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Portraiture for Gradient Voices in Education: Tales from Two Dissertations

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Abstract: This article offers a transparent, co-authored account of learning, practicing, and defending portraiture as a humanizing methodology for documenting "gradient voices" in education—voices shaped by layered identities and by shifting political and institutional conditions that increasingly police belonging and define what counts as rigorous knowledge. Drawing on our portraiture-based dissertations and the collaborative relationship that emerged between them, we place portraiture texts in dialogue as objects of inquiry, asking how one portraiture project illuminates another and how methodological understandings accumulate across positionalities. We describe key stages of portraiture fieldwork and interpretive rendering, including recruitment as relational negotiation, the use of interviews, fieldnotes, and policy artifacts, and writing as the primary analytic practice. Across our contrasting contexts—raciolinguistic teacher education research in Arizona and pandemic-era teacher preparation during COVID-19—we show how portraiture holds contradiction, movement, and "goodness" without flattening experience into decontextualized themes. We argue that portraiture expands prevailing definitions of rigor by foregrounding ethical representation, reflexivity, and accessibility, and we conclude with implications for graduate researchers and journals seeking methods that honor complexity while remaining accountable to the communities whose lives and voices are most often constrained.

Keywords: portraiture methodology, qualitative methods, voice, identity, teacher education

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Introduction

In the United States, 2025 has witnessed a sharp intensification of political and institutional efforts aimed at restricting who belongs, whose stories matter, and which forms of knowledge count in education. At the federal level, the U.S. Department of Education has taken steps to eliminate or roll back references to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives, removing public-facing guidance and training resources and signaling a shift away from equity-oriented educational policy (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). Major universities, facing political pressure and legislative mandates, have also begun dissolving their DEI programs, as seen when the University of Michigan shuttered its flagship diversity office in response to statewide directives (Walker, 2025).

These educational shifts coincide with broader political movements that intensify surveillance and enforcement against immigrant communities. Recent immigration policies have heightened visa scrutiny, targeted international students, and expanded cooperation between local law enforcement and federal immigration agencies, contributing to widespread fear among immigrant families and multilingual youth (Anderson, 2025). Schools across the nation report rising absenteeism, emotional distress, and community instability as students absorb the trauma of ICE raids, deportation threats, and anti-immigration rhetoric (Álvarez, 2025). At the same time, multiple states have introduced or passed legislation restricting LGBTQ+ inclusion, gender-affirming practices, and curricula that address race or inequality, further narrowing the possibilities for students and educators whose identities fall outside hegemonic norms.

These converging forces create an academic climate where research that honors the lived experiences of individuals who are not white, wealthy, or institutionally protected becomes increasingly fraught. Quantitative metrics, compliance-based evaluations, and narrow definitions of “rigor” often overshadow the complex, relational, and emotionally textured accounts that marginalized communities carry. In this moment, the question is not simply methodological — it is ethical: *How do we continue to produce work that recognizes and preserves the humanity of those whose lives are systematically devalued?*

It is in this context that we turn to Portraiture. More than a qualitative method, portraiture is a form of care, resistance, and relational scholarship. It insists on honoring complexity, contradiction, and voice at a time when narratives of marginalized communities are being dismissed, surveilled, or politically constrained. It offers pathways to document the lived realities of multilingual students, immigrant families, queer educators, community activists, teacher candidates of color, and countless others whose experiences rarely fit neatly within themes, surveys, or standardized reporting structures.

And yet, portraiture is not solely a methodology for the marginalized. While historically taken up to center the experiences of those pushed to the periphery, portraiture also opens up generative space for researchers and participants whose social locations include privilege. In an

era where debates about DEI, identity, and belonging are often framed as zero-sum — where advancing equity for some is falsely construed as diminishing others — portraiture counters this scarcity logic. It creates space for *everyone* to reflect, question, and contribute their story.

In our collaboration, portraiture makes space not only for multilingual immigrant scholars of color like Tipsuda, but also for white middle-class teachers and scholars like Jaclyn. Rather than positioning privilege and marginalization as opposing categories, we treat portraiture as a way of cultivating relational knowing—understanding how lives intersect, diverge, and inform one another. One of us (Jaclyn) brings experiences shaped by whiteness, teaching, and an ongoing search for more humanizing forms of research. Tipsuda brings experiences shaped by multilingualism, racialization, and navigating institutions that often misrecognize scholars of color. These experiences are not in tension; instead, portraiture enables both to exist in conversation.

For us, it is not about “either/or,” but “both/and.” Both voices matter. Both experiences reveal something about the institutions we live in. Both contribute to reimagining education. Thus, portraiture becomes a methodology not only for documenting inequity, but for cultivating the intellectual, emotional, and ethical space necessary for scholars, teachers, and communities to learn across differences. It is a methodology capable of holding the gradient voices of education—multilingual, queer, undocumented, white, working class, middle class, first-generation, veteran educators, and new teachers alike.

This paper emerges from that belief. Drawing from our portraiture-based dissertations and our collaborative journey, we offer a transparent, accessible, and reflexive account of how we learned to conduct portraiture, how we navigated the academic structures that police what counts as “rigor,” and how we stepped into our own identities as researchers and educators. Our goal is not to prescribe a singular version of portraiture, but to show how our stories, methods, and positionalities braid together, and to offer guidance for scholars who wish to engage in deeply humanizing research in a time when such work is both urgently needed and increasingly threatened.

Problem Statement

We could not find a straightforward, accessible way to *do* portraiture when coming from two different epistemological standpoints: Tipsuda approaches research as a critical scholar, while Jaclyn approaches research as a practitioner–teacher scholar grounded in humanizing, relationship-centered inquiry. Because of this, we felt a responsibility to show others—junior researchers, doctoral students, and pre-service and in-service teachers—how we connected portraiture to our own commitments and how we carried it out in practice. We do not claim this is *the* way to do portraiture; rather, we offer *one* transparent account of how we learned to work with the methodology across differences.

This paper also carries a story about navigating higher education systems in which qualitative narrative work is often treated as less rigorous and about moving through a male-dominated academic culture while becoming doctoral graduates—dynamics that shaped both of us, albeit differently, as Jaclyn (a white, English L1 scholar) and Tipsuda (a multilingual scholar of color). We trace how we were drawn into portraiture; how we learned to conduct research with it; and how we came to write with the intimacy and responsibility that portraiture requires. Along the way, we share what it meant to first learn how to tell our own stories, to pitch the topic

to our committee, and to step into an independent scholar-self rather than remaining positioned only as "students."

We argue that portraiture is more than a methodology for data collection and representation. For us, it became a way of reimagining what counts as knowledge, rigor, and voice—particularly for marginalized and "gradient" voices whose lives do not fit neatly into themes or survey results. Finally, we suggest that portraiture is not only useful for research: as educators, we also see it as a teaching tool that can deepen how we listen to students, honor complexity, and improve our practice.

Literature Review

Portraiture as a Humanizing and Relational Methodology

Portraiture was developed by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) as a qualitative methodology designed to capture the complexity, context, and humanity of lived experience while maintaining analytic rigor. Positioned at the intersection of art and science, portraiture intentionally resists deficit framings and reductionist accounts by foregrounding voice, relationship, and meaning making. Rather than fragmenting participants' lives into discrete codes or variables, portraiture seeks to construct holistic narratives—portraits—that attend to both the individual and the institutional contexts shaping experience.

Central to portraiture is the concept of *goodness*: the deliberate effort to listen for strengths, agency, and resilience without ignoring tensions, contradictions, or structural inequities (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). This orientation distinguishes portraiture from both celebratory storytelling and extractive forms of qualitative inquiry. Portraitists are tasked with rendering participants' lives in ways that are empirically grounded, ethically responsible, and aesthetically compelling, while also interrogating how power, race, class, language, gender, and institutional norms shape those lives. Over the past two decades, portraiture has been taken up across education research to illuminate the experiences of marginalized students, teachers, and communities, particularly in studies of race, language, leadership, and educational equity (e.g., Chapman, 2005; Dixson, Chapman, & Hill, 2005; Lyman, Strachan, & Lazaridou, 2012). These studies demonstrate portraiture's capacity to reveal the emotional, relational, and political dimensions of schooling that often remain invisible in large-scale or compliance-oriented research traditions.

Another important piece to portraiture is the idea of wholeness. Portraiture aims to craft a coherent, artful narrative that holds together as a believable whole—more like piecing together a quilt or weaving a tapestry than isolating parts for inspection (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Rather than breaking participants into fragments, it seeks to represent the fullness of their lived experience in a way that conveys their core essence. Although we are each multifaceted in our identities and voices, portraiture seeks to understand the wholeness of our experiences by blending the nuances to honor the pieces of the whole. Despite the use of the word subject in a research study, individuals are more than the pieces of information we extract from them for our scholarship. They are people with rich lives and experiences, and they deserve to be portrayed as such. Portraiture honors the wholeness of the subject, not just the pieces we use for our studies.

Portraiture, Positionality, and Reflexivity

Unlike methodologies that attempt to minimize the researcher's presence, portraiture explicitly centers researcher positionality as a constitutive element of knowledge production. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) argue that the researcher's voice, history, and interpretive lens are inseparable from the portrait itself. This emphasis aligns portraiture with feminist, critical, and interpretivist traditions that view knowledge as situated, relational, and co-constructed (Haraway, 1988; Pillow, 2003).

Subsequent scholarship has extended this reflexive dimension by examining how portraitists navigate their own identities, privileges, and vulnerabilities in relation to participants. For researchers of color, multilingual scholars, and women navigating historically exclusionary academic spaces, portraiture has offered a way to write against epistemic erasure and methodological gatekeeping (Dixson et al., 2005). At the same time, scholars have also demonstrated how portraiture can serve as a site of reflexive learning for researchers whose social locations include racial or institutional privilege, enabling them to examine complicity, responsibility, and ethical engagement rather than neutrality or distance.

This relational stance is particularly significant in contemporary educational contexts where debates about equity and inclusion are increasingly framed as polarizing or oppositional. Portraiture disrupts binary logics—marginalized versus privileged, oppressed versus complicit—by attending to how lives intersect, diverge, and inform one another within shared institutional structures.

Narrative, Counterstory, and Gradient Voices in Education Research

Portraiture shares affinities with narrative inquiry and critical storytelling traditions, including counterstorytelling in Critical Race Theory (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Like counterstories, portraits challenge dominant narratives and surface experiential knowledge that has historically been dismissed as anecdotal or subjective. However, portraiture differs in its sustained attention to nuance, contradiction, and relational complexity. Rather than positioning stories solely in opposition to dominant discourse, portraiture allows multiple truths to coexist—even when they are uncomfortable or unresolved. Recent scholarship in qualitative and critical education research has increasingly called for methodological approaches capable of holding *gradient voices*: experiences that do not fit neatly into categories of marginalization or privilege, resistance or compliance, success or failure. Scholars argue that such approaches are necessary for understanding the layered realities of multilingual learners, teachers navigating policy constraints, queer educators, immigrant families, and others whose lives unfold within shifting political and institutional terrains (Paris & Alim, 2017; Patel, 2015). Portraiture offers a methodological response to this call by enabling researchers to trace how individual experiences accumulate, echo, and refract across contexts. In doing so, it allows stories to speak not only as isolated cases but as part of a broader relational and historical tapestry.

Despite its strengths, portraiture remains underrepresented in peer-reviewed journals, particularly outside of dissertation research. Scholars have noted that journal formatting conventions: word limits, rigid headings, and expectations for thematic segmentation; often constrain narrative methodologies, forcing portraitists to fragment portraits into decontextualized excerpts or thematic summaries. As a result, portraiture is frequently treated as pedagogically valuable but methodologically marginal, or as appropriate for dissertations but not for "high impact" publication. At the same time, qualitative researchers have increasingly called for greater transparency around how narrative and interpretive methodologies are learned, practiced,

and defended—particularly for early-career scholars navigating review processes that privilege positivist notions of rigor (Knaflic, 2016; Tracy, 2010). Yet there remains limited literature that explicitly documents the *process* of learning portraiture across epistemological differences, positionalities, and institutional constraints.

This study builds on and extends portraiture scholarship by treating portraiture texts themselves as subjects of inquiry. Rather than positioning individual dissertations as standalone methodological exemplars, we examine how our portraits speak to, build upon, and illuminate one another. In doing so, we conceptualize portraiture as a relational knowledge-building practice—one that allows experiences to accumulate meaning across time, context, and positionality. By placing our portraiture dissertations in dialogue, we respond to calls for methodological transparency while also challenging narrow definitions of rigor that marginalize narrative, reflexive, and relational scholarship. We argue that portraiture is uniquely positioned to document gradient voices in education and to model forms of inquiry grounded in care, accountability, and intellectual generosity—qualities that are increasingly necessary in a moment marked by political retrenchment, epistemic exclusion, and the erosion of humane educational research.

Methodology

Tipsuda's purview

We came to know one another through portraiture. While searching for examples of portraiture in educational research, I encountered Jaclyn's dissertation. I was immediately drawn to the clarity and accessibility of her writing work that carried methodological rigor while remaining readable and deeply human. It felt written *for others*, not just for committees or reviewers. I reached out by email, initially asking for brief advice about writing portraits. What followed was not a one-time exchange, but the beginning of an ongoing scholarly and personal relationship. Through regular conversations, we began sharing reflections on research, doctoral study, and the challenges of conducting humanizing qualitative work within academic structures that often privilege distance, efficiency, and narrow definitions of rigor. Over time, these conversations became the relational foundation of this study.

I am a Thai scholar whose education and teaching career in the United States have been shaped by being continually Asianized and internationalized. I have often been positioned as a "non-native speaker" of English and a perpetual foreigner, identities that shape how my work and expertise are read within academic spaces. These dynamics intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside my roles as a doctoral researcher, educator, and mother to a multilingual child. Portraiture offered a way to work from this complexity rather than suppress it. It allowed me to document lived experience with care and depth of the racialized bilingual pre-service teachers, without flattening stories into themes or deficit framings. My positionality as a multilingual, racialized scholar informs how I listen, interpret, and write, and continues to shape this collaborative analysis.

Jaclyn's Purview

I stumbled across portraiture during the dissertation process. What appealed to me, almost instantly, was the blending of science and art: a way to bring my scholarly knowledge and my skill as a storyteller together.

My journey through the Ph.D. process was long and winding: two states, two schools, multiple proposals and drafts, and exploring many methodological and theoretical frameworks. As a person guided heavily by instinct, I could feel when I was trying to fit a square peg in a round hole, but quitting was never an option. I started out with quantitative methods in an Educational Psychology program, specifically interested in motivation and self-efficacy research. The more I read the literature, the more I realized that the questions I was asking couldn't be answered by quantitative methods.

I threw myself into studying qualitative methodology which felt intuitively like a much better fit. I had never felt more confident in my research abilities than when I was interviewing and sifting through the data. As a trained English teacher, this felt so similar to literary analysis, a skill I had honed during my MA in English program. Despite my affinity for storytelling, narrative inquiry never felt quite right: it felt too winding. I desired more containment. This led me to case study.

I wasn't in love with it. I never was. Enough people had told me that a good dissertation was a done dissertation, so I was willing to move forward with the method. It fit my research questions, and my committee felt confident enough in my study to move me to the data collection stage of my dissertation. As I continued to read and write for literature review, specifically regarding teacher education literature, I stumbled across the reference to the *Good High School* by Sarah Lawrence Lightfoot (1983). I read the introduction and felt the goosebumps up and down my back. This was what I had been looking for.

Many scholars don't need personal investment, the love and passion of the method, and the desire and joy to create good research and art, simultaneously. I needed it. I can't do my best work if I am not madly in love with what I am creating. I reached out to my advisor, explained to her what I had found, and told her that I thought portraiture was better fit for my study. She wasn't horribly familiar with the method but saw my excitement and trusted my vision.

After this moment, everything simply seemed to fall together.

Findings

TC: I did not arrive at portraiture with a clear blueprint. I learned portraiture through reading, uncertainty, practice, and revision - often simultaneously. What ultimately became my dissertation was shaped not only by data collection, but by how I studied portraiture itself: how I read foundational texts, examined dissertations that modeled the method, and worked through what it meant to write portraits that were both rigorous and human.

JN: Same. My dissertation did not start as a portraiture, but as a case study, as mentioned previously. As I sifted through the data and continued to read to build my study, I stumbled across the method when reading a text that mentioned *The Good High School.* I had collected data 6 months prior to this discovery but had not done a whole lot of work on the dissertation as we were in the middle of the Covid Pandemic and to be 100% honest, it was hard to do any kind of creative work when it felt like the world was falling apart. Therefore, my journey to portraiture is different from my co-writer, and therefore will not follow her particular path.

Pre-Dissertation

JN: There were a handful of "Ah ha" moments for me in my dissertation process: the discovery of *The Courage to Teach* by Parker Palmer (2007); the discovery of the term "Critical Incident" as defined and discussed by David Tripp (1993); and the method of portraiture from the book *The Good High School* by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983). Each discovery noted a shift in the trajectory of my dissertation. I found Palmer in my previous program; his writings about the teaching profession, especially his theory of the "Inner Teacher" became the lens I viewed much of my scholarly, and professional, work through. I read about the term "critical incident" as I was in the process of writing my dissertation proposal, after my oral exams. Again, I was aware that I had found a word for what I have always been curious about: moments that change people and how they move forward from these moments. Due to the nature of critical incidents, and my research questions, case study seemed the most logical form of qualitative inquiry and my advisor agreed. So we moved forward, my proposal was approved, my IRB was approved, and I began collecting data a month afterwards.

TC: For me, it started with this one summer with my dissertation chair, Professor Jeanne Powers, introducing me to portraiture by assigning *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). We read the book together throughout the summer, and I became deeply intrigued by the methodology, even though I did not yet know that portraiture would later become the foundation of my dissertation and scholarly trajectory. As I continued reading, I encountered the idea that one can never write portraiture in the same way as Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, which prompted me to look for how other scholars had actually done portraiture in dissertation research. Reading Juan Carrillo's portraiture dissertation was especially important for me, as it showed that portraiture was feasible within a dissertation timeline and could be carried out rigorously within institutional constraints (Carrillo, 2010). Later, during the writing and sense-making phase of my dissertation, I encountered Jaclyn Naster's portraiture dissertation, which influenced how I thought about writing, voice, and the craft of constructing portraits on the page (Naster, 2023).

Recruitment

TC: Recruitment unfolded in two phases. Before recruiting participants, I first had to negotiate access to the classroom. I contacted professors teaching the SEI course during the semester of my study, as access to pre-service teachers depended entirely on instructor permission. This process took longer than expected. Some faculty did not respond, others requested clarification, and a few expressed hesitation about having research conducted in their courses. These delays shaped the study timeline and highlighted how access is mediated by institutional hierarchies and faculty gatekeeping. During this phase, I was not recruiting participants; I was seeking permission to be present and explaining my research purpose and methodology Only after gaining classroom access did participant recruitment begin. By that point, the semester was underway and students had already observed me in the classroom. At the suggestion of one instructor, I created a brief interest survey and shared it via a QR code after pitching the study to the class. The survey asked about students' self-identification with marginalized communities, home language and languages spoken, K–12 schooling location (Arizona, other U.S. states, or outside the U.S.), prior ESL classification or coursework, and level of interest in participating (yes, no, or maybe). I emphasized that completing the survey did not constitute a commitment.

Although these questions appeared straightforward, they were not always clear or linear for participants. Some students struggled with how to identify their linguistic or educational histories, particularly around ESL labels or multi-state and transnational schooling. I met individually with several students to clarify responses and discuss fit. Through these conversations, some students opted out, others joined after initially selecting “maybe,” and a few stepped away as the semester progressed. Rather than viewing these shifts as attrition, I understood them as part of the portraiture process. Recruitment remained fluid, shaped by conversation, clarification, and participants’ capacity to engage. The final group emerged through mutual decision-making rather than a single screening moment.

JN: For me, I had been working as an instructor and supervisor of preservice teachers my entire tenure at the University of Kansas, I had many channels in which to recruit participants. My dissertation topic focused on the student teaching experience, so I was able to send an email about my study to a few groups of preservice teachers. I received four responses, almost immediately, which based on the many education case studies, 3-5 participants were ideal. I had proposed three methods of data collection: journal entries, observations, and interviews. I was in the process of negotiating ways of observing my participants in their student teaching placements in earlier March of 2020. My study shifted in the blink of an eye when the world shut down due to the Covid pandemic. So, my study changed, and I was only able to use two data sources: journal entries and interview data.

Data collection or Fieldwork

JN: I collected data from March of 2020 - May of 2020. Each participant had 5 interviews in total: our first was in person, and the last four were virtual. Each participant was given a journal prompt, by me, regarding Palmer’s theory of the Inner Teacher (1998) as a beginning point. These journals gradually became a space for my participants to share their concerns and struggles with the complete upheaval of their student teaching experience. I used the journal data, and data from previous interviews, building on the common themes and topics. My data collection and data analysis are very much a cyclic process: the data I collect becomes topics to discuss in future observations and interviews, almost like a tree branch. The initial interview becomes the main branch, with each interview after, creating its own branches and offshoots. Sometimes these branches intersect and crisscross, sometimes they grow in just one direction. But my initial interview set the stage for themes and topics, with each additional piece of data expanding on the common themes, while other details are shorn and trimmed.

TC: Rather than treating this phase as data collection, I understand it as portraiture fieldwork. This process took place over one academic semester and centered on sustained engagement with participants. I conducted four semi-structured interviews with each participant at key points across the semester. Interviews were conversational and flexible, allowing participants to elaborate on experiences, revisit earlier moments, and clarify meanings over time. Interview questions were informed by qualitative interviewing approaches that emphasize responsiveness, depth, and participant voice rather than fixed protocols (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In addition to interviews, I maintained ongoing classroom presence in the SEI course. This allowed me to observe instructional practices, peer interactions, and moments of tension or affirmation as they occurred in situ. I documented these observations through reflexive fieldnotes, attending to classroom interactions, contextual details, and my own positionality as a

researcher. Fieldnotes were written following ethnographic approaches that treat observation and reflexivity as central components of qualitative data collection (Emerson et al., 2011). I also collected artifacts connected to participants' educational experiences, including course syllabi, assignments, training materials, and relevant language policy documents. These artifacts provided institutional and policy context for participants' narratives and supported an understanding of how individual experiences were situated within broader structures shaping teacher preparation and language education (Prior, 2003).

Interpretive Rendering

TC: After completing data collection, I intentionally took a brief pause before beginning formal data analysis. Following a semester of sustained fieldwork and interviews, I needed time to step back from the material. During this period, I worked on drafting several other manuscripts—not as a distraction strategy I would necessarily recommend, but as a way to re-enter writing and thinking before returning to the dissertation analysis with focus and clarity. After the pause, I returned to the data with a clearer sense of both the analytic demands of portraiture and the theoretical commitments guiding my work. My analysis was informed by a raciolinguistic perspective, which foregrounds how language, race, and power are produced and regulated through educational policies and teacher training contexts. This framework shaped what I attended to in the data, particularly how participants were positioned by institutional discourses and how they positioned themselves in response over time. I began analysis by rereading interview transcripts in chronological order for each participant, alongside my fieldnotes and relevant artifacts. Rather than coding line by line, I focused on identifying narrative threads—recurring tensions, shifts in self-understanding, moments of contradiction, and points where institutional language collided with lived experience. Attention to time was central. I examined how participants' language, confidence, and positioning changed across interviews, especially as they moved through the SEI course.

JN: As an English teacher by trade, data analysis is my favorite piece. I begin analyzing data the moment I encounter it. As I listened to my participants, I would notice changes in tone, a narrowing of eyes, a catch in the throat. All of this is data.

Honing my technical research skills took me quite a bit of time, but I did learn that I am a big fan of the outline. My high school-self scoffed at outlines, preferring a more intuitive approach to writing. As I have matured as a writer, so have my front-loading skills, outlines being one of them. Lawrence-Lightfoot's explanation of emergent themes and life litany really spoke to me. She states in her book how to sequence and layer the emergent themes that scaffold the story (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 247) as an outline.

1. Theme 1
    a. Relevant dimension 1
        i. Evidence
        ii. Evidence
        iii. Evidence
        iv. Dissonance
    b. Relevant dimension 2 (and so on…)
2. Theme 2 (and so on…)
3. Conclusion

(Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 2007, pp. 263-264)

I would go back to reread the interviews and their journal entries, prior to the next interview, and pick out words that were repeated or themes that seemed to transcend across data points. I would also pay attention to my reaction to certain points of data and explore that personally. These became my emergent themes. The relevant dimensions, as mentioned above, were often tied to critical incidents of the participant.

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997), life litanies are "an insistent theme, a driving current that flows through each life journey…it offers coherence, purpose, and definition to the journey…a generative dimension of human experience." (p. 197). These became the frame of my portrait. While reading through the data, I would hear the same struggle, the same phrase, the same person brought up multiple times, in various contexts. I turned these into "I" statements which became the overall theme of each participant's portrait. Then in turn, the way each theme was presented was through this lens of the life litany.

Painting/Writing the Portrait

TC: Writing functioned as the primary analytic practice in this study. I drafted portraits iteratively, moving back and forth between interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and policy artifacts to test emerging interpretations. Rather than summarizing themes, I approached portraits as narrative constructions that hold together individual experience and structural context. Throughout this process, I returned to portraiture scholarship to guide analytic decisions about coherence, voice, and representation (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), as well as portraiture-based dissertations that modeled how analysis and writing could be integrated within a dissertation format (Carrillo, 2010; Naster, 2023). Writing and analysis continued until the portraits held together both conceptually— and ethically—faithful to participants' trajectories while making visible the raciolinguistic structures shaping their experiences. I treated contradiction, movement, and partial understanding as analytically productive rather than as inconsistencies to be resolved. As I wrote, I intentionally traced tensions between participants' raciolinguistic identities, their language ideologies, and the expectations they were developing as future teachers. Analytically, I approached the data as a jigsaw puzzle, piecing together narratives across time, institutional contexts, and ideological shifts to construct multidimensional portraits.

One portrait illustrates this approach. A participant, Valeria, described being socialized into valuing Americanization and American English as pathways to success, belonging, and the validation of her U.S. citizenship. Although she was born in the United States, she moved to Mexico and later returned for schooling. Upon reentering U.S. schools, she internalized the belief that rapid English acquisition was essential for mobility and survival. She took pride in testing out of Structured English Immersion (SEI) within a few months, framing this achievement as resilience, while failing to credit the English knowledge she had already developed in Mexico—learning she described as not "counting" as formal education. She carried these beliefs into the College of Education, aspiring to help students like herself learn English as quickly as possible. Her understanding shifted after taking an SEI course taught by a critical scholar who foregrounded racial inequities faced by multilingual learners of color. Through coursework and our conversations, she began to recognize a multilingual pathway into teaching and ultimately changed her major. Despite growing confidence, she continued to doubt her English proficiency, describing herself as being "stuck" in a forever English learner mindset and

carrying an English proficiency certificate to job applications even when it was never required. Another contradiction persisted. While she expressed a desire to advocate for multilingual education, she continued to frame Spanish primarily as a stepping stone toward English, positioning English as the ultimate goal. Rather than resolving this tension, I treated it as analytically meaningful. Following Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), the portrait holds together growth and constraint, revealing how institutional structures and sociopolitical language ideologies continue to shape what participants imagine as possible.

Alongside tension, I also attended to what Lawrence-Lightfoot describes as goodness. Across portraits, participants demonstrated rich forms of capital—familial support, community knowledge, and pedagogical strategies developed through navigating multilingual schooling contexts. They leveraged their experiences as former English learners to position themselves as multilingual experts, forms of expertise often unavailable to their English-monolingual peers. I initially felt overwhelmed by how to organize the portraits within the dissertation. With guidance from my advisor, Professor Jeanne Powers, I developed six portraits: three focused on former English learners in Arizona and three focused on the Structured English Immersion (SEI) coursework in which they were enrolled. These paired portraits allow readers to see both participants' trajectories and the instructional spaces, expectations, and language-ideological climates that shaped their experiences.

JN: Once I had all my pieces: the "I" statement, and the emergent themes outline, and my concluding statement, the portrait was the easiest part of the dissertation, and the pieces I am most proud of. Not only did I want to do good research, but I wanted to honor these participants with my writing. I started each portrait with the "I" statement on the top with a quote beneath, from the participant: a quote I believed to fully capture the essence of their life litany. The first section was what I titled "The View from My Perch," where I took the opportunity to be reflective and identify any biases in this particular portrait. This was my way of being transparent about my role in the research, their former professor, and my personal experience in teaching, all three facets that could sway my data.

The additional sections were each titled by an emergent theme, with evidence provided to support, from both the interviews and their journal entries. I ended each piece with a concluding statement titled "The Critical Path." This was my way of bringing the portrait back to the concept of critical incidents and highlighting how their personal identity and beliefs were instrumental in identifying critical incidents, not only in their past, but in their present student teaching experiences. Personally, "The Critical Path" was my favorite piece to write. It always felt to me like a love letter to each participant: a way of saying, I see and hear you. Your lived experience matters.

When I was done with individual portraits, I created a group portrait with the emergent themes that were consistent across participants. Then, I used each participant's life litany as lens to look through each of these emergent themes, showcasing how everyone's identity shaped the way they interact with these common themes. This was a way show how the participants experienced the events of student teaching differently and how these differences are related to the identity stories (life litanies) the individuals told of themselves.

Every time I finished a portrait, I would cry at the beauty I had witnessed unfold before me as I wrote the portrait. Writing this now has me a little teared up, remember the true joy I experienced being able to write quality academic research that I also felt was meaningful and important to my participants.

Presentation/Defense Day

TC: As I prepared the slides for my dissertation defense, I was struck by how hundreds of pages of writing had to be distilled into fifteen slides and delivered within fifteen minutes. In that process, I realized that I would not have the time—or the visual means—to paint a full portrait of each participant in the way portraiture methodology invites. I could not use participants' images, and the constraints of the defense format required a different kind of representation. Rather than feeling anxious, I felt an unexpected sense of excitement. The defense marked the end of a long doctoral journey—one filled with moments when I questioned whether I could continue, particularly while balancing doctoral work and raising a young child. What sustained me was a deep determination to finish, alongside a network of support. On the day of my defense, I felt surrounded by a team of supporters—climbing friends, doctoral peers, and committee members—whom I affectionately call my "Avengers" for the strength, care, and distinctly different forms of expertise they brought to my work.

That sense of liberation opened space for experimentation. The night before my defense, I began exploring the use of generative AI to create visual portraits of my participants. I described each participant's physical features, personality, and presence, and the resulting images resembled them in broad, impressionistic ways without being identifiable. The multimodal portraits turned out to be more effective than I anticipated. For me, this marked the beginning of imagining new possibilities for portraitists who cannot—or do not feel comfortable—drawing by hand. Through technological affordances, including AI, portraiture can expand to include multimodal forms of representation that remain ethically grounded while opening creative and analytic possibilities. Importantly, these visual portraits did not replace narrative portraiture. They functioned alongside participants' own words. I retained direct, verbatim quotations, grounding the images in participants' voices and experiences in alignment with portraiture methodology. What emerged was not a recap of findings, but an extension of portraiture—one that invited viewers to engage relationally with participants' stories across modes. Below, I present an example of a multimodal portrait I created that day (figure 1.)

Figure 1

Portrait of Valeria

JN: I was utterly terrified of my defense. Despite trust in my advisor and her tremendous support, I was deeply wounded by my previous graduate program. Without going into too much detail, I had multiple experiences in a previous program in which I thought I was well prepared, but it turns out I wasn't. I remember so clearly the questions they asked that I didn't know the answers to and the looks of pity on their faces at my unsuccessful presentations. I felt like a fraud my entire program, leading up into the defense. I was grateful I was able to do it over Zoom. Despite teaching for a living, my past experiences were still too fresh and the idea of feeling like I was in front of a firing squad was too overwhelming for me.

And then the defense started. I really wish I would have recorded such tremendous feedback, almost all positive. I remember one professor on my committee saying how dense and detailed my research was, how well I structured it, and how accessible it was to read and understand. At one point someone said, "this is really great research" and every committee member nodded. I almost cried, but I kept it together until the end. My confidence as a writer had been deeply shaken, and I spent 7 years in a different program attempting to bring it back. My dissertation defense did just that. I am forever grateful to my advisor Dr. Heidi Hallman for believing in me and lovingly guiding me back to myself.

Lessons Learned (what portraiture is and isn't)

JN: The most important lesson I learned in this whole process was that it was possible to be both a scientist and an artist at the same time. If I had to pick a life litany for myself in my portrait of my experience writing a dissertation, it would be "I have to listen and trust myself."

Portraiture allowed me to be myself, not only as a researcher but as a storyteller. I became an English teacher because I loved to talk about and analyze literary text. But I became a researcher because I wanted to make the world a better place for kids and so in order to do that, I would have to understand what caused some of these behaviors I saw as a teacher. Once I started studying education, I realized that oftentimes, kids were responding to the adults in their life. So my focus turned to teaching, specifically teacher education. How could we train teachers to support our kids to give them the best chances at positive outcomes?

Portraiture is not a generalizable research method, but it does provide insight into human experience. All I have ever wanted to do was to make a positive change in the world, but I started out too broad. I wanted grand sweeping changes on the macro level, but craved connection and creativity. My portraits are not meant to be used as a measurement tool: a way to imply causation or correlation. They are an opportunity for the reader to see themselves in another person's experience.

TC: I agree deeply with Jaclyn. For me, portraiture became not just a methodological choice, but an ethical one. It was the only approach that felt capable of holding the voices of a marginalized group of college students—racialized multilingual preservice teachers in the state of Arizona who had once been categorized as English learners, physically and socially segregated, and required to learn within English-only environments both inside and outside of school. Their experiences were shaped by institutional surveillance, deficit positioning, and policies that framed their multilingualism as a problem rather than a resource. I knew that presenting their stories in any other way would flatten their experiences and reproduce the very harms I was trying to critique. Portraiture allowed me to render their lives as layered, contradictory, and unfinished—rather than as data points or thematic fragments. While it worked powerfully for the dissertation, I also experienced some resistance when submitting portrait-

based manuscripts to journals that privilege concise, thematized findings and expect interpretation to be fully spelled out for the reader. Portraiture asks something different: it asks readers to sit with complexity and to make meaning relationally.

Through this process, I also came to know myself more deeply as a scholar. I am grateful that I had already written autoethnographic work, because without that sustained engagement with my own layered identities, I would not have been able to ask the kinds of careful, relational, and incisive questions this work required. Over time, I built trust with participants, treating them with respect and care, and understanding our work together as relational rather than extractive. Portraiture made space for that kind of knowing—for participants and for myself—and I would not choose another approach. I imagine someone walking through an art gallery and abruptly stopping at the beauty of one of the pieces. It speaks to them. It causes emotions to flood their body. It changes the way they see the world. They leave the gallery changed. The way they see the world now has changed. Not only do I want my work to change the reader, but I also want my work to change my participants. I want them to know that their stories are important. I want them to have a piece of themselves, forever immortalized in my writing. Something that when they question themselves, they can go back and read it and remember who they are. I want to bring people home. Portraiture brought me home.

Concluding Thoughts

While editing this journal, two pieces of text resonated with us. In Fernandez (2025), she shares how her writing was a way to "reclaim the act of writing from the sterile confines often imposed by conventional academic production [to be] transformed into a living archive, rich with the complexities of pain, joy, and inherited legacies" (p.6). The other was Krause (2025) writing about her experience researching in a K-12 school and how she "began to question the boundaries of what counted as "rigorous" research. I saw how the desire for clean clear evidence and causal claims could crowd out other kinds of knowing—bodily, intuitive, linguistic, relational. This shift was not abstract. It came from being with teachers and bilingual families…[and] it came from listening to pre-service teachers struggle" (p.19).

Krause speaks about the gulf between quantitative and qualitative methods above, especially noting the use of the word rigor and how she juxtaposes it to the word "knowing." As qualitative researchers, we must defend our "knowing" with thick description, triangulated sources, and deep reflective work regarding our positionality as researchers. We wonder if because there is already a hesitation with the "rigor" associated with qualitative methods, that when portraiture requires a more aesthetic and artistic style of writing, it is that much farther away from the "sterile confines often imposed by conventional academic production" (p.6) that Fernadez (2025) references.

These sterile confines and clean, clear evidence of more quantitative researcher is often gatekept by language that only the experts speak, making much research inaccessible to anyone that doesn't speak the language of academia. Portraits are intended to do the opposite. As Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis (1997) state

> It is in the resolution of this generative tension between the requirements of responsible research is the potential of artistic expression that the portraitists will successfully create an aesthetic call – – a portrait that tells the story faithfully, but in such a way that it holds interest for the general as well as the specialized reader. Portraiture strives to resonate be

> on the particular that has so preoccupied science to the universal that echoes throughout art (37).

Just like art, portraiture should be universal. It is not just for the academic or the scientist. It is for everyone to read, enjoy, and relate to. This is especially important in today's changing world where non-academics can see themselves in the stories and experiences of others. Portraiture doesn't gatekeep; it keeps the door open for all you chose to enter and wish to learn more.

Portraiture is also a method "that can take voice and voices seriously," (Featherstone, 1989, pg. 378). In this method, both the voice of the researcher and the participant are to share an equal playing field on co-creation. Portraiture seeks to "reshape the relationship between researcher and audience" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.9). This also diminishes the hierarchy and power dynamics that often exist between researcher and subject.

Tipsuda was told by a committee member that portraiture isn't a "sexy" method for research papers, though it is a "cool" methodology for dissertation. It is very possible that the lack of embracing portraiture as a method is that it seeks to disrupt many of the power dynamics higher education often perpetuates. It's not that portraiture isn't sexy; it is that portraiture is rebellious. It rebels against traditional ways of doing research and invites outsiders to participate. It seeks a balance of art and research: "a kind of storytelling, close to ethnography, lively in its speech and capable of dealing with issues of quality and value. It is a conscious process of nesting stories in the dimensions of time and culture" (Featherston, 1989, p.376). It requires vulnerability of both the participant AND the researcher: that vulnerability is not innate in all researcher/participant relationships and must be cultivated mainly by the researcher. It seeks subjectivity, not dismisses it.

Portraiture also requires a deep knowing of self, on the part of the researcher. As Palmer (2007) puts so eloquently:

> When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject–not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth…the work required to "know thyself" is neither selfish nor narcissistic. (p.3)

Palmer's theory aligns with the requirements of portraiture, as

> That identity, character, and history of the researcher are obviously critical to the manner of listening, selecting, interpreting, and composing the story. Portraiture admits the central and creative role of the self of the portraitist…the person of the researcher – even when vigorously controlled – is more evident and more visible than in any other research form (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p.13)

We do not believe deep, personal reflection to be a job requirement for professors or researchers, yet this research method requires it. However, no one can be forced to look within. Therefore, portraiture requires even more work on the part of the researcher: work everyone is not willing to do. However, if we want more stories like the ones in this special issue, we need a research method that supports them. If we want a more complex understanding of the human experience, we need researchers willing to do their own personal work to understand their own complexities. And if we want to uplift more gradient voices, we need methods that are

accessible to all kinds of people, not just academics. We call for journals to be more open-minded and inviting to portraitures to honor the gradient voices of those that have traditionally been silenced in academia. Our places of higher education cannot continue to boast of diversity and equity when their students and professors are shouting, with silent voices, about the oppressive systems at play. To disrupt outdated systems, rebellion is required. To engage in portraiture is to engage in a rebellious act. To dismantle the systems that continue to harm individuals, we must dismantle the idea that good research looks one way.

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