

Article

## Through Thick and Thin: How Views of Identity Affect Listening for a Story in Portraiture

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### Abstract

This article illustrates how different conceptions of narrative identity shape the ways that researchers listen for stories in the research approach of portraiture. To do so, we explore the methodological details of two portraiture studies, one on the integration of religious faith and learning among college professors and another on college student participation in hip-hop culture. In this exploration, we illustrate how psychosocial and storied resource perspectives of identity in each study shape the positioning of participant voices as resonant, dissonant, or excluded altogether. Overall, we look beyond issues of researcher reflexivity to elucidate one of the distinguishing features of portraiture and call for coherency between key constructs such as narrative identity and the different elements of qualitative research processes more generally.

**Keywords:** identity, listening, narrative, portraiture, reflexivity, voice

**Author Note:** Both portraiture studies described in this article received permission from the Human Subjects Review Board at Regent University, thereby following proper protocol for qualitative research. Additionally, in accordance with protocol, the names of all participants used in this article are not their real names.

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Over the past decade, some areas of qualitative research have shifted toward a focus on narrative inquiry, that is, the understanding that, for qualitative researchers, stories (rather than merely descriptions) are embedded in the gathering, processing, and presenting of data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Because of the inherent nature of storytelling, researchers often wrestle with how to handle such data properly (Mello, 2002). Indeed, the task is even more complex because “narrative is an interactional experience that is constantly negotiated and manipulated by both listener and speaker” (Mello, 2002, p. 232). According to Chase (2005), because narrative researchers view themselves as narrators who are attempting to narrate the narratives of others, they must actively examine an entire range of complexities regarding voice, representation, and interpretive authority.

The complexities and dilemmas that surround narrative and stories are especially relevant to the research approach of portraiture. Created by Harvard professor Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, portraiture deliberately blends aspects of several types of qualitative approaches, including narrative inquiry (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Portraiture allows the researcher to function both as researcher (following typical qualitative research protocols) and as artist (creatively painting word pictures and unapologetically using one’s own authentic voice). Primarily because of the portraitist’s deliberate move away from the role of observer/reporter and toward the role of principal actor within the investigation (English, 2000; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Mello, 2002), the portraitist wrestles almost constantly with the complexities of narrative inquiry (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This wrestling occurs most particularly within a distinguishing characteristic of portraiture, that is, the subtle, yet significant, distinction between listening *to* and listening *for* a story, which centers on the active role of the researcher as he or she shapes, interprets, and even writes himself or herself into the stories and narratives that other people offer (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

In this article we address this interactional experience of collecting narratives in portraiture specifically and in qualitative inquiry more generally. We explore how different, implicit conceptions of identity by researchers affect how they listen for stories and function as portraitists. In referring to different conceptions of identity, we do not refer to the large body of research on researcher reflexivity, as analyzed extensively by Pillow (2003). Rather, we refer to a continuum of “thick” and “thin” views of the individual or social context (Smith & Sparkes, 2008) and the subsequent construct(s) of identity itself. For this exploration, we draw from our two portraiture studies that explored how faculty members at an evangelical Christian college integrate their religious faith with their learning (Matthias, 2007) and how participation in hip-hop culture implicates college students’ educational lives (Petchauer, 2007). Overall, in a symbiotic fashion, we illustrate that where a researcher falls on Smith and Sparkes’ (2008) continuum shapes how he or she acts and reacts as a portraitist.

### **Our Process of Inquiry**

Our process of inquiry was multi-faceted and began with a surprising recognition that the products of our portraiture studies were, stylistically, very different from one another and connected to some of our personality traits, demeanors, and temperaments. A common advisor and mentor brought this contrast to our attention. He was instrumental in both of our studies, as well as in our development as scholars, and consequently was in a unique position to make such a deep observation. When we read one another’s portraits, we were startled at the contrasts. In her study, Matthias (2007) wrote, using rich description, seven separate portraits of professors to highlight gestures, expressions, and choice of clothing and objects in their surroundings, anything that might highlight and reveal them as individuals. Then a group portrait was created, which methodically discussed common themes that had emerged from analyzing the data. The writing

style was flowery, colorfully descriptive, and filled with details, thus producing, so to speak, portraits obviously painted with a fine brush and clearly defined lines. Petchauer (2007), on the other hand, wrote detailed portraits of participants as well as impressionistic sketches of their cultural and institutional context. The writing style was bold and, at the same time, flexible. In keeping with the metaphor, Petchauer’s portraits were painted with a broad brush and more blurred lines than Matthias’ (2007).

This recognition of the differences in our final portraits made us wonder *why* these differences had occurred and therefore led us to explore, through conversation and electronic mail, aspects of our studies that were fundamentally different (e.g., our choice of research setting, the ways we navigated the field, how we selected participants, and our judgments about whose stories merited further inquiry) and how these could be related to salient aspects of our identities. Through this process of questioning, we revisited impressionistic records, field notes, interview transcripts, and reflective memos in order to ascertain important details.

In an attempt to move beyond issues of researcher reflexivity, for example how we believe these aspects of identity shaped our studies, and question more fundamentally how the very constructs of identity shape portraiture, we used Smith and Sparkes’ (2008) five-point continuum of narrative identity as a framework to classify how we conceived of identity in each of our research topics. In other words, we were not content with self-analysis about how different aspects of identity shaped research but sought a deeper analysis. Based on our different self-classifications along the continuum, we then explored how these different conceptualizations could account for some of the noticeable differences between our portraiture studies.

### Identity on the Thick/Thin Continuum

While Spector-Mercel (2010) reminds us that all narrative inquiry deals with a range of psychological/individualistic questions on the one hand and sociological/historical/anthropological questions on the other hand, we are deliberately focusing on how the researcher views his or her own identity. Smith and Sparkes (2008) illustrate some of the different ways that researchers conceptualize narrative identity. By reviewing multiple studies that have focused on participants’ identity, they have rightfully stated, “scholars from assorted perspectives or traditions promote various ideas of what narrative identities and selves are and how they should be studied. That is, the concept of narrative identity or self can mean different things to different people” (p. 6). Smith and Sparkes then create a framework for viewing different typologies of identity conceptions along a continuum, one that they freely admit is not firm but often blurred or blended. Smith and Sparkes use the language of “thick” and “thin” to describe the prominence that each of these typologies gives to either the individual or social relations upon which identity is constructed. This continuum flows from a psychosocial perspective of narrative identity on the one end—one which has a thick view of the individual and a thin view of the social—to a performative perspective on the other end—one which has a thick view of the social and a thin view of the individual (see Figure 1). Echoing Gadamer (1975), Smith and Sparkes recognize that such a wide variety of perspectives is likely to continue, given that different interpretations of any social phenomenon such as identity tend to “reflect, in part, the ontological, epistemological and political leanings and assumptions the interpreter(s) bring to the task, as well as their situational requirements, biases, and prejudices” (p. 29).

Figure 1. Illustration of Smith and Sparkes’ (2008) Spectrum of Identity Perspectives

Psychosocial perspective	Inter-subjective perspective	Storyed resource perspective	Dialogic perspective	Performative perspective
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Although we acknowledge that their continuum is “intended to be illuminative rather than definitive or exhaustive” (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 28), we find it to have explanatory power for us as we reexamine the complexities of our roles as portraitists. While Smith and Sparkes’ work focuses on how researchers view identity in their *participants*, we believe that we can use the continuum as a heuristic to explore how we as *researchers* view our own identities. In other words, as we turn our attention to how we as portraitists listened for stories, we find ourselves in different places on Smith and Sparkes’ continuum in terms of how we view the concept of narrative identity.

### Listening for a Story in Portraiture

A key characteristic of portraiture that separates it from other qualitative research approaches, such as ethnography, is the subtle, yet significant, distinction between listening *to* a story and listening *for* a story (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). This distinction originates from the autobiography of Eudora Welty (1995) wherein she describes the eagerness she felt as a child when she waited for stories to emerge from the adults in her family. She recalls an almost breathless anticipation and an intuitive sense that the stories had been waiting for her presence in order to be told in just that way at that time. Welty (1995) calls such listening for stories “an early form of participation in what goes on” (p. 14). Within portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) makes this key distinction clearer by elaborating:

The former is a more passive, receptive stance in which the listener waits to absorb the information and does little to give it shape and form. The latter is a much more active, engaged position in which the narrator searches for the story, seeks it out, and is central in its creation. (p. 10)

According to Back (2007), as researchers we are “eavesdropping on the story as partisans . . . The listener’s commitment to hearing places us on the side of the story from the outset” (pp. 7-8). Complicating this participatory aspect of listening for a story is that in a research context, the active engaged process of searching, seeking, and shaping a story is tied to the culture, history, ideologies, and familial, educational, and life experiences of the researcher. To some extent, this is the case with all research approaches. However, portraiture emphasizes this active position of the researcher as an integral and definitive feature of the research approach (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005).

Despite this acknowledgement of the centrality of the researcher’s participation among portraitists, explorations of it concentrate almost exclusively on the final document that a portraitist produces—how voice is represented in it and who has the right to corroborate it (e.g., Aguirre, 2005; Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Chapman, 2005; Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2011; Hill, 2005; Witz, 2006). Consequently, in a typical understanding of narrative research, the focus has been on *product* rather than *process*. This recognition is important because the key component of listening for a story happens in the process of portraiture: whose stories are solicited, included, excluded, or heard as central or dissonant? In other words, representation in final products has been favored over the more pivotal process of how portraitists actively shape and construct stories. At the risk of over-extending the metaphor, we suggest that discussion has until now focused primarily on studying the final portrait with almost an underlying assumption that all portraitists choose the same canvases, paints, and brushes to create it.

### **Thick and Thin: Situating Identity Typologies Into Social Phenomena**

In this section we illustrate the two points along Smith and Sparkes' (2008) identity continuum that match how each one of us conceived of identity differently. We describe these two conceptions in general but also elucidate them by situating them in the social phenomena that were the subject of our respective research projects. In Petchauer's case (2007), we draw from research on the general topic of study (i.e., hip-hop culture), which is the primary basis for his storied resource perspective of identity (Smith & Sparkes, 2008) in hip-hop culture. For Matthias (2007), we draw from her own auto-ethnographic data to illustrate the basis for her psychosocial perspective of identity (Smith & Sparkes, 2008) in context with religious faith and learning integration.

#### **Petchauer's View: Storied Resource Perspective of Hip-Hop Identity**

At the midpoint of the continuum created by Smith and Sparkes (2008) is a *storied resource perspective* of narrative identity (see Figure 1). This typology gives equal prominence to the view of both the individual as well as social relations in constituting identity. In other words, "a person is assumed to be both positioned by others as having a certain sense of self or identity, *and* actively position her or himself" (p. 16). Smith and Sparkes explain that a storied resource perspective acknowledges that people can and do create stories unique to their own circumstances, but at the same time these personal experiences "cannot be extricated from the social . . . A person thus draws upon established and recognizable larger narrative resources to construct an identity and sense of self, but in ways that are unique to the circumstances of a particular life" (p. 20).

Important to this typology is the perspective that rather than people existing as carriers of culture, they are culturally immersed, and culture "speaks itself" through a people's stories and bodies (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 16; see also Riessman, 1993). Also related and important is that people draw from available, socially existing metanarratives (connected to cultural and institutional formations) in order to story themselves and construct identity (Davies & Harré, 1990; Somers, 1994; Taylor, 2005). The importance of existing metanarratives as resources is in sharp contrast to the thick psychosocial perspectives of identity in which the individual constructs narrative identity largely from her own mind, unmediated or influenced by thin social webs, relations, and metanarratives.

This storied resource perspective of identity has many connections to how identity is implicitly conceived in hip-hop. The claims I, Petchauer, make below about identity in hip-hop are based on my reading of hip-hop scholarship and my participant-observation in local communities of hip-hop for over ten years. I argue that these claims are relevant to identity in hip-hop in general, but some aspects are relevant to White participation in hip-hop more specifically because hip-hop is most consistently understood as a subset of Black culture (Morgan, 2009) or as a culture demonstrating many characteristics of Black culture (Perry, 2004). In terms of the thick view of the individual in hip-hop, the individual has an obligation to declare oneself into existence and membership through voice, dance, or claiming public space (e.g., graffiti). In other words, particularly for Whites, hip-hop is a civic-participatory culture; one is a part of it due to what one does. This declaration cannot be passive either. It must be deliberate, forceful, unique, and convincing to the surrounding hip-hop community if it is to be accepted as authentic.

Examples of this quality abound within the expressive elements that make up hip-hop, such as emceeing (i.e., rapping), dancing (e.g., b-boying and breakdancing), graffiti writing, DJing and turntablism, and using creative language (Forman & Neal, 2004). All of these expressions take

place within a community of practitioners, whether it is a group of hip-hop “headz” competitively freestyle rapping one after another, dancers taking turns competing against one another, or graffiti writers painting their monikers in public spaces for others to recognize. In each of these contexts, one enters into the communal activity boldly and forcefully (Harrison, 2003; Schloss, 2009). Harrison gives a clear example of this from a freestyle rap *cipher* (Spady, Alim, & Meghelli, 2006), the communal space in which rappers gather to share improvisational rhymes and often do so in a spirit of competition. Harrison explains that in order to enter the cipher and rap, one must often interrupt an emcee toward the assumed end of his or her freestyle rhyme with stronger, louder vocals. Similarly, to participate in a breaking (i.e., dance) cipher, one must enter precisely at the end of another dancer’s “set” with a dynamic, kinesthetic introduction of him or herself, and if two dancers attempt to enter at the same time, there is an expectation that they must then battle (i.e., compete against) one another (Schloss, 2009).

These examples of moderately thick individualism in hip-hop are also balanced by moderately thick social relationalism in hip-hop. One of the clearest instances of this can be found in the fact that these bold declarations of identity take place in a social, communal context. In hip-hop communities, as suggested above, this context is referred to as a *cipher* (Spady et al., 2006). While a cipher is often a circular gathering of hip-hop practitioners and enthusiasts, it is the communal unit of analysis within hip-hop—the necessary communal context for hip-hop to take place. As such, although the activities described above are individual expressions of identity, the social context of hip-hop enables them. In fact, there is no cultural logic to them without the cipher.

The centrality of hip-hop metanarratives also attests to the moderately thick social relational positioning of hip-hop. Hip-hop metanarratives include the oral histories of the culture as a whole and its individual expressive activities with respect to specific individuals, crews, and locales. The nostalgic gaze of hip-hop, whether it be by romanticizing the past in music (Hill, 2009) or sampling and reconfiguring old music to create new music (Schloss, 2004), ensures that hip-hop’s present is defined, in part, by rearticulations of its past. Also important to these metanarratives is that both knowledge of them and properly situating oneself in context with them are essential to membership in hip-hop and for creating a hip-hop identity, particularly for Whites (Kitwana, 2005). This knowledge includes more than just dates and names, although these are important as well. It also includes knowledge of conflicting narratives and contested historical details, and often taking an informed position with respect to them. Such metanarrative knowledge is an essential element to the above declarations of identity.

Finally, the frequent personification of hip-hop itself by hip-hop practitioners and scholars also helps locate hip-hop within this storied resource perspective. This personification can often be heard through discussions about “the state of hip-hop” or more recent popular and scholarly debates about whether or not hip-hop is dead. In fact, Rose (2008) starts her recent book with the statement, “Hip-hop is not dead, but it is gravely ill” (2009, p. ix). Common personifications of hip-hop such as these attest to the quality that in a storied resource perspective, culture exists in part separate from the individual and “speaks itself” through a people’s stories and bodies (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 16; Riessman, 1993).

### **Matthias’s View: A Psychosocial Perspective of Identity as a Recovering Fundamentalist**

On one end of Smith and Sparkes (2008) continuum there is a *psychosocial perspective of narrative identity*. This view takes a thick view of the individual and a thin view of the social compared to other views further along the continuum, giving primacy to a person’s interiority in terms of how identity is created with respect to narratives. Smith and Sparkes explain that

someone with this view holds “a deep respect for the centrality of experience, the ‘inner’ world of the individual, our selves as conscious decision makers, and a subject who reflectively puts together the possible stories that might be told as narrative episodes of one’s life” (p. 9).

Perhaps because I, Matthias, have always had a rich inner life, and also because I like things to be well defined, I fall squarely on the psychosocial end of Smith and Sparkes’ continuum. This view also lends itself to the careful and continual examination of spirituality since one’s faith—at least in a North American context—is intensely personal and individualized. Because my faith is such an integral part of how I view myself, my own desire for internal consistency inevitably influences the choices I make as a researcher; that is, I do not have one identity as a woman of faith and another as a scholarly researcher. Thus, the fact that I consider myself a recovering fundamentalist is intertwined with my psychosocial perspective of identity as well as with how I conduct my research.

I have a strong Christian fundamentalist heritage on both sides of my family and was raised with the belief that everything in my life could be categorized as right or wrong, good or bad, us or them. In 1976, I matriculated to a well-known fundamentalist university in South Carolina, reveling in the experience of living and learning with 6,000 fellow believers, proud of being separated from the “secular” world and confident that we had the answers to all of life’s questions. Eventually, however, as a graduate assistant I became cynical about the viability of fundamentalism, managed to cram an entire adolescent rebellion into one week over Christmas break, and was summarily expelled. This experience—and the subsequent internal wrestling on deep emotional, psychological, and spiritual levels over the next few years—led me to redefine myself and create a story about who I am and why. Therefore, Smith and Sparkes’ description of the psychosocial perspective as one that views identity as “an internalized life story that develops over time through self-reflection” (p. 9), especially resonates with me.

Today I view myself as a recovering fundamentalist. I choose the descriptive phrase deliberately. While I have not abandoned Christian orthodoxy, I now place myself in an entirely different category than the one in which I was raised. I am comfortable identifying myself as one of the new evangelicals described by Fitzgerald in *The New Yorker* (2008). We focus more on issues of poverty and injustice than on pro-life and same-sex marriage, and we resist the notion that God is tied to any particular political party. In these ways, among others, I have heartily rejected my fundamentalist past. However, I also recognize that just as a recovering alcoholic will always consider herself an alcoholic susceptible to the temptation of alcohol, I admit that fundamentalist paradigms continue to be a part of who I am. My basic personality is ordered and linear; my mind categorizes things easily and readily. I am a stickler about time constraints, a stereotypical list maker who takes joy in accomplishing tasks and crossing them off the list. Thus my *nature*, combined with my *nurture* (i.e., the way I was raised and educated), provides a powerful fundamentalist tendency that is often difficult to resist. Indeed, it often surfaces in unexpected and surprising ways, including the way I approach my role as a researcher. Specifically, despite my personal and academic growth in recent years, I have never been able to fully embrace with any intellectual integrity the more postmodern epistemologies so prevalent in academia, perhaps because of the lingering influence of fundamentalist thinking on my ideology.

Smith and Sparkes explain that underpinning a psychosocial perspective is a realist epistemology that leads the researcher to uncover the interiority of experiences of their participants; that is, there is an understanding that their narratives “have a real nature, which can be found and known for what they actually are” (2008, p. 10). This explanation helps me understand that my self-identification as a recovering fundamentalist is inseparable from how I view identity in the first place. Therefore, I continue to be on the end of the continuum that takes a thick view of the

individual and a thin view of the social when I consider identity. Even the more personal tone of this explanation—as opposed to Petchauer’s more impersonal approach—demonstrates my leaning toward the psychosocial end of Smith and Sparkes’ continuum.

As I was discovering new ways of rejecting my fundamentalist tendencies, I became fascinated with how other professors in Christian colleges and universities managed to integrate their own personal faiths with their scholarship. Since I view identity from a psychosocial perspective, my attempts to reconstruct my own story led to a desire to hear the stories of others. Specifically, as one who has “an inherent drive for narrative coherence and order,” I yearned to “explore the interiority of people [specifically, other professors] and uncover their inner world via the stories they [would] tell” (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 9). As Sikes (2006) acknowledges, researchers often choose topics to study that support the work they are doing on their own identities, ones that “have personal resonance and import” (p. 109) for them. While qualitative researchers have long acknowledged this fact as they reflect on their own biases (Chapman, 2005, 2007; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997), I am suggesting that without a psychosocial view of identity, I would not have identified myself as a recovering fundamentalist, nor would I have focused my scholarship on the topic of the integration of Christian faith and academic life among professors at an evangelical college.

### **Listening for Stories: Resonant and Dissonant Voices**

One of the most significant ways that our conceptions of narrative identity affected the application of portraiture was in how we listened for stories. One key feature of portraiture is distinguishing between resonant and dissonant voices. The resonant voice is one that harmonizes with the voices of other participants; in other words, the participants’ voices provide the common themes that emerge from the constant comparative analysis of the data. In contrast, the dissonant voice, also called the deviant voice by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), is the voice of a participant that deviates from the common themes in some way. In portraiture, as with other qualitative approaches, it is especially important that the researcher pay close attention to the dissonant voice; indeed, he or she is encouraged to actively listen for it.

### **Situating White Participation in Hip-Hop**

In Petchauer’s study, one clear instance of these voices and related narrative identity constructions was in listening for the stories of White participants of hip-hop at two of the institutional settings, and ultimately judging whose stories merited further pursuit and inclusion in the overall portrait and whose did not. In line with a storied resource perspective, central to these judgments were the stories and the hip-hop actions articulated by individual participants (e.g., rapping, DJing, forms of dancing, writing graffiti) and the degree to which individuals drew from and situated themselves in established hip-hop narrative resources.

### **Weston College and the Freestyle Rap Radio Show**

Weston College is an elite, private institution in the Northeastern United States, with 85% of the 1,600 student body identifying as White. In addition to these demographics, it should be noted that a core group of ethnic minority students on campus viewed the majority White student body and administration as unaware and even unconsciously celebratory of White privilege. A helpful example here is when ethnic minority students recognized that for many White students, reading canonical works that attempt to explain social oppression (e.g., Marx and Freire) functioned as cultural capital that excused White students from interrogating their own privilege on campus. Early in the study, I was brought by one student named Isaac to the college’s small AM radio



station so that I could meet a group of students (and potential participants) who hosted a hip-hop radio show. The show ran from 12 a.m. to 2 a.m. on Friday nights and focused on freestyle rapping, an improvisational form of rap where instead of performing rehearsed songs, rappers create most of them in the moment. For the majority of the show, the hosts and their friends passed a microphone around so that they could take turns freestyle rapping over instrumental beats.

During the show, Isaac, Zach, Jason, and Alex all took turns rapping, with Zach and Alex taking the most turns. All of the students were White except for Alex, who was Asian. Before entering the studio, Isaac told me that the rest of them were “just beginners,” which was clear from their attempts to freestyle. They were focused on creating elementary forms of rap such as rhymed couplets, often regardless of any clear meaning that was made from their words. As beginners, they had not developed other skills of rapping such as breath control, internal rhyme, multiple meanings, storytelling, or different rhyme “flows” to complement different beats. They sometimes incorporated esoteric topics such as Greek mythology and physics rather than any topics that seemed meaningful or significant to their personal lives.

In addition to this skill level, this group also demonstrated what I understood to be rap and hip-hop as a disingenuous and ironic caricature of Black culture and masculinity. While the hosts would take turns rapping, the other listeners in the studio would frequently punctuate the emcee’s lines with the exclamation of “yeah!” carried on for a few seconds in a tone much deeper than their talking or rhyming ones. While verbal affirmation and feedback is normal in hip-hop, the intentional tone and giggles that often followed it are not. Consequently, I understood this response to be a self-conscious performance of hardness or masculinity that they associated with hip-hop. Similarly, the students’ use of language and slang derived from hip-hop (i.e., Hip-Hop Nation Language, Alim, 2006) and Black language (Smitherman, 1997) also seemed self-consciously performed and unnatural.

While the above scene calls into question the degree to which these students were “immersed” in the culture of hip-hop or the degree to which it was “speaking through” them, equally important was a discussion event that took place the following day about the political potential and limitations of hip-hop. The event was led by a political hip-hop music group that was to perform on campus later that night. From a story resource perspective, a communal event such as this provides participants with opportunities to draw from the existing hip-hop narratives of history and activism (e.g., Bynoe, 2004) to construct a hip-hop identity. And this is precisely what took place among most of the 11 participants, except for Zach and Alex, two attendees from the radio show the previous night, who remained silent for the whole discussion. When one of the performer-discussion leaders attempted to involve them in the discourse by asking them directly why they attended the discussion, “just to hang out” was the response that Alex gave to answer for the two of them.

In summary, I did not include the radio hosts as participants in the study or as part of the overall portrait of hip-hop collegians at Weston College because they did not fit a storied resource construct of hip-hop identity. That is, to some degree they did participate in some kind of hip-hop cultural activities, though in ways that I perceived as disingenuous and problematic. But, in my observation, they also did not draw from the existing hip-hop narratives in order to construct a hip-hop identity. In fact, they seemed uncomfortable and out of place in the midst of other students who were doing this kind of storied identity work.

### **Nathan as a Contrasting Case**

One contrast to the students at the freestyle rap radio show at Weston College that helps clarify how this construction of identity shaped listening for stories comes from Nathan, a White participant at Colonial University. Colonial was a public institution in the Southeastern United States, with a student body of 38,000 at the time of this study, and Nathan was an emcee who occasionally freestyled among his friends, at parties, and sometimes when he was alone. He was also president of the university's chapter of the National Hip-Hop Summit Action Network, though he acknowledged during the study that he was becoming disenchanted with the organization because of its lack of a clear vision and its unmotivated members.

In terms of his skill as a freestyle emcee, Nathan was not dynamic in my estimation, though I would judge him as superior compared to the radio show hosts at Weston College. From Nathan, I seldom heard creative, multiple meanings or rhyme patterns, or other characteristics that were present among some other emcees in the study. His style sounded more like sentences spoken to the beats with few creative alterations. Nathan was aware of his below-par skills, telling me at one point that he "wasn't really feeling it" lately. Nevertheless, Nathan continued to freestyle, and I understood Nathan to be honest and genuine in his rhymes due to their content. In my field notes from one of our first encounters, I documented his inclusion of topics such as stress from the late arrival of his financial aid cheque, frustration at a lack of participation from his friends in a university-wide compilation CD he was attempting to put together, and even displeasure with his dilapidated college living conditions, which included roaches. Initially, hearing him rhyme about these topics made me want to consider him for full participation in the study. Later, I understood that these were important facets of his life because he spoke of them in our interviews. Therefore, the hip-hop practice of freestyle rap, regardless of his less-than-stellar skills, was a genuine form of expression for these issues, not an ironic caricature as it appeared to be for some students at Weston College.

Equally important to the ways that hip-hop was expressed by him was his use of larger hip-hop narratives as resources to construct his identity, something absent from the students at Weston College. For Nathan, situating himself was related to a recognition of his own White, racialized position in hip-hop. His awareness of this and subsequent wrestling with its implications was evident even in the first minute of our initial interview as he reconstructed his experiences in hip-hop: "I mean with hip-hop you know, I haven't been with hip-hop my whole life obviously because, I mean, one, being Caucasian, White." He was aware that by liking and participating in hip-hop, other people could view him as conforming to a stereotype about young, White males attempting to "act Black." On more than one occasion he highlighted that he did not prefer Eminem, the White hip-hop artist who has been popular across racial categories. Apparently, attending working-class public schools with both Black and White students and learning about hip-hop through his Black friends provided a context for him to gain awareness of his racial position, sometimes in very painful ways. The instance during middle school when he was called a "wigger" for wearing a pair of Nike Air Force One sneakers (made famous by a song of that title by the rapper Nelly) was particularly formative. Also important was being called "White boy" before being beat up by a group of Black classmates in elementary school.

Overall, Nathan's case is an important contrast to the students at Weston College because it illustrates a more personalized, genuine participation in hip-hop compared to the students at Weston College. Nathan also demonstrated an awareness of the larger, racialized hip-hop narratives by showing an awareness that hip-hop is a part of Black culture and by distancing himself from Eminem, a popular White hip-hop artist. By listening for Nathan's story, these

storied resource elements led me to hear his story as part of the larger story of hip-hop collegians at Colonial University and pursue it throughout the study.

### **Listening With the Ears of a Recovering Fundamentalist**

If it is true that a portraitist participates in the narratives even as they are told, then I, Matthias, must take Back's (2007) advice and "abandon [any] radical pretence" (p. 18) that I am not listening with ears bent to hear the participants' stories in a unique way. Of the seven participants I observed and interviewed for my study (Matthias, 2007), four of their narratives elicited a deep emotional response in me, particularly because of how I view identity—both my own as well as theirs—as psychosocial and also because of my self-identification as a recovering fundamentalist. Like Welty (1995), I entered into the interview process with an eager anticipation of the stories I would hear. Part of this anticipation was deeply embedded in my psychosocial perspective of the identities of my participants. I assumed that my own "strong urge to find some experiential unity" (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 9) would also be true of the participants in my study, and that this urge would be evident in the authentic ways in which they shared their narratives. Thus, when I sensed even a hint of disingenuousness, I became disappointed and was tempted to dismiss those particular participants as dissonant voices. Conversely, when I sensed that participants had genuinely wrestled "to draw meaningful connections across one's past, present, and anticipated future" (p. 9)—a key characteristic of the psychosocial perspective of identity—their stories resonated with me (and thus their voices were viewed as resonant). In summary, as I was listening for stories as a portraitist, what the participants shared could not be separated from what I heard with the ears of a recovering fundamentalist who has embraced a psychosocial perspective of identity.

#### **Beverly and Claude: Dismissed as Dissonant?**

The stories of both Beverly and Claude seemed somewhat disingenuous to me when I first heard them. Beverly was the first interview of the seven that I scheduled. Her demeanor was very professional, and although she shared some very personal aspects of her own faith experiences, I remember feeling disappointed when I left her office, and noted those feelings in my reflective field notes. Later as I transcribed the interview and began to analyze the data with a constant comparative approach, I realized that Beverly's narrative—although certainly reflective of her unique personality and experiences—was resonant with the themes that were emerging from the data of most of the other participants. As I reflect now upon my initial impressions as a portraitist who was listening for a story, I recognize that my own psychosocial view of identity, combined with my self-identification as a recovering fundamentalist, had elicited a negative response to Beverly's stories. She was, in a sense, so polished and controlled in her manner that I had falsely decided, on a purely emotional level, that she had not done the hard internal work that a psychosocial perspective identity demands.

Claude answered my questions sincerely and was arguably the most cooperative and hospitable participant in my study. But, because his answers were often couched in what I viewed as stereotypical fundamentalist phrases familiar to me from my childhood, as I listened for his story, I found myself disappointed. He spoke, for example, of the acceptance of his academic discipline as "a good and perfect gift from the heavenly Father." Later in the interview, he explained that as Christians "we are temples of the Holy Spirit" who should be "doers of the Word and not hearers only." I reacted to these phrases as "too pat" because I had heard many fundamentalists from my past use these phrases and others like them as a shield to hide behind and protect themselves from penetrating questions that might challenge assumptions and facilitate deep integration. Such self-examination was necessary for the cohesive identity I was exploring in this study and, not

coincidentally, also necessary from a psychosocial view of identity in general. I have no real reason to believe that Claude was anything like the fundamentalist teachers and professors of my youth. However, my own identity as a recovering fundamentalist, along with my psychosocial perspective, clearly influenced the way I listened for his story, and his particular way of telling his story led me to position his voice as the dissonant one among the seven participants.

### **James and Karl: Wrestling and Resonant**

In contrast to the narratives provided by Claude and Beverly, the narrative that James provided contained a deep wrestling for coherency between his spiritual longings and his academic proclivities. Listening to his story, for me, meant hearing not only about his conversion to Christianity but also a lifelong search for meaning in his spiritual life as well as his academic one, on an emotional level as well as an intellectual one. In relation to a psychosocial perspective, James' narrative was clearly "orientated towards developing unity and a coherent story across [his] past, present, and imagined future" (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p. 13), key traits that were less obvious in the other two participants.

Because of my own struggles with fundamentalism, and my own narrative that I have constructed from much self-reflection over time, when I discovered that Karl had experienced a similar struggle, his story resonated with me and undoubtedly influenced the way I listened for his story as well. Karl explained that when he was growing up, he was led to believe "that a certain kind of Republican Christian conservative political worldview was just what the Bible teaches. And so if you read the Bible right you get to low taxes." However, as Karl explored global and social issues and "really started to listen and hear people who had different socio-economic backgrounds who were a different race" than he was, he began to change his views. I, too, had been taught that "true" Christians always voted as conservative Republicans, that liberal Democrats were the enemy, and that this was the only way to view the political scene in the United States. Like Karl, the more I exposed myself to other viewpoints, educated myself, and became more open to hearing the voices of those who were not like me, the more I began to view my faith in radically different ways. Karl and I had both struggled to reconstruct our stories through self-reflection, interior dialogue, and a merging of the intellectual and the spiritual. We had, it seemed, both taken a psychosocial approach to our identities, rejecting the toxic elements of fundamentalism as we sought unity and coherence in our life stories.

### **Reflections and Implications**

Returning to a distinguishing characteristic of portraiture—listening for a story (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997)—our exploration helps clarify one important dimension of how researchers listen for stories and actively shape the stories told by participants. This important dimension is due to conceptions of narrative identity and, more specifically, the different degrees of primacy that one gives to either the individual or the social-relational as one listens for stories. In this way, understanding how researchers conceive of narrative identity lends further understanding to the subtle, yet significant, process of listening for a story in portraiture. As such, this exploration deepens (rather than extends) the current body of research on portraiture (e.g., Bloom & Erlandson, 2003; Chapman, 2005; Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2011; Hill, 2005; Witz, 2006) by elucidating one of its definitive characteristics rather than discussing the more surface-level issue of voice in the final portraiture.

Our exploration also extends the work on narrative identity offered by Smith and Sparkes (2008). This was done first by applying it to two unique phenomena—hip-hop culture and the integration of religious faith and learning—that have not received much attention as phenomena relevant to

narrative identity. Our exploration demonstrates that the direct and indirect questions posed by narrative inquiry are also relevant to phenomena such as these. Second, this exploration extends the work of Smith and Sparkes by connecting it to issues of research methodology and approach. In other words, they do not specifically extend the relevance of their heuristic into the realm of qualitative research methodology. We believe this is an oversight and that the heuristic is very relevant to portraiture specifically and to qualitative inquiry more generally.

One set of questions this exploration raises deals with the continuity between key constructs such as narrative identity and different aspects of the research process. From one perspective, our retroactive exploration demonstrates continuity between our different constructs of identity and the different ways we listened for stories, particularly how we heard the voices of participants as either resonant or dissonant. This continuity was a result, we believe, of the guiding influence of our ideas about what identity is in the context of our different topics/social phenomena. Because this was a retroactive exploration (i.e., we did not precisely articulate our conceptions of narrative identity at the outset of these portraiture studies), it is likely that there were also incongruences among our notions of narrative identity and other aspects of research design and procedures, such as central questions, interview techniques, accessing and navigating the research field, and constructing the final portrait. Stated another way, there should be continuity among conceptions of narrative identity and other aspects of the research process beyond how one listens for a story.

This continuity can be illustrated specifically at the level of research questions. For example, the central question of Matthias' study was "What are the personal experiences of exemplary professors as they integrate their faith and learning?" The way that this question frames the central phenomenon of integration and the subsequent study coheres with many key aspects of a psychosocial perspective. These include the emphasis on the "inner" world of the individual, people as conscious decision-makers, an internalized life story due to self-reflection over time, and identity as something that an individual possesses and is endowed with (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). As a contrast, a slight change in this question, such as a move away from "personal experiences" toward social experiences, would create discontinuity between the key construct and the central question that guided the study. For example, Matthias could have asked the question this way, "What are the different roles that faith-based communities play in the lives of exemplary models of faith and scholarship integration?" While this question appears similar to the initial research question, in actuality it has less continuity with the psychosocial perspective because it takes primacy away from the individual experiences and puts it more on the social-relational. This example from Matthias' central question illustrates that in addition to considering how researchers' beliefs about narrative identity shape a study, it is also important to consider the coherency and incoherency among such conceptions and parts of the research process.

Overall, the existence of continuity and discontinuity among key constructs such as narrative identity and various aspects of the research process suggest that there is much benefit from researchers clearly articulating what they believe narrative identity is at the outset of their research. Granted, sometimes researchers will openly acknowledge how they view narrative accounts (e.g. Demuth, Chaudhary, & Keller, 2011), but we are suggesting that they take an even further, deeper, and richer step. This revelation goes beyond addressing issues of reflexivity (e.g., Pillow, 2003) such as how a researcher's personal biases and racial(ized) or gender(ed) identities shape various aspects of research. In this way, we believe that we are attempting to address some of the concerns that have been raised about the complexities of narrative research (Chase, 2005; Mello, 2002). If researchers openly reveal the ways in which they view narrative identity, just as they have been revealing other biases for decades, they decrease the likelihood of conflicting research components, whether these are at the level of theory, approach, or practice. The

continuum offered by Smith and Sparkes (2008) serves as a useful heuristic with which researchers can make such articulations.

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