Marginalia and Meaning: Off-Site/Sight/Cite Points of Reference for Extended Trajectories in Learning

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Abstract
This study argues that drawing upon off-site/sight/cite points of reference affords a space for extended trajectories of learning and the cultivation of rich and atypical personal meaning unavailable within the terrain and climes of typical schooling frameworks. This paper continues the author's effort to establish the efficacy of a poststructural and poetic aesthetic in qualitative research writing.

Off-Site/Sight/Cite Positions
In order to write this piece, I will have to work the outside margins.
In order to write this piece I will have to transgress research propriety.
(I shouldn't have said that out loud.)

I have a dilemma. I have been a classroom teacher in elementary education and I value greatly the efforts involved in traditional curriculum planning and schooling, and yet I suspect that the bulk of what is learned, of what has blood and breath meaning to the student, is assembled outside of the classroom. And I suspect that what counts most to the classroom student is not the take-home assignment, not the in-class notes, but rather the doodles in the margins of a loose-leaf, the sketches inside the rear cover of the notebook, the ill-formed thoughts at the back of the brain that the teacher rarely cares to look at.
(I shouldn't have given up my location so easily.)

The editors of this richly themed issue of the Journal of Social Theory in Art Education have sketched out homologous off-site/sight/cite positions that triangulate the realm of the learner I am most familiar with. The out-of-site learner, the My Side of the Mountain learner,¹ making sense of what others choose to overlook; the out-of-sight learner, making relevance of those who are or that which is socially constructed to be invisible: the stigmatized, the impoverished, the adolescent, to name a few; the out-of-cite learner, making sense of texts outside the canon, of images outside the popular, of identities outside the norm, of voices outside the auditorium. As I write of these notions, I realize that there is a likely genesis for my appreciation of the given theme: I was born in the vicinity of this off-site/sight/cite confluence and yet I have been made whole. I have lacked nothing—no intellectual grounding, no insightful perspective, no contextual evidence—that I could not plant or grow on my own. I have lived well off of that which has been my territorial inheritance. As I write of these notions, I also realize that I have chosen to teach in this wide-open confluence where so many more dwell than the traditional educational community is equipped to acknowledge.

(They'll follow me for sure. They'll bring their developments. Spoil the pristine earth. I'm leading them straight to the place that has been my home.)

Afterschool and Saturday Program Art Classes

I began my walk as a professional educator as a lowly afterschool teacher. I know I was at the lower rung of the totem pole for two reasons. For the most part, it was evident in our position in the nether regions of the castle-like building that housed Hunter College Elementary School (HCES) in New York City. We were in the basement. The main office of the Hunter "Clubhouse" extended-day program, along with the classrooms and spaces made available to us so that the Little Room students (our Kindergarteners through 1st graders) and the Big Room
students (our 2nd through 5th graders) could safely congregate, have snack, take their classes, and be picked up by their parents and caregivers, were all consigned to the nether regions of the school building.

Secondly, this experience didn’t count\(^2\). I started off as an instructor in the program, teaching Drawing, Painting, Poetry, 3-D Design, etc. and eventually became its director, and yet throughout my tenure at HCES many parents evidently viewed what we did as a babysitting service until they were able to get off of work and pick up their kids from the school. Furthermore, yellow sheets of paper from the NYC Board of Education told me that my experience teaching art to children, day in and day out, during the school year and over portions of the summer counted not a whit, nor jot, nor title toward state certification. It was meaningless work—except for the fact that it was filled with extraordinary meaning-making activity. Children made out-of-site discoveries in the basement of their very own school building as they were afforded opportunities in Clubhouse to paint and draw, to sing and dance, to perform and build stage sets, and to create their own poetry or video games in a place where such exploration was welcome. And for those who needed time to breathe and play outdoors, this was afforded as well.

While I was teaching in the basement, I created a class called **Picture This!** The premise was to offer the child an opportunity to connect recognitions stored up in memory and the saliencies in their burgeoning experiential encounters with the world, to simple word concepts using a methodology of marker and crayon. This was research by the children in a rudimentary form, but research nonetheless\(^3\).
The recognitions of the youngsters in this afterschool class were *re-cognitions*, visual reinterpretations of previous cognitive activity, generating new learning from out-of-site experiences. Re-cognition recreates, customizes, abandons, dismantles, and refines memories into a self-awareness that changes its shape with time and circumstance. Such changes of mind can be evolutionary and incremental or, in the cases of the stories that suddenly enthrall and overwhelm our attention, the changes can be revolutionary—but whatever the case, these changes of mind can be evidenced in the drawings of children.

Afterschool activities are a place where “in-site” classroom learning, carried over from the regular school day upstairs, may find egress in projects and activities designed and managed by the students themselves. Such out-of-site meaning-making translations are reminiscent of my first teaching experience, while still an undergraduate art student (and former architecture student) teaching Sculpture and 3-D Design to targeted high school students in Saturday Program at The Cooper Union. These students, with little access to arts education in their own schools, traveled in on public transportation to our...
landmark college building in lower Manhattan to explore the other side of the mountain, the side of the mountain where their own inquiry, their own facility with materials, their own willingness to take risks, culminated in products and processes that they themselves could name valid. To name a methodology, or to name a final product is a powerful thing. The following object (see Figure 2) was named a “chair” by a student I no longer remember, and then left behind as a marker that a naming had taken place in the corridors of the Cooper Union, the experience of which was evidently more important to the student than the papier-mâché object itself. I photographed it as a marker of the making of a chair, a form of mark-making more important to me as a representation of the experience of teaching than of the object itself.

![Figure 2.](image)

Out-of-site learning—whether a student learning to learn or a teacher learning to teach—is exceptional in its efficiency, ardent, and bounty when that learner is allowed ownership over the design, means, and outcomes of their own labor. In Spring 2005, in my final year as a visual arts classroom teacher during, I created a new afterschool course for 3rd and 4th graders titled *The Master/Apprentice Portrait-making*
Workshop. This took place during in-site school hours at The School at Columbia University. During our time together we created a collaborative workspace, where the children drew constantly and assisted one another with their drawings, where I assisted them with their portraits and they assisted me with my own portraits of them. Every major project undertaken in the class took several weeks to complete. One particular 3rd grader, named Tal Vicario, stands out in his rendering of the “pictures and facts” on his side of the curricular mountain: the side where learners cut their own clearings in the surrounding chaos of imagery, fueling a vision of a sound world, and feeding a native facility, a need, to draw together perceived reality and imagined representations—the touchstones—of that reality 4. His mother Blair, who happens to be a research psychiatrist at a New York hospital, took the time to carefully relate to me Tal’s development in these collaborative off-site spaces as she was picking him up at the end of our long work days. In those weary moments she communicated her passion for the growth of her child, quietly shouting out the reason for what Ms. Gomez (my assistant), the kids and I were attempting to do. For that reason I have moved her correspondence with me from an off-site position and opened up a space for her here.

I have a wonderful son named Tal (age 9) who has many talents. However, fine motor control and visual perception were not two of them. As a child, he never drew—ever. It was unclear whether this was due to lack of interest, lack of skill, or some combination of the two. His passion was baseball, and you didn’t need to draw to play shortstop.

As a result, when he told me one day that his only complaint with his new school was that he did not have enough art time I was startled. Even more startling was when he signed up for “Master
Portrait Drawing” as an afterschool class. He chose this class even though it required attendance twice a week for 2 hour sessions each, and it prevented him from playing afterschool basketball with his best friend. I kept my mouth shut as he filled out the afterschool form, but I wondered if he would even last one week.

In fact, he lasted all semester, he chose an extra week of art at the end of the school year, and he lamented the fact that his teacher was moving away and would not be at school the following year. For the first time in his life, Tal liked drawing and looked forward to art class.

The class itself was straight-forward. The children were instructed in basic drawing techniques and different media (e.g., charcoal, pencils, watercolors, oil). They then brought in photographs of family members and began to draw. What was not straight-forward was the effect of the class on Tal.

The first thing I noticed as Tal worked week after week on his family portraits was that he began to notice visual details in the external world. Historically, this was a child who struggled to discern E from F or to find something in the refrigerator right in front of him. As he worked on his portraits in art class, he began to be more observant with his eyes outside of art class, pointing things out to me as we walked through the city and reading billboards and store marquees. It is as though drawing helped him open his eyes to the visual world, and he was looking at it for the first time, instead of blocking it out.

The second thing I noticed was his increasing ability to see both the forest and the trees. Historically, Tal had a tendency toward tunnel-vision: when he noticed a detail, he saw nothing else. He could get caught on one word in a sentence and miss the overall meaning. However, in art class, Tal was learning how to draw his brother’s face, which required that he draw his brother’s two eyes, nose, mouth and teeth all in the right proportion to each other. Then, he drew his mother’s eyes in his mother’s face, his father’s ears on his father’s head,
etc. To make his family portraits look like his family, Tal had to move back and forth between the forest (i.e., the overall effect) and the trees (i.e., the specific facial features). I began to notice his increasing ability to do this not only with his drawing but with his thinking as well. Whether drawing taught him to do this or whether he was ready to do this and drawing was a way to practice combining the part with the whole, I don’t know. However, the growth in his conceptual flexibility was quite dramatic.

Finally, I found that Tal could express himself in his art. A passionate soul, Tal has strong and direct emotions. There is no ambiguity when he is happy, mad, or sad. However, most schoolwork did not give him a chance to reveal himself. How does one express sadness memorizing multiplication tables? Likewise, writing a sentence with third grade writing skills was more likely to generate emotion (i.e., frustration) than to express it. Moreover, Tal had many feelings that he was not yet ready to put into words (e.g., anger at a best friend’s betrayal, fear of bombs on subways). No wonder Tal liked recess and sports: here were activities where emotional expression (i.e., the joy of victory and the agony of defeat) was integral with the actions themselves. What was interesting to watch was to see how Tal learned that drawing was another activity in which he could freely express himself. This particularly struck me one night, when there was a fire in the street outside our apartment. There was an explosion in the gas pipes underneath the street that had in turn set a car on fire. As a family, we watched this outside our window, both drawn to the event and a bit fearful about what would happen next (e.g., would the car explode? Would we need to evacuate our apartment?). At a certain moment, Tal said to his brother “come on, let’s draw this” and ran to his room to get paper and pencil. He drew what he saw from our 16th floor apartment, and I saw how drawing helped him to organize the event in his mind and to process his fear of it. He brought this drawing into class the next day, as his way of telling his friends. This was a first.
In sum, art class fueled Tal's cognitive and emotional development and facilitated his making certain conceptual leaps as he approached his ninth birthday. Few other classes in the curriculum fostered these same skills (i.e., visual acuity, discerning the sum and the parts, emotional development) in a non-verbal and motoric way. Always supportive of the arts for their aesthetic value, I gained a new appreciation for their importance as part of an elementary school curriculum. (H. Blair Simpson, M.D., Ph.D., personal correspondence, October 10, 2005)

St. John's Place

While an out-of-site-learner struggles to make sense of experiences outside the bounds and purview of the regular classroom, such as in the case of Tal's car fire drawing, the out-of-sight learner struggles to make sense of meanings that populate their lives even as they are rendered socially invisible by their more affluent neighbors, even as they are ostracized as socially unbearable by their fellow citizens, even as they are rendered as inconsequential texts by an educational hegemony that does not suffer the commonplace, the vernacular, telling stories of meaningful learning and development standing independent of rites, requisites, and all the other R's mandated for schooling and social achievement.

Not too far from the low-income Crown Heights neighborhood I grew up in, the landscape dropped away into the shell-shocked poverty of East New York and Brownsville. A family friend, Eleanora, lived as a teenager in the frightening poverty that was just a few blocks away if you walked straight down a deteriorating stretch on St. John's Place. She lived with her mother in a building that, if it wasn't already condemned, should have been. Infested with vermin, it stood almost dumbfounded and almost totally alone on a square block where most of the other neighboring apartment buildings had already been torn
down. The neighborhood was far less safe than the building. I visited often however, yet always with necessary caution.

Eleanora comes to mind because the deficiencies of her initial learning experience were pushed out-of-sight, out of mind by so many. The imprint of that learning experience became visible to me one day in a casual conversation we had while walking on Lincoln Place. I was well into my college years and, as I recall, Eleanora had just graduated high school and started attending a local community college. She mentioned with great excitement how well she had done on a recent test. I asked her what grade she was given and she said she received a grade just over a 65—just passing. Within her experience, her grade was cause for celebration because it had at least surpassed a failing grade! I was truly taken aback. How had her teachers throughout grade school failed to see the oppressively low ceiling of expectation they were constructing for so many of our children? Why do we suppress the aspirations of the poor? Why is it so easy to obstruct one another’s view that the impoverished share a desire for learning and development equal to that of the child born with greater economic privileges? Why have the lives brought momentarily into focus by two recent hurricanes now tumbled out of the view of the camera?6

I undertook to help this bright young lady study for her tests and raise the ceiling pressing on her shoulders. I helped her edit her papers before turning them in. But I also collaborated with her on a shared work of art. My exercises in collaborative artmaking began as a vehicle for opening up clearings for others to wander about on my side of the mountain for a while, so that they in turn, like the Jean Craighead George character Sam Gritely, might identify a tree outside of the familiar that was deemed worth hollowing out, worth calling home.

Prior to the collaborative effort, I had shot and printed a brief black & white photo essay of Eleanora in the small apartment she shared with her mother, Mary. One of those photos lingered in my imagination; the light cast from her gated bedroom window played across her face
in such a way that it appeared the light was emanating from within her. And I knew it was so. The photograph thus cried out to become a hand-wrought portrait, to be translated into new energy and form. In the following image (see Figure 3), one can see the poem Eleanora wrote along the margin of the clay, soil, and oil pastel portrait I constructed. She was actually quite tentative about revealing herself. Ultimately, I opened up a space for her meanings to be made poetry, for her poetry to be made visible, and for her new visibility to make her inner visions known.

![Figure 3](image-url)

Today, Eleanora has emerged as a registered nurse and mother of two children, married to an electrical engineer, while her oldest child—my godson, Donovan—is an absolutely level-headed young man gifted in both mathematics and science who, though having just begun college, is already planning on pursuing advanced engineering degrees. Meanings wrought from an impoverished start in life, desires for the unattainable, for the improbable, once invisible, have come fully into view.
Extended Trajectory
(written on the occasion of my doctoral defense)

Veering sharply to the shoulder
undercarriage pelted with stony debris
I am lifted upon a cloud of dust
wheels screaming, suddenly die
tractionless now above the snap snap of tall grass
until dredging a heavy scar across open field

I am bowled from the vehicle

Sliding, flipping

slipping...

I see meadow
I see sky
I see possibilities
but my trajectory is unknown

Standing somehow

(I shouldn't still be here)

ral yards from fresh wreckage
I am bleeding, but whole
Skin abraded, ligaments stretched
but no bones have been broken this morning
and I am not dead yet
I am left to find a way home
through the uncertainty that injury brings

I am dizzy;
one misdirection leads to yet another;
motion begets exploration;
the open field becomes a succession of moving targets;
possible destinations;

and I am the method of inquiry

I have been inverted;
a body without organs
I am composed now of external vectors
and the possibility of multiple trajectories

I am extended along imaginary lines of inquiry
and I am on my way home
where e’er I go.

Entering the Forbidden
There is a comics store in lower Manhattan called the Forbidden
Planet that I used to visit often, to satiate a space in my own thinking
for the out-of-cite reference point. Very early on in my educational
studies, during an opportunity I was given to advise students preparing
portfolios for entrance into undergraduate art schools, I was cautioned
to weed out those students who too regularly referenced comic or
graffiti art influences or conventions. I didn’t know any better at the
time, but I now wonder what makes those conventions any less valid
than any other convention a young learner may choose to explore. I
wonder whom I may have refused a momentary access to the center of
our curricular enterprise. I wonder what out-sites/sights/cites may
have been embedded in those early portfolios I reviewed, hard-wrought out-sites/sights/cites I deprived myself the opportunity to catch a glimpse of.

Even so, as an artist/researcher/teacher\(^2\), I return over and over again to the area in popular Western culture that has made a space for someone like me, already familiar with positions out-of-site, out-of-sight, "not quite acceptable" (Rolling, 2004). The underground comic. The independent film. The graphic novel. The studio blockbuster. I have found that comics and movies having nothing ostensibly to do with my research, often have everything to do with my research if I look long enough, or at the very least, avoid overlooking or highbrowing what I am seeing. I have found the stories they tell and the images they conjure to be necessary departures that draw me out to unexpected vantage points on the less-traveled side of the mountains I climb.

A well-received 1997 Canadian film called The Hanging Garden was written, produced, and directed by a witty, soft-spoken friend from my past, Thorn Fitzgerald, who attended The Cooper Union at the same time as I during our undergraduate years. Thom tried to teach me and a few other daring souls how to do performance warm-ups and improvisational exercises in what we called The Arbitrary Theater Group at Cooper Union. I still have the script I wrote for one of the skits we performed for the college community. It's not very good, but was worth the attempt.

In Thom's film, the lives and motions of a particular family remain positioned around the corporeally imagined adolescent body of Sweet William, who apparently hanged himself by the neck until he was dead from a tree in the middle of the family's growing garden. As the film presents it, William's body—morbidly obese—along with the family secrets that manifested itself in his obesity and suicide has remained hanging in that tree for over ten years just out-of-site/sight/cite—
uprooted, unseen, unreferenced and yet central to the family garden. William and his family—Sweet William, Poppy, Iris, Rosemary, and Violet—are named after the plants and flowers that grow in their extensive plot of earth.

When William, not yet altogether whole in his newly trim and metrosexualized body, suddenly returns to visit the family for his sister Rosemary’s wedding, he finds that his family has essentially taken root about the stifling, fertile circumstances of teenaged Sweet William’s attempted suicide. As a result, they too are dying, are already dead, or are doomed. His family has become entirely dependent upon his hanging body, which sustains the familiar circumstances of their florid emotional and corporeal decay. Now the uprooted/unseen/unreferenced body of evidence of familial neglect and abuse is inescapable in the shape of an altered and visible body moving freely in their midst, much in the same way that out-of-site/sight/cite points of reference for learning are made evident in the body of this writing as it is read.

The adult William’s return to this dying garden also exacerbates his own bouts with a suffocating asthma-like condition. William is assaulted by this malady whenever in proximity with his former body. He is also assaulted by the presence of the focal point of his teenage affection—Fletcher, his first homosexual liaison. Fletcher happens to be the new husband of William’s sister at this family gathering. When William has his breath nearly completely snatched away in the midst of being groped by the newly wedded Fletcher, the adult William runs desperately to the nearby garden, cuts teenaged William from the tree, and using his own two hands as bludgeons against the garden, buries the lingering specter of himself once and for all. In burying the weight of his alternative corporeal imagining, an adolescent so cocooned in bodily tissues he is unable to breathe freely, the adult William is also then able to find a new trajectory and becomes whole. The off-cite
reference point of dead William is integrated into the live William’s psyche as his fingernails fill with fresh dirt.

Viewing the teenaged Sweet William hanged ten years in a tree, an impediment to the present-day Sweet William desperate for freedom—and all this while the child Sweet William blithely dashes about the entire film like a harbinger of possibility—causes in me a similar yearning to see learners relinquish propriety and certainty to trod from time to time outside the lines of expected location, perspective, and context. If we would but situate ourselves within a nexus of off-site/sight/cite positions once imagined to be beyond ourselves, outside the garden of our beloved familiars, mightn’t we also

In 1989, a landmark graphic novel took the unique approach of focusing on the fragile psychology of Batman, the Dark Knight, a mortal man compelled to costume himself as a bat so as to terrorize criminals, while yet confronting (or failing to confront) his own terror of the criminality that murdered his parents. Originally titled *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth*—and brilliantly illustrated by mixed media artist Dave McKean as he experimented with telling the story through a combination of painting, photography, sculpture, and assemblage—the novel begins when Batman is called in by Police Commissioner Gordon to quell a deadly riot led by his nemesis, the Joker, at a local asylum for the criminally insane. I would like to reference a conversation Batman has early in the story with Ruth Adams, a psychotherapist who has insisted on staying with her patients in spite of the danger. When the subject turns to the case of the Joker, a subject particularly sensitive to Batman, Adams admits that he is a special case, whom some of the asylum staff feel to be beyond treatment.
...Batman stands belligerently straight.

ADAMS: IT'S QUITE POSSIBLE WE MAY ACTUALLY BE LOOKING AT SOME KIND OF SUPER-SANITY HERE.

ADAMS: A BRILLIANT NEW MODIFICATION OF HUMAN PERCEPTION. MORE SUITED TO URBAN LIFE AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.

Adams crouches down and begins to gather together the scattered Rorschach cards. Batman folds his arms, showing that he's looking for a fight by adopting this defensive posture. Adams all but ignores him. She has no intention of being drawn (into conflict).

BATMAN: TELL THAT TO HIS VICTIMS.

ADAMS: UNLIKE YOU AND I, THE JOKER SEEMS TO HAVE NO CONTROL OVER THE SENSORY INFORMATION HE'S RECEIVING FROM THE OUTSIDE WORLD.

ADAMS: HE CAN ONLY COPE WITH THAT CHAOTIC BARRAGE OF INPUT BY GOING WITH THE FLOW...HE CREATES HIMSELF EACH DAY.

(Morrison, 2004, final script, p. 21)

The preceding out-of-cite reference becomes a fascinating reflection on the Batman himself when taken in the context of the entire constellation of Batman comic titles, series, graphic novels, and crossovers, wherein the notion is repeatedly advanced that the Joker and the Batman are polarities of the same psychosis—that the Batman is just as psychologically barraged and fractured as the Joker, but has
disciplined his manifestations so his outbursts of violence are unleashed only upon criminals. Or upon himself.

Drawing upon off-site/sight/cite points of reference, the Joker transforms himself daily so that on some days he is merely a mischievous clown, and on other days a remorseless killer. Drawing upon off-site/sight/cite points of reference, the Batman transforms himself daily so that during the day he is the sophisticated billionaire Bruce Wayne, and at night, a stone cold vigilante. But these are just comic characters—and if that isn’t marginal enough for you, feel free to note that they are psychotic to boot.

I would argue however that, drawing upon off-site/sight/cite points of reference, my student Tal can transform himself into an artist, my friend Eleanora can transform herself up from poverty, and I can transform myself into a scholar, a poet, and researcher. We have done so, and we continue to transform, creating ourselves each day.

References


Notes

1 This classic book written by Jean Craighead George has returned to mind in recent years; this was a book that I reread often in grade school, one that spoke to me as an outsider: an African American from Crown Heights, Brooklyn bussed by my parents to an all-white school district in Sheepshead Bay to get a better education; an asthmatic introvert banished by my teachers each day to endure recess period in an overwhelming and boisterous schoolyard; an early starter, never in his social group... almost one year younger than the all other kids when I started school because of a late December birthday, then tracked as gifted and talented and forced to skip seventh grade, making me nearly two years younger than my grade-level peers by the time I started high school. How desperately I also wanted to run away, just like young Sam Gribbley, to the unseen side of the Catskill Mountains where I could hollow out my own worth!

2 I have come full circle on a journey that began at Hunter College Elementary School when I was hired by a previous director of the school's extended-day program to teach art and creative writing in the afterschool hours. It was a part-time job, paying $10 an hour with no benefits—certainly not a job that any new husband aspires to, especially one with a M.F.A. degree in his dresser drawer. Over the next few years it seemed as though I would encounter every possible obstacle to my achieving my state certification as an art teacher. Understand, I had never taken a single credit of study in education in all of my undergraduate and graduate studies; it never seemed to fit in. Now I was paying for that oversight or lack of good counsel (actually, both). Although my poverty-level employment was humbling, something about the prospect of working with children humbled me even more. The program director who hired me actually had to convince me to take the job. I didn’t think I was qualified or prepared. I was curious,
however. I wondered about my ability to teach young children. Curiosity was enough to get me started.

3Brent Wilson (1997) writes: “I like to think of research as re-search, to search again, to take a closer second look. Research implies searching for evidence about the way things were in the past, how they are presently, and even about how they might be in the future” (p. 1). In one particular Picture This! class as we sat around a table, I asked the children the question, “What is big?” I solicited discussion, feedback, points, and counterpoints. One child responded, “A dinosaur skull is big.” He then recounted a recent museum visit, standing in a large cap next to his Dad, the tallest figure in the drawing (see Figure 1). His concept of what “big” is was tied to his memory of an experiential, visual/spatial encounter in relation to his own body.

4Mr. Rolling helped me get into art. I never did art before, and he got me into drawing portraits of my family. In the end, I started to collaborate with Ian, another kid in the class. I liked that I got to learn how to draw, that it was fun. What I liked about art: I got to make up stuff and to use my imagination, I got to look at pictures and facts. I got to make portraits (Tal Vicario, personal correspondence, October 10, 2005).

5In 1908, when Charles W. Eliot—near the conclusion of his term as president of Harvard University—had the question addressed to him as to how the decision might be made that certain children go to industrial schools, others to ordinary high schools, and others to mechanics art high schools, Eliot’s response was that “(t)he teachers of the elementary schools ought to sort the pupils and sort them by their evident and probable destinies” (cited in Kliebard, 1999, p. 43).
Art and Survival in the Shadow of Two Hurricanes
by James Haywood Rolling, Jr.

I am looking across my desk at a recent issue of TIME magazine that I squirreled away because it featured an article by economist Jeffrey D. Sachs that presents the argument that our generation can end poverty in the world by the year 2025, if we chose to do so. At the time, it was worth saving for two reasons. The more trivial reason was that I had been his daughter’s art teacher for the past two years at The School at Columbia University. More importantly, the article indirectly challenged my estimation of the value of my profession. How does what I do as an art educator count in the face of people starving to death? How does it help if I offer a paintbrush and a crayon to hands seeking grain and potable water?

I have also been looking at the television, for the past month it seems, and I have been similarly confronted by the images of my neighbors in the South, battered and displaced by two successive and massive hurricanes. These are Americans I am familiar with, although I was raised in the Northeast. I grew up in Crown Heights, Brooklyn and although my family was not the poorest of the poor, I was close enough to poverty’s cavernous echoes to know this: poverty lingers. It changes the way you think, your expectations. It tears down the prospects of families for generations on end. Poverty is a pattern for living that is not erased just because civil rights laws are passed, or because those who do not live in daily proximity to poverty present themselves as more tolerant of difference, or because there are vast sums of money to be made in sports or entertainment.

The patterns of poverty are accumulative, just as are the patterns of extreme wealth. In the U.S.A., poverty and wealth perpetuate one another. Irrespective of the generosity of a few philanthropists, or the ingenuity of a few new-money entrepreneurs, the larger private sector free market systems that invest money, trade money, transfer money, and provide dividends on money, do not seek to address generational financial inequities for those who
have been left struggling to make ends meet. Apparently, no one has to pay for the creation of poverty in America. The fact that the forebears of America’s impoverished citizenry were typically held out of reach of, or systematically denied, opportunity to accumulate significant wealth, or access to an education of life-changing consequence, still fails to sway the hearts of those who manage or legislate this nation’s capital to attempt any systematic reparations. It is comical that some of those same compassionate hearts, as exemplified by our own president, are now apparently disconsolate over their rediscovery of poverty as it was flushed out before the cameras of the news media, wandering out there in the flooded streets, survivors of public shelters gone awry, awaiting busses to move them across state lines to new wards for the newly homeless.

I am a first-generation college graduate who has emerged from the poverty that lingers in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. But I am also an artist and a teacher, which doubles the likelihood that when my bank account is tallied up at the end of the day, I will never be counted as wealthy. Yet, in times like these, folks like me just want what they do everyday to count for something that makes other lives better.

There is no art in suffering. But perhaps there is art to be made in the redemption of lives that we as a nation now have the opportunity to make better. Perhaps the stories of emergence from the darkness of the Louisiana Superdome and New Orleans Convention Center can best be told with the healing touch of a crayon and paintbrush put to paper. Perhaps such art can contribute to the building of a culture of reconciliation in place of the shattering and revelation brought on by two hurricanes.

Art educator Rita Irwin describes the artist/researcher/teacher as “living their practices, representing their understandings, and questioning their positions as they integrate knowing, doing, and making through aesthetic experiences that convey meaning rather than facts” (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004, p 31). I have tried to do so in this writing.