their best?

Summer:

One day, when the other students were absent and it was just Summer and me, I decided to go ahead with my collage lesson as planned. So she and I sat and worked together, sometimes talking and sometimes in silence. We settled into a flow of movements, turning magazine pages, tearing, cutting, arranging and rearranging images on the table. She tends to pull a lot more images than I do, all remaining within a certain color scheme, before she starts meticulously cutting them into shapes. I tend to pull images that I respond to with wonder and nostalgia, based upon my immediate responses and feelings that day. The series of images I pull when I work usually tell me a story, though I may not hear its plotline or understand its characters.

Summer is passionate. When asked about something she cares about, she pauses momentarily, teetering on the edge of her shyness. Once she decides to speak, however, her energy is palpable, bubbling out in half-sentences, leaping from thought to thought and leaving her near breathless in many cases. She's very thoughtful, though appearing scattered. Other people and ideas are always considered and acknowledged in her speech. I can see her wrestling with her thoughts, trying to prioritize what is verbalized, and I identify with her. I often have a difficult time completing thoughts, instead jumping from one to the next as I realize caveats and possibilities. Perhaps that is why she and I connected through making collages. We both have ideas pinballing around in our heads and need to slow down and make visual connections between them to gain deeper understanding. We have talked about coming to understand things through collage.

S: I've been doing collages ever since you taught me. Every time I pick up a magazine I want to start cutting it! I really feel like that is super-expressive. Somebody else put it there, you're just changing it and arranging it... (I am) letting my energy flow straight rather than scattered. It makes me focus. It has no rules, which makes it better for me because I like not following the rules.

L: What do you learn when you make collages?

S: How I react to colors: jewel tones all the time. I always choose the most vibrant colors. It helps me understand how attentive I am to color, how much of a visual learner I am. It helps me think about what I want to do in life...traveling, going places.

L: (*pointing to one of Summer's collages*) So making this helped you think about that...here it is on paper, all these things I wasn't quite sure went together. That happens when I do collage. It's like, 'Wow, I didn't know I was thinking that.'

S: It's really cool to tap into that. It's like, I'm communicating with myself without words...I'm just going, that's what I meant about the energy thing, it just opens up and flows.



I don't believe we ever truly understand how we work as artists, though we can attend to the process and the habits that lead to insight. I cannot speak for Summer and the exact process that she experiences while working. However, I can see a good bit of it in her actions and trust that she has found a comfortable space to make her experiences tangible. Learning with Summer has taught me to trust the flow feeling, to trust the synchronicity when it happens.



This is the collage I made with Summer that day.

The quote written around the main figure says:

Chance is always powerful. Let your hook always be cast; in the pool where you least expect it, there will be a fish. - Ovid

I hate it whenever people second-guess themselves.

syn·chro·nic·i·ty (s_ŋ'kr_-n_s'_-t_, s_n'-)

n. *pl.* **syn·chro·nic·i·ties**

1. The state or fact of being synchronous or simultaneous; synchronism.
2. Coincidence of events that seem to be meaningfully related, conceived in Jungian theory as an explanatory principle on the same order as causality (American Heritage Dictionary, 2009).

Synchronicity works:

Researchers with aesthetic vision perceive the dynamics of a situation and know how to 'read' it...they look for pattern within disorder...they construct forms and suggest meanings.

- Anne Sullivan (2000, p. 8)

At this point in the book, I hope the reader has a sense of the literature, research, and previous educational and personal experiences that influence me. I hope the reader has a sense of my teaching experiences and students through artifacts and stories. I hope the roles of student, teacher, artist, and researcher are evident in the work to authentically reflect the interwoven nature of my experience. What follows are works created as I processed and reflected upon all that information and the spaces in-between. Through these “synchronicity works,” I hope the reader can gain a sense of how I think as an artist, and what keeps me motivated to continue working. I hope that the in-between spaces may be illuminated by these aesthetic presentations of data (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Irwin & Springgay, 2008).

Thoreau says, “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately....and see if I could not learn what it had to teach” (1854, p. 118). These words echo to me each time I revisit an image or a piece of text to see what it has to teach. When I sit and stare at the sky, which I’m apt to do, and am doing right now, I am letting my mind amble through the woods of my memories, through my visual archive of experience. I suppose part of it is the posture one has to take in order to really, comfortably stare at the sky: head leaning back, feet up, or preferably, whole body lying down, face up to the heavens. These postures are open, vulnerable, and encourage a slowing of breath and thought.

Martha Graham said that we are channels, and that our responsibility as artists is to keep those channels open. I am not always able to sit still and stare at the sky for insight, but I move through my life with senses tuned and mind open to synchronous insights. Sometimes they happen in the car, during conversations, or in dreams. Often, it is simply a matter of attending to images and/or text that appear in close proximity. Lawrence Weschler created an entire book from his similar visual practice of collecting “uncanny moments of convergence, bizarre associations, eerie rhymes, whispered recollections” (2007, p. 1). Found photographs, art works,

and his ruminations are juxtaposed and lightly categorized for the reader to make what he or she will of the convergences he sees.

Here you will find several works of text and image, beginning with three vignettes, moments of insight gained through synchronous art works, my students' and mine interacting. These are stories that help explain my openness to synchronicity in my art-making process. You will also find juxtaposed photographs taken by my students and me, images interacting without text. Lastly, you will find two movies, slide shows of photographs taken by my students and me at the two schools during the re-visioning project. These are not the same movies that Rob Peterson and I created and posted on the Re:city website. These are re-investigations of the images and their relationships to each other.

Richardson (1997) explains that poetic representation engages the body differently than prose. As such, the body enjoys the feelings of poetic rhythm and cadence, which are similar to both spoken words and dance. The works that follow were created in a rhythm different from the rest of this Applied Project, in moments when I allowed the experiences to dance as they wished on the page. I hope the reader can engage in this rhythm, ambling and leaping as he or she wishes.

Synchronicity 1: A hole and a leap

On the way back in to the school, Luca photographed the sign on the door that said:

Alternative School Area: Do Not Enter.

Without time to think, I photographed him photographing the sign. Every time I went into the Alternative School that sign bothered me. It was both abrasive and pitiful, handwritten on red construction paper, faded and peeling off the door. Each time I opened that door, I took a minute to look at the sign and take a deep breath. The students came into the Alternative School area through that door every day. Luca was the only one who photographed it.

A month later, I was packing my bags for a semester in Italy and honestly did not give much thought to those photographs for some time. However, upon scrolling through them on my laptop, in a sunlit studio in Cortona, I was moved to tears by my own semi-forgotten photograph.



I went to Cortona intending to make books about my teaching experiences. Working in a new media, book arts, I was entranced by the possibilities yet struggling with the technicalities. I was once again placed into the role of novice art student, unable to do as I wished with a media. My hands could not keep pace with the experiences and ideas flowing over me.

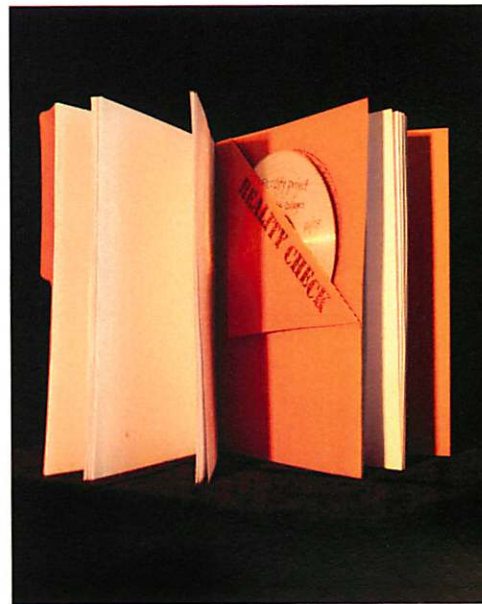
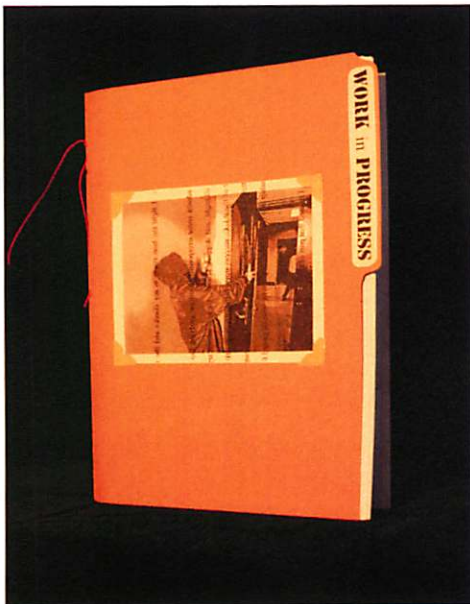
That day in the studio, I was searching for some inspiration, for a path back toward my pre-Cortona work, a way to connect my daily *dolce vita* with my students' now distant voices, clamoring for attention. Cloaked in a gigantic hoodie, face hidden, one of my most challenging students literally holds open the door for me, to a breakthrough in the studio that day and on this page.

I worked from early morning well into the night on a little book called "Work in Progress." Shaped like a manila file folder, it contains text written in the semester prior: a literature review and a narrative. Dividing the two sections is a pocket, stamped "Reality Check," which holds a DVD of my students' photographs. As I cut the hole for the DVD, a phrase came jolting into consciousness,

Where you used to be, there is a hole in the world, which I find myself constantly walking around in the daytime, and falling into at night.

– Edna St. Vincent Millay

This phrase echoed in a gallery, ten years earlier, surrounded by my senior exit show of paintings. It was scrawled, tiny, in the corner of a seven-foot canvas, a reference to people lost to me, for one reason or another. I'd based the main character of a story written the previous semester on one of them.



Though I felt I was on to something in the book studio, the process became even clearer when I spoke about it on film, and then edited it, for days. Watching myself talk about my work, I re-mapped the twisting, turning, and uncertain path of my process as a student, teacher, artist, and researcher.

A photograph, a poetic turn of phrase, the out-of-sorts feeling of being immersed in an unfamiliar place: these things caused leaps in memory and understanding that could not, would not, be captured in text alone. I could absolutely no longer ignore the synchronous turns and connections that were happening. I could no longer hesitate to do an arts-based approach to this work. I could no longer push aside the meandering, yet startling, process of allowing my experiences and thoughts to interweave and present themselves in multiple formats. There was no way I could convey this rich layered experience solely in academic-style writing. Thus continues the work in progress.

Synchronicity 2: Uccello magico

In the bookmaking class in Cortona, I rediscovered a way of working intuitively, finding materials and following my instincts to form them into books. Italy is a haven for those of us interested in paper, and it was easy to be overwhelmed by the amount of gorgeous materials available for bookmaking. When strolling the markets and shops, however, I only purchased things that interested me on a level beyond pure visual delight, beyond words. At a *cartoleria* in Florence I found white paper patterned with burgundy birds perched in twining branches, interspersed with elegant ochre birdcages. Without question, I purchased it, returned to the studio, and began the painstaking process of cutting out the lacy illustrations. Days later and just hours before a critique, neck and fingers aching, I questioned my sanity as I stared at a pile of cutouts, not knowing what to make of them.

Suddenly, with “I know why the caged bird sings” on the tip of my tongue, I ran to the computer lab to look up and re-read the entire poem. As my eyes ran along the first lines, they grew hot with the threat of tears and a sharp inhale released an “aha” sigh. I had forgotten the poem’s beginning.

*A free bird leaps on the back of the wind
and floats downstream till the current ends
and dips his wing in the orange suns rays and dares to claim the sky.*
(Angelou, 1969).

Hardly an hour earlier, I was sitting on the Etruscan wall atop Cortona, overlooking the valley. As I did most nights, I was staring into the brilliant orange sunset, palms outstretched to feel the wind.

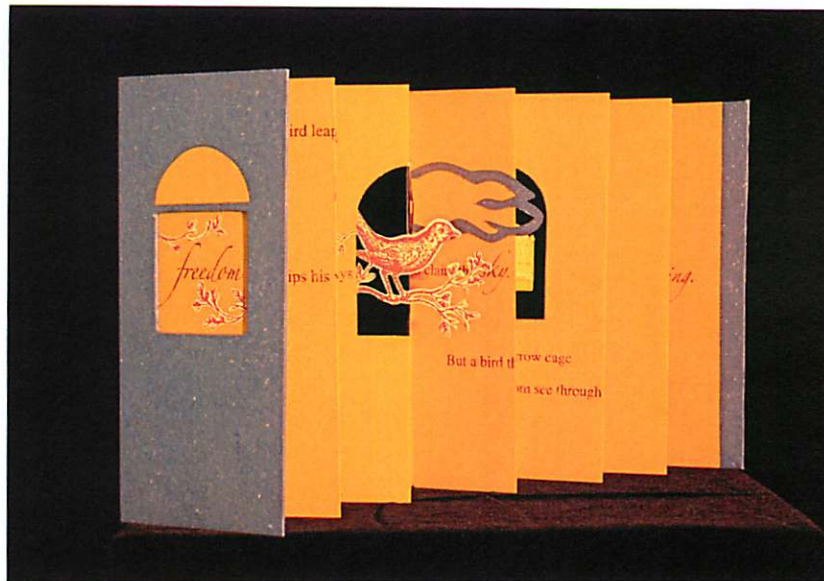
After dinner, I met a friend for coffee and talked about my students back in Athens. I don’t think I’d spoken of them in quite some time, possibly since I arrived in Italy. A channel opened up in me, thoughts and emotions began leaping between my studio in Italy and my former classroom in Athens. I trudged back up the stone hill to the studio, lines from the poem and the conversation running through my head. As I transferred text and scarlet birds *onto*

folded ochre paper, my mind leapt to Elizabeth, my initial impressions of her and a postcard she made.



At the end of the prior semester, I asked my students to make a postcard answering the question: “Where are you?” Elizabeth explained that the rock symbolizes the mountain of tasks to accomplish in life and the work required to make and reach goals. She feels that at some point, one can fly from the burdensome climb up the mountain into hopeful skies. She feels close to that point.

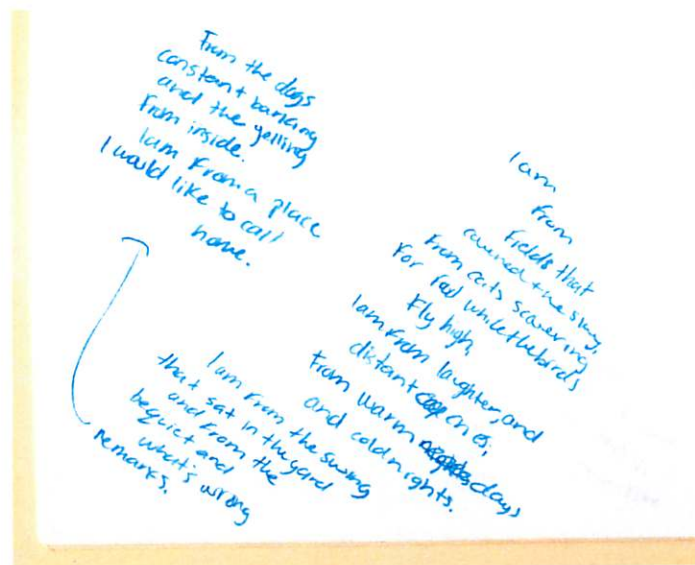
Though not entirely conscious of my mental processes at the time, I know now I made my “Freedom” book as a reflection on my semester in Italy in sharp contrast with the semesters prior in Athens alternative schools. I contrasted my ability to be there in Italy, to stare at the sun and feel the wind, with my students’ limited resources and support systems. I remembered the way they skulked around, staring at me in disbelief when I asked them to trust their ideas. I remembered the anger and sadness I felt from some of them, the hope from others. Mostly, I remembered the disconnected feeling, the distance between the traditional school system and the alternative school places, between the “regular” students and my students. Before, I struggled with my various roles interacting with the students. Now I distinctly felt the distance between my students and me.



Looking now at the images close to each other, I marvel at the complex beauty of Elizabeth's postcard, how carefully she fit the magazine images together. I also marvel at the simplicity of my book, which is very different from my usual, thickly-layered work. However, it is the factors that contributed to the art-making that are more interesting to me now. I am intrigued by visual memory and the ways in which memories and experiences intertwine in the process of art-making. Especially when I am tuned in to the way my mind leaps if I let it, I find myself making art that is connected to other experiences through deeply meaningful, evocative visual clues. When I am open to seeing, absorbing, recalling, and revising images from the world around me, regardless of how or when they come to me, I open up to synchronicity.

Synchronicity 3: Where We're From

When I was first introduced to the poem, "Where I'm From," I had no idea that it inspired teachers across the country to use it in their classrooms. I had no idea that the poet was a woman from Kentucky, or that she also wrote children's books. I just loved the cadence and rich sensory details of the poem. I loved the memories it stirred from my own life. That's why I read it to my students. I didn't ask them to write a poem, but to listen to the details and describe a sacred place in their lives. At the time, I didn't know I had an aspiring novelist in my class.



Jackie has big plans. She is working on a *novel*, one of several in a *series* about vampires. (There's another one about werewolves, but we won't get into that right now. Sigh.) She plans to go into the military so she can go to college and major in Biology and minor in Photography or Psychology, she's not sure which yet. She's also thinking about teaching because this one time she got to teach a science lesson and everyone said she did better than the regular teacher. So that might be something to think about. She likes art and music and theater and nature and is just bubbling over with questions or ideas for me most of the time. She's also usually got some kind of dra-ma going on because people are just soooo, you know?! She spends so much time talking and talking that I wonder how much she *l-i-s-t-e-n-s*.

When I read the following words on Jackie's postcard, I realized
she heard every word I said.

*I am from fields that covered the sky,
from cats scavenging for food while the birds fly high in the sky.
I am from laughter and distant cries; from warm day and cold nights.
I am from the swing that sat in the yard
and from the 'be quiet' and 'what's wrong?' remarks.
From the dogs constant barking and the yelling from inside the house.
I am from a place I would like to call home.*

The courage and honesty that students show me is both humbling and inspiring. Just when I start to think I know what to expect, someone surprises me. Just when I start to feel reeeallll-y unmotivated, someone shows me what is possible. Just when I think I've sucked the marrow from *every* creative bone in my body, someone reminds me how exciting it is to make art. As I struggled to finish this Applied Project, I returned to Jackie's postcard and found the courage to write my own poem. All the childhood memories that were unearthed as I explored my own educational experiences twirled into rich sensory details and fell into a familiar cadence.

Where I'm From

I am from shocking blue skies
and purple-mountains-majesty,
torn paper collages and M-shaped seagull-birdies.
I am from coloring books, Golden books,
and mommy's funny voices reading aloud.

I am from singing in the car
and dancing in the kitchen,
folk music and Motown on the record player.
Red velvet covered the speakers,
my two-year-old fingertips buzzed by the bass.

I am from baking, canning, and sewing,
making costumes and Barbie furniture.
Sitting on the countertop
I learned to thread a needle.
Sometimes I got to use the hot glue gun.

I am from do-it-yourself home improvements,
raking leaves and washing cars.
Sitting on the sawhorse
I learned to swing a hammer.
Sometimes I got to paint.

I am from walks in the woods and fishing at dawn,
knife safety and knot-tying.
The “Pack it in, pack it out” religion
meant sore shoulders but
shaking, glorious, Zen at the summit.

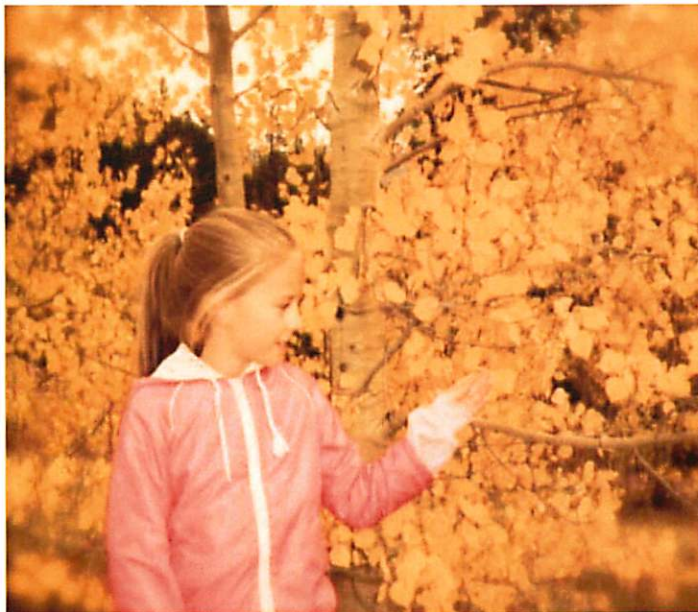
I am from long trips in the car and
The World’s Largest Ball of String.
Holding hands on the beach
until my brother and I felt
too old for dad’s annual photograph.

I am from glitter and paint-covered overalls,
turpentine and sulfur-stink fix trays.

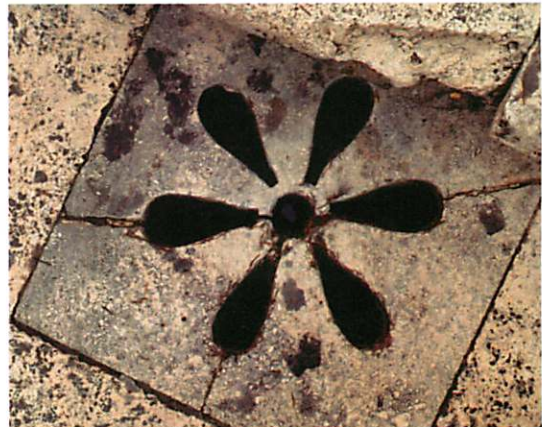
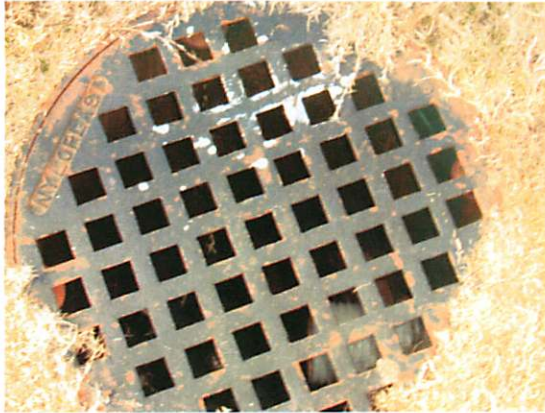
I am from Ms. “get your dark areas darker”
and Dr. “good, Dancer, damn good”
lifelong mentors both.

In my closet there are boxes full
of memories, market-finds, craft-store sale items,
postcards, maps, and photographs.

Creative collecting
for all the things I’ve yet to make.









What lives in the silence?



Epilogue: Realizations

In the process of living and telling these intertwined stories, mine, theirs, and ours, I reached many realizations, which continue to evolve. I realized that art education curriculum grounded in place can connect otherwise disconnected students to themselves, to others, to the communities and world we all share. Place-based art education helps develop qualities in our students that are required of creative, empathic members of a sustainable global society. Embracing and extending established goals of postmodern art education, curriculum grounded in place teaches us all to pay *attention*, re-think *relationships*, and be *critically reflective*. If we cultivate attention to our surroundings, we may grow closer and gain more understanding in our relationships, to others and the world around us. Together, as interconnected lives, we can critically reflect upon our world and artfully render our experiences and understandings. The work that we make marks our journey and shows us possibilities.

I realized that sometimes it is more difficult to be gentle than tough, and that my ability to meet that challenge serves as a model for my students. I realized that teaching boldly and humbly are not two different actions, but interdependent facets of responsive teaching. I realized that beauty and truth are present, even in difficult situations, if I am attentive and open to seeing them. I realized that a dancing, leaping mind loves synchronicity and learns best from the silent, in-between spaces. Upon reflection, I realized that in some of those spaces are stories.

I realized that my story and process as a student, teacher, artist, and researcher is inextricably intertwined with my students' stories and our experiences together, in and out of the classroom. The moments that I share and connect with students are but tiny interludes in our complex, layered lives. It is the insight within those moments that reverberates, grows, and touches other lives. The voices of at-risk students were largely under-represented in the literature I explored during my graduate program. This lack was diametrically opposed to the abundance of stories I absorbed during my brief art-making encounters with students. I realized that when given a chance – time, space, attention, support, and trust – students *will* share their stories. It is my job to help them do that, and to meet them, ready to share mine.

By sharing my experiences in this book, I hope to provide other educators with insight into the possibilities of teaching and learning with at-risk students. Despite time and space constraints, it is possible to be responsive to student needs and interests, to be creative with

materials and activities, and to be reflective upon the intertwining nature of life and work, teaching and learning. It is possible to engage the students at the margins, if we are willing to artfully engage with the places in which we exist, be they literal or metaphorical, shared or separate. It is possible to artfully render our experiences as students, teachers, artists, and researchers, if we are willing to examine and delight in the interweaving of our roles and the insights therein. I hope this book illuminates possibilities, encourages explorations, and inspires others to teach and learn alongside their students, even the difficult ones. It is possible to help them see their places with new eyes, and move forward with a sense of ownership, rendering their experiences more thoughtfully and artfully. If students can grow this way in our classes, imagine the possibilities for their growth outward into the world.

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