Research as an Aesthetic Process: Extending the Portraiture Methodology

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Creatively existing in this moment  
of lived experience.  
Conducting and documenting research  
That feels  
Black, woman, race, gender.  
Research that breathes individuality, hears context, and sees subjects  
Lives.  
Research that speaks.  
Aesthetic research for a living moment.

Norman Denzin (2003) described this moment in qualitative inquiry as the “seventh moment” wherein notions of subjectivity, perspective, reflexivity, and “messy texts” are more transparent in the research process than in...
previous “moments” in qualitative research. Ironically, in what can be considered a major turn backward, the newly re-formed Institute for Education Sciences has taken the position that “scientific, evidence-based” research is most appropriate and worthy of funding from the agency. In addition, many of the calls for proposals have stated that research must be based on a model that has control and treatment groups and must have measurable outcomes. This retreat to an interventionist model of research appears to ignore context, voice, perspective, and aesthetics. Moreover, this attention to so-called rigorous research does little to compel scholars to explore ways to engage in “rigorous” research that goes beyond positivistic interventions and that embraces the powerful potential of organic and artistic representations of education research.

Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (1983) methodology of portraiture blends the aesthetic with the doctrine of social science research. Through portraiture, researchers can demonstrate a commitment to the research participants and contextualize the depictions of individuals and events. Portraiture is best described as a blending of qualitative methodologies—life history, naturalist inquiry, and most prominently, that of ethnographic methods. Drawing on the visual artistic metaphor of portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot suggested that portraiture represents the essence of what we endeavor to do in social science research: to (re)present the research participant through the subjective, empathetic, and critical lens of the researcher (p. 10). Thus, the researcher or portraitist’s rendering is always already partial. However, this partiality is not in and of itself a negative aspect of the research. Rather, this partiality provides the portraitist the space to acknowledge her or his presence—physically, psychologically, spiritually, and emotionally—in the research, thereby dismantling the notion that the researcher is the only knower and expert on the lives and experiences of the participants.

In their explication of the methodology of portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jennifer Hoffman Davis (1997) maintained that rigor, subjectivity, aesthetics, and art (broadly defined) are not contradictory ideals. Scholars such as Elliot Eisner (1998), Valerie Janesick (2001; as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), and Laurel Richardson (1990) shared Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis’s passion for expressing educational research through artistic lenses and maintained that forms of research that veer from traditional methodologies are valid, compelling representations of participants’ lives and experiences. These representations illustrate life’s complexities while providing a critical examination of the portrayed events. To provide such a rich text and achieve an in-depth rendering of events, portraiture embraces methods from both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms and demonstrates a research style that privileges methods of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The rich texts that are borne out of the portraiture project adhere to post-positive elements of validity (Lather, 1986) and extend to postmodernism...
essentials of contexts, settings, and situated events (Agee, 2002; Denzin, 2003; Foley, 2002).

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) categorized the major aspects of portraiture research to include emergent themes, relationships, contexts, voice, and the aesthetic whole. These major characteristics highlight and complicate the many roles performed by the researcher during the multiple stages of the research process. In this “seventh moment,” researchers are able to explore the complexities of participants’ lives through conducting lived research that seeks to forefront the perspectives, voices, and experiences of the researcher and the participant, the portraitist and the subject. Moreover, researchers are better able to mobilize and enact “praxis,” as described by McLaren (1997) and endorsed by Denzin (2003), to form empowering partnerships between the researcher and the participants. Harkening to critical (Carspecken, 1996; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000) and feminist research epistemologies (Bernal, 1998; Collins, 1990, 1998; Reinharz, 1992), the portrait is created through sifted negotiations between the portraitist and the participants.

THE SEARCH FOR GOODNESS

These stories, or narratives, are described through Lawrence-Lightfoot’s “search for goodness” in the methodology of portraiture. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) explained that she was inspired to move beyond traditional methods of social science research because of the continued focus on “pathology and disease rather than health and resilience” (p. 8). In addition, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) argued that research that focuses solely on failure has a tendency toward being facile. That is, it is easier to locate and document shortcomings and failures than to find those moments of resistance and negotiation that ultimately lead to success. For Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, portraiture rests on a search for goodness, which they described as research that looks for the strengths of particular sites. Portraitists examine the ways in which subjects meet, negotiate, and overcome challenges. The methodology serves as “a counterpoint to the dominant chorus of social scientists whose focus has largely centered on the identification and documentation of social problems” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xvi). Goodness is identified through measurable school indices as well as qualities that are more elusively captured in the words and actions of the actors (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 23). It is the rhythm of schools and classrooms, the ways in which students are treated, and the expectations set forth by the teachers and administration. Finally, the inconsistencies, the vulnerabilities, and the ways in which people negotiate these terrains are central to the expression of goodness.
Mullen (2003) offered that arts-based research has challenged the historically narrow conceptions of social science research that present research as a one-way binary. Indeed, the contributors to this special issue sought research methodology(ies) that would help us challenge normative notions of gender, race, and “good” teaching that have served to marginalize and oppress. Moreover, Mullen suggested that the rendering of research texts are “performances.” The contributors to this special issue sought to “perform” the written research text in varied and complementary ways that aid in addressing the inherently political import of their work.

In concert with critical race theorists (Crenshaw, 1995; Parker, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Williams, 1991) Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) argued that the researcher must acknowledge the extent to which the researcher’s perspective, experiences, and identity informs her or his construction of the portrait. The experiences and ideology of the researcher must be shared with the readers to acknowledge biases, lenses of analysis, chosen imagery, and the presentation of selective voice—both the researcher’s and the participants’ words and actions. The ideology of the research is further reflected in the stories the researcher chooses to tell and the ways in which the researcher tells them. Much like the stories and counterstories that are presented by critical race theorists (Duncan, 2002; Fernandez, 2002; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1994; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001; Villenas & Deyhle, 1999), Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) made the political commitment to relate the stories of strength and complexity that she built using the data. Moreover, the counterstories provided in this issue carry on the critical race theory (CRT) project of challenging the dominant discourse that renders people of color invisible and extraneous participants in society. Furthermore, CRT recognizes that although race, class, and gender are social constructions, they are also lived in very real and tangible ways. The counterstories in this issue provide us with a broader view of the ways in which schooling is gendered, classed, and raced. The portraitists (or jazz musicians or poets) in this issue challenge us to deeply contemplate matters of social identity and culture and the ways in which these phenomena inform and influence teaching and learning experiences.

The authors in this issue draw on the five essential aspects of portraiture to construct their research and narrative texts. The foci of the research presented in this issue include documentations of students’ experiences, explications of teachers’ pedagogical beliefs and practices, and intersections within the phenomena that surround the practices of schooling. In this special issue, the studies express the goodness of their subjects and the complexities inherent within their contexts. In doing so, the researchers capture various nuances of participants’ experiences: the rhythm of Black life, the shifting shape of women’s lives, the unpredictability of teacher’s lives, the intersectionality of identity, professionalism, and private spaces. These portraits depict participants who are thoughtful, caring adults and young people who exert, accom-
moderate, and challenge power. For portraiture to illuminate the complex dimensions of goodness and to capture the attention of broad and eclectic audiences, the researchers blend music and poetry with rigorous data collection and analysis methods.

Each author also extends herself to her audience by articulating her positionality and subjectivity with regard to the research. In each article, the portraitist/musician/poet makes known the personal and professional connections that are inherent in the chosen project. The beliefs, goals, and ways of knowing of each author and her participants come to life in the portraits/compositions/poems that have been created. These aspects of the pieces in this issue enhance the stories being told. Using the tenets of portraiture, the researchers generate images, fashioned by thick descriptions of events and contexts, that bring the reader into the lives of teachers, students, and teacher educators—people who are also Black folk, women folk, children, and adolescents.

We as young researchers, document, compose, reveal portraits through and beyond community and academic epistemologies, female eyes And brown skin.

COLLAGE OF RESEARCH

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) referred to the ultimate projects as an aesthetic whole where all the pieces of the work appear, as guided by the researcher, in the final portrait. Although the aesthetic whole of each of these studies looks very different, there are significant themes that flow between the articles. Each researcher attempts to stay true to the elements of portraiture outlined by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis while extending and modifying the methodology to fit her individual research design. In this special issue, the authors use portraiture to examine issues of race and racism in both the classroom and the curriculum. Two authors (Dixson and Hill) reconceptualize portraiture to highlight the connections between other artistic (jazz and poetry) and inventive expressions for research.

The ways in which the portraitist/musician/poet uses portraiture also reflects life history and narrative research epistemologies. Similar to life history research and narrative research, the researcher’s development of rapport and disclosure of the self are intimately tied to the types of data that the researcher is able to glean from participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cole & Knowles, 2001; Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002). In addition, narrative researchers
and portraitists contextualize and synthesize their work by triangulating the words of their participants with archival data, historical artifacts, interviews with people surrounding their participants, field observations, and shadowing of participants. Thus, the researchers in this special issue methodically used multiple research tools to construct intricate, multifaceted portraits of individuals and events.

*Extending the Metaphor: Notions of Jazz in Portraiture, Adrienne D. Dixson*

Dixson addresses Calmore’s (1995) notion of the relationship between jazz and CRT. Calmore described Archie Shepp and Ornette Coleman’s voices in jazz as “fire music” that sought to challenge traditional notions of tonality, sonority, and instrumentation in jazz music. Moreover, this “fire music” was squarely situated within the Black power movement of the 1960s and was viewed as the musical voice of revolution. Similarly, CRT scholars have challenged the tonality, sonority, and instrumentation of legal scholarship by examining the ways in which the law has served to reify and support racist policies. Dixson suggests that this “fire music” might be a useful way to think about conducting research that seeks to help bring to the forefront the counterstories of the historically marginalized and invisible (African American women teachers). She extends the metaphor of portraiture and argues for what she calls a jazz methodology. These new components of portraiture are delineated through the solos, breaks, and riffs that compose the art of jazz. In this metaphoric extension, the researcher is the “bandleader” who cocreates the musical text with teachers, students, parents, and the community. Dixson explores ways in which the process of research, particularly with African Americans, can be a synergistic process that occurs between the researcher and participants. Moreover, she argues that this jazz methodology is part of an epistemological turn toward research that is situated, contextual, and inherently and explicitly political and can be described as a “racialized epistemology” (Ladson-Billings, 2000).

*Expressions of “Voice” in Portraiture, Thandeka K. Chapman*

In this article, Thandeka K. Chapman uses the methodology of portraiture to conduct a “search for goodness” in a ninth-grade, multiracial English classroom. Using the lens of CRT, Chapman examines the various contextual forces that influence a veteran White teacher’s pedagogical choices when teaching literature by authors of color in a school district that was recently desegregated. She explores the confluence between CRT and portraiture with
regard to notions of Lawrence-Lightfoot’s (1983) “search for goodness,” the six elements of voice, and the situated identities of the researcher in the study. Chapman contends that CRT and portraiture confront axiological tensions in research traditions that are confounded by issues of race, class, and gender.

**The Poetry in Portraiture:**
*Seeing Subjects, Hearing Voices, and Feeling Contexts, Djanna A. Hill*

This article highlights the use of womanist theory and two essential features of portraiture—context and voice—to understand the perspectives, experiences, and practices of Black women teacher educators at three different higher education institutions. Hill uses poetry to communicate the form or movement of each portrait and in doing so, creates poetic portraits or what she has termed *poetic afriographies* of Black women educators. She provides the poetic counterstory that illustrates the ways in which race continues to matter in both positive and not-so-positive ways. Hill discusses the use of poetry as a vehicle to enhance qualitative approaches to inquiry and influence wider audiences.

**“City Girl”:**
*A Portrait of a Successful White Urban Teacher, Heather A. Harding*

Using the method of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), this article explores two questions: (a) How does one White teacher, identified as successful by her principal, articulate her motivations and goals for teaching students of color? and (b) How do her racial identity and her understanding of race inform her pedagogy and practice with students of color? Harding uses the major aspects of portraiture to examine notions of culturally relevant pedagogy for a White female teacher living in the northeastern United States.

**Learning to Teach in the Shadow of 9/11:**
*A Portrait of Two Arab American Preservice Teachers, Roberta M. Newton*

In this article, the author explores a question raised by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997): How does this line of investigation inform (give shape to) the product—the developing portrait (p. 60)? By considering two of the methods examined by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis—poetry and collage—
Newton argues that these arts-informed approaches to inquiry allowed her a unique space for co-theorizing about women’s lives. This process of co-theorizing enabled her to render a portrait that reflects the tones, intensity, and various hues of her coparticipants’ experiences during this historical time period—the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Arts-informed inquiry allowed this author to paint an “authentic portrait” by engaging in evocative experiences with her coparticipants that revealed the multidimensionality of their lived realities.

CONCLUSION

These articles endeavor to expand the boundaries of portraiture research by enlisting elements of jazz and poetry and posing new research questions for exploration. Although these may be new forms of documenting qualitative research, they are not new ways of speaking to a larger audience. Portraiture is a 20-year-old methodology that is just beginning to gain substantial recognition in education research communities. In this beginning of the “seventh moment” in qualitative research, researchers are asked to seek and share “new knowledge” for qualitative inquiry. We can attempt these lofty and noble goals by reaching into our historical memory, moving forward in our thinking, and building on the fine work that provides an excellent foundation (Denzin, 2003). The authors in this special issue honor the voices, experiences, and contexts of portraitists and subjects who want and need to be heard.

I see you, as you want to be seen
I hear you, as you want to be heard
I speak you, as you tell me what to say
I write you, as you give me the words
Through your eyes, your words, your voice
I too, am revealed.

REFERENCES


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