

8-26-2017

# The Song (Does Not) Remain the Same: Re-Envisioning Portraiture Methodology in Educational Research

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## Recommended APA Citation

Brooks, S. D. (2017). The Song (Does Not) Remain the Same: Re-Envisioning Portraiture Methodology in Educational Research. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(8), 2231-2247. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss8/16>

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### Abstract

This conceptual paper explores how portraiture methodology re-envisioned was used in an educational research project with white teachers. What qualifies as authentic voice and an appraisal of how portraiture and auto-ethnography hold up against the critique of voice-centered research made by Lather (2009), Mazzei and Jackson (2012a) and English (2000) are discussed in the context of the author's personal narrative journey to the use of portraiture methodology. Next, the trail blazing methodological contribution portraiture makes by allowing an expansion of creative research methods in education is discussed.

### Keywords

Portraiture, Voice-Centered Research, Ethnography, Autobiography, College Access Programs

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## The Song (Does Not) Remain the Same: Re-Envisioning Portraiture Methodology in Educational Research

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*This conceptual paper explores how portraiture methodology re-envisioned was used in an educational research project with white teachers. What qualifies as authentic voice and an appraisal of how portraiture and auto-ethnography hold up against the critique of voice-centered research made by Lather (2009), Mazzei and Jackson (2012a) and English (2000) are discussed in the context of the author's personal narrative journey to the use of portraiture methodology. Next, the trail blazing methodological contribution portraiture makes by allowing an expansion of creative research methods in education is discussed. Keywords: Portraiture, Voice-Centered Research, Ethnography, Autobiography, College Access Programs*

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### Introduction

The landscape of qualitative educational research with low income and under-represented minority students is vast. Rather than re-hash the myriad of ways that researchers have approached qualitative research with teachers, this paper explores the element of voice in portraiture methodology juxtaposed against the critique of voice-centered research by Lather (2009) Mazzei and Jackson (2012a) and English (2000). The nature of a search for an authentic voice in research, and the quest for research that captures the positive aspects of a program as well as the possibility of re-envisioning portraiture methodology using de/colonial approaches to research with teachers in high school intervention programs is the focus. I argue that in utilizing braided methods (Weis & Fine, 2012), the use of portraiture allows for a consideration of the structural and institutional, the cultural context of schooling, as well as an exploration of the “writing self” and the “researcher as instrument” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). The structure of this conceptual paper is as follows: I begin with an Artist’s statement, in keeping with the artistic element of portraiture methodology, which blends an aesthetic approach with rigorous social science inquiry. An introduction to the original study and brief literature review of portraiture follows. The purpose of the paper is to illustrate how portraiture is re-envisioned to focus on avoiding damage-based research with over-researched populations (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

The original study was locally focused, but the program in the original study is widespread throughout the US. By narrowing the focus on the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) program in the state where I live, I was able to spend more time with individual teachers over the course of three years. The aim of the study was not to gather generalizable data, but rather to address a gap in the literature around culturally responsive teaching practice in the AVID program. Examining the role of the white teacher in the work of assimilating students in the habits of whiteness is important work. The original study (Brooks, 2017, forthcoming) argued that niceness, politeness, and hospitality are covers for the *in loco parentis* (parental) roles some teachers intentionally assume in this particular program to maintain the myth of meritocracy and subdue student questioning of white supremacy. I also considered the intersecting ways in which gender and whiteness, socioeconomic status of students, and teaching assimilative norms manifest in the context of the historical feminization of teaching in public schools in the US. Women teachers are doing the work of socializing

students into middle class norms and values. It is in this sense that the intersecting nature of race, class, and gender manifest in the classroom. This original study built on current conversations about diversity work in US public schools; teacher narrative portraits illustrated the insidious ways some teachers used assimilative norms and values and the myth of meritocracy to uphold white supremacy. This study contributes to a body of knowledge that brings to light the need for better teaching of culturally competent pedagogy for white teachers to improve the educational experience of under-represented minority students.

### **Artist's Statement**

I am a musician and an academic. My artistic sensibility manifested as a child in story writing, and I sang anything and everything. I would observe the world outside of my migrant hippy/Indian child eyes and fill white lined paper with what I defined as fairy stories, stories about girls who lived in one place, had ponies, and new school clothes, and got to do things like watch television, play sports, flush a toilet, or eat whenever they were hungry. There was often a lack of food, no electricity or running water, and those things others took for granted were luxuries in our family. I wrote little songs and stories about girls who talked to their friends on the phone, and took showers every day. I drew pictures of horses and illustrated my books with poems and songs. As I became a teenager and young adult, I kept writing, keeping a diary and continuing to write poems and songs. I was born, I think, with a writer's soul, but lost touch with that side of my writing self in academia.

As a first generation college student of color from a background of extreme poverty, I made it to college. I believe it was because one counselor in my night high school program (I was a high school dropout) encouraged me to think about college. He helped me finish my diploma, and showed me the things I needed to do. I ended up in college through an Educational Opportunities Program, as a conditional admit. I did not have my high school requirements completed, but wrote an essay describing my situation. I ended up admitted to college a year early. The process of applying to college was terrifying, navigating the financial aid process, petitioning for independence from my parents with the government (I had been an emancipated minor since age 15 ½), and struggling with a sense that I did not belong in college. This teacher/counselor spent hours helping me, over and above the scheduled school day. He helped me with my writing before school officially started, worked with me over many lunch hours, and even gave me rides home to the downtown apartment I shared with several runaways and a drug addict. This teacher was a hero, but it was not until later in my PhD program that I began to question the "teacher as hero" trope.

My early college papers were given back to me with red ink all over.... "avoid 'I' statements, be objective, citations?" In academia, we are encouraged to be invisible, to be objective in our writing and research, to keep story telling for somewhere else. I am pushing against this trend, I wish to remain present and be a presence in my writing, to write my way into new stories, and different understandings, to remain true to my poet/lyricist Arapaho self. The aim of portraiture methodology in educational research is to "create a narrative that bridges the realms of science and art, merging the systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 6). I embraced portraiture because of the importance of art and story and emotion in my life.

My interest in and connection to the AVID program stems from my own experience as a poor, mixed race, first generation college student. My relationship with schools and my own path to college are the first reason I focused my research on the college path for under-represented students. It truly was teachers and counselors that influenced and supported me. My interest in working with AVID teachers stems from my work as a graduate student coordinating a high school-to-college bridge pipeline program in a public university

admissions office. I worked with high school counselors to bring groups of under-represented students to campus for a day long college advocacy program, and AVID classes were often participants.

The AVID students that participated in the bridge program were predominantly low-income students of color. Their teachers were predominantly white and female. Students from the AVID classes came to the program with great questions, sometimes scripted, sometimes not, and they stayed engaged throughout the day long visit. Students from other groups that visited were not as engaged. In my informal conversations with teachers during two years of program work, I noticed that both AVID and non-AVID teachers who engaged with underrepresented students seemed to have a high level of commitment to get their students into college. However, AVID teachers talked about stress and pressure more often, and discussed with me the very high expectation from supervisors and administrators that they would get every student in their AVID classes into four-year colleges and universities. With my professional background as an academic advisor and counselor at both the community college and the four-year university levels, I questioned whether this push to get every student into a four-year university was good practice. Some students would be better suited starting out at community colleges or in professional-technical programs for many reasons, one of the main being the cost.

### *Overview of AVID*

The AVID program is a college readiness system for elementary through post-secondary students that is designed to increase school-wide learning and performance, most often in schools that serve under-served students (often poor and minority). AVID is a national program, and works directly with school districts to raise student achievement and awareness about college, as well as promote college-going culture in the school. There are more than 4,000 AVID schools in the United States serving 238,000 students (Contreras, 2012). AVID programs utilize an in-school academic support curriculum that targets students in the “academic middle,” those with “C” average grades. Students in the academic middle are considered more likely to have the potential to succeed in college, but might need added support, encouragement and exposure to the “possibilities and doors that college likely will open” (Contreras, 2012, p. 510). The program works to place academically average students in grades 4-12 in advanced level courses. The program’s philosophy is that students will rise to the expectations placed before them by teachers who challenge them. The program’s AVID College Readiness System (ACRS) claims to untrack and accelerate student learning, uses “research based methods” of effective instruction, provides meaningful and motivational professional learning to students and teachers, and acts as a catalyst for systemic reform and change (AVID, 2013; Mehan & Hubbard, 1996; Watt et al., 2011). Rather than focusing on standards-based testing failures and tracking, the AVID curriculum builds behavior and skills that foster success and the expectation that students will persevere in school (AVID, 2013). AVID teachers and administrators identify and recruit potential students.

The AVID program is a paradox, with its mission of increasing access to college preparatory education to under-represented students a positive one. However, the program’s goal is essentially assimilative, with students taught how to navigate the high school to college pipeline. The fact that there is a need for intervention programs such as AVID in the US speaks to the failure of public schools in the US to provide education for all. In is in the sense of paradox that portraiture methodology is a productive methodology to look at the AVID program. One of the most powerful characteristics of portraiture methodology is “its ability to embrace contradictions, its ability to document the beautiful/ugly experiences that are so much a part of the texture of human development and social relationships” (Lawrence-Lightfoot,

2005, p. 9). In capturing both the “raw hurt and the pleasure of his/her protagonists *and* works to embroider paradoxical themes into the inquiry and narrative” (p. 10) paradox is central to a portraiture project.

Very little research has focused on the role that teachers play on the ground (in classrooms), and how they may or may not be the reason that intervention programs are successful in helping under-served students navigate the path to college. I believe teachers are the reason students succeed, and the teachers involved in this research echoed that sentiment. However, this is tricky ground. When white, female teachers internalize notions that they will save poor, brown, and black students, devalue students’ existing cultural values and familial heritage, and persistently work to assimilate students, serious questions arise. Are teachers doing damage to students involved in the AVID program? Existing research that examines successful intervention do not address “the passion, dedication, and commitment of staff to improving the lives of youth in these programs” (Contreras, 2012, p. 522), and this is important to document. However, teacher’s commitments to students in programs such as AVID need to be critically examined. My original study asked how teachers navigate the tricky ground of recruiting to their respective programs, how whiteness is operationalized or not in AVID classrooms, and whether the myth of meritocracy is infused in their teaching and curriculum. In particular, the segregated AVID classroom was examined in several urban locations, with a questioning of the particular ways whiteness and the myth of meritocracy manifested in pedagogy and curriculum by White and female AVID teachers.

Other questions surfaced as I began the analysis of field notes and interview transcripts. Some of the analytic questions were: How does the structure of schooling in the US produce an effect on teachers’ ability (or inability) to effectively (or ineffectively) contribute to the “upward” assimilation of poor/minority youth? Do programs like AVID disrupt circuits of dispossession? What brings teachers to teach in intervention programs such as AVID? What is it about their multiple subjectivities that bring them to commit to a particular group of under-represented students? Portraiture methodology allowed me to work through these questions.

There is a call in portraiture to “unveil the universal truths and resonant stories that lie in the specifics and complexity of everyday life” (Cahnmann-Taylor et al., 2009, p. 22). Rather than searching for a universal truth in the original study, I was more concerned with documenting the ways that teachers in high school intervention programs for underrepresented students work within the school context, especially how power circulates with and through them. My background in feminist research methodology shapes my commitment to the specific ways that teaching is feminized in our society, whether I was talking to male or female identified teachers. My identity as an Arapaho woman and scholar also shaped the way I re-envisioned portraiture methodology, in particular how it might be deployed in an anti/colonial way.

Portraiture methodology calls for close attention to context as an important tool in the interpretation of meaning. As a Native woman, peering back at history, in particular, the history of schooling in the US, is always critical to the lens which I use to look at my “data.” I was committed to moving beyond coding as an analytic practice in my interviews and participant observation with teachers. I also thought with theory, answering Mazzei and Youngblood-Jackson’s (2012b) challenge to avoid the simplistic treatment of data, and instead, use theory to think “with” the data. It felt important with my project to think both philosophically and methodologically, and with Tuck’s (2009) call for “desire-based” educational research. Tuck says, “desire-based research frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (p. 416).

## Literature Review: Introducing Portraiture Methodology

The aim of portraiture methodology in educational research is to “create a narrative that bridges the realms of science and art, merging the systematic and careful description of good ethnography with the evocative resonance of fine literature” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 6).

Portraiture methodology allows for a connection between life history, biography, and fieldwork. This section explores the contours of portraiture, the subsequent critiques of writing and representation it elicits, and finally, how it was re-envisioned in my research. The reasons why I chose this method as opposed to auto-ethnography is also discussed.

Portraiture, a method of inquiry and a form of documentation in the social sciences, combines empirical description and aesthetic expression. It blends art and science, and research “portraits” that are created around researching educational programs are designed so that the complexity of human experience is captured (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Portraiture research takes into consideration the social and cultural context and perspectives of the people with whom the researcher is collaborating. Research portraits are shaped through dialogue between the researcher and the participant, a focus on history and context, and participant observation. Portraiture methodology and auto-ethnographic methodologies are similar. Both claim to capture an “authentic” voice and the researcher’s presence is articulated throughout the portrait.

Portraiture, as a methodological approach to research, is rooted in Geertzian ethnographic tradition. In *The Interpretation of Culture* (1973), Geertz describes the ethnographer’s work as an interpretive search for meaning, involving the researcher trailblazing a path through a “dense thicket of interpretation” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 91) and “through piled up structures of inference and implication” (Geertz, 1973, p. 7). Geertz makes a clear distinction between “thin” and “thick” description. Thin description is described as un-interpreted data and the systematic documentation of who, what, where, and when of the action. Thick description is defined as the information that the researcher needs to gather both in context and from a variety of sources to decode the environment being studied. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997), “the portraitist honors Geertz’s distinction between thin and thick description, seeking to include both vividly detailed, low inference (thin) description and thoughtful, discerning interpretation (thick) in the text” (p. 91). Both forms of description are central to the establishment of authenticity and the texture of the portrait, and both together create possibilities for description and analysis that either alone fail to capture.

What distinguishes portraiture methodology from other forms of ethnographic research is a focus on the construction of symbolic meaning that is re-framed using interpretation. The researcher then represents the interpretation in the construction of a portrait that intentionally employs aesthetic aspects. In common with Muccio et al. (2015), I used interpretations from *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) as a guide for the data collection, analysis, and the reporting process. The challenge was to use portraiture as a guide, incorporating artistic (aesthetic) interpretations, in this case fictionalized stories, with the empirical data. I re-envisioned the steps Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis suggest, instead using the concept of “plugging in” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012b) to think with theory about the data. Muccio et al. (2015) discuss their portraiture work as being “guided by constant comparison and for resonant refrains and present(ing) the portraits first as stories before ultimately transforming them into poems” (p. 8).

Other distinctions exist between portraiture methodology and other ethnographic approaches to research. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) say that portraiture is “an iterative and a generative process; the themes emerge from the data and they give the data shape and form” (p. 185). The portraitist, using artistic metaphor, “draws out the refrains and

patterns and creates a thematic narrative framework for the construction of the narrative” (p. 185). Portraiture is phenomenological in that it is concerned with describing the lived experience. The methodology is framed around combining disciplined, empirical processes of description, interpretation, analysis, and synthesis with the aesthetic process of narrative development (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997).

In practice, this is very difficult. While I had anthropological skills such as listening, observation, documenting, and transcribing, to be able to write in such a way requires literary writing skills not taught or supported in a doctoral program in education. The larger question that concerned me as I moved through the initial stages of participant observation in the classrooms of teachers I had interviewed, was how was I going to manage trailblazing a path through a dense thicket of interpretation? The final project was a compromise, I reported my findings in a traditional way, but also included two portraits of teachers who had very different approaches to their AVID teaching.

What distinguishes portraiture methodology from other forms of ethnographic research is a focus on the co-construction of symbolic meaning that is re-framed in terms of interpretation in the portrait. The researcher (the artist) interprets the subject of the portrait internally and searches for meaning and coherence in observation. The researcher then represents the interpretation in the construction of a portrait that intentionally employs aesthetic aspects. The reader-perceiver makes sense of the subject by actively interpreting the portrait, and in the re-interpretation, portraits are re-created (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Other distinctions exist between portraiture methodology and other ethnographic approaches to research. The artistic techniques in portraiture allow for interpretive insight, analytic scrutiny, and aesthetic order in the collection of data. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) say that portraiture is “an iterative and a generative process; the themes emerge from the data and they give the data shape and form” (p. 185). The portraitist, using artistic metaphor, “draws out the refrains and patterns and creates a thematic narrative framework for the construction of the narrative” (p. 185). Portraiture is phenomenological in that it is concerned with describing the lived experience. Portraiture methodology is framed around combining disciplined, empirical processes of description, interpretation, analysis, and synthesis with the aesthetic process of narrative development (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997).

## **Ethnography**

Smyth and McInerney, in “Whose side are you on? Advocacy Ethnography: Some Methodological Aspects of Narrative Portraits of Disadvantaged Young People in Socially Critical Research” (2013) argue that an approach to ethnography that is inclusive of the lives, perspectives, experiences, and viewpoints of the least powerful is possible with portraiture methodology. They use portraiture methodology to advance “advocacy ethnography.” Advocacy ethnography is a social justice based approach to research with educationally under-represented minority students and involves researchers advocating for the participants of their research. Smyth and McInerney say, “We believe that such a stance does not compromise the intellectual integrity of research when it is based on rigorous, robust, authentic, and well documented ethnographic accounts” (p. 2). Empirical analysis and the voices of participants in the form of narratives create a dynamic portrait that brings issues of inequity in education to light. AVID teachers and coordinators are involved in advocacy work with under-represented minority students. Mehan et al. (1996) argues that this advocacy for AVID students helps them navigate the college pipeline.

This approach to ethnographic research builds on the legacy of “critical ethnography” (Foley, 2002; Madison, 2005; Willis & Trondman, 2000); “public ethnography” (Bailey,



2008), “activist research” (Fine & Weis, 1996), participatory action research, (see Chevalier & Buckles, 2013; Fine, Weis, Powell, & Mun Wong, 1997), and “collaborative ethnography” (Lassiter, 2005). What distinguishes advocacy ethnography from these approaches is the attempt to “confront problematics that have at their center the erosion of public spaces and public spheres in the headlong rush to privatize all aspects of society. In doing so advocacy ethnography declares that it has a standpoint or a set of interests and considers the espousal of such to be a badge of honor, rather than a defect that is laminated over or made opaque” (Smyth & McInerney, 2013, p. 2). Advocacy ethnography attempts to frame and explain issues in terms of wider social causation, has a fundamental commitment to re-assembling, reconstructing, and portraying participants’ lives in ways that honor the multidimensionality and complexity of peoples’ lives.

While critical ethnographers have focused on the ways that schools perform the “privatized, extractive, and consumerist” work of the economy (Smyth & McInerney, 2013, p. 3) advocacy ethnography focuses on the quest for more socially just schooling, for the spaces where youth are allowed to build their identities, and where they can express themselves. Like critical ethnography, advocacy ethnography is openly ideological, and does not seek to conduct neutral, “objective” research. Smith and McInerney say, “We believe that such a stance does not compromise the intellectual integrity of research when it is based on rigorous, robust, authentic, and well documented ethnographic accounts” (p. 2). Portraiture methodology is another distinguishing characteristic of advocacy ethnography. The creation of a “portrait” of the culture of the AVID classroom provides perspectives on the program missing in the existing body of research.

Coffey (1999) in *The Ethnographic Self: Fieldwork and the Representation of Identity*, discusses how fieldwork, a human activity, cannot be separated from the selfhood of the ethnographer. Ethnographers inhabit their fields of study, build relationships, develop rapport, and infuse their own stories into those of their research participants. Ethnography informs and is informed by a researcher’s sense of self. Coffey explores the often deep emotional attachments that develop between the “field” and the “fieldworker,” arguing that reality as it is experienced in the field does not exist in a vacuum. In this sense also, the ethnographer does not occupy a realm of reality that is insulated from the field itself. In order to understand the social world of our research participants, we process through our own lenses. She says, “In researching, constructing, and writing the lives of others, we are engaged in negotiating and writing ourselves” (p. 47).

Coffey focuses on how fieldwork research and writing practice “construct, reproduce, and implicate selves, relationships, and personal identities” (p. 1) and challenges ethnographers to complicate dichotomies that frame researcher-as-stranger or going native, arguing for a more nuanced way in which “the ethnographer cultivates strangeness and distance in order to gain insight and understanding of the cultural setting while experiencing personal growth, based upon a view of the self as a product of and subject to its own agency and will” (p. 22). The fact is that fieldwork is conducted with “social actors in a peopled field,” (p. 22) and cultivating personal relationships is critical to a successful ethnography. These elements are subject to the same emotional and personal elements that underlie all human relationships. “The narratives of ethnographic friendship are indicative of social actors sharing biographies in the field. They serve to remind us that we are a part of what we study” (p. 47).

We are, as researchers, “The ultimate research instrument” (p. 161) and our bodies are a part of the cultural and social settings we choose to study. Coffey asserts that ethnographic fieldwork is emotional and personal, and in remembering, analyzing, and re-telling and re-writing our experiences, the ethnographic self is ever-present, and is the place “where we, at least privately, acknowledge our presence and our conscience” (p. 120). We inhabit our texts in the ways we inhabited the field that generated the data that created the text, and she argues

that neither “can be divorced from the biography and identity of the ethnographer. In the “reflexive awareness of the role of self” (p. 141) in shaping the text, Coffey says, “It is totally necessary and desirable to recognize that we are part of what we study, affected by the cultural context and shaped by our fieldwork experience. It is epistemologically productive to do so, and at best naïve to deny the self an active, and situated place in the field. However, it is not necessary to make the self the key focus of fieldwork, and to do so would render much ethnographic work meaningless” (pg. 37).

Coffey grounds *The Ethnographic Self* in a feminist discourse on the nature and process of social research. She says, “It draws upon the desire to locate the self as a gendered, embodied, sexualized and emotional being, in and of the research; discounting the myth that social research can ever be neutral or hygienic” (p. 12). In demystifying the researcher and the researched as “unattached and objective instruments” (p. 12) rather than framing research as personal, emotional, sensitive, reflexive and situated in cultural and structural contexts, much can be lost. Rather than searching for a universal truth in my research, I was more concerned with documenting the ways that teachers in high school intervention programs for underrepresented students work within the school context, especially how power circulates with and through them, and the particular ways this shaped their teaching of under-represented students. My background in feminist research methodology shaped my commitment to the specific ways that teaching is feminized in our society, whether I was talking to male or female identified teachers. My identity as an indigenous woman and scholar also shaped the way I re-envisioned portraiture methodology.

While I like to think that I am not a novice researcher, or even a beginner ethnographer, staying true to both the art and science of portraiture in practice is difficult, but I was determined to stay the course. I wanted to write something that my readers would enjoy reading, in which creativity plays a role, while doing something positive for the students I am committed to. I combined the disciplined empirical process of writing field notes and collecting and analyzing data with the aesthetic process of narrative development. I am holding onto the personal belief that portraiture has the potential to “occupy the very space opened up by the ruins of the concept of ethnographic representation” (Lather, 2009, p. 18).

### Voice Centered Research: Critique

In the invocation of authenticity that underlies portraiture, questions arise about the authoritative voice of the researcher, the power relationships inherent in research, and how the “other” is positioned. Fenwick English, in “A Critical Appraisal of Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s ‘Portraiture’ as a Method of Educational Research” (2000), critiques portraiture methodology as fundamentally failing to invite interpretation. English questions the authority of the portraiture researcher in “arbitrarily and unilaterally creating portraits” (p. 21), usually of “the other.” He argues that there is no external, independent referent for ascertaining the truth-telling capacity of the portraitist. He also takes issue with portraiture’s attempt at “capturing the essence” of the subject and a quest for a “foundational and stable truth, which in turn requires the portraitist to become omniscient” (p. 21). The biggest issue with portraiture as a method for English is “in its failure to interrogate what it conceals, i.e., the politics of vision” (p. 21). The politics of vision, for English, refers to the uncontested right of the researcher to situate, label, center, and fix “in the tintured hues of verbal descriptive prose what is professed to be real” (p. 24). As in auto-ethnography, the researcher centers herself as all powerful, raising questions about the perpetuation of imperialist research relationships with marginalized people.

In the creation of a narrative that is complex, provocative, and inviting, as well as documenting human behavior and experience in context, portraiture searches for the “central” story, and is concerned with creating an “authentic” narrative, in which points of thematic

convergence “are like searching for patterns and textures in a weaving” (p. 12) Lawrence-Lightfoot elaborates, saying, “the portraitist’s standard, then, is one of *authenticity*, capturing the essence and resonance of the actor’s experience and perspective through the details of action and thought revealed in context” (p. 12) In the attempt to capture this ideal “essence” of the researched, Lawrence-Lightfoot falls prey to the critiques put forth by English (2000) and Lather (2009).

Auto-ethnography also succumbs to the continuation of imperialist research traditions and the pitfalls of “voice centered” research. Questions of authenticity and voice should be central in the auto-ethnography of Ellis (2004) and Behar (1996), but are not well attended to. Neither unpacks the problem in “speaking for” and “giving voice” to marginalized people. According to Lather (2009) “Confessional tales, authorial self-revelation, multi-voicedness, and personal narrative, all are contemporary practices of representation designed to move ethnography away from scientism and the appropriation of others” (p. 20). Lather argues that these moves remain problematic in that there are still normative, universalizing and assimilationist tendencies in the research process, and while the critique may be somewhat different for each type of representation, it is important to recognize the power differential inherent in these kinds of representation as well. Multi-voiced research, for example, is subject to this critique. Even with researchers co-creating narrative, the researcher always remains in control of the final research product. With portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot maintains that in creating a portrait, authenticity must be central in capturing the essence and resonance of the participant’s experiences and perspectives. In the creation of the narrative portrait, the researcher must remain vigilant to empirical description and aesthetic expression. Attending to issues of power, particularly the authorial power in the creation of the portrait, and focusing on who decides what is authentic reflect Lather’s concerns.

In common with Lather, Jackson and Mazzei (2012a) challenge qualitative research methods that oversimplify knowledge claims, preclude dense and multilayered treatment of data, and represent “voice” as an expression of experience devoid of context. In resisting methodological simplicity, Jackson and Mazzei call for thinking philosophically and methodologically, avoiding the trap of fixed meaning. Researchers can guard against “being seduced by the desire to create a coherent and interesting narrative that does little to challenge hegemonic discourses and (over)simplified knowledge claims. We use theory in our effort to refuse the romance of voice, as we attempt to open up, rather than foreclose meaning” (p. 746).

Mazzei and Jackson (2012a) also argue that even those accounts of voice that attempt to democratize the research process are not transparent about decision-making in terms of “giving voice.” They ask: who was listened to and how might voices necessarily be complicated, distorted and fictionalized in the process of both transcription and re-inscription? In asking these questions, it is possible to examine whose interests are being served in re-inscription and consider who is further marginalized. In “Refusing to Let Participants Speak for Themselves,” Jackson and Mazzei (2012a) believe a more complicated, productive, and nuanced story can be told. If the research focus is only on the spoken or scripted word in capturing data and making meaning, our understanding of what our research participants are saying is limited.

Portraiture’s attendance to voice is more complex than auto-ethnography’s, including what Jackson and Mazzei define as “out-of-field” data. In portraiture, “listening” for a story or emergent themes draw on an aspect of voice that Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) define as the voice of the witness. Drawing on Geertz’ (1973) “thick description,” the researcher scrupulously records observations. The researcher then acts as interpreter and adds the “why” something happened to the view of “what” was described. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis and caution the researcher to be aware that “in making the interpretation, the portraitist must be vigilant about providing enough descriptive evidence in the text so that the

reader might be able to offer an alternative hypothesis, a different interpretation of the data” (p. 91), similar to auto-ethnography. Portraiture partially escapes the critique of voice-centered research by including out-of-field data, other than the spoken or scripted word. As I continue with my research, I wonder, does portraiture have to entirely escape the critique of voice-centered research? If I account for its limitation, is that enough?

Cairns, Gaztambide-Fernandez, Kawashima, Menna, and VanderDusen (2011), discuss the limits of portraiture as a methodology in terms of issues of representation. They argue that while English’s (2000) critique “overestimates authorial intent” (p. 22), he does point to “the problem of claiming authenticity as a strategy for circumventing the problem of the validity of truth-claims” (p. 22). Cairns et al. found that portraiture methodology, while allowing for notions of authentic experience in terms of finding essential truths, was not consistent with their experiences utilizing portraiture methodology to study arts programs in public schools. In their work navigating spaces where they were outsiders who did not “authentically” belong, negotiating terms of engagement with their research subjects, or in managing the “artifices of research representation,” authenticity was always and ideal that was out of reach. They say:

If anything, claims to “authenticity” seem to lie tenuously in our attempt at candid transparency, measured by our conscious and unconscious apprehensions, how we want to be perceived, identified, positioned as authors, and our ambivalences about what we cannot claim to “know.” (Cairns et al., 2011, p. 22)

They argue that the strength of portraiture lies in its ability to generate new questions rather than providing an authentic answers and reproductions.

The question that remains, however, is: how does portraiture escape these critiques? In doing research with human beings, in my case, with teachers and students involved in high school intervention programs designed to give under-served and under-represented high school students the added support needed to navigate their way to college, I find that there are sometimes spaces where I need to privilege the spoken word, using what teachers and students are actually saying. Many of the students in the programs I have been working with over the last three years come from historically silenced and marginalized groups of people. Positioned as I am, as both inside and outside in this research, it is with respect and caution that I write *about and with* these student and teacher voices, and make claims about which voices are authentic and whose stories get told. I can’t quite give up on “voice” in research completely. I am willing to risk giving too much power to voice because I do not want to move in a manner that reinforces historical silencing.

### **Re-Envisioning Portraiture: Goodness**

Portraiture’s focus on goodness is compelling. In orienting research towards the positive, portraiture has an important place in research involving education and marginalized communities, particularly those research projects in educational settings that focus on programs that are making a positive social impact and attempt to avoid deficit tropes about under-served students. The shift in thinking from a focus on what is working instead of what is not working in marginalized communities is discussed by Eve Tuck, in “Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities” (2009). Tuck calls for communities, educators, and researchers to consider the devastating impact of research that only documents the pain and suffering of marginalized communities in an effort to hold those in power accountable for oppression. Tuck argues that this approach to research and scholarship is flawed, and in using this type of research to leverage resources for oppressed groups, a re-inscription occurs of marginalized people as one

dimensional. Marginalized people are stereotyped as depleted, ruined, and hopeless. In portraiture methodology, embracing a notion of goodness that is complex reflects a shift to what Tuck defines as “desire-based” educational research. Tuck says, “desire-based research frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (p. 416).

Portraiture endeavors to capture “goodness” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p. 8). In developing “goodness,” Lightfoot argues that in response to the tendencies of educational and social science researchers to only focus on what is lacking in a research situation, the portraiture method was created. The deficit focus on failure limits our perception of our world, and creates a smokescreen for what is positive or working well. Lawrence-Lightfoot believes that this skewed sense of the world can lead to the development of cynicism and becomes grounds for a refusal to take action. She argues that a focus on the negative “often bleeds into a blaming of the victim” (p. 9) and that “the focus on pathology seems to encourage facile inquiry” (p. 9) in contrast to the development of a collaborative relationship between researcher and researched. By developing a research methodology that focuses on success, Lawrence-Lightfoot seeks to address these imbalances.

A damage-based focus on failure in educational research limits our perception of the world, and creates a smokescreen for what is positive or working well. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) believe that this skewed sense of the world can lead to the development of cynicism and becomes grounds for a refusal to take action. She argues that a focus on the negative “often bleeds into a blaming of the victim” (p. 9) and that “the focus on pathology seems to encourage facile inquiry” (p. 9) in contrast to the development of a collaborative relationship between researcher and researched. By developing a research methodology that focusses on goodness, Lawrence-Lightfoot seeks to address these imbalances. The development of a collaborative approach to research when combined with an aesthetic style of writing may have powerful implications for social justice based research in education, and avoid pitfalls associated with deficit-based educational research.

Does an avoidance of deficit/damage based research, a quest/search for goodness foreclose critical questions about AVID? In looking for the good as a researcher, am I ignoring what needs to be critiqued? In programs clearly predominantly framed as “doing good” for students, would a critique of AVID serve? There is a guilty part of me, I admit, that is struggling with the “outing” of this program as inherently assimilationist and white supremacist. The white half of me is in battle with the indigenous half of me. Initially I wanted this to be a collaborative project. I am concerned about their feelings, that if they saw what their words looked like on paper, I would somehow get blamed for making them seem racist. Or that they wouldn’t see at all, and I will have to fight for my interpretation of them as white supremacist or doing the work of whiteness.

### **Researcher Authenticity, and Representation**

Aspects of portraiture methodology hold great potential in social justice based research in education. In voice centered research, Jackson and Mazzei (2012b) are concerned with who was listened to (in the research) as well as how voices are complicated, distorted and fictionalized in the process of both transcription and re-inscription of the research participant’s words. With portraiture, the focus on the self and positionality of the researcher opens up opportunities to interrogate whose interests are being served and consider who is further marginalized in research. Jackson and Mazzei (2009) believe a more complicated, productive, and nuanced story can be told if the research focus is not only on the spoken or scripted word in capturing data and making meaning, but also focusing on understanding what research

participants are saying is limited. By attending to these questions in portraiture, the potential to expand the story is possible.

While portraiture methodology highlights the researcher's role in the construction of a representation of the context of a research project as well as the participants in making herself visible and explicit as the instrument of research, it does not ask the researcher to explore the fluidity that may shape her positionality, and does not require the researcher to face difficult questions about reflexivity and representation. Addressing power dynamics that shape research projects are particularly important as critiques of portraiture question the ideal of what counts as "authentic" voice in portraiture methodology. Avoiding a singular, unequivocal and transcendent "truth" in the portraiture research by interrogating the power relations inherent in the research relationship should help to avoid the pitfalls critics such as English (2000) bring to light. The allowance for multiple truths in the research will avoid presentation of a singular and totalizing picture and an "authentic" voice. Another possibility for the re-envisioning of portraiture methodology lies with the creation of relationships with research participants that are entered into with consciousness of power relationships. Interrogating the question of what gives the researcher the right to create and impose a centralized narrative and avoiding the creation of a single, totalizing story is critical to a re-envisioning of portraiture methodology.

### **Portraiture, Voice, and a High School Intervention Program**

In working towards avoiding pain-based, damage centered research, Tuck and Yang (2014) ask the question, "how do we learn from and respect the wisdom and desires in the stories that we (over)hear, while refusing to portray/betray them to the spectacle of the settler colonial gaze? How do we develop an ethics for research that differentiates between power, which deserves a denuding, indeed petrifying scrutiny, and people?" (p. 223). I kept returning to the macro structure of settler colonialism, and the ways that schools are shaped within the system of settler colonialism and neoliberalism. Settler colonialism is a very particular shaping of colonialism. It refers to colonial domination in not only the United States, but on a global scale. It is, according to Tuck and Yang (2014), differentiated from what they call "exogenous" colonialism in that the colonizers "discover" a place, permanently settle there, and "claim" the land. Settler colonialism is a permanent structure, rather than an event that happens. The settler colonial nation then sets out to "destroy and erase" indigenous inhabitants and claim their land. There is a "triad" relationship between white settlers, erased Indigenous peoples, and slaves. Settlers are constructed in terms of "leadership and innovative mind," indigenous people only in terms of the land they value, and must be extinguished in order to lay claim to the land. Slaves are only valued in terms of their bodies; ownable, abusable, murderable (p. 224). This triad, they argue, is the basis for formation of Whiteness in the settler colonial nation. The relational nature of erasure, bodies, land, and violence are reflective of the permanence of the settler colonial structure. Schools become critically important in the settler colonial project, in particular in helping to reproduce structures of settler colonialism in the ways that children are trained to assimilate.

What does this say about high school "intervention" programs that selectively recruit students who wouldn't necessarily have the social and cultural capital needed to navigate the path from high school to college and upwardly assimilate? What would teacher stories, and the analysis of "data" look like when creating portraits of teachers involved in programs such as AVID through these theoretical lenses? Do these programs further the myth of meritocracy that is maintained under settler colonialism? Tuck and Yang (2014) ask, "how do we learn from and respect the wisdom and desires in the stories that we (over)hear, while refusing to portray/betray them to the spectacle of the settler colonial gaze?" In my own work, how do I learn from and respect the wisdom and desires in stories of teachers that I am (over)hearing?

How do I avoid the metanarrative of social science research that it is the research itself that leads to change? In focusing on the investigation of AVID teachers and teaching on creating a framework of refusal, in that the type of investigation I endeavor with teachers places my and their experience respectively as researcher/participant firmly within the structure of schooling within the settler colonial system. In utilizing a framework of refusal in research, a limit on “conquest and colonization of knowledge by marking what is off limits, what is not up for grabs or discussion, what is sacred, and what can’t be known” (p. 225) at the center of the research.

In honoring the critique of “voice” centered research as laid out by Lather (2009), Mazzei and Jackson (2012a), English (2000), Tuck and Yang (2014) also argue that the main colonial task of research is to “pose as voicebox, ventriloquist, interpreter of subaltern voice” (p. 225). Drawing on the work of Morris and Spivak (2010), they ask questions such as “what does the academy do? What does social science research do?” and make the argument that these questions must be engaged pedagogically, mainly positing that rather than the answer, these questions will lead to expanded conversations. Tuck and Yang (2014) describe the burden of speaking in/to the academy or being required to “ventriloquate” for the subaltern as a starting dilemma for researchers interested in issues around representation and “giving voice” in social science research. In a refusal to be purveyors of the subaltern voice, and in refusing to contribute to pain narratives and damage centered research, desire based research avoids the pain narrative as evidence of authenticity. The question becomes, what does this look like in practice? This has become my central concern as I move through data collection and analysis.

My story shapes the kind of researcher that I am, and it is critically important that I am able to infuse my identity in the type of inquiry projects I choose to engage with. It is in this sense that I braid my story with that of the participants. My young childhood memories are blurry. Some folks have a razor-sharp memory for those little details, and I do not. I have very specific, vivid, memories out of the context of my family’s larger presence. I do remember the first time I realized I was a “person” with intent and free will, an individual. I was riding with four other people in some old piece-of-crap junker truck we had at the time, driving down a Santa Ana neighborhood street without a seatbelt on, maybe on someone’s lap and I have the sense we are going to school. I am closest to the door, and I am looking in the passenger side mirror at myself. I had never really SEEN myself in the mirror before that day. I pondered who that person in the mirror was, with her big staring green eyes and pointy nose, and rough, straight hair.

I remember wondering if I was smart enough to go to school. I remember my first day of kindergarten, vaguely. The class smelled like ants. We had to sit within the boundary of a small taped out square on the floor. I was afraid of getting in trouble and getting bit by ants. Somehow, in my child-mind, the ant smell equated to the use of ants for punishment in the time-out corner if one were to leave his/her square on the floor. I don’t think I was at that school very long. I wonder if I even finished kindergarten. We moved around a lot. I went to a different school in first grade.

Reflecting, I still sometimes have the feeling I am going to get in trouble if I do not follow the rules at school. So, I follow the rules. I had to figure out what the rules were by myself. We were on the run most of my childhood, and I changed schools often, every school had different rules: social, emotional, academic, non-academic. I felt invisible, always trying to fold in on myself, hoping no one would notice my second-hand clothes and self-cut hair.

Random people along the way, a few were teachers, helped me learn the rules. I do not remember the ant teacher, my kindergarten teacher. I do remember a creepy old lady babysitter that gave us watered down Kool-Aid popsicles as our afternoon snack after school. She met us at the school and walked us to her house. I only remember going a few times. I say “we” because I think my younger sister was with the babysitter when they came and got me at school.

For kids like me and my siblings, the ideal that all public school students will have equal access to a college preparatory curriculum and advance through their merit from high school to college is a myth. According to Cooper (2011), as students move through primary and secondary school to college, the numbers of immigrant, ethnic minority, and low-income youth who continue through high school to college shrinks disproportionately. The high school to college transition is a critical process, and when successfully navigated establishes a firm foundation for a student's continued educational progress and success.

I wonder what my high school years might have looked like if I had been involved in a program like AVID (Advancement via Individual Determination). Intervention programs that partner with public schools in the US are considered to be important resources in raising underrepresented student achievement, particularly in middle and high school, and provide guidance to students as they progress through the educational pipeline (Contreras, 2011; Gandara & Bial, 2001). For underrepresented minority and/or poor students, efforts by intervention programs such as AVID have served to compensate for unequal opportunities in learning and access to college knowledge and resources. In this sense, intervention programs are designed to help underrepresented students build the social, educational, and cultural capital needed to succeed in school (Cooper, 2011; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1986; Gandara & Bial, 2001; Mehan et al., 1996). In other words, the teach kids how to navigate in a world of whiteness. I was intrigued with the intersection of my own schooling story and how and what students experienced in these "leg-up" kind of programs. What kinds of messages were students getting from teachers about the system, access to resources, and how involved were teachers outside of school?

I did not attempt to create an authentic portrait of teachers within the AVID program, but rather, to write my way into an understanding of the ways in which the AVID teachers wrestle with concerns about the emotional care of their students. As well, how teachers internalize their "en loco parentis" roles with their students, and very particularly, the ways that our stories might be woven together in the creation of a re-envisioned portrait, one that does not center voice, but examines the multiplicity of structure, subjectivity, power, and voice. All of these elements intertwine in the creation of an ever-changing portrait, one that does not assume the centrality of voice.

## **Conclusion**

A re-envisioned portraiture methodology has given me the creative freedom to look at a particular high school intervention program with many new lenses. Portraiture allows for a connection my own felt and lived experience, very particularly my own schooling story to the stories of students and teachers involved in high school intervention programs. In writing my way into the particular ways in which programs such as AVID both create new opportunity for some students in opening a pathway to college, while at the same time teaching assimilation and whiteness is possible.

In defining the research lens, and interrogating the call for portraitist's to repeatedly ask the methodological question about the process of research, I am compelled to continually address the question of how my voice gives shape to developing portraits of teachers and students in the AVID program. As discussed earlier in the paper, the argument that when not checked, voice can become self-portrayal. Rather, the call to meaningfully imbue the lens of the portraitist's vision with particular facets and hues rather than clouding, distorting, or redirecting the portraitist's view to avoid challenging the integrity of the aesthetic whole is critical to creating an "authentic" portrait.

A damage-based focus on failure in educational research limits our perception of the world, and creates a smokescreen for what is positive or working well. Lawrence-Lightfoot



and Hoffman Davis (1997) believes that this skewed sense of the world can lead to the development of cynicism and becomes grounds for a refusal to take action. She argues that a focus on the negative “often bleeds into a blaming of the victim” (p. 9) and that “the focus on pathology seems to encourage facile inquiry” (p. 9) in contrast to the development of a collaborative relationship between researcher and researched. By developing a research methodology that focusses on goodness, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis seek to address these imbalances. The development of a collaborative approach to research when combined with an aesthetic style of writing may have powerful implications for social justice based research in education, and in particular, research with groups making a positive impact on underrepresented students’ lives.

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### Article Citation

Brooks, S. D. (2017). The song (does not) remain the same: Re-Envisioning portraiture methodology in educational research. *The Qualitative Report*, 22(8), 2231-2247. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol22/iss8/16>

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