Where Two Railroads Cross

Teaching Reading and Writing through Me Books

CAMILLE GOODISON

An old W. C. Handy blues chorus refers to a place where two railroads cross: the Southern and the Yellow Dog. It was there, in Moorhead, Mississippi near the Yellow Dog Café, where I taught summer school one very hot July ten years ago. I had just joined an emergent literacy summer program run by my school, Binghamton University, in partnership with the Mississippi Delta Community College, and, given my background as a writer, I was asked to serve as "writer-in-residence" for a class of thirteen third-graders. My job was to design an engaging literacy curriculum for the summer vacation months when the students would be out of school and thus in increased danger of falling behind. I wanted to design a project the children in the program could start and complete within a few weeks, one that would involve their families and community, and that the students would find interesting and engaging. I finally decided to have each student publish a book about his or her life, which we would call a "Me Book". I envisioned these books as having both sentimental value and permanence—a keepsake for the students and their families. Beyond helping the students create scrapbooks where each child could write about themselves and their favorite things, I also wanted the children to commit to a more collective project, such as an oral history of their community. For my class of rising fourth-graders, still young enough to remember their Dr. Seuss, yet already worried about junior high, surely it wouldn't hurt to encourage valuing those things which endured, and suggested security.

On the first day of class I told the students about my idea and we talked about how we would approach the project. After some discussion, we chose the theme of "Zoom In, Zoom Out" for our Me Books. During our first sessions together, we practiced zooming in on our lives and then zooming out to our families and community by using warm-up activities like filming with a digital camera, or playing a scavenger hunt game using magnifying glasses, or zooming in to identify familiar places on a local map. Through their 'Zooming' tools, the students came to understand how to view themselves as being part of a greater whole.

From our first conversations we knew we wanted the Me Books to include chapters on self, family and community. We began with essays on topics like

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"what I want to be when I grow up," overcoming a challenge, or a favorite family event or recipe. The first few days were focused on creating self-portraits and writing brief personal essays. Later the students wrote essays on their families, and included photos they'd taken of family members. During this process, we also began thinking about possible subjects for our oral history project and started preparing questionnaires and practicing interviewing techniques. This overlap worked out well. The students finished their personal chapters while working on their family chapters, and completed the family chapters while working on the oral history interviews; each step of the process informed the next.

Zakia, bright and outspoken, was always the first to class and was, at eight, one of my youngest students. Every morning she came in and greeted me with a big smile. I'd be playing Indie.Arie at a low volume, and as Zakia's friends joined her at their table she would begin to write while swaying to the music. One day the journal topic was "What I want to be when I grow up." I asked for specifics: telling the kids to talk about what it would take to realize this ambition, what the job would entail on a day-to-day basis, someone they knew or knew of who did this job etc.

Zakia mentioned the children's book illustrator Andrea Davis Pinkney and seemed to know a lot about the artist and her work. Among our picture books were four by Pinkney: *Bill Pickett, Rodeo-Ridin' Cowboy*; *I Smell Honey*; *Pretty Brown Face* and *Solo Girl*. Any one of these would work with our zoom theme but since we were just starting out and were doing self-portraits I selected *Pretty Brown Face*, a board book about faces. The self-portraits the students did would be the first page of their Me Books. I gave the students each a mirror, pencils, crayons, and paint and asked them to paint what they saw when they looked at themselves. Zakia painted an expert watercolor, including her braids and smile. "Beautiful," I told her.

Later that day, while the students were working on their "Where I am From" poems, I read my own to them. Zakia laughed when I, speaking Jamaican English, said the line "I'm from 'Lawd, gal pickney' and 'Ah weh yu a seh?'" – both expressions of pleasant surprise, such as "Oh, girl!" and "No way!" or literally "What are you telling me?!" I wanted my students to see that it was all right for them to express themselves similarly, that there was nothing wrong with the way they or their relatives would speak, among themselves, when no one was watching. One of the poems came back with "I'm from 'Shut up!'" and another with "I'm from 'Uhnh-uh' and 'Hmm-Hmm.'" The students were typically discouraged from speaking dialect in and outside of class by well-meaning adults, mindful of the race, class and power issues at stake. This was ten years ago, but Moorehead, Mississippi, kept its own time. I lived in a college dorm on one side of the railroad tracks and taught at a schoolhouse on the other side. You could stand on one side and throw a Frisbee to the other, it was that close, but everyone knew where the lines were drawn and rarely crossed them.

As they went about putting together their Me Books, the students wrote and edited their usual way, that is, in standard English. For their poems, however, I let them know, in the interest of integrity, that the vernacular was fine.

Tatiana couldn't get enough of the pink glitter gel pens I gave her for her journal. In her self-portrait she made sure to include a tiara. She also enjoyed working with her photographs. For the chapters of their Me Books that cover family I gave each student a disposable camera and asked them to take a set num-

ber of pictures and return the camera after three days for someone else to use the remaining half. Tatiana returned hers over the limit. Judging from the photographs, she was the apple of her family's eye and I could see why she was anxious to tell their story. We laid out the pictures she'd taken of her relatives. She told me their stories, which came not from the people posing in the photos but from the details in the background: the flashy red car her mother stood in front of, the quilt covering the bed where three girls sat cross-legged in a row. We worked on the best way to arrange the photos so they told a story. The shiny new car was her mother's prized possession which helped her mom get to her job outside of town. The non-farming (and better paying) jobs in Moorhead were typically out of town. The photos told a story of proud strivers, a close-knit clan, who were doing fine, thanks. I asked Tatiana to add captions for each photo as we arranged them in her book. As long as the story of her family was being told, I said, the descriptions didn't have to be literal. She wrote a silly ode to the green plastic chair glimpsed in one of her shots: "Oh my chair/To sit there/Without a care…." I didn't discourage her.

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Our last week my student Jules challenged me to a game of arm wrestling: "For real, okay? Don't cut me any slack." And I didn't. Bright, confident and outgoing, Jules handled himself well around adults. When I detected a typo in that day's edition of "Daily News," the class newsletter summarizing each day's events as dictated by the students, I was tempted to recall it, concerned about what the children's parents might say when they saw the mistake. Jules said "My grandmother can't read anyway." So read to her, I told him. This was how I found out they all read "Daily News" to their grandmothers. In the children's oral history interviews I found out that many of the grandmothers were literally taken from school to go and work in the fields. We were surrounded by endless acres of former cotton fields, where soybeans now grew, and, further out near the town's edges, by catfish farms, the rumored source for the fearsome mosquitoes which swarmed at night. One of the interview questions that came out of our brainstorming sessions concerned the shuttered library and the dead downtown area. Jules' mother remembered going to the library when she was younger but then it was padlocked and never reopened. Some people claim snakes got into it, she said in her interview with Jules, and other people say the city simply closed it. Not long after that the shops downtown closed. It used to be a lively scene, she recalled, especially on Saturday night. You could go to hear music. Now, she said, you have to rent a vehicle and drive out to Clarksdale or maybe even Memphis to do that.

Once they finished their interviews with relatives, I thought it would be good to have the students interview a few more people for their oral history reports in order to get a better picture of life in the community. As a class they interviewed their seventy-two year old retired former principal, Mrs. Ross, who taught at the school for forty-two years and told them about her time there during the Civil Rights Movement. She remembers teachers weren't allowed to participate in the struggle for civil rights or else they would be fired. She told my students how the movement emerged out of voters' registration drives, and about the bus loads of people who came to help: "Activists were abused by white segregationists. Churches were burnt down because mass rallies took place there. Activists lived in local

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homes and you wouldn't know what homes they lived in. It was too dangerous." She told the students that people were asked to remember parts of the constitution in order to vote and that school teachers were barred from voting, as well as from owning insurance, and even from church membership. She remembered that "it was a war. Inevitable, like the Civil War."

Out of the earshot of my students she told me what happened after the movement. During this 'post-war' period people were given the choice of attending a "white" school or a "black" school but black students were told they couldn't go to a "white" school. All the white students went to private school. They just left. And the resources for basic materials like books never made it down as promised. "Black" schools made do with hand-me-downs and outdated books. Public money made its way into the new private schools, shoring up another two-tier system of education. When I asked her for suggestions on answering the children's questions concerning this period, she repeated what she'd said before: it was like a war.

I told my students to transcribe their interviews with their families, but that before they published them in their Me Books, they should use the interview with Mrs. Ross to add any related background information. We discussed what it means to put something in context, and talked about what they'd heard and learned and how they could do this.

The last day of school was an emotional one. I didn't sleep much that week, more from excitement than anything else. The kids did very well at our final event. They'd spent the last couple of days putting the finishing touches on their Me Books. All their personal essays were illustrated and printed on sturdy art paper. Their special-person photos were secured on the page and accompanied by their neatest writing. Some students pasted the pages of their Me Book in a ready-made notebook; others made their own book covers and binding.

Amid all their "Where I Am From" poems, their pictures, and their essays, could be found a portrait of each student's family, which included historical folklore of the neighborhood and community. During the event, every student got a chance to read their "I'm From" poems for their parents. I got quite a few hugs but the biggest surprise was Jess. He was repeating the grade, and very closed off when I first met him. I could tell it was emotional for him too—a spontaneous action. He hugged me for a long time.

Shortly after this experience, I returned to New York in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The frequent fighter planes flying overhead gave me a sense, like Mrs. Ross, of what war sounded like for my generation. My time in the Mississippi Delta has remained a compelling memory of that summer, whatever the day's news. It felt like a real ground zero, in the sense that so much of what defines American history and culture had its roots there. I learned a lot about this, but also of the possibilities of life-writing as a way of reaching young writers still developing their skills and finding their place in the world. I'd like to think that the experience of creating these books contributed positively to the children's sense of themselves. I have kept in touch with some of my students, all of whom are doing well, and now making their way through the last days of high school.