A Living Curriculum of Place(s)

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I write America for the ones I will mother
Who won't be just Black or white
But, who won't want to be an "other."
Their parents chose to love
And to rise above
What is less understood.
They looked beyond the skin
To the heart of a friend
And saw their future.
They envisioned the complexion and hair texture
Every feature
The beauty of two races creating one.
I write to multiracial America.

—Rosie Baker, Elementary Gifted Education Teacher,
Mobile, Alabama, 2011

Autobiographical Roots of the Inquiry

MY MOM gave birth to me, a white male, in 1980 at Sparrow Hospital in Lansing, Michigan. At the age of six, my family moved from multiracial Lansing to the largely white nearby suburb of Okemos. We moved so that my two older siblings and I could attend the affluent community's well-regarded public schools. My mom soon came to teach at Okemos' lone middle school; my dad worked for the State of Michigan's foster care program. Toward the end of my high school years, I decided that I wanted to follow in my mom's occupational footsteps and become a teacher. When I then left Mid-Michigan for Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, I experienced my first geographic move as an adult. My family remained in Okemos, and I still thought of Okemos as my home, but I wasn't living there.

Dartmouth, an Ivy League school with a strong conservative history—but not conservative in an ecological sense—was a difficult place for me even though Okemos had some similar elements. I wanted to be a teacher, but in my sophomore year, the College attempted to shut down the small Education Department that "produced" teachers. One of my roommate's mothers asked me, "*Why* do you want to be a teacher?" Her son took part in corporate recruiting. When I approached a history professor about inviting Howard Zinn to come to Dartmouth and a local high school to speak about his work (e.g., Zinn, 2003), the professor responded, "We don't care for him here."

I played varsity basketball while pursuing a degree in history and secondary teaching. In my junior year, I met a white woman named Erica, whom I would end up marrying three years later, but we didn't date at that time. In my senior year, I chose not to play basketball in order to do student teaching. Upon graduating from college with my secondary social studies teaching certificate, I moved to an ocean-side community in New Jersey. For two years there, I worked as a tutor for a family with three children. During that time, Erica and I began dating. Born and raised in Mobile, Alabama, she was living in New York City and then Cambridge, Massachusetts. We decided to get married, and so I moved to Massachusetts, where I took a job teaching social studies at a large public high school.

Although I didn't physically move to Mobile, my life did move there as trips in the ensuing years to see Erica's family turned the city into what I now think of as my second hometown. I quickly came to learn the names and pronunciations of streets and the city's geography. I ate at Erica's favorite restaurants alongside trying out new ones. I began to learn about the city and its region's history and current issues. In particular, largely through Erica's work (e.g., Frankenberg, 2001, 2005), I learned about Mobile's racial past and present.

Simultaneously, I was teaching "early" U. S. history classes ten miles south of Walden Pond. I remembered learning about Walden Pond as a high schooler in Michigan, but *now* I was teaching about Walden, a spot where some of my students had gone swimming in the summers. What my students learned about Walden and its most famous visitor, Henry David Thoreau, was certainly different from what I learned as a student in Michigan. I was also teaching about the history of race and racism in the U.S., using texts by Howard Zinn (2003), Ronald Takaki (1993), James Loewen (1995), and nearly everything published by *Rethinking Schools*, as well as historical writings and speeches by Bartolomé De Las Casas, Tecumseh, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, John Brown, and others. Having grown up a Northerner, and teaching Northerners, I asked students how the concept of place (and the narratives and counternarratives of particular places) constructs the present-day meanings of historical events like the Civil War.

After three years teaching in Massachusetts, Erica and I moved (back, for me) to Mid-Michigan, where I began a doctoral program in curriculum, instruction, and teacher education at Michigan State University (MSU). Living in East Lansing, which is bordered by Lansing on one side and Okemos on the other, I was a different person living in a different place even though "it" was the place where I was from. For the first time, I experienced Old Town, a marginalized community in Lansing that is known for its embrace of social justice issues and actions.

After three years of coursework and teaching at MSU, Erica and I made our most recent move to State College, Pennsylvania. Erica took a position as a tenure-line faculty member at Penn State University (PSU). I worked part-time as an adjunct faculty member while I conducted research and wrote my dissertation. Living in Central Pennsylvania, displaced from my academic

community at MSU, I was thinking and writing about place while adjusting to a new place of living and building a new academic community at PSU.

Studying Living Curricula of Place(s)

I had decided in my middle years of graduate school, as I thought deeply about what I came to call "my living curriculum of place(s)," to study how teachers' past, present, and future learning experiences in the places of their lives shape their work as teachers. A living curriculum is a person's developing course of learning experiences. Building on Aoki's "live(d) curriculum" (1996/2005), Connelly and Clandinin's "personal practical curriculum" (1988), and Pinar and Grumet's "poor curriculum" (1976), a living curriculum is personal and social, engaging all elements of a person's life. Further, following He (2003), a living curriculum is the flow of life, like a river, meandering across, mingling through, and mixing up boundary constructions. It is dynamic, always unfolding, forever experienced, undergone, and lived by a person. The basic unit of a living curriculum is an experience. Following Dewey (1938), experiences hold elements of *continuity* (across time) and *interaction* (across a personal-social spectrum), which are embedded in a *situation*. Clandinin and Connelly (2000), building upon the works of Dewey, add a third dimension to the situation, what they call a "three dimensional narrative inquiry space": an experience occurs in (a) *place*. Often implicit in an experience, this third dimension, place, is critical to understanding one's living curriculum.

Place is commonplace. Geertz writes that place, "something that is a dimension of everyone's existence, the intensity of where we are, passes by anonymously and unremarked. It goes without saying" (1996, p. 259). And yet, when place becomes a focal point of examination, it is quite elusive, fluid, difficult to bound. Despite commonplace notions of place (like that of the social studies textbook with which I was asked to teach, which characterized place in static physical terms), place is far more than a simple geographic category (Berry, 2010; Casey, 1996; hooks, 2009). What *is* place? And, what is *a* place? Is it a concept, abstract and universal? Is it only localized, something specific? Is it rooted in a tract of land? Is it comprised of *things*, like people, physical structures, and myths? Do proximal people inhabit the same place? Place, like curriculum, is lived and dynamic, constructed and reconstructed through relationships with one's surroundings. Thus, place is landed in a physical sense, imagined in a psychological sense, felt in an emotional sense, storied in a historical sense, enacted in a cultural sense, constructed in a social sense, and surely it "is" in many other senses as well. Places are schools, cities, congregations, ideas, bookstores, forest paths, hospital rooms, prison cells, nostalgic thoughts. All places are sites of learning, as learning is always *emplaced* (Cajete, 1994).

Other peoples' places, and perhaps our own, are most accessible through stories. I studied this concept of living curricula of place(s) through the stories of three public school teachers: a Black female elementary school gifted education teacher in Mobile; a Filipino male middle school social studies teacher in Mid-Michigan; and, a white male high school English teacher in Boston (Kissling, 2012). These teachers were from geographic places in my life, which speaks to how this work was inherently a study of my own living curriculum of place(s). Drawing from the narrative work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000), He (2003), and Lawrence-Lightfoot (1995), and understanding lived experience from a research-as-pedagogy approach (van Manen, 1997), I focused on the continuity and interaction of learning in and across places of these teachers' lives. Contrary to much contemporary research in education (Denzin & Lincoln,

2000), I purposefully sought to work intimately with the teachers (Laura, 2010). In this article I focus on stories of one of those teachers: Rosie Baker. Pseudonyms are used for Rosie and some characters and places in her stories. Although Rosie endorsed the use of her real name, I choose to conceal some details in narrating her stories (Britzman, 2000; Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000). In the story that follows, which is structured by a prelude, three acts, and a postlude, I tell of Rosie's living curriculum of place(s)—a course of her past, present, and future learning experiences in the settings of her life—and how this curriculum, rooted in Mobile, shapes her current and future living, including her work as a teacher. I conclude by considering how this story, and my telling of it, dives into the wreckage of daily living (Ayers, 2012), a place where there is potential growth for all of us.

Prelude: Rosie and Me

Rosie Baker is a Black woman who lives in Southern Alabama. She is an elementary school teacher, in her early thirties, and married. Of modest height and a slender build, she speaks softly, often smiling and laughing. Her "Southern accent" is easily distinguishable to the orientation of my Midwestern ear. Even though she has taught elementary school for nine years, she is routinely assumed to be a college student by people she meets in the public, non-school sphere. Gentle outside of the classroom, she is a powerful presence in the classroom as she regulates the activities of her students.

I met Rosie just under a decade ago, during my first visit to Mobile. Erica and I were at Carpe Diem, her favorite coffee/tea house in Mobile, when she spotted Rosie, a friend from high school.[1] At that time, I was living and tutoring in New Jersey. Rosie was living in Mobile and teaching elementary school in the nearby city of Prichard. We both were recent graduates from teacher education programs at small liberal arts colleges, and we had much to talk about with respect to education and teaching. Over the following years, I visited Mobile once or twice a year. On some of those visits, I saw Rosie, at Carpe Diem or elsewhere. During these years, Rosie moved from living in Mobile and teaching in Prichard to living and teaching in the unincorporated territory of Mobile County that is immediately south of the city. In this same period of time, I taught high school and attended graduate school.

In the spring of 2011, I sent an email to Rosie to inquire if she would be interested in participating in my study. I told her that I hoped to work with a teacher I had already known in Mobile. She enthusiastically agreed to participate. Committed to the power and importance of story (e.g., Umphrey, 2007; Witherell & Noddings, 1991) and particularly informed by the narrative inquiry work of Clandinin and Connelly (2000), I sought for Rosie to share stories of her living and teaching. We conducted a series of interviews over Skype and in person. We wrote in various forms: she responded to a questionnaire (that I wrote), composed poetry, and kept a journal about her living and teaching during a segment of the study. I kept a journal about my living and researching during the study. For one week, I visited Alabama and spent the majority of the time from morning to evening, save only nights, with Rosie. The week unfolded at Rosie's school, at her home, and at some of her favorite places in and around Mobile including sharing meals with her and her husband Rick.

Act I: Family and Race in Rosie's Poetry

In the poem at the onset of this article, Rosie focuses on her yet-to-be-born children "who won't be just Black or white."[2] A Black woman married to a white man, Rosie thinks that her future children won't want to be identified as "other." As part of her job as an elementary gifted

education teacher, she handles paperwork that students and their families must complete in order to apply for gifted education. Some of this paperwork includes "state forms" on which parents must indicate their child's race.[3] For parents whose children have a mixed racial background, the option is to select one singular race (like "Black" or "white") or "other." That some of her future students' parents have to make the tough decision—with an inaccurate, limiting outcome either way—bothers Rosie. "They should have a fair choice." But Rosie is not just bothered as a teacher. She is bothered as a future parent. Some day she and Rick will need to negotiate the same problem on these or similar forms; her future children will need to negotiate the same problem in their daily living. She wants them to have a fair choice.

When I first read Rosie's poem, I thought it pertained to her multiracial students and their interracial parents since she teaches students from diverse backgrounds and so often speaks about teaching in a language of mothering. I interpreted the line, "the ones I will mother," as referring to the *students* she will teach in the future. But then, as she spoke about the poem, I realized her intent. She had considered writing about her gifted education students—how they are sometimes "others" and how misconceptions about them abound—but she decided, "I want to do something more personal…My husband and I will have kids sooner rather than later."

In the fourth line of the poem, Rosie moves from first person to third person. The subject is "their future children," even though "their" is a form of *our*, referring to Rosie and Rick's. Such a rhetorical move is intriguing; it signifies a change from the nearby and subjective toward the distant and objective. A larger, societal point is being made, perhaps, but seemingly without the passion of the personal. *They* "chose to love/And to rise above/What is less understood." Despite living in a society that is not entirely accepting of interracial relationships, they chose to love each other, marry, and live their lives together. "They looked beyond the skin/To the heart of a friend/And saw their future." In such action, they sought to distance themselves from the lingering racism of a society that hasn't moved beyond skin color, including miscegenation. They were friends in love: why should their skin colors prevent their friendship and union, especially when, together, the future was brighter?

Maintaining the storyline from the distant third person, Rosie notes that the parents of the future othered children thought about the ramifications of their union. They considered "every feature" of their future children, particularly "envision[ing] the complexion and hair texture," and foresaw "the beauty of two races creating one." Their children would be beautiful, not just in physical appearance but also in societal chemistry. Then, returning to the passion of her first person, Rosie closes: "I write to multiracial America." A simple, powerful statement that possesses double meaning. Perhaps "multiracial" is an adjective that describes "America." It is also an adjective that could be used to describe Mobile, as well as Rosie's classroom, which is comprised of Asian, Black, Latino/a, and white students. She might be *sharing* her sentiment with an America that is comprised of peoples of many different races. Perhaps, though, "multiracial" is a verb in the infinitive form, indicating that her writing is action. With these words, she might be *making* America racially mixed. Her future children will be biracial; her future grandchildren might be multiracial.

Act II: Rosie's Living—Growing Family, Rising above Race

Born in Mobile, Rosie has "strong ties" to the city that she calls "home." The scale of home, though, does not reduce solely to Mobile. "More specifically than a Mobilian," the term commonly used to represent a person from Mobile, "I would probably say that I'm from The Loop, which is a specific area in Mobile." She grew up in The Loop, near the city's center. Its

boundaries are porous, which reflects the diversity of the neighborhood during her childhood. It possessed "all of these different groups, just all mixed into one." Recalling her schoolmates from The Loop, she said, "You had the kids whose mom and dad made sure that everything was paid for, because they could…And then you had the kids who, as soon as the bell for lunch rang, ran across campus to get to the cafeteria because that was their meal that day. You had the entire spectrum." The Loop's population was economically diverse; but it was also racially diverse, although Rosie never mentioned that fact. The issue of race, explicit in the history of daily living in Mobile (e.g., Pride, 2002; Wilson & Harris, 2012), is largely implicit in Rosie's words about her life in Mobile.

Perhaps the biggest reason why Rosie marks The Loop as home is because Mother James lived there. At the time of Rosie's birth, her parents had recently divorced. As a result, she grew up with her mother and two sisters, apart from her father. Because her mother worked full-time, Rosie spent much of her childhood at Mother James' house. The biological mother of 16 children, Mother James, whose race Rosie did not identify, looked after the children of women in the community who worked or went to school during the day. "I lived at her house more than my own home when I was really little," Rosie said. When she was old enough to attend school, she went to Mother James' house after school. And she was not alone. "Anyone who wanted to drop their kid off at Mother James' [house] could. So there were always two, three, or four kids," and this was in addition to any number of Mother James' own children.

Rosie recalls that each child at Mother James' house—those there for the day as well as the ones to whom she gave birth—thought that she or he was Mother James' favorite. The children would debate the issue, each certain of her or his exceptionality, and so would Rosie. "I really think I was the favorite," she says now. "I don't even know that there's anything that can be said to convince me otherwise." When I asked Rosie why she was so certain, she replied that Mother James "would always speak highly of me while I was standing in front of her, whether she knew I was there or not." Rosie then shared a more recent story, which took place at the 60th wedding anniversary party for Mother James and her husband. Mother James' youngest child, while making a speech that thanked the guests for attending, said, "There's someone in the audience who is here and my mom loved her. Mom loved her like she loved one of us. And she loved her more than everybody else, I think." Hearing this, Rosie thought, "That must be me, I'm her favorite." Then, Mother James' husband shouted out "Where's Ro-Ro?," his nickname for Rosie. Mother James followed, "Rosie, stand up so everybody knows who you are."

Mother James was the most prominent adult in Rosie's childhood life, which caused a young Rosie to sometimes refer to her as "mom." Such instances elicited a quick, stern correction from Mother James: "No, no, no. I'm not your mom. Your mom's coming [to pick you up]." But looking back, Rosie calls Mother James a "definitive mother" and credits her for teaching Rosie what it means to be a mother (and, as you will see below, a teacher). Talking about her vision of the *ideal mom*, Rosie said, "When you are with mom, are most cherished and loved. You are disciplined. She finds the best in you and she corrects the worst in you. She points you in the direction you're supposed to go. And you don't doubt her love at all." Mother James was *this* mom for Rosie. Mother James was a disciplinarian, giving correction when it was warranted, but she also was caring and endlessly patient. And when Rosie thinks about this mothering multiplied out across all of the children for whom Mother James cared, she calls it an "ultimate love and sacrifice." Reflecting with awe, she said, "I don't know how you spread your love so equally that your kids think that you love them more than anybody else."

When she was four years old, Rosie was diagnosed with cancer in her nervous system. Shortly after her fifth birthday, she underwent a major surgery that removed a bundle of cancerous tissue that was located behind her lungs. With a timely diagnosis and the necessary surgical response, her cancer was quickly and effectively halted. The process was certainly life threatening, but it did not play out over a number of months or years, as is the case with some cancer treatments. While Rosie had a series of doctor visits in the years after her surgery, they were largely "check-ins" aimed at making sure that all signs remained positive.

As a result of her cancer, Rosie entered a new community that was starkly different from her previous experience with her family and Mother James. At first it comprised the people at the hospital, during and beyond her treatment: patients, families, advocates, doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals. Since cancer afflicts people with different characteristics, Rosie met a variety of people. After Rosie's successful treatment, this community opened up further in the form of a camp for youth who were battling or had survived cancer. Each year, during one week in June, Rosie attended Camp Golden at a campground in rural Lower Alabama. She was a camper for her first ten years there until she was eligible to be a counselor-in-training and, eventually, a counselor. Today, after 24 years, she remains involved as one of the camp planners.

The camp, for the young Rosie, "was [a] separate life." It was an intense experience, and she loved it. She met other youth and adults who became recurring figures in her life. She learned skills like horseback riding, which had not been a part of her life previously. "Two weeks before the camp [each year], I had my bags packed and everything was ready to go. When I got home, I would sleep and then call friends from the camp and we would stay on the phone for a week or so." Then she would turn back to the particulars of non-camp life until the following June.

Although Camp Golden was a separate world for Rosie, it became integrated into her daily life as a counselor. She realized, "I am to that 8-year-old is what my counselors were to me." She started thinking about the need "to give [campers] the normalcy that they don't find at school or at home cause no one else can identify." Rosie followed up this comment by saying, "I definitely can't identify to some degree because my treatment was so quick and so easy—some of them have had such a difficult time—but there are some people that can [identify]." She found that she was able to connect well with campers, particularly "in situations that they are not always comfortable in…I looked for the kids who are timid or don't want to get on the bus [to the camp] because they're so scared and try to really coax them in and get to know them." She was committed to making the camp a welcoming community for all.

Unlike the camp, school and church were significant daily places for Rosie throughout her childhood. She was a student in the Mobile County Public School System, a large and extensive district that spanned the urban, suburban, and rural areas of the county. Rosie enjoyed school and excelled at it. She recalls how in elementary school, after usually finishing her week's work by Tuesday, her teachers would ask her to teach her peers during the remaining days of the week. She attended a magnet middle school in downtown Mobile that was focused on performing arts. In high school, she attended a prestigious public school, where she entered into and participated in a gifted education program. The student populations of both of these schools were highly diverse as they drew students from across all of Mobile County. Similar to her experience with her camp community, through school, Rosie met and befriended a variety of youth at her age with different racial, geographic, intellectual, and experiential backgrounds.

During these schooling years, Rosie and her family began attending Spring Church. The church was next to Interstate 65, just west of The Loop in a bustling area of Mobile, and it was

another community comprised of people from across the county. The racial composition of the congregation was predominantly white, although Rosie did not speak in depth about it. Over the next two decades, she was an active member of Spring, even if all the other members of her family gradually left it. She attended and later worked at "children's church." As a teen and an adult, she worked in the church's nursery during services. She also participated in the youth and young adult groups.

During her high school years, Rosie participated in the "Spring Church Bus Ministry." A mission group from the church would board a bus and drive 15 minutes north on I-65, leaving behind the bustle, to Prichard, a place "of huge poverty." As Rosie described,

> Prichard was high in crime and low in money…just this other, other world. The street signs were off the streets—and this is, of course, before the days of GPS—because if you take the street signs down, the police don't go in at nighttime because they can't find their way in, around, and they can't find their way back out. So it was just like this crazy danger zone where we did bus ministry.

In her description of Prichard, as with her description of The Loop, Rosie focused on the economic make-up of the population but not the racial one. However, Prichard is a highly racially segregated city. At present, the racial composition of Prichard is 86% Black (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2010). The racial composition of Prichard's public schools is just under 100% Black (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

Children from Prichard were invited to board the Spring bus. They would then go to church in Mobile for an "incredible service," and to a nearby mall or movie theater, places that the Prichard children rarely, if ever, frequented. Rosie and the church members would "love on [the participating children], give them candy and junk, and then drive them back home." Reflecting on her experience with the bus ministry, she said, "I think that is where I learned that people's concept of the hardest thing is different. The hardest thing that you'll ever deal with is the hardest thing *for you*, but it might be a cakewalk for someone else." Rosie added that it "was a time in my life when it was just incredible to realize that these kids are going through some very tough stuff." She had survived cancer and lived in a family split by divorce, but she experienced a different kind of "tough stuff" through the bus ministry.

Rosie stopped participating in the bus ministry when she left Mobile for college. She attended a small private school elsewhere in Alabama, a several-hour drive from Mobile. She studied elementary and early childhood education. Her intent was to become a kindergarten teacher. In the summers after her junior and senior years, instead of returning to Mobile for a full summer, Rosie worked at a children's camp in the Catskill Mountains of New York. But after her second summer at the New York camp, which followed her graduation from college, she returned to Mobile. She completed what she called her "last limbo move," which would bring her "home for as long as [she wants] Mobile to be home." I asked Rosie why she returned to Mobile and she said, "I don't think I thought of it much…I don't think I even considered living anywhere else for my adult life." At another point, she said that her feeling after college was, "I'm ready to go back, I'm ready to be back in Mobile." She then referenced a friend's article, published in a local monthly magazine, "about how Mobile leaves its mark on people. [Mobilians] go and live in other places but there's nothing quite like being back in Mobile." Even though her friend who wrote the article had moved away from Mobile and called himself an "expatriate," Rosie noted "a lot of Mobilians will move back to Mobile after years of being

some place else." Rosie's move back to Mobile signified a return to where she was rooted. Her past was located in Mobile and she had no reason not to see her future there, especially as the people and communities to which she was closest were there.

Once again, she attended Spring Church regularly, and there she rekindled her friendship with Rick Baker. They initially met at Spring when both were in high school, even though Rosie lived in The Loop and Rick lived in South Mobile. The two had different schooling backgrounds: Rick went to private schools while Rosie attended public schools. Rick was two years younger, so, as Rosie remembers, "We didn't really hang out in the same group" as teens. But when Rosie returned to Mobile and Spring after college, they quickly became close friends. After a few years, they married.

In addition to meeting Rick at Spring, Rosie met two married couples that, she says, have become "extended family." Speaking of one of the couples, she said, "There are surgeries that my mom has no idea that I've had and I've just gone to their house and let them take care of me." The man and woman of the other couple were "kind of surrogate parents to both Rick and [Rosie]," as they hosted Rosie and Rick's wedding reception at their house and paid the majority of their wedding expenses. "They're definitely invited to any [events and celebrations] that we have and it's the other way around." Rosie said, even, that the couple jokes that she is an adopted daughter.

When I asked Rosie why she referred to these couples as "extended family," she said it was because they "are not really blood-related." I then mentioned Mother James, wondering why she hadn't noted this same distinction with respect to her.[4] Rosie responded with a smile: "Mother James surpasses everything for me. You know, she's just—I've never thought about the fact that she's not really related to me." Rosie then made a distinction: "[Mother James] was always there, whereas with these extended family, I've added them along as I've grown older."

In recent years, many of Rosie's important communities of people and places have shifted. After teaching north of Mobile for three years, she moved to Violet Elementary, near the city's southern boundary. After they got married, Rosie and Rick moved to a house in a new subdivision in South Mobile. Then they decided to leave Spring Church for another church near Violet. Given that her school, house, and church are all located in South Mobile, Rosie does not venture back to The Loop very often. In this sense, while Rosie remains a Mobilian, what that moniker means for her has evolved. Any future child of Rosie and Rick's will grow up a Mobilian, but likely with strong ties to South Mobile, not The Loop.

As Rosie's living curriculum shows, family is a central topic in her life. In all the places of her life, there is family. She speaks about her immediate family, her camp family, her church family, her extended family, and her school family. Siblings are family. Friends are family. Teaching colleagues and students, as I will describe below, are family. This is a dynamic notion of family; family is not limited to biological relations, which fix a person foremost to blood relatives. Rather, family is constructed for Rosie through lived experience. The people central to her daily living become family. To this point in her life, family has always been in process, becoming.

This becoming, though, has not been a journey that Rosie navigated with her immediate biological family. Indeed, Rosie's mother and sisters are minor characters in her stories. Her varied experiences brought her into new communities (and families) by herself, largely without her immediate family. The few occasions with her family that Rosie mentioned show her in opposition to relatives. For example, when talking about Mobile's Mardi Gras celebration, which

is one of the city's biggest community events each year, she said, "I had to go to Mardi Gras because my family loves Mardi Gras, which is so funny because I hated it."

Act III: Rosie's Teaching—Growing Family, Rising above Race

From a young age, Rosie wanted to be a teacher. Her elementary teachers recognized and nurtured this passion, giving her small teaching opportunities, both in her own classroom and in the classrooms of grades younger than hers. "As mystical as it sounds, I felt I was destined to be a teacher." Later, in her high school years, her experience of teaching children at camp and church enhanced her desire to teach. In her early days of classroom teaching, Rosie aimed to "help my students grow…as individuals and contributors in society." As her teaching responsibilities and contexts changed in the ensuing years, she came to think of her teaching as "helping students adapt to their changing environments." Speaking about the present moment of her teaching, she added, "My greatest passion is to help [students] realize that everyone has differences, strengths, and desirable qualities."

At the end of her senior year of college, Rosie attended a teaching job fair in Mobile and met a principal that she "just really loved." She decided to teach at the principal's school, Barnes Elementary in Prichard, coincidentally where the Spring Church bus went years before.

When Rosie told people in Mobile that she was teaching in Prichard, they feared for her because of Prichard's reputation as "such a tough area." But Rosie wasn't concerned: "With my background of working there for four years in high school [with the bus ministry], [fear] didn't even come into play. I was like, 'yeah, let's do it.'" As a follow-up question to these statements, I asked Rosie if she had been excited about teaching in Prichard specifically because it was regarded to be a tough area. She responded, "probably not—I grew up in an area that was not Prichard but not very high on the socioeconomic ladder and so I don't think it was a factor." Rosie was at Barnes because of the principal.

While Rosie taught in Prichard, she lived in Mobile. Each morning she drove the same direction as the Spring Church bus to the school. Not only was Barnes located in Prichard, but also many of the students at the school lived in the two neighborhoods where the church's bus had picked up youth. When she began teaching at Barnes, most of the kids that had participated in the bus ministry with Rosie were beyond elementary school, but there was one student, Roosevelt, who Rosie instantly recognized. When she left the bus ministry, Roosevelt was five years old. When she began at Barnes, he was "this huge fourth grader." Upon seeing Rosie, Roosevelt approached her and asked, "You came on the Spring Church bus, didn't you?" From that point forward, Roosevelt was protective of Rosie. "Don't mess with her," he would say to other students, "I know her." This made Rosie laugh—"I can take care of myself, it's okay"—but it pleased her to think that the bus ministry had such a positive impact on him.

Rosie's description of Prichard, both when she talked about the Spring Church Bus Ministry and her teaching at Barnes Elementary, focused on the high level of poverty in the community. She referred to Prichard as low on the "socioeconomic ladder" and talked about attendant issues like high crime. She did not speak about the racial make-up of Prichard until I asked about it. In her three years at Barnes, every student that she taught was Black. I asked how this racial isolation impacted daily life at Barnes. "Sometimes the parents didn't understand the push for something better," she responded. "When you have one group only and one mindset only…there isn't a whole lot of growth." She continued, "there isn't an understanding of growth or the understanding of growing pains. So I think that's where race played a factor—that you don't even realize a need for the outside world...You don't understand the need for other

experiences." Later returning to this idea, Rosie added, "Just the experience of interaction with someone who is not in your own home community can just grow you exponentially." This wisdom was engendered from Rosie's living curriculum. Through camp, school, and church, Rosie had repeatedly grown in her interaction with new communities.

Her first two years at Barnes were in a third grade classroom. "I loved the independence of those kids that were still very dependent on us." But then going into her third year, her principal asked her to move to fifth grade. There was an opening and the principal said she "needed someone strong there." Rosie made the move. She did not enjoy the year as much as the previous ones and the main reason was the emphasis on testing. "The students were making huge gains but because they weren't meeting state requirements, they were seen as unsuccessful…That was heartbreaking." One of her fifth graders had begun the year at a second-grade reading level. Over the course of the year in Rosie's classroom, the student rose to a fourth grade reading level. But when Barnes' scores were reviewed, this student—along with many of her peers—"wasn't considered a success." As a result of this experience, "I really kind of fell out of love with regular education and I wanted to get back to teaching so my students could just learn. And teaching without the pressures—just teaching for the fact of learning and to grow kids and to help them grow as individuals." She sought a new teaching context.

After three years at Barnes, Rosie accepted the position of gifted education teacher at Violet Elementary School, where she has now taught for the last six years. The school is located in South Mobile, in an area that transitions from suburban to rural as one heads away from the city. South Mobile comprises neighborhoods inside and beyond the southern part of the city; what is beyond city limits is unincorporated Mobile County. The population of South Mobile is predominantly white and it possesses a wide socioeconomic range. Violet Elementary in South Mobile is certainly a different teaching context than Barnes Elementary in Prichard.

Although Violet is less than 15 miles from where Rosie grew up, she had not been to it prior to interviewing there. After having "a very comfortable interview" with the principal, Rosie left thinking, "Okay, I'm here—this is definitely a school that I could see myself fitting very well with." When she was offered the job in the ensuing days, she accepted it. "My personality type is well suited for some schools and not so much for others," Rosie reflected. "Finding the right place to teach is a lot like finding the right place to live—since so much of your life is given to that school."

In addition to looking for the right place to teach, Rosie and Rick were looking for the right place to live. As Rosie took the job at Violet, she and Rick found a house in South Mobile, several miles away from the school. Her remaining link to the roots of her childhood was Spring Church, but after some time she and Rick found a new church in South Mobile, just down the road from Violet. In a matter of a few years, she had re-rooted herself in all aspects of her life to South Mobile.

In her teaching career, Rosie has had two *home* schools: Barnes and Violet. Considering the two, she offered, "at Barnes I had to be a tougher teacher. I had to be very strict and very stern, whereas I can allow my students a little more room at Violet just because of the nature of the schools." Unlike Barnes, where over 90% of students qualified for free and/or reduced lunch, just over 50% of students at Violet qualify, and the racial composition is more balanced, though predominantly white (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). According to these socioeconomic and racial metrics, Violet's student population is more diverse than Barnes' student population.

In addition to the different student populations of these schools, Rosie noted how she is a different teacher at Violet compared to who she was as a teacher at Barnes. She has two teaching selves: Miss Leonard and Mrs. Baker. Miss Leonard is Rosie, tough and no-nonsense, in her early years of teaching at Barnes; "this nice Mrs. Baker gal" is Rosie at Violet—although Miss Leonard occasionally still surfaces (i.e., she talked about recently "having to go Miss Leonard on [a student]" in order to address a problem). Clearly the change is marked by when she married Rick and took his surname. However, it is also marked by the move from Barnes to Violet. To acquaintances in and around Mobile, Miss Leonard was an unmarried woman, signaled by the honorific *Miss*. In a narrow, but common, perception, she lacked a family: she did not have a husband, nor did she have children. But throughout Rosie's life, family is a far more dynamic concept than this. And yet, even with a dynamic notion of family, Miss Leonard also lacked a family at Barnes. While geography, student characteristics, teaching duties, and other elements changed in Rosie's move from Barnes to Violet, a central change for Rosie was that she was able to cultivate a family at her new school.

At Violet, Rosie teaches most of her students for three consecutive years, from third through fifth grade, seeing each grade level for a full day once a week. She becomes very close with her students and their families. Not only is she a teacher of her students, she becomes an advocate for them in their regular grade-level classrooms. This is especially needed, she said, for gifted students who excel in some areas but struggle in others. Rosie noted that "teachers don't mean to have this perception but they think a gifted student is someone who is highly motivated, who does really well on all of their assignments…that can be a gifted student but it's not necessarily the typical gifted student." Thus, Rosie sees her role as a gifted education teacher extending in her school beyond the walls of her classroom.

During my time with Rosie, she frequently talked to her students' parents on her cell phone, both during and outside of school hours. And at other points, she spoke about how she planed some assignments, classroom activities, and field trips with input from parents. Rosie shared her life experience with her students. "They [i.e., her students] know almost all of my stories," she said. "I use as much of my personal life as possible to wrap them into whatever it is that they need to be wrapped into. They love it. They love knowing about the Mrs. Baker that's not in the classroom. I'll exploit myself."

In turn, Rosie learns much about her students when they're not in the classroom. For example, one of her female students had a sister who was going to get married. Rosie's student, though, was prevented from attending the ceremony because of the family's religious beliefs. This was difficult for the student; she wanted to attend the ceremony. Rosie remembers, "We spent several weeks in a row talking about how she could still be a part of the wedding without going to the ceremony." They also talked about how the student's life was going to change with her sister moving out of home.

Rosie told me a number of stories about her teaching, but she told me one story twice. Before I visited Mobile, she described a moment when one of her students shared with the class that his mom tried to commit suicide. The context for Rosie sharing this story was a discussion about how she strove to help her students adapt to their changing environments. Rosie recalled how another student responded by asking, "Do you really think you should have told us that?" Rosie then talked with the students about "how [they could] support someone who's going through something difficult" even though she "was not prepared to talk about [the situation] with the entire class." Then, during an interview at her school, I asked Rosie to tell me a powerful story from her time at Violet. The following are our conversations.

Rosie: We were actually over on that carpet [in the corner of the classroom] and that was a very small group of students. Their class, I only had boys. So it had to have been their fourth grade year. I only had boys and there were 7 or 8 of them. I don't remember what we were talking about—we were probably reading a book and discussing just whatever when it came to the book—and just out of the blue, he said, "I think a hard time was when my mom went crazy and she tried to kill herself. We had to put her away and so I went to go live with my grandmother." And the entire class just stopped and watched him. One of the kids said, "Wow, that was probably more than you should have said there."

Mark: One of the kids actually said that?

Rosie: Yeah, he was just shocked. He was like, "I can't believe you just said all of that." And I told him, "Well, you know, it's very good that he wanted to share that with us." And then we talked about, "How do you talk to someone when they've shared more than you expected them to?" It ended up being a very productive conversation, and validating his feelings about that being a very tough thing to live through. And how it's a great thing that he had a grandma who could step in and take care of him and his little brother. The opportunity having arisen to share that was very good. And, you know, we just talked through it as best as we could. The kids didn't look at him stranger after they realized that, "Wow, he's just shared something big that I never expected."

Mark: Do you recall if he seemed to think at some point, "Oh, wait, I shouldn't have said that?"

Rosie: No. He just threw it out there. Even when that kid said, "That's a little more than you probably could have told us," he was just like, "This is it, this is just the way it is."

Mark: Was your initial reaction like the kids' [reaction], like, "Whoa, why'd you share that?"

Rosie: I was just shocked that he would. I was completely, cause I knew his back-story and I was not at all prepared that he would say that much. And I just thought, "Where'd that come from? Wow! I can't believe that. I can't believe that he's actually telling us this."

Mark: Was that moment referenced at all in the class ever again?

Rosie: I don't remember, I don't remember.

Mark: Why do you think it stands out for you so much?

Rosie: I want my students to feel safe with me and comfortable with me in that they can be who they are. And sometimes I tell them, "I have to put you back in check. You are who you are and you're wonderful but sometimes I have to correct you." But also that they feel they can tell me anything. And, you know, let me in on their world, and let me know what's bothering them. And really that I'm not just their teacher who's here but someone who really cares about them. And I want our classroom to be a safe zone, where, "If someone does something to you, I'm going to back you up, I'm going to help you. And that you have emotional support

> here." And so, working so hard to try to help my students feel safe, just really, it's a fist pump. It's like, "Wow, that happened! That's awesome! That's really cool."

Rosie wants her students to understand that she's "not just their teacher who's here but someone who really cares about them." This compassionate and *radical love* (Freire, 1993) derived from her living curriculum, mothering, is central to her work as a teacher. I hear Mother James in these words, particularly when she talks of putting students "back in check" while recognizing their potential. Rosie constantly brings Mother James to her classroom. She interacts with students the ways Mother James interacted with her. She is stern and correcting, but she is caring, liable to give a hug at any moment. She often says, "When it comes to my classroom, I have to set boundaries, I have to teach kids about responsibilities, I have to expect of them because they haven't learned to have those responsibilities on their own. They haven't learned to meet expectations, necessarily." At another point she states, "I expect a lot out of them. I think [that] they can be responsible for a whole lot, [and] that we do them a disservice when we don't make them responsible for a whole lot." Then, she concludes, "I'm strict but I'm not bad." This, I imagine, is the firm imprint of Mother James. Although she never made the direct connection, how she described Mother James is how she describes her teaching. In her classroom and school, I saw her embody the *ideal mom* that Mother James set out for her.

At the end of my visit, Rosie asked me a question about my time spent with her. She wondered if I noticed her favoring any students in the classroom. She made no connection to Mother James, but in this question she was striving to live up to the standard that Mother James set for her. With "ultimate love and sacrifice," it was Mother James who made each child feel favored, cared and loved. Whether it was true or not, the children at Mother James' house, including Rosie, felt like they, individually, were the favorite. In this light, Rosie's "stern" and "strict" treatment of her students—but also her hugs with them—made sense to me. She, like Mother James, was her students' mother (but not their mom).

Although Rosie felt she was destined to teach, she did not necessarily set teaching for the rest of her career. When I inquired about this, she said that she would like to become a midwife, working with women about to deliver babies. In fact, as recently as last year, she looked into what it would take for her to gain the necessary certification in order to switch occupations. While it is hard for me to tell how likely such a jump would be, it is interesting to consider why the move is enticing for her. Committed to the act of mothering, midwifery would place Rosie at the earliest stages of life. While a teacher is concerned with the development of the child, a midwife is focused on the birth of a human. When she studied to become a teacher, Rosie was interested in kindergarten, the earliest phase of formal public schooling. Although she currently enjoys teaching her upper elementary students, working as a midwife would take her beyond the limits of a schoolteacher.

Postlude: Revisiting Family and Race in Rosie's Poetry

Whereas the topic of family is overtly central to the living and teaching stories that Rosie told me, she seldom made explicit the topic of race in those stories. Indeed, outside of her "I Write America" stanza above, she rarely mentioned race. She never overtly engaged the topic of racism. This silence on race surprises me. Given the racial history of the U.S. (e.g., Zinn, 2003), and particularly that of the U.S. South (e.g., Pride, 2002), race is difficult to extricate from any person's life (Falk, 2004; hooks, 2009; Pinar, 1991). On top of this, Rosie is a Black woman and she is married to a white man. She and Rick live in the third largest city in a state that was a

prominent site for the Civil Rights Movement a half century ago and still it is at the present. Alabama has become a national focus after it passed some of the strictest immigration legislation in the country.[5] In the past decade, Rosie has taught in schools where students have been largely, and some entirely, racially isolated.[6] And yet, race was not explicit in her storytelling.

Perhaps, though, this should not be surprising to me. Race and racism are not easy discussion topics. For many people (if not most or all), across a breadth of experiences and backgrounds, race and racism equate to tension, struggle, oppression, and oppressing. In U.S. schools and their broader society, these topics frequently reside in the hidden (Giroux & Purpel, 1993) or null curricula (Eisner, 1979/2002) of living and learning. Further, I am a white male from the U.S. North studying and writing about the life of Rosie, a Black female from the U.S. South. With respect to race, gender, and region, my identity is tied to a history of oppressing while hers to a history of being oppressed. Regardless of any commitment I make to living and working for social justice for all living beings, I cannot simply ignore these histories.

As Rosie's poem clearly shows, race *is* a significant issue in her life. Family and mothering are explicitly central to her living curriculum of places. And, as she notified me two months after my time with her in Mobile, she will soon give birth to a child who will have both Black and white ancestry. This child, in a society not fully ready for her or him, will be labeled as "other." Family, for Rosie, is intertwined with race. But she writes about her ability, with Rick, to "rise above" race and racism. What is most near to her heart is her family which is the very tool for challenging the constraints of race(ism). Raising a biracial family is a huge challenge in the U. S. South.

Rosie's stance with respect to race might be called "post-racial." Such a description is tenuous because "post" indicates *moving beyond*, which stands in contrast to *rising above*. In our last interview, Rosie spoke about several incidents that took place in her school during the school year: the suicide of a father, a parental fight at a youth baseball game attended by a number of students, and the death of a teacher's husband. In each of these instances, the school's counselor chose to close-off student discussions about what had happened. Students were simply not supposed to talk about it, and no action was taken by the school to help students make sense of what had happened. Rosie expressed frustration with how these events were handled by the school. "[Students] don't know how to cope with loss or major tragedies if we don't teach them how to cope with those things." She then added, "It doesn't help our kids at all for them to just not talk about it." This latter comment, juxtaposed with Rosie's omission of race in her stories, strikes me. I wonder about the impact on Rosie and those around her when she doesn't talk about race. What are the implications of this *silence* for her life? How do her lived (and living) experiences in Mobile, Prichard, and South Mobile perpetuate her silence? How does her silence influence these places? Is there tremendous action in this silence? What are the implications of this silence for her students' lives? What are the implications for her different families and communities?

While talking about Rick's impact on her life, Rosie raised two questions that she said she often thinks about: "Who am I?" and "How odd are we?" She said, "When you talk about a marriage, it sometimes changes you. Sometimes you have an influence on the person, but it even more magnifies the person that you are." Mindful of the second question, she reflected on how she and Rick embark on "odd" activities that might be unlike a typical couple: they frequent bookstores; they like to browse flea markets; and in general, they spend a large amount of time together in watching DVDs, reading, or attending church. This "odd" description seemed odd to me. What, really, is a normal couple? And why would it be odd for couples to do these things?

While I wondered about what she meant by these questions, I figured that part of her sentiment might involve the fact that she and Rick are an interracial couple. But Rosie did not speak to that. I wonder if what Rosie said about her student who shared with the class that his mother attempted suicide has ramifications for her own life: "sometimes kids don't realize how difficult their stories are."

Conclusion: Autobiographical Struggle and Growth in the Inquiry

After my time with Rosie in Mobile, I struggled to make sense of her living curriculum of place(s). As illustrated in the questions I have posed above, I remain in that struggle. It appeared to me that Rosie, a loving, smart, and strong Black woman, had fled her biological family and the community of her youth. She moved from The Loop via Prichard to South Mobile and then from Barnes to Violet. In doing this, seemingly, she was trying to flee the crippling realities of race and racism in the United States.

But she wasn't fleeing! She teaches predominantly white students in a suburban community. She is a caring, powerful, demanding teacher with a massive positive imprint on the lives of her students. If her presence and actions in the classroom don't call into question for her students the absurdity of racism implicitly or explicitly, what else could? What's more, she is committed to living in a marriage with a man of another race in a society that struggles with mixed races. Such a commitment itself is a direct challenge to a racist society. Now, elevating that challenge, with her husband, she is bringing a biracial child into this society. These powerful actions portray a woman who is hardly fleeing race and racism.

There is no simple narrative here. Themes are not grand. They are complex and messy without being reducible to "Black and white." They are fluid. At the beginning of this article, I explained why I chose to fictionize Rosie's real name. As *I* wrestled with *her* stories, doing something akin to what Bill Ayers calls "diving into the wreckage" (2012), I found myself asking: who am *I* to write *her* stories? This question took on great significance for me, especially as I (re)considered the significance of race, gender, class, and power in her stories and wide awakenings I have obtained from her stories. The wreckage, not in the sense of devastation or an impossible future, complicates the ebbs and flows of life where realities collide and possibilities unfold in He's (2010) "living in-between" and Aoki's (1986/2005) "indwelling in the Zone of Between." The wreckage is Rosie's. It is mine. It is the reader's. Diving into the wreckage and understanding this work and my future work are inherently contested and extremely worthwhile. I am reminded of the words of Frederick Douglass in a speech titled "The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies": "If there is no struggle there is no progress" (1857/1985, p. 204).

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[1] Years before, Erica, Rosie, and their friends often hung out at Carpe Diem. More recently, with some in the group—like Erica—living in other geographic regions, Carpe Diem has become a place for re-connecting, even when it is unplanned.

[2] I shared with Rosie a poem (Simmons, 2003) in which nine different poets offer a stanza that begins with "I write America" or some variation on that wording. I then asked Rosie to write *her* stanza.
[3] Rosie is the speaker/writer of any quotations, like "state forms," that are not overtly linked in the text to a speaker/writer.
[4] But like Mother James, Rosie did not mention the racial backgrounds of these couples.
[5] Rosie raised the issue of undocumented immigration, which she referred to as "illegal immigration," during one of our interviews: "This is a point of contention between my husband and I. I can understand the desire to live in a free nation, to cross an ocean and risk all, and even cross illegally, to come in. I love Americans and I want them to have the jobs, too, but my heart goes out to the people that have risked their lives to come to our nation and then also to be turned around and sent back. I know that there are students in my class whose families are illegal to the country. I know there are…One student, he said his mom went down to Honduras because his grandmother was sick. She couldn't get back into the country [because] she didn't have the right papers. And she has a baby—how can I say she should not come back? You know, even if she's done so illegally, how can I deny her coming back to be with her family, her one-year-old baby?"
[6] While teaching gifted education at Violet, Rosie has also taught students from other elementary schools that do not have onsite gifted education programs, some of which are comprised of nearly all-white student populations.