Balancing the Whole: Portraiture as Methodology

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Portraiture in art is a process of representation through which the artist recreates the subject of the image, interpreting nuances of physicality and personality through artistic elements such as line, color, and composition. This artistic process results in a tangible imprint of the artist’s understanding of and relationship with the subject of the portrait. Similarly, the research portrait, a written narrative, is imprinted with the researcher’s understanding of and relationship with the individual or site that is represented in the text. Like the artist, the research portraittist works to balance elements of context, thematic structure, relationship, and voice into an aesthetic whole that is so carefully constructed that every part seems an essential ingredient in the clarity of cohesive interpretation (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

As a qualitative research methodology, portraiture is distinguished in part by this preoccupation with artistic coherence. The quest for coherence, for balancing a whole, plays a constant role in the researcher’s efforts to construct a narrative that authentically portrays the central story of the subject or site. Portraiture is based on a belief in narratives or stories as primary and valid structures through which personal and professional identities are framed, sustained, and shared (see, e.g., Bruner, 1996). The narrative in portraiture is respected as an essential vehicle for meaning making in the life of the individual or group (Bateson, 1989; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1994) and in the work of the attendant researcher. Narratives taken from literature are frequently used as foils for individual experience and as fodder for the interpretive process (see, e.g., Gilligan, 1982). In portraiture, however, the interpretive product (the research portrait) itself embodies artistic and literary elements. Simultaneously holding to empirical rigor and to artistic mandates, portraiture participates in a tradition of forging bridges across social science and art (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Portraiture may be regarded as embracing ethnographic objectives and techniques even as it rewrites both the form and function of traditional case

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studies. Like exemplary case studies, successful portraits provide detailed and responsible accounts of individuals or groups. Unlike case studies that focus, for example, on analyses of strengths and weaknesses, portraiture embraces the notion of a “good” whole—one that necessarily incorporates challenge and error even as it functions effectively. Finally, like other recent research traditions, such as grounded theory (Haig, 1995; Kinach, 1995), portraiture relies on inductive rather than deductive analysis, the generation rather than testing of theories, and a humanistic determination to speak through relevant voices, rather than academic codes, thereby reaching a broader audience.

Introduction

The artist stands before her subject confident that, after various conversations back and forth, a relationship of trust has been forged. The person whose portrait is being painted relaxes on the chaise. The artist’s eye moves from sole of bright blue shoe, to rounded hip, to resting elbow, to melancholy eyes. What major forms emerge for the artist as central to the figure she is interpreting on canvas? How will she organize these emergent central forms into a cohesive whole that will make sense to a viewer and seem an apt portrayal to the subject of the work? Imprinted with the unique style of the artist, the final portrait does not contain every detail of what the artist sees; but in its organization of central shapes against a backdrop that illuminates the whole, the artist somehow captures the essence of the subject. Rising from her chaise to take in the final work, the subject nods with a look of both surprise and interest, “Yes,” she says, “I can see that that is me.”

Far from the artist’s studio, on the third floor of Longfellow Hall at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, I sit with a small team of researchers. Together, we are making aesthetic decisions about the context, content, and structure of the research portraits that we are constructing. One of the researchers shares her progress in organizing her understanding of the site she has been studying, a community art center in the Fruit Belt section of Buffalo, New York. After weeks of careful review of contextual documents, field notes, and interview data, things are coming together. From the language of the center, as documented in 200 pages of transcriptions, she has identified three major themes that emerge and seem to authentically organize her interpretation of the nature of arts learning that is provided at the site. Resonant constituent language has rendered as titles for these themes: “the model of the professional artist, realistic accessibility, and constant survivor” (Davis, Soep, Remba, Maira, & Putnoi, 1993).

The artist critiques and revises his selection and portrayal of form through a lens that is tempered both by his understanding of the particular subject and his broader knowledge of art and art history. Similarly, this researcher has tested the selected themes across dimensions deemed relevant through extensive study of the broader scene of community arts education. She has created a backdrop as if on the canvas of her portrait, made out of data she has selected from observation, interview, and close study of written materials. And this backdrop illuminates her portrayal as surely as the negative space.
on the artist’s canvas makes its positive counterpart more vivid. Attending as the artist does to aesthetic details such as metaphor, vivid description, and cohesive composition, this research portraitist has created a balanced whole that is grounded in rigorous research but accessible to readers including and transcending the academy. When the directors of the community art center read what they call the “story” of their center, they let us know, “Yes, we can see that that is us.”

In the pages that follow, I hope to shed light on the inner workings of a research methodology that I view as inherently interdisciplinary, integrating rigorous standards of qualitative research with the aesthetic qualities of works of art. In unpacking the elements of this apparently seamless process of interpretive description, I focus on the rigorous dialectic that persists between process (the triangulation of data through observation, interview, and material review) and product (the carefully constructed narrative portrayal). The variety of portraiture that I describe draws on the work of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983, 1994) and on my own adaptation of her individualistic approach into a collective endeavor suitable for use by a group of researchers (Davis et al., 1993, 1996; Pruyne et al., 1998). Lawrence-Lightfoot and I have outlined in some detail foundations and guidelines for the use of portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). But in the limited space of this chapter, I hope to provide a vivid if condensed account of the methodology in action, implemented by a group of researchers working together to create research portraits that resonate with authenticity to readers across disciplines and circumstance.¹

This unfolding of the process in action is organized around the component parts of the portraiture process: context, group voice, relationship, emergent themes, and aesthetic whole. I hope throughout my discussion to be able to make convincing links between the methods of research portraitists and the process of working artists. Perhaps the distance between the artist’s studio and the research office is shorter than we think and perhaps there is much to learn from a look in both directions.

## Context

Education, like art, does not happen in a vacuum. The physical neighborhood in which schools or art centers work, like the size and diversity of the community that is served, are all important elements that contribute from the outside to the inside of the walls of the site. Artists know well that a change in the shade or scene selected for the background of the portrait can transform the effect of the image. Similarly, research portraitists choose well what to include in an introduction to a portrait to set the stage for what will follow. The palette from which the researcher constructs an introduction is made up of selected

¹Examples are based on the author’s past work in Project Co-Arts and current work in the Arts in Education Program Portraiture Project. She is grateful for support for these initiatives from the Bauman, Cummings, Ford, Dodge, Julian, and Warhol Foundations and from the National Arts Learning Foundation.
pieces of information reviewed carefully with an eye to an understanding of the environment in which the site functions.

When I wrote the portrait of the Artists Collective in Hartford, with the help of my research team, I immersed myself in newspaper articles, census reports, annual reports of the center, and other data that would let me know about the North End of Hartford and the Collective’s then-home on Clark Street. Leaving out extraneous details, I tried to provide threads that would help clarify the details I would share as I wove my interpretation of the education provided. For example, the following excerpt from the introduction to the portrait sets the stage for both the Afro-centric art center and the community it serves:

Judging from the bustle of working people, a visitor might be surprised to learn how hard hit financially Hartford has been in recent years or the high percentage of Hartford’s residents who are actually unemployed. Judging from the predominance of white pedestrians downtown, a visitor might also be surprised to know that almost three quarters of Hartford’s population is either African-American or Latino—many living at or below the poverty line. The white executives who crowd the street by day leave the city for the suburbs at night, and the African-American and Latino residents maintain their respective places in the North and South Ends of Hartford. The rooftops of the small two and three-decker homes of the largely African-American community of the North End are visible from the upper floors of the downtown buildings. It is difficult to convince a cab driver to take a fare there; but the North End is an easy walk from downtown. (Davis et al., 1993, p. 14)

The process of creating a research portrait of a site begins a long time before the site is visited. Studying relevant written materials provides a context for the researcher’s encounter with a site and provides a respectful familiarity with the place that will positively affect the relationship with constituents. This preparation also provides a cachet of data from which to draw not only for the context that is provided at the start of the portrait (what fellow researchers and I have entitled the “outside in”) but also on the contextual threads that will be woven throughout. Contextual elements ranging from the neighborhood in which the site is located to the details of a room in which a moment of teaching and learning is described shed different and important hues on the individuals, and action, and the increasing clarity of the portrayal.

In the following contextual description, the reader moves from outside to inside the center and experiences the setting of the Artists Collective as a series of selected details that reflect priorities of the education and community promoted at the site:

From outside to in, the change in atmosphere is as dramatic as the change experienced crossing “the line” into the North End. Opening the double doors into the main floor’s hallway, eyes are drawn upwards to the colorful banners hung from the ceiling in rows of three. Neatly hung posters line the hallways. Some announce performances by noted black artists, others advocate a drug free America: “Drugs don’t care about you; connect with
people who do.” On the tops of skirted tables lie well ordered stacks of free brochures: “Cocaine/crack, The Big Lie”; “Thinking about Drugs? Think about this.” There are brochures that announce local arts events, tours of West Africa, and programs to help you, “if someone close, has a problem with alcohol or other drugs.” An order form for a new publication announces, “Finally, a guide for the unique issues facing black parents: Different and Wonderful, Raising Black Children in a Race-Conscious Society.” (Davis et al., 1993, p. 3)

Against this level of carefully described internal physical context, the interactions of constituents is illuminated and made sensible both from a visual and pedagogical perspective. We see the colorful banners and posters that densely line the walls and we understand that a large emphasis is being placed at this site on building community and keeping children away from drugs.

Throughout the text, references to contextual details gathered from numerous relevant sources (field notes, documents collected before and throughout a site visit, information gleaned in interview settings) ground both the observations and interpretation of the portraitist. In setting the stage for a dance class in which well-known New York choreographer Aca Lee Thompson is working with young dancers, I include as background physical detail that provides context for the scene. The selection of this detail highlights the contributions that persist in which world-class artists link up with a tiny but powerful center for arts learning:

Overhead against the classroom wall above a wall-wide mirror is a mural painted by the late renowned artist Keith Haring. Outlined in black on a white ground, the dancing figures are characteristic of Haring's familiar style: a cross between Aztec/Egyptian/primitive and modern/media/cartoon. Haring was visiting Hartford’s Wadsworth Atheneum one day and Ms. McLean says, “It was such a nice day; he came on a Saturday. He left this with us.” Haring’s mural art adorns city and subway walls in New York City and a wall in this classroom in Hartford, Connecticut. The juxtaposition of world class art and minimally renovated classrooms exemplifies the achievement of the Oasis on Clark Street. An independent arts space expert contracted in 1986 observed, “This is a very successful organization in a very makeshift facility.” (Davis et al., 1993, p. 23)

As in a painted portrait in which favorite objects of the subject may be included, contextual details help the reader see and understand the action and structure at the portrayed site. The various kinds of contextual elements that inform a research portrait fall into the categories of (a) physical context, clarifying detail that sets the stage like the skyscrapers and sidewalks of Hartford or the Herring mural described earlier; (b) personal context as detail that clarifies an understanding of individuals and interactions from details of appearance to life stories that inform the portrait; and (c) historical context, data that places the here and now portrait within the continuum of the individual site’s journey from past to future. Examples of personal and historical context can be found in the following excerpts, describing the founders and directors of the Artists Collective:
Dollie McLean is a petite woman of African/Caribbean origin whose former life as a dancer and actress is imprinted on her straight posture and graceful gait. Her hair, edged with blonde highlights, is pulled straight back off her face and tightly drawn above her head into an upright ponytail wrapped in fabric. Her high style appearance would seem to reflect her New York City roots.

Jackie McLean also strikes an urbane New York image. He is dressed for an interview in an elegant dark suit with a floral print tie in purples and greens. His gold watch, bracelet, and rings echo “show biz,” “big city,” “New York.” A light-complexioned African-American, Jackie McLean sports a goatee and his feathery brown hair is laced with threads of gray. Mr. McLean describes his wife’s shopping days on New York’s Orchard Street: “. . . and Dollie’s shopping was always more looking and thinking about something a long time. She is very frugal. She runs the Artists Collective the same way which is why we never had a deficit.” (Funding cuts in the last year have resulted in the Collective’s first deficit.) (Davis et al., 1993, p. 17)

Providing personal context as visual description seems always the hardest challenge for research portraitists. What sort of physical detail is appropriate to include? How much should be left out of the scene? When personal contextual information is included superficially, it reads as if it were an intrusion rather than an integral part of the portrait. To just tell the reader that the individual speaking has red hair informs very little. Personal and historical contextual details, like all the elements the portraitist is balancing, are carefully chosen to inform, clarify, and enrich (rather than decorate) the written account and the reader’s consequent understanding.

In the example just given, selected details in description of the McLeans enable the reader to visualize these two individuals. Moreover, they help to contextualize them against the backdrop of the story of their New York roots, a thread that informs the narrative throughout. The McLeans’s connections with New York enable them to bring top-notch professional artists into the Collective. But the New York connection also emerges as a dissonant thread in the tension that persists on the part of community members who mistrust individuals coming from New York to help adolescents in Hartford’s North End. Later in the portrait we hear that

Jackie McLean recognizes the tension within the community and voices their sentiment: “Who do they think they are coming in here to help us? We coulda’ done it!” He says, “When I get them all together, I say, ‘Why didn’t you do it? You didn’t do it, so stop talking about it. We did it.’ ” (Davis et al., 1993, p. 48)

Similarly, when we first meet the McLeans, physically and personally, we encounter relevant contextual historical data introduced even in the small detail of Dollie’s frugality. Dollie’s shopping encounters become important historical context, useful to include in the portrait, because they set the stage for her careful financial management of the center.

Issues of what to include or leave out persist throughout the writing of the portrait and the data collecting that informs that process. Just as our
portrait painter is leaving out extraneous visual information and focusing on highlighting particular elements in her painting, the research portraitist is “testing” information and its relevance to the understanding and portrayal of a cohesive interpretation of the subject or site. A description of personal sacrifice adds important perspective to an understanding of the founder’s motivation.

The move from New York City to Hartford in 1970 was not an easy one for Dollie McLean. It came at a time when her children had reached the age where she could spend a little more time paying attention to what she wanted to do. Although she had given up dance, she had continued to attend weekly dance classes to keep in shape and, as a propitious head start for the acting career to which she had long aspired, she was accepted as an actress in New York’s Negro Ensemble Company.

But Jackie McLean’s two and then three day weekly trips to Hartford to teach a few music courses at the University of Hartford’s Hartt School of Music were growing as they would into a full time position as professor, founder, and chair of the African-American Music Department Jazz Degree Program in 1973. “By 1969,” Mr. McLean tells the story, “it looked like most of my work was going to be not in New York City but here in Hartford. I began to talk to Dollie very carefully about moving. . . ”(Davis et al., 1993, p. 17)

**Group Voice**

No matter how realistic in detail (suggesting objective or photographic representation) an artist’s portrait may be, the individualism of the artist is indelibly imprinted on the work. We see in the work of the famous portraitist John Singer Sargent, for example, a stylistic tone that suggests a level of comfort with Boston’s elite. The trappings and furnishings of the rich from jewelry to china to ornate costumes are not accentuated in his work—they present almost as expected givens in the settings portrayed. We are not surprised to learn that Sargent sat at table with members of the society he portrayed, devoted patrons such as the wealthy Boston icon Isabella Stewart Gardner. Beyond the ease in presentation we may sense behind the brush strokes, in the brush stokes themselves, there is a distinctive style. Those familiar with paintings will be able to note without the benefit of a label, “That’s by Sargent of course.” Similarly, in a research portrait, the voice of the researcher is imprinted on the rapport with the research participant, the language used in portrayal, and even on the particular details that are chosen to be included in a work.

For example, if I were to visit and portray the community art center Plaza de la Raza in Los Angeles, many elements of the scene would be unfamiliar to me. Dias de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) might, for me, be especially intriguing. But when our Mexican portrait researcher visited the center and wrote about the holiday as if it were a given, she had to be reminded that a reader like me might not know about it as she did. This researcher was bilingual and was able therefore to achieve a more nuanced understanding of many of the aspects of the center’s effectiveness. We decided that because her voice was bilingual, the researcher should share that perspective with the reader.
An example of this literally bilingual approach to portraitist voice can be found in this brief but representative moment from her portrait:

Speaking in Spanish, the migajón (bread dough sculpture) instructor, Ofelia Sánchez, tells the story of a 73 year old woman who came from Argentina to the United States to live with her daughter, but her daughter always left her at home alone. The older woman constantly said that she wanted to die, “¡Ay, Dios mío! ¿Porqué no me recoges? Yo ya no más no sirvo para nada.” (Oh, My God! Why don’t you bring me to you? I am no longer of any use). According to Sánchez, after joining the migajón class, this woman said that her daughter’s absences no longer bothered her. Indeed, she wanted her daughter to leave so that she could have more time to make flowers, “¡Ay Diosito! ¡No te vayas a creer que te dije que me llevaras, si tengo que hacer muchas flores todavía!” (Oh My God!, disregard what I said to you earlier about bringing me to you. I still have many flowers to make!). (Remba in Davis et al., 1996, p. 147)

Different individuals bring different backgrounds and understandings that have an impact on what they see, hear, and make sense of in any setting. An experienced artist visiting a community art center would ask different questions of a print maker than a researcher who had never seen a printing press. On a very basic level, voice is what makes individual researchers see what they see and include or leave out what they choose to in a portrait. Voice necessarily affects observation, understanding, and reportage. Beyond individual perspectives, however, both individuals and groups of researchers working collectively on a set of portraits need a set of foundations and constraints with which responsibly to focus their ultimately indelible individual voices. How is that achieved?

The study to which I refer throughout these pages (Davis, 1994; Davis et al., 1993, 1996) had as its research question “What does educational effectiveness look like in community art centers in economically disadvantaged communities?” A frequent misconception about portraiture is that it is not driven by a research question; that it is instead some kind of comprehensive interpretation of a subject or site. All research begins with a question and the best research begins with a question to which we don’t know the answer (Curtis, personal communication, 1989). Like any research initiative, portraiture is grounded in one or more questions, and the data gathering, from selection of relevant written materials for study to the establishment of an interview protocol, is informed by that question.

Researchers (individuals or groups) embarking on a portrait need to do some sort of preliminary study such as a literature review as a preparatory step. Project Co-Arts, for example, began with a full-scale national study exploring what counted as “educational effectiveness” in the field of community art centers. The preliminary study included a review of articles from and on the field, reviews of descriptive materials from more than 300 centers, in-depth telephone interviews with educational directors at more than 100 centers, and on-site visits to 32 centers (Davis, 1994). This research into the general scene provided a context for our selection of particular portraiture sites and a tenor of expertise for our collective researcher voice. Knowledge of the broader field
links the individual example and context to the more universal scene and context. That knowledge informs the researcher’s voice and, through that voice, the ways in which the narrative will be framed.

When a research team sets forth, as we did, to do one or a series of portraits, it will very consciously work to establish some version of what I have called “group voice” (Davis et al., 1993, 1996; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Group voice is simply the agreed on parameters that lend harmony and coherence to the individual voices of team researchers as they meet various sites in their portraiture research. Group voice does not replace individual voice, even when a research team decides to remove the “I” or “we” from the portrayal—to write the portraits in the third-person. Individual voice will always guide vision, understanding, and choice as described earlier. But group voice provides shared constraints that ground the individual forays and ensures that they will all provide links between portrayal of individual sites and a broader vision of the field.

In creating a group voice, researchers may begin by identifying what we call “relevant dimensions” with which to guide their study. My view of relevant dimensions is similar to what Lawrence-Lightfoot has called the “preoccupations” of the researcher as “her disciplinary background, her theoretical perspectives, her intellectual interests, and her understanding of the relevant literature” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 93). Relevant dimensions are the salient areas of study identified by preliminary research and consequent researcher expertise. The dimensions not only frame the portrait, they connect the subject or site of the portrait to the broader field of which it is a representative.

Accordingly, our large-scale preliminary study of a few hundred community art centers (as described earlier) helped us to identify four relevant dimensions within and across which educational effectiveness (as determined by the field) in these settings seemed to occur. Those relevant dimensions were

1. Community: The community that the center serves;
2. Teaching and learning: The overall educational philosophy;
3. Administration: The organizational structure of the center; and
4. Journey: The overall history of the center from its origins to its vision of itself in the future.

These dimensions would guide our research in various important ways. From the start we would be sure, when collecting written materials from a portrait site, that we had data that informed our understanding of these areas of preoccupation. Appropriate materials might include, for each dimension, (a) letters from or articles about the community (community); (b) teacher journals or written descriptions of curricula (teaching and learning); (c) documents that had to do with funding or leadership (administration); and (d) documents such as annual reports over a series of years that included the history of the site or five-year plans that contained visions for the future (journey).

Similarly, our interview protocol was guided by these dimensions. For example, to inform the dimension of community, a question we would ask was, “Can you tell me about the community you serve?” For teaching and learning:
“Can you tell me what counts as success in your classroom?” For administration: “Who is in charge here? What can you tell me about the leadership of the place?” For journey: “Can you tell me about the history of the place and where you see it going in the next five years?” And for all constituents: “What would you tell someone on the other side of the country who wanted to start a place like this? What makes this place so special?”

Individual researchers can formalize their grounded preoccupations as relevant dimensions with which to achieve a similar focusing of their portraiture work. For example, a student writing a portrait on a community school of music was particularly interested in self-image as an artist and its impact on adolescent development. In her preliminary review of pertinent psychological and sociological research, she identified four relevant dimensions that were associated with self-image as an artist. She incorporated these dimensions into her individual portraiture voice as mentorship: master/apprentice relationships; family: familial support; flow: commitment to optimal experience; and performance: affecting the formation of identity (see Powell, 1995).

For individual researchers, the determination and application of relevant dimensions lends a certain integrity to individual voice. For a research team, relevant dimensions provide a common frame—a group voice that is grounded in broader research—a unified disposition to the individual perspectives represented and valued on a research team. Of importance, relevant dimensions are brought into the site by the portraitist—informing the voice through which the narrative will be told. While focusing data collection, relevant dimensions provide an instrument through which themes may emerge from the site and a sounding board against which the resonance of emergent themes may be tested, as described in a later section.

A group of researchers working together on individual portraits benefit from regular team meetings at which developing ideas can be shared, individual questions addressed, and group voice continuously refined and agreed on. Although it is always most practical to have one writer or senior writer for each portrait, subsets of the research team can work together as we did in the Co-Arts work, visiting sites in pairs, expanding the reach of the portrait writer both in data collection and affirmation of observations (Davis et al., 1993, 1996). Typically, a pair of researchers on site will meet at the end of each day to share notes and consider such process issues as to what extent relevant dimensions have been thoroughly explored, what themes may be emerging to be “listened for” the next day, and how the relationship with the site is developing. On one project (Pruyne et al., 1998), six researchers collected data separately, met regularly around these issues, and wrote different sections of one shared portrait. In current work, individual researchers are data collecting and working on their own. But in all these settings, the team’s work is linked by group voice and grounded by group meetings that serve as sounding boards for developing ideas and an arena in which concerns and directions are reviewed.

One important protocol determined at such meetings concerns attitudes and personal presentation for group members entering a site and forging a relationship. “Never be late.” “Be a listener and learner.” “Dress for each visit as an honored and honoring guest.” Such “nuts and bolts” decisions about
entering a site, as micro as they may seem, help set the stage for generative relationships and a team standard across all site visits by the research team.

**Relationship**

Artist and subject reflect on the work together. As the model expresses her pleasure and interest in the portrayal that she is reviewing, she is measured with her language. Understanding the time and intensity the artist has put into the work, she is grateful to see that she recognizes herself in the portrayal and can celebrate what she had not anticipated. “I look sad in this image. Is that what you saw?” “I believe what you have painted is an expression of me.” The artist has been measured in her portrayal of the sadness she sees, careful to link it to the comfort of the chaise—careful not to turn the image into a treatise on sadness rather than a portrayal of the individual subject she has come to know well from days of looking, painting, and relationship building. “This image is about you,” the artist shares, “but it is my vision of you, so it is part yours and part mine.” Through this sharing—the model’s hours of sitting, the artist’s concentration on the figure before her—a relationship of trust has been forged. “You may look and see because I know that you will not betray me in your expression of your vision.”

“Do no harm” is the researcher’s mandate. In the telling of a story, a story that through the telling is no longer just that of the site or subject, the researcher holds to that mandate. In entering the site, the researcher has initiated a respectful relationship simply by studying carefully contextual materials about the site. “There’s that picture of Jackie McLean,” I comment as I enter the halls of the Artists Collective. “I read about it in an article about the center and am excited to see it for myself.” Constituents realize that the researcher is earnest in his or her interest and has spent some time preparing for the visit. In the tone of questions, in the attention given to listening and observing carefully, to the expectation of goodness rather than a search for the problem, the researcher is building a positive relationship. This relationship will scaffold the time spent in on-site observation and discourse and demonstrate throughout the visit that there is mutual respect and a level of trust that will not be violated. Beyond that, relationship guides what will or will not be included in a portrait as the researcher determines protectively what information illuminates and what intrudes.

In our group portraits, this relationship is prioritized from first contact made with the site to last. In initial contact, we demonstrate our preparation for a visit we care about—through informed and respectful interaction—and in the final portrait, we demonstrate our dedication to doing no harm—through carefully monitored portrayal. Indeed, before a portrait is read by anyone beyond the research team and the constituents at the site, a final draft is shared with research participants so that they can review it in detail. They let us know what, if any, erroneous information we may have included and where, if any place, we may have inadvertently offended.
It is interesting to note that at this juncture in the work, my repeated experience has been that we can never accurately anticipate what we have included that might offend and what will cause no distress. Invariably in the portraits we have produced in various projects, we have been surprised by what aspects of the text caused disagreement. One participant reports, “The researchers say my smock was batik. I hate batik clothes and would never wear them. That smock was handpainted by me and my granddaughter.” A change is respectfully inserted. When asked whether the financial distress of the site is treated with a level hand, the surprising response, “Actually it felt to me as if you ‘sugar-coated’ our pain. It was much worse than you describe” (Davis et al., 1996).

The construction of an authentic interpretation—one that is affirmed by the site as well as by the researchers—results from a redefinition of the boundaries that traditionally separate insider from outsider knowledge. A trusting relationship between research participant and researcher allows for the co-construction of a story that belongs to and honors them both. Furthermore, that relationship extends beyond the limits of the portrait. It is not uncommon for constituents at a site to stay in touch with a portraitist, to call long after the research portrait is completed to share some news that is assumed of interest to the researcher.

At a gathering at the White House in 1996, Hilary Rodham Clinton was honoring the work of community arts educators and the publication of the President’s Committee Report on programs like the Artists Collective that serve youth who have been placed at risk (Weitz, 1996). As Dollie McLean and I wound up the marble stairwell to the reception area, I was taking the scene in—the elegance, the gorgeous portraits, the famous guests. Dollie took my arm and leaned in close, “Let me tell you about the new meals project we’re starting at the Collective. We want to focus on manners and the art of listening at the table. . . .” It had been three years since the portrait had been completed.

Relationship is developed and cultivated in every element of the portraiture process, but in the interaction that is essential to interview, its significance is clear. For example, in training for such back and forth, the group of researchers role-plays the technique of writing down key words that are spoken by the interviewee. These brief notations help guide additional questions and confirm, in the researcher’s repetition of these words, a listening and attentive attitude. Empowering research techniques (Mishler, 1991) scaffold the exchange and assure the respondent that the researcher really cares about the answers and the integrity of the story being told.

In our portraiture initiative, after Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983), we set out to study goodness. This expectation of goodness, as opposed to a deficit model based on the identification of problems, sets a tone for relationship that is positive and trusting. Sites like those we studied in the Project Co-Arts/Safe Havens study (1993) are accustomed to having evaluators come and assess their practice. It takes time to assure these constituents that evaluation is not our mandate. In recognizing goodness, challenges are assumed as part of the process not identified as signs of a problem, and a positive perspective is promised and maintained. This approach, coupled with the displayed apprecia-
tion of a supplicant learner gratefully welcomed to a site, set the stage for a relationship marked by trust. As with all features of portraiture, that relationship informs the data-collecting process as well as the creation of the final narrative.

**Emergent Themes**

The artist has decided which forms will be highlighted in her portrayal: the chaise, the resting elbow, and the melancholy eyes of her subject. The chaise is clearly an organizing force, representing comfort both literally and metaphorically—its rounded edges and restful contours echoing the shape and tone of its occupant. The resting elbow, punctuating the subject’s contact with and reliance on the chaise—and the melancholy eyes, taking restful comfort a step further to the edge of sorrow. Rounded drooping lines embody these resonant themes: comfort, contact, and sadness. These themes resonate throughout the lines and textures in the image and also offer coherence to the portrait’s portrayal.

Back at the research table, the research team is considering the coherence that is offered by the three major themes that have emerged at the Artists Collective in Hartford: family, safe haven, and the process of becoming somebody (Davis et al., 1993). Having demonstrated the resonance of the language of these themes throughout the repeated refrains heard in interview, voiced in daily rituals, or used in descriptive written materials, we now “walk” the theme of “safe haven” through the relevant dimensions that scaffolds the portrait team’s work.

In terms of teaching and learning, I point out, the center is a safe haven from the low academic expectations that its African American students face in schools. In terms of the community, it is a safe haven as a place full of celebration of art replete with positive African American role models in a community in which negative stereotypes abound. In terms of its administration, it is a safe haven for the artist educators who have joined together as founders, board members, and faculty to build a program offering alternatives to urban youth. At the collective, their lives as artists are valued and space is designated for the pursuit of their talents in various artistic domains. And in terms of the journey of the center, it echoes the journey of its founder Jackie McLean, who found a safe haven in music from the drug addiction he was fighting decades ago in New York. Following the inspiration of that journey, the founding and future of the center will be dedicated to providing such a safe haven for its constituents.

Although these examples represent only a portion of resonance within and across the dimensions—there are many more that unfold in the narrative—and they serve to illustrate the ways in which the emergent themes, like the dimensions, are both distinct and porous. Illustrating the theme of safe haven as perceived by community members and expressed in educational context by director Dollie McLean, an excerpt from a section of the portrait makes the point:
A staff member says of the Collective: “. . . people call this an oasis and it is because [here] people are not overwhelmed by a culture that feels alien to them. . . .” One parent explains: “They don’t observe black history and holidays in school—just segments of that; we reinforce that at home that you are capable, that you are no more or less than anybody else. But that ain’t happening at school.” At the Collective, Ms. McLean says they “lay” the art “on top of culture and heritage.” She believes, “the origin of many of the problems we have with our youth is the fact that they’ve been taught . . . whether it’s from the school system, television, whatever—that they come from nothing; they’re nobody; they’re thieves, they’re pimps, all of the worst things. . . .”

The achievements celebrated on the Collective walls proclaim a different reality and Dollie McLean finds the students “behave quite differently” at the Collective. She remembers at one of their first open houses (Open House At The Artists Collective = “OHATAC”): “A teacher came [and saw] the young man that we had at the door taking donations, or taking names. The teacher pulled me aside and said, ‘Dollie, do you know who that boy is that you have sitting at the desk?’ I said, ‘Yes, that’s Marvin and he’s one of our star students.’ Marvin was just wonderful with us, but obviously all his school childhood—it was that thing, he was labeled as a bad kid. So I just think a lot has to do with what kids accomplish, you know their own sense of self-worth.” (Davis et al., 1993, p. 21)

There is something about works of art that makes the representations they contain not just depiction but valid expression of human experience. It is the way in which the portrayal of the subject on the chaise in the artist’s portrait focuses on one woman’s sadness, but speaks of sadness writ large. There is a similar quality about the interpretation that a research portrait provides that tells the reader not just about the Artists Collective as an individual site but more generally about other sites of this nature in urban centers around the country. The emergent themes organize the account of experience and make it comprehensible to the constituents at the site who know it first-hand as well as to the readers of the portrait who reinterpret the experience through their reading.

Ultimately a series of portraits on the same subject (e.g., community art centers) can be analyzed through a comparison of emergent themes with an eye to a clearer vision of a field. In reflecting on emergent themes across community art centers, we consider whether there are, for example, informative links between the themes identified for the Molly Olga Center in Buffalo (the model of the professional artist, realistic accessibility, and constant survivor) and those of the Artists Collective in Hartford (family, safe haven, and the process of becoming somebody; Davis et al., 1993). What principles of effectiveness can be derived from the resonance of themes across sites? In a final reflective chapter in the Safe Havens collection, I address this question and derive from such considerations a set of overarching descriptive criteria (see Davis et al., 1993, pp. 184–186). These activities demonstrate the way in which emergent themes organize what we discover internally (within the site) and offer structures that can be useful to external consideration (from the perspective of the field). In this way, portraiture functions as inductive reasoning and generates theory that can inform broader understanding.
Summarizing the process, in end-of-day on-site reflection and in consultation with coresearchers, portraitists record their developing ideas and evidence for emergent themes and consider, as I have described, their aptness. Reflecting in this way at regular junctures throughout the site visit allows the portraitist to maintain an ongoing rapport with both the process (the collection of data) and the product (the portrait), both of which, as the interpretation comes together, are organized around emergent themes.

After the site visit, in the ongoing analysis of data, emergent themes are implemented in a new way, as structures for coding and triangulating data from a number of sources. But even in this stage of the data analysis, the portraitist, like the artist reflecting on process, is ready to change. A researcher working on a recent portrait of the Boston Arts Academy wrote a first draft of a section of the portrait around the theme of “passion and satisfaction”—an expression he heard frequently in his time at the school. But in reading the draft, it was clear that constituent language throughout the data sorted under the title of this theme repeatedly addressed the issue of, in constituent language, “meeting challenge.” Indeed, reviewing his transcription data with an eye to relevant dimensions, it was “meeting challenge” that seemed more apt for the naming of this theme and for the structuring of his portrait.

From data collection (triangulated around material review, site observation, and in-depth interview) to the final stages of writing the portrait, then, the emergent themes taken together structure the researcher’s interpretation as an aesthetic whole. The presentation of emergent themes and the interrelationships among them illuminates the structure of both the site and the portrait—the parts of the interpretation and their necessity to a view of the whole.

**Aesthetic Whole**

The artist looks at her painting and at her subject. At first the gaze is from subject to portrait and portrait to subject in almost rapid and rhythmic motion. But after a while attention is focused on the canvas. Does everything fit? Does this look right? When the artist decides a work is done—when it is complete and “right”—may be the most important decision of the ongoing process. In reaching this decision, the visual artist plays the role of producer and perceiver all at once, considering the work as fulfilling her artistic objectives and trying hard to view it from the eyes of the other who will be making sense of the image. Does this make sense? Do the parts fit together into a sensible whole? When the image has reached this level of coherency, the artist will say, “Yes. That’s right.” At least for now.

In considering as a final methodological element, the most comprehensive feature of the research methodology of portraiture—the aesthetic whole—we realize that it has been a beacon in the process from its inception. From selection of materials to review, from scenarios observed, and interviews staged, the end in view, the mounting of a coherent interpretation, has been the ballast for both developing process and product. The portraitist, like the artist, is constructing and communicating her understanding for the reconstruction and
reinterpretation of the reader. This communicative expression of understanding relies on the creation of a balanced composition, a unified whole.

As psychologist of the arts Rudolf Arnheim put it, “In a balanced composition, all factors of shape, direction, location, etc. are mutually determined by each other in such a way that no change seems possible, and the whole assumes the character of ‘necessity’ in all its parts” (Arnheim, 1966, p. 76). He continues, “Under conditions of imbalance the artistic statement becomes incomprehensible” (1974, p. 20). Accordingly, the researcher needs to assemble the respective parts of the interpretation and to justify the inclusion of each separate entity in terms of its relation (even as a dissonant refrain) to the congealing whole. Without unity, without the parts fitting together into an intelligible articulation, there is no communication, no understanding to be shared or found.

At every juncture, the researcher is balancing three areas of judgment: aesthetic and empirical concerns, the separate parts of the overarching interpretation, and the various features of the methodology through which the interpretation has been attained. Three broad concerns—questions of “how to”—underscore the numerous queries that have been raised and fuel the portraitist’s process of composing the narrative: (a) how to fit together what is included; (b) how to decide what to exclude; and (c) how to know when the whole is unified.

In addressing these issues, and giving shape to our group voice, our research group was supported in the final writing stage by an agreed on schema for the creation of the overarching aesthetic whole of final team portraits. Project Co-Arts’ pattern or skeletal framework was called a “generic outline” (generic in that it could serve all of the separate portraits). It delineated a plan of action in which each portrait began, as we have discussed, with an opening section that introduced the site in terms of its context or setting as well as the emergent themes that would structure the aesthetic whole of the portrait.

Thereafter, the generic outline calls for individual sections, one for each emergent theme, in which evidence of the resonance (and dissonance) of the theme is included with regard to each of our identified relevant dimensions. Presenting each theme section as a more linear construction than portraitists could or would want to achieve (for example, many more than three sources of evidence and dissonance would appear in a given theme section), the generic outline specified the following broad brushed pattern:

THEME I (e.g., safe havens)
   a. Relevant Dimension 1 (Teaching and Learning)
      i. evidence (e.g., the story of the student not doing well in school who finds success at the center)
      ii. evidence (another resonant example/story/refrain)
      iii. evidence (another resonant example/story/refrain)
      iv. dissonance (e.g. the parent who resents the cost of education at the center)
   b. Relevant Dimension 2 (Community)
      i. evidence (e.g. the story of the center as a source of celebration of African-American history)
ii. evidence (another resonant example/story/refrain)
iii. evidence (another resonant example/story/refrain)
iv. dissonance (e.g. the mother who is not allowed on the basis of her gender to present her daughter in the Rites of Passage ceremony)
c. Ibid. for dimensions 3 (Administration) & 4 (Journey)

For each subsequent theme (3 and 4), the same approximate girders were suggested. Giving shape to the process of testing emergent themes by virtue of their resonance across dimensions (as described earlier), the generic outline helps to scaffold the researcher’s final process of creating an aesthetic whole. Finally, our outline called for a conclusion, a brief retrospective holistic view that might be accomplished explicitly through the portraitist’s reflection or implicitly through a story that seemed both emblematic and integrative. With the Artists’ Collective portrait, I used a concert at the Children’s Museum in Boston as a synthesizing final event.

Researchers use the generic outline specifically to ensure that they include stories that exemplify the resonance of themes across dimensions and that they balance their examples of evidence thoughtfully throughout the text. But the outline offers the same sort of structural tool as sorting data according to dimension and later by theme. Just as it is important in the writing not to line evidence up sorted by dimension for each theme, it is important to vary literary elements in the text. Context leads the way in balancing observations of classroom pedagogy with physical details of site and individuals and various direct quotations from constituents. Applying expressive language, rich metaphor, and vivid descriptions, the research portraitist, like a Spiderwoman, is weaving elements into a vibrant multifaceted whole.

The subject or site itself, then, as it is perceived and understood by the portraitist, is the governing force in the construction of the aesthetic whole. Patterns or substructures, like the generic outline, are there to be adapted in response to the portraitist’s interpretation of the overall gestalt. Portraitists’ ongoing considerations of the structural requirements of the final portrait ensure that a view of the whole is guiding the development of each unfolding part. The weaving together of the parts of the whole exemplifies the ongoing portraiture dialectic between process and product. It is out of this continuous weaving that the aesthetic whole is created.

Unity is expressed in the methodology of portraiture as surely as in the research portrait. Just as the close attention to each separate part of the portrait is obscured from the reader through the invisibility of seams, so too is the methodology of portraiture, that I have unpacked here part by part, in the end, a seamless endeavor. Enriched throughout by carefully constructed context, expressed through theoretically grounded group and indefatigable individual voice, informed by cautiously guarded relationships, and organized into scrupulously selected themes, the research portrait is the result of a subtle synthesis of rigorous procedures that unite in an expressive aesthetic whole. Just as the portrait (product) is perceived as one unified whole, so too is the methodology of portraiture (process) performed from start to finish as a unified endeavor.
At the children’s museum:

Jackie McLean has arrived. He is smiling and clapping and speaking back to the musicians. The sparsity of the crowd has been overwhelmed by the intensity and electricity of the audience’s experience. We are yelling and clapping; we are entirely engaged. Dollie McLean, dressed in white, looks worried. One of the children is ill; she needs to get him back to Hartford. As the performance comes to an end, the announcer says there will be a second performance in just a few minutes. The thought that the performance will begin again is almost unbelievable. The intensity and accuracy of this work seems impossible to duplicate without even a rest. But in the dressing room, the energy is uplifting. Even an onlooker can experience what the Collective mother describes as “the self-esteem and the good feeling you get after a good performance—that natural high that will encourage you to do a lot of things. . . .” The audience has experienced the “high” Cheryl Smith noted in the prison audiences: “they are high not for one day but they are high for a year until we return . . .” It seems possible.

All the Collective family members are there to celebrate the children’s success, to gather and share in Jackie’s that evening. . . . It seems as if all the training has been rehearsal for a moment like this. And Dollie McLean agrees, “Yes, you get to see the finished product . . .” She adds with a smile, “but it is never finished” (Davis et al., 1993, p. 51)

References


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