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## Deep Portrait: On the Atmosphere of Nonfiction Character

I once spent a few weeks in the Iron Range region of northern Minnesota, one of many regions where my Croat great-grandfather worked as a miner. I was a part of a group of writers and photographers undertaking the Iron Range Documentation Project, during a time when the region was undergoing economic distress due, in part, to the changes in the mid-1980s American steel industry. Working under the direction of a well-known couple—a married poet and photographer known for their documentary work in Central America—most of the participant artists were in our twenties and thirties. We were not natives but visitors, or perhaps interlopers, most of us driving four hours up from Minneapolis-St. Paul. We spent our time on the Range interviewing and photographing locals and creating documentary poems, essays, and photographs from our encounters.

I can't say I produced any worthy work out of experience. I was a twenty-something, recently-politicized, lesbian-feminist, and an inexperienced artist; our portrait subjects were, for me, too much like the post-immigrant Slavic-American family I'd yet to reckon with, back in the old steel mill suburbs of Chicago. In those days, well before lesbians and gays were on TV, I had yet to develop the diplomacy skills I later learned from years of teaching, and lacked the boyfriend, husband, new baby talking points that the other women artists, regardless of their political leanings, used to meld into conservative family life on the Range. I would have been better equipped to document the last years of the old-school lesbian bars in St. Paul, but the Iron Range was a draw because even then I knew "lesbian" was not a big enough map upon which to chart all of my American story.

And I did then begin to think about both the ethics and difficulties of writing about actual, living people. At one of the planning meetings we—the young, white liberal-to-radical, college-educated artists from the city—discussed our difficulties fielding the social attitudes of some of the small mining town interview subjects, people like my relatives, who back on the south side of Chicago we would have described then as “white ethnics,” or “Reagan Democrats.” Our work on the Iron Range took us to bars, weddings, polka festivals, and family dinner tables, and while the Iron Rangers talked about the mine closings, the unemployment, the friends and family members who’d abandoned their homes when they couldn’t pay the mortgage, and their dream vacations back to the Old Country, they also (again, like my relatives) did not shy away from letting fly a few racial slurs.

“I know how to make them ugly,” one of the white photographers said at the meeting, describing the ways he could manipulate the camera angle or the framing, in ways to convey the ugliness of words one of the former miners had felt free to share. Everyone laughed nervously as the photographer spouted; we all knew what he was talking about. Were we required to accept and record every hateful aspersion and racial epithet? What was our role as documentarians, as writers-of-witness committed to truth-telling?

I sympathized with the angry photographer, but at the same time, because of my own sense of disharmony in this queer-unfriendly territory, I began to cultivate an awareness of all the ways the artists involved in this project worked from a slippery ethical position, evidenced by how physically repugnant the photographer appeared to me as he described to us how ugly he could make his portraits of subjects whose home ground we had invaded, with our notepads and cameras, during a time their community suffered great vulnerability. Were we comrades? Judges? Friends? Something was missing in my understanding, but I could not have said then what, and thus was only able to write about the russet tones of the open pit iron mines and the charming lilt of the polka mass. Some of the others developed powerful work out of that project, but I was myself unable to create a deep portrait with any lasting resonance.

I have become, in the nearly thirty years since, no more patient with any variety of identity slur, but my ideas about the documentary ethics of the creative nonfiction writer, as well as my strategies for rendering creative nonfiction portraits, have, at least, expanded.

What was missing in my early understanding of nonfiction portrait has to do with the ways actuality shadows the creative nonfiction page. Character may be the area where nonfiction prose is the most unlike fiction, because the nonfiction writers, due to the nonfictional nature of the genre, will never be able to fully speak from a deep character point-of-view separate from our own, and because, in as many cases as not, our character referents are not only actual but actually living, potentially wounded by any words we publish about them, leaving the nonfiction writer a relatively limited ethical field within which to work. This means that characters in most nonfiction works play a much different role than they do in most fiction, functioning as portraits and foils for a more deeply developed narrator, rather than as longing and obstacle-battling narrative engines, advancing plot.

When talking about creating character in creative nonfiction we begin, as does the fiction writer, with the classic five-pack of character development: What do they look like; what do they say; what do they do; what do they say about themselves; what do others say about them. From these elements, as in fiction, creative nonfiction writers are able to bring a sketch of human character to the page. We may also refer to the definition of character John Gardner described in his classic text *The Art of Fiction*, as an agent struggling for his or her own desires, reminding us that characters, to take full presence on the page, must act, not just be acted upon (65).

As we consider these fundamental craft tenets, we see already all the ways the angry documentary photographer's threat to "make him ugly" would not be nearly enough, if our goal is to bring a full portrait of this beleaguered, slur-slinging Iron Ranger to the page. Such a depiction of only the subject's ugliness might serve as a character sketch of the photographer's point of view in that moment, but would probably be too narrow a depiction to have any real meaning as either portraiture or documentation.

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What then is needed to deepen the portrait? Some nonfiction writers have used third person point of view as a tool to unfurl human presence on the page, but in most cases this strategy is merely another way to expand the first person point of view by use of what appears to be, but is (as in the photographer's ugly portrait) not really a third person point of view. Some nonfiction writers employ a limited third person point of view guided by deep interview, capped off by what the subject is willing to reveal to a writer; some rely on explicit or implicit cues that the narrative is temporarily digressing into invention, a move tempered by any essay or memoir's structural ability to withstand tangent. (For instance: Tom Wolf's immersion reportage point of view shifts in *The Right Stuff*; John Edgar Wideman's narrative retelling of his brother's arrest told in his brother's voice in *Brothers and Keepers*; Nick Flynn's speculative ventures into his father's psyche in *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*; Jo Ann Beard's forays into a deceased killer's motivations in "The Fourth State of Matter;" and Maxine Hong Kingston's deft use of "perhaps" to propose alternate versions of a family story in *The Woman Warrior*.)

In these cases—as in a more straightforward descriptive portraiture in which the narrative lens of a first-person narrator's point of view is clear—the people on the page are essential elements of the narrative atmosphere, necessary to provide the reader with concrete understanding of a narrator's world, but which operate in the manner of what Virginia Woolf called "moments of being" (70), carrying the reader past the skin and bones of the human subject, into the observable cloud of impression all humans leave in their wake. We understand people through the sound and movement of their existence as well as their physical and psychological impression, which is an approach to portraiture that moves away from the longings and obstacles of plot formation and into the realm of lyric.

By lyric portraiture I refer to more than just the music of character, or the lyre of language we might pluck and strum to express character, but also the employment of literary strategy that gets at our encounters of be-ingness—the visceral, and often embodied, impression or experience of moment and image and understanding, obtained without telling a story or attempting to explain, but rather illumination

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achieved through opening the subject to some new and gut-felt view. A lyric move can shatter a reader into awareness or shades of consciousness that can't be achieved in any other manner. Sometimes that impression or understanding comes of letting go of discursive meaning, the way we might experience a jazz improvisation or abstract painting. When we approach character from a lyric rather than narrative direction we get at not the psychological interiors of characters other than the narrator, but rather the evocation of observable human presence.

The sparest of actions can convey, as in photographs, the emotional resonance of the human body. A middle-aged woman at the wedding stiffens, and her spouse narrows her eyes, when a man they do not know places his hands on her bare shoulders and leans in to whisper into her ear. A newly married retiree notices her new daughter-in-law collects old teapots, then seems to forget the man she just married as she drifts into a memory about her dead husband's antique business. The light across the spare bedroom lengthens as a man tells his adult daughter that his mother, her grandmother, never seemed to love him. Compression, attention, detail, intense witness, and authorial love for the human experience are some of what deepen the lyric portrait.

As does attention to context and history. We will likely not be able to write of a human subject's unshared thoughts and unconscious impulses, but we are often able to explore the forces that carried any person to his or her particular place and time, in tandem with the others of his generation and condition. I ask my students, when considering the people they bring to their pages, to consider: where these people come from; their cultural and class background; what in the world they are a part of and what they are not a part of, what, out of history, they carry; and the ways history might infiltrate their present moment. A retired teacher making coffee in her tidy Florida kitchen overlooking a golf course grew up in an unkempt Chicago housing project. A snazzy widow out to dinner in the Pump Room in the Chicago Loop was the daughter of an East Side railroad worker ripped off by company lawyers. A Midwestern lesbian college administrator who wears suits to work has a tattooed back just like her Italian-American grandfather, back

East where her mother lived before she married the Michigan Swede who doesn't know his daughter has tattoos.

Creative nonfiction writers enter deep portrait as much through nuance or context as through psychology. As artists of actuality our job is to lean back to take note of where our subjects have been placed by history, as well as where they have placed themselves, and we must then lean in close to notice our subjects' most subtle moments of resistance, determination, resignation, and affection. Our pages then are shadow realities made of the embodied intelligence of image, sound, and suspended moment intersecting with the visible and invisible histories that carried our people into the current moment, allowing us to experience any human subject as flawed and full, and therefore alive.

And so if I had that Iron Range Documentation project to do over again I would imagine the difficult old Iron Ranger was my uncle. Then I would aim for a complex portrait, that included, yes, the ugliness of some of his words and world views, as well as the hands-on beauties of his years working the gears and the dirt of the late industrial revolution, and including my own discomfort over what I perceived to be my alienation from these small towns where gays and lesbians were still in the closet, and my awareness of the ways my discomfort might skew the portraits I created of others. I would, as well, include portraits of the lesbians I snuck away from the documentation project to have dinner with, in the home of the lesbian friend-of-a-friend whose neighbors did not know she was a lesbian, and I would include stories of the Iron Range families of some of these lesbians, families who undoubtedly included a few of the old uncles who my photographer colleague might have liked to use his camera to make ugly. I would also write of the russet tones of the open pit mines and the way that old foul-mouth ranger danced on his toes on the way out of the polka mass, and perhaps, too, speculations of whether (though I will never know) my grandfather had, as an immigrant child, learned to polka on this ground between the boat and Chicago, his father a miner, his mother a cook in a rooming house for Croat miners, the antecedents of the ones still leaning against some mining town bar, face illumined russet in the low light of afternoon,

fingers grasping a cold bottle of beer, yammering an old-time story I would, were I there, either hate or love to hear.

## Works Cited

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