The Distance to Delight: A Graduate Student Enters the Field

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Abstract

This article documents the first stage of the qualitative research process: "entering the field." In it, the author, a young graduate student, uses portraiture to describe her journey to find a "research site" and then establish a "research relationship" with this community, a town in rural Arkansas. This portrait offers a critical exploration of the author's attempt to position herself in the field—locating herself through labels of race, geography, and occupation—and understand the layered identities and positions of community members. In struggling to build these relationships, the author questions the clinical language commonly used to describe the rich and complicated relationships often developed through qualitative work.

Keywords

qualitative research, portraiture, rural education

Like many graduate students, I arrived at graduate school with a clear research interest—the relationship shared by rural school and rural community—but I struggled to find a research method and a research site. After three years of experimenting with various techniques, trying and then abandoning languages and practices that felt reductive and clinical, I found a method: portraiture, "a genre of inquiry and representation that seeks to join science and art . . . [,] that blurs the boundaries of aesthetics and empiricism in an effort to capture the complexity, dynamics, and subtlety of human experience and organizational life" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv). Portraiture relies upon "thick description," upon a deep understanding of context, upon dialogue between "actor" and "portraitist." It requires explicit attention to positionality—not to remove a researcher's influence but, instead, to identify, understand, and balance this influence.[1]

Soon after I discovered portraiture, I found a research site, too, a story I tell here. What follows is a portrait—my first portrait—of an emerging relationship between a research site and beginning researcher.

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I am lost and running late. I've tried I-240 North, I-240 South, I-240 East, and I-240 West, and none seem to lead to I-40 West. I flew into Memphis but then somehow lost my way to Arkansas. I'm trying to find Dorothy, a woman whom I've spoken with only once before: she's waiting for me at a Fred's Discount Store in Forrest City, Arkansas.

After a series of wrong turns, I finally speed under a sign for I-40 West. I'm still late, but I take the time to run into the Arkansas Welcome Center and grab a free map. My eyes scan the state, trying to locate Forrest City. I work westward from Memphis, finally discover it several inches in, and run back to the car. The landscape is a green blur outside my car windows as I speed past, a rate fueled by my lateness and three cups of coffee.

I laid awake for a long time last night in my Cambridge, Massachusetts, bed, unable to find a comfortable spot between the blankets tangled around my feet and the anxious thoughts surfacing in my head. An open duffel bag sat on the floor next to the bed, stuffed full with clothing and books and shoes. I spent the night straightening my sheets and wondering how it would feel to be on the other side of these next two days, to have finished this trip to Arkansas. I knew I should probably be more concerned with the outcome of this trip—would I finally find a research site?—but instead, this close to my flight down South, I could only think about how I would spend two days alone with someone I didn't know, someplace I didn't know.

Now, when I finally reach signs for Forrest City, I pull off the highway and try to ignore the questions and doubts flashing through my mind. I follow Dorothy's directions,

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counting lights and ticking off the landmarks she named—through one red light, past the bright neons and yellow-striped parking lots of McDonalds and Wendy's, through another traffic light. I swing into the parking lot of Fred's Discount Store, pulling up to the doors. I quickly jump out to greet Dorothy; with little discussion, she locks her Fred's bag in her parked minivan, we both climb into my car, and then we're driving again. It isn't until later that I get a close look at this woman—brown skinned, round and animated and solid, surprisingly short, a gray cloud of hair adding several inches to her presence. For now, though, I only hear her voice, as regular as the mile markers flashing past the window.

Reaching the Field

I first got Dorothy's name through Lavina, and Lavina's name through Page, and Page's name through Rachel. Rachel—the president of a national organization supporting local, rural advocacy and grassroots organizing groups—I had emailed a month-and-a-half ago. For the past two years I have sat in my Cambridge apartment, scattering email like buckshot across the Southeast. I send these emails—carefully worded queries politely asking the recipients about their connection with a particular rural community or school system and then inquiring whether, if it wasn't too much trouble, they would be willing to talk with me about their work—and I picture each email landing in an inbox, each inbox accessed at a computer, each computer sitting at a desk. The desks are dotted across the Southeast: perched on Appalachian mountaintops, strewn across the green flatness of the Mississippi Delta, nestled in the valleys and crevices of fertile, rolling pastureland.

Rachel had been the recipient of one of these emails, but this was a targeted email, guided by the personal recommendation of a mutual acquaintance. Rachel had put me in touch with Page, an organizer in the Southeast, who had given me the number of Lavina, the president of Arkansas Advocates for Community and Rural Education (ACRE), who told me to contact Dorothy, ACRE's lead organizer, who has agreed to spend the next two days with me, taking me to a few towns with local ACRE chapters. And so here I am, following Dorothy and her story, a graduate student desperately trying to "enter the field."

Recognizing the Field

Dorothy and I are driving to the town of Elaine where Dorothy has a meeting that night, and we're taking the long way there. Dorothy's voice is directive—"Go through that next light," and then, "Now, see where that gas station is? You're going to make a right there," followed by, "And take a look at those houses when we pass . . . this is the rich part of town"—telling me where to turn, what destination to anticipate, what detail to notice. The narrative is continuous—a text that accompanies the landscape we speed through. Very soon we're beyond the neon advertisements of Forrest City, and now it's all green flatness outside our windows. I imagine the view from an airplane, squares of green, bordered by thin ribbons of dusty road.

We weave in and out of towns—a small stand of homes, accompanied by a gas station or convenience store, maybe situated at a bump in the road where railroad tracks overgrown with weeds cut across. These little interruptions to the green farmland feature the same homes with sagging porches—once white, now dingy with years of loving use or benign neglect—surrounded by a puddle of yard, often scattered with children's toys or clusters of yellow wildflowers or old trucks missing wheels and an engine. In the bigger towns we see the neon again, the neon text of discounts, sales, rebates, loans, foreclosures, and bail bonds.

Dorothy provides a steady stream of information about the towns we pass—"This town's Black," or "This one's White," or "Now this town, they've had some problems." Through her organizing work, she knows many of these places intimately, and she rattles through their complicated accounts—complex narratives of local politics and statewide mandates, racialized histories and a deteriorating agricultural economy.

We pass schools in these towns. Some, built with stacks of white concrete blocks, have a long parking lot in front and "portables"—classrooms in trailers—in back. Now, at 4:00 p.m., with the children gone for the day, they look desolate in the stretch of the afternoon sun. Many are surrounded by low-rent apartments or a row of convenience stores, similarly quiet. These are "receiving schools," Dorothy explains, facilities that have gained students when nearby community schools closed, or "consolidated." I can't help but think how sterile, how impersonal, these facilities look—the only indication of life is a glimpse of graffiti on the white building, partially hidden by another concrete wall.

She also points out other buildings—buildings that are recognizable as schools, schools that are now closed. These structures seem to vary more in appearance. Some come from the 1950s-tradition of school design, rectangles long and low. Others are more modern, made of brick, boasting eaves and peaked roofs, covered with windows of various shapes and sizes. All of these schools are small, though, and all are located within a town, rather than on its fringes. I'm surprised by the good condition of these buildings. Some, Dorothy tells me, are used by the community for church services, but many simply sit empty.

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It's a narrative I've heard before. I heard it when I taught in Tennessee—in the predominantly poor, almost entirely

White rural town of Vanleer, a town with one stoplight and dozens of smoke-ringed tobacco barns, a town of four hundred citizens, countless churches, endless potlucks, and zero anonymity, a town with an abiding love for its school. It was a story that began with, "Well, this school's been here long as I know," and then got around to, "Now if this town were to ever lose this school . . ." and then just sort of trailed off, metaphors of death and loss lingering in the silence. It was this story that intrigued me, stayed with me, and echoed in my head as I entered the Harvard Graduate School of Education and now sat in the lecture halls of a doctoral program.

Seeing the Field

After passing through a number of towns, Dorothy announces that she wants to take me to Snow Lake, an all-Black community on a remote stretch of land tucked into a corner of the lake. This is the first real destination of the afternoon; it becomes the one stop we have to fit in before arriving at the night's meeting. She wants me to see the 70-mile bus ride the children of this community endure, the long, slow trek around the lake to one of those overcrowded concrete facilities we passed awhile back. And, she simply explains, she wants me to see the lake.

It appears when our highway stops abruptly at its shore, and we must turn onto a curvy road that traces the lake's edges. It is unlike any lake—or any thing—I have ever seen. It's something between a lake and a bayou, and it's absolutely enormous. Water stretches in every direction, but the lake is dotted with trees, towering cypresses that stretch straight up from the middle of the flat, blue stillness. The lake's surface is patterned by the cypress knobs poking from underneath, the strong trunks, the dark clusters of shadows formed by the trees' small canopies, and the long expanses of clear sunlight. The contrast of these forms, the clarity of the water—it pulls my eyes from the road ahead of me.

We get lost when the road veers from the lake's edge and then crumbles into gravel. We finally come upon a small side road with four or five houses surrounded by dusty, harvested fields. Dorothy tells me to pull into a driveway. I do, trying to ignore the reel of bad horror movies featuring weary travelers and crazy locals playing through my head, and then Dorothy tells me that *I* need to go ask for directions—"This is a White house." I have no idea how she knows this, but I oblige and I climb awkwardly from the car.

I make my way between faded lawn ornaments to the door of the trailer. I can see something blocking the entrance from the inside, and the concrete stairs leading to the door are covered with dead plants in cracked plastic pots. I can hear two voices yelling inside the house, and I glance back at Dorothy watching me from the car, her eyes barely visible above the dashboard. I lean over the plastic shards and bare branches and knock hard.

The shouting stops. For several long seconds nothing happens, and then I hear a voice again, this time yelling from behind the house—"What?" A woman—indeed, a White woman—emerges from behind the house, and I explain that we're lost, looking to get to Snow Lake. I wonder how she'll receive this; will she ask me why a White girl is looking for a Black town? Will her response be phrased in strings of racial epithets? Can she see Dorothy in the car? Where is that other voice I heard yelling?

But she laughs, an abrupt, short snicker: "Well, you're here. You're in Snow Lake." "This is Snow Lake?" I ask. She seems to take my incredulity as a comment on the reality of these five houses and replies a bit defensively, "Yes, this is Snow Lake. We've been here for years." I ask if there's another Snow Lake, one a bit larger, a community with children that are bused into the big town for school, a community located on the lake itself. I don't mention that it's a Black town I'm looking for. No, this is it, she tells me; this is the only Snow Lake. I climb back in the car, reporting all of this to Dorothy. She also laughs, but this is an ironic laugh, not altogether surprised that, for this White woman, the Black Snow Lake doesn't exist.

We never make it to Snow Lake, and I wonder how many towns I never saw in Tennessee.

Locating Myself in the Field

As the meeting in Elaine finishes, Dorothy can't remember my name; she wants to introduce me to a latecomer, and she tries to say my name but can't pronounce it. After I provide it to those gathered in the church at the edge of this Black town, Dorothy describes me as a teacher from rural Tennessee. The next day, hours of conversation and many miles later, when she introduces me in a White town, tripping up only a little on the pronunciation of Mara, she calls me a researcher from Harvard. I wonder how she chooses these descriptors. Is she shielding the people we meet, thinking ahead to which label could be more threatening? Is she protective of me, knowing which identity may cause people to feel threatened and grow defensive or suspicious, which identity may foster connection and allow them to open up and talk? Or does it have little to do with me, choices instead based on how she wants to position herself in reference to a particularly identified me or decisions made by criteria I do not even think to consider?

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I choose my labels carefully. When I first introduced myself to Lavina and Dorothy, I raced through "I'm a graduate student at Harvard" and lingered on "I taught third grade in the rural South" and "I grew up down here in Louisiana and Georgia, and my family still lives here"—figuring that, if I'm looking to do research in the South, the

label of a recognized academic institution could lend credentials, but the labels identifying me as a Southerner and a teacher would provide credibility.

This isn't my first experience with multiple—and perhaps inconsistent—identities. In fact, while in Tennessee, I was christened "Confederate Yankee" by the father of my best friend and teaching colleague. He had meant to call me a *Connecticut* Yankee, but it came out wrong—Confederate Yankee, syllables stretched long by his Southern drawl. My friend Michelle laughed, amused by her father's slip. It was actually a better title for me, she claimed, because I was born in the North, raised in the South, educated back in New Hampshire and Connecticut, and finding my home there in Tennessee. Confederate Yankee was perfect, she said, and I liked it, too: it was an affectionate title, a show of acceptance and belonging.

But now that I'm in Cambridge Michelle calls me "Harvard" more than she calls me "Confederate Yankee." And my sister in Atlanta will often end a political argument with, "But, Mara, you're at Harvard," a reminder that I'm somehow out of touch with reality, that I'm distant, that I couldn't possibly understand the way things are for her, other Southerners, or, in her mind, the general public.

I have grown familiar with the implications of these labels, and I carefully select which identity to highlight in a particular interaction. Sometimes, though, I become abruptly aware of identities and politics these labels call up that I had failed to anticipate. I'm also part of a Harvard-sponsored research project in Mississippi, this one studying Southern Echo, a well-established, Black, education-organizing group. At the beginning of every interaction, I select the descriptors that I think will set the interviewee at ease—legitimacy gained with a little bit of "Harvard" and a lot of "Southerner." I'm beginning to understand Mississippi's story, a Southern story but one that I am less familiar, less comfortable, with: Whites often continue the oppression of the slavery and Jim Crow eras by controlling the public school system, "serving" as its superintendents, deciding its policies through legislation like the appropriately named Minimal Education Program, controlling the fate of thousands of Black public school students—all the while sending their own children to private academies, supplemented by the donations of wealthy landowners and casino owners and occasional bonuses from the public coffers. I find the public/private system in Mississippi repugnant, of course, and my fieldnotes are filled with details of the atrocities committed through the perpetuation of this system.

It's only later, in the fourth interview of a second data-collection trip in Mississippi, somewhere during the chain of follow-up questions and the frenzied scribble of notes, that I am stopped short by a realization—I am that White Southern private school kid. I sit there, not hearing the interviewee anymore, and I finally remember that I am White, I am Southern, and I went to a private school. It's an identity, a label, which I had hidden out of consciousness and sheltered from the harsh light of this Mississippi story. I feel sudden shame, both for the meaning of this identity and my slowness to recognize it. And my mind races through the implications—my complicity in these dual systems, my perpetuation of educational inequity—and then it trips over another thought. When I do introduce myself as a Southerner, a White Southerner, what identities—unintended identities—have I conjured in the minds of those I've interacted with? In an effort to set minds at ease, to establish connection, what distances, what gulfs, have I instead created? What does it mean to be a *Confederate* Yankee?

And in graduate school the distance between me and the rural South, both Black and White, seems even wider. Here, it's the rural South rather than me that gets labeled, and, here, the "rural South" label is risky, for here it carries political implications. During my first-year doctoral seminar, I heard lists of facts and statistics about urban education, read pages and pages of reports and arguments about city schools, never hearing any comment on the rural schools twenty percent of American children attend. The little rural research I could find, fitting neatly within the confines of eight small library shelves, focused mostly on the "backwardness" of these schools—curricula offering little more than the "three Rs"; staffs made up of underqualified, overaged teachers; institutions rife with racism and provincialism; students and parents caring about nothing beyond the Friday night game. When rural communities did find themselves a part of current debate, confused and blinking in the public glare, it was often the fanatically religious, homeschooling zealots who occupied the stage. And, when I was really honest with myself, I knew that I held my own characterizations of rural education, perhaps more benign but just as simplistic; I had even picked Vanleer, Tennessee, to teach and live in for its fulfillment of my definition of the rural South—a small, remote town found when the road ended abruptly at a red barn and a surprised cow.

On all sides the caricatures were evident, the labels salient. Here I was, a White woman, born up North and raised in the South, a graduate of a New England college and then a teacher in a small rural Tennessee town, a doctoral student studying at Harvard and living in the city of Cambridge. And I wanted to work with communities like those I had taught in—tight-knit, poor-in-resources-but-rich-in-relationships, pasture-filled towns that talked of their little school with affection, with pride, with fierce loyalty—towns that deserved, I felt, more educational resources, more respect, and more attention than they received. Something worked in these towns, something was special about the relationship between school and community, and it was worth understanding, worth talking about, and worth preserving. This is what I had found in Vanleer, and this is what I hoped to find again, another one of these

tight-knit towns, this time a place to research rather than to teach.

For me, now was the time, that point in the life cycle of a graduate student, to "enter the field"—or as it is more often, more crudely known, to "gain access"—to hone my research question and then find a place to answer it. But now that it was time, now that my buckshot emails had finally garnered a response, I simply wondered how I would manage the distance, now that I was toting all of these labels. How would I—a graduate student with a complicated history of associations to North and South, rural and urban, teaching and research—enter the field—a small, rural Southern town?

Finding the Right Field

It's among all of these stops, somewhere within these hundreds of miles, that Dorothy and I visit Delight. We stop there for lunch, joining Lavina at a diner, a light blue cinderblock building with faded white lettering. A buffet, filled with warm piles of fried chicken and silver tins of mac-and-cheese and canned green beans, sits along one wood-paneled wall under a pink-and-blue fake-flower arrangement, and the other patrons watch us make our way to our table. As we eat, Dorothy and Lavina explain the town's struggle to fight off consolidation—momentarily staved off through the community's overwhelming approval of a tax increase, now looming under the threat of low enrollment. We finish our meal, talk to a couple of town residents in the parking lot, and then head over to the school. It's two slow blocks there, driving through a short corridor of small shops and neat businesses and waiting at the leisurely, diagonal paths of a handful of people crossing in front of us.

The campus is grassy, and its organization as a cluster of small buildings connected with covered walkways makes it seem bigger than it is. We meet Kathy, a Black woman with a quick, bright laugh; she's the school's principal and, for the moment, the district's superintendent, as the current superintendent recovers from an automobile accident. Kathy updates Dorothy and Lavina on the health of the ailing superintendent and the status of enrollment numbers, and our conversation fills the intervals between visits from students needing medicine or dropping off a note, teachers delivering a message or asking a quick question. Then we head over to the gym to find the basketball coach, a resident of Delight and the president of the local ACRE chapter. He's more reserved, making eye contact only with Dorothy, especially after he mistakes the "Harvard" in Dorothy's introduction of me for "Henderson" and tells me that his wife went there, too—a misapprehension that Dorothy is quick to set right. Cyndi, another teacher and organizer whom a student helps us track down, is more eager to talk to me, her words quick and excited, punctuated by small movements of her eyebrows or chin; she wants to hear about my teaching experience in Tennessee, and whether we faced consolidation there.

Dorothy is quieter now, only adding particulars to the bits of narrative that Kathy and Coach and Cyndi each begin. These details fall together into a story. In Arkansas, they explain, a district can be incorporated into another existing district, or two districts can be consolidated together, for a number of reasons, a mandate announced by then-Governor Huckabee just a few years ago. Three of these reasons have become the most common routes to consolidation: deteriorating facilities, financial distress, and low enrollment. Should any district face any of these conditions for more than two years, the district risks consolidation and its schools risk closure, its students bused to another facility. The state does not look at a school's test scores, nor does it consider how important that school is to the economic or social fabric of the community in which it is located. And, statewide, Lavina adds, these apparently uncomplicated policies look less forthright, for it is poor communities and African American communities that have faced a disproportionate number of school closures. In Delight, a White town located between two tiny Black communities, all three communities sending their children to the one K-12 school in this district, residents recently thwarted a fiscal consolidation threat by overwhelmingly passing a measure to increase the millage tax that funds the school, a campaign supported by parents, the town's small businesses, and community members alike. But now, only one year later, consolidation endangers the school again, this time because the enrollment has dipped sixteen students too low. And so, they explain, they're looking into their options, partnering with a local developer to provide affordable housing to teachers and other public employees, expanding their foreign exchange student program, finding ways to publicize their high test scores in an effort to attract more choice students, and joining other groups in the state to fight the legislation. Publicity, Kathy later tells me, could only help.

Hesitating in the Field

I'm fascinated by the story that I'm hearing; in many ways, it's a recognizable narrative of unquestioning devotion to a school. These teachers and residents are eager to talk, to tell their story, and I'm more than willing to listen. A school with a committed and energetic staff, an attentive and dependent community, an integrated and high-performing student body—this school defies all of the stereotypes of rural Southern education. The injustice of the community's situation is made only more stark by the very idyllic, very Main-Street-America appearance of Delight. This is the story of rural education that needs telling.

But I have doubts. This isn't the all-White community that I taught and lived in, and I don't see the familiar,

traditional, assumed division between Black and White either; instead, I see both Black and White students on campus, and I see a mostly White teaching staff under the trusted leadership of a Black principal. I don't know what to make of all this; this isn't the story I know from Tennessee, and it's not the one I've heard at Harvard, either. I also don't know how to position myself, which identity to choose. Do I describe myself as a longtime Southerner? A university researcher? And how do they see me, my White skin, and my notepad?

Also, Delight doesn't seem to fit the customary notion of a reserved, reactive small town. Here, it seems they're interested in me—and my Harvard identity—for the possibility of political leverage. Who, I wonder, would be "gaining access"?

Entering the Field

Before leaving the school, we visit a house adjacent to the school's property, usually occupied by the principal or some school administrator. Kathy lives here now, and many of the bedrooms sit empty. Dorothy tells me how much I'm going to like the backyard, and when we get back there, she tells me to take off my shoes and stand in the grass. I had mentioned to her the day before that this was what I missed most about Tennessee—being able to walk around in barefeet.

I slide my feet out of my sandals and step onto the grass. The cool blades slide between my toes, and I can feel the dusty soil clinging to my sweaty soles. My feet remember this—standing in my backyard in Tennessee, following the dog as he sniffed the yard's perimeter, stepping high through the dewy grass taking the trash out back, running quick across the hot pavement to reach the coolness of the neighbor's yard. Should I choose a research site because my feet feel right?

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Later, I do follow up with folks in Delight. After long phone calls and email exchanges, frequent discussions of the details of my work and theirs, and many assurances that I have a place to stay, Delight will become my research site. I will continue to talk to Dorothy, too, of course—a conversation that has become a long, discursive dialogue about community organizing, about race in the rural South, about educational injustice and educational promise. And sometimes we will just chat about her kids and grandkids or the church hall she's decorating for Christmas or my life in Cambridge.

Right now, though, leaving Arkansas after two days and 850 miles in the car, I watch the green flatness and wonder if I've "entered the field," if I've "gained access." And then this question is pushed out by other questions, the questions that occupy me for the next hundred miles—how has Delight escaped the usual dynamics of the racialized South? Where does a town find sixteen kids to attend its school? Why are the people of Delight so devoted to their school? Will they be able to tell me, to show me? And will I be able to listen, to see this town for all its particularity, for all it offers? How will I—a graduate student with a complicated history of associations to North and South, rural and urban, teaching and research—fulfill this relationship with this small, rural Southern town?

But for now all I can do is search out I-40 East, with questions running through my head and plans to return in a couple months, with my feet, now stuffed in shoes pressing hard on the gas pedal, still dusty from the grass in Delight.

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Note

1. The qualitative method of social science portraiture was developed by sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, and she first employed the method in her 1983 book *The good high school: Portraits of character and culture*. Her inquiry, countering the long-standing research tradition of documenting failure, explores "goodness" in six high schools, offering an analysis that was both "critical *and* generous" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p. 6). In 1997 she published *The art and science of portraiture* with Jessica Hoffman Davis to describe the methodological and epistemological understandings of portraiture and the necessary role of a researcher's "voice" in creating a portrait, and, since then, others have used this method to "capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 3). Portraiture challenges the notion of researcher neutrality or objectivity, considers the ethics of research relationships, and gives aesthetics a place in the research product; as such, it parallels qualitative methods like critical ethnography (Madison, 2005), which focuses on exposing hidden power structures, and autoethnography (Ellis, 2003), a method involving self-narrative. Klaus Witz has addressed the use of essentialist portraiture to understand a participant's consciousness in a series of articles published by *Qualitative Inquiry*: see "The Participant as Ally and Essentialist Portraiture" (2006), "Consciousness and the Study of Human Life and Experience: 'Higher Aspects' and Their Nature" (with Lee & Huang, 2010), and "Understanding Another Person and Cooley's Principle of Sympathetic Introspection: Consciousness in the Study of Human Life and Experience II" (with Bae, 2011).

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Bio

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