

**Social Portraiture:**  
**Photography and Audio through the Sociological Lens**  
A Fairhaven College Interdisciplinary Concentration

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Committee Members:

John Feodorov: Chair: New Media

Seth Feinberg: Sociology

Jamie Hoover: Radio



When I use the term “social portraiture”, I am referencing the art of capturing a social moment, with careful attention paid to elements such as emotion, personality, as well as a representation of the events that led up to that particular moment. While traditional portraiture has historically been represented in drawings, paintings, sculpture, photography, and other visual media, my studies will broaden that definition, incorporating both the visual elements of photography and the aural elements of radio as a method of telling stories and expressing ideas through a personal and revealing lens.

But what informs social portraiture? My experience has shown me that portraits are effective when they speak to both the informational and the social—showing, telling and inviting the imagination. Conversely, the “put your hand on your knee” and “tilt your chin a little up” type of portraiture (and the whole school of thought stemming from this approach) is of no interest to me. A posed or contrived portrait inevitably results in conceptual shallowness. To understand social portraiture, one also has to understand the context (personal, social, political) which led to a particular moment being captured.

Social portraiture draws from many schools of thought and is thus inherently interdisciplinary. I have narrowed down these disciplines to focus on the four which I see as being most relevant to the field; the areas of study which I will pursue through this concentration will be photography, radio, sociology and journalism. While journalism and fine-art are traditionally regarded as two separate areas of study, the mindset that my concentration will embrace blurs the lines between these fields: journalism is art, just as art is journalism—a good portrait is a personal interview, and a good personal interview is really a portrait. Through my education, I want to push the envelope by promoting critical thought with portraits and stories captured in image and voice.

## **Art**

When I speak of art, I don't refer to the art that often fills galleries—that is Art with a capital 'A', the stuff that makes you think of white gloves and martinis. The art that I refer to is the work that is much more inherent to all of us, whether it is stick figures or oil paintings. I find that works of art created by society's rebels, the downtrodden, and poor to be much more conceptually rich and accessible than the work of an artist who spends their days contemplating white paint on a white canvas. I want to learn how to create art that acts more as a communal asset than a talking piece for the wealthy.

## **Photography**

Photography is my primary area of study. In the past three years of shooting, I've quickly matured my skills on the technical end of the discipline. Unfortunately, that came largely at the expense of conceptual merit and application. My goal now, through my Fairhaven education, is to build up the conceptual side of my work by studying other fields (such as sociology and journalism) which inform my particular niche—portraiture. I will continue my study of photography to further my knowledge in the field through study of influential photographers of the past, trends for the photographic future, and lots of applied photography. Photographers who I draw inspiration from are the ones who mastered the careful balancing act of emotion and information to create portraits which strike a chord with me: Richard Avedon, William Eggleston, Nadav Kander, Milton Rogovin, and Les Krims.

## **Radio/Audio**

As far as the history of the media goes, radio has certainly been a highly influential medium for both hard news and more artistic endeavors, and it is a medium which is likely to stay relevant for many more years. Through my concentration, I will continue my studies of radio through

mostly unaccredited, but very hands-on experience, starting by acting in my junior year as the News and Public Affairs Director for KUGS-FM, Western Washington University's radio station. My particular interest in radio is in the non-commercial and public sector. Through my previous work at Northwest Public Radio and KUGS I have gained perspective that makes me seriously consider it as a career path. The radio that has influenced my work has been largely dominated by documentary and feature work of Edward R Murrow, Tom Ashbrook, Scott Carrier, and Ira Glass.

### **Social Science**

Educating myself in the social sciences will help me to build a strong informational foundation for the understanding of the elements of social control, the effects of bias and prejudice, and the basis of the societal norms that dictate human interaction, public policy, and everything in-between. Learning both the practical and the technical aspects of the social sciences (especially sociology) will give me the backbone of information essential to the other, more vocational and communicative aspects which are essential to social portraiture.

### **Journalism**

Journalism is both a practice of fact gathering and presentation—it is the glue that binds a story together. Journalism also provides a set of standards and ethics which can be observed when investigating and documenting a matter of interest. While radio and photography have historically been linked with journalism, how will I use *my* skills in these areas to show stories (both on macro and micro levels) in a light that has perhaps not been seen before? My study of journalism will explore this question and give me a toolset to use in a both presentational and investigative fashion.

## **Courses**

My studies will focus in the arts and social sciences, but will also contain courses designed to further my journalistic skills, such as The Art of the Interview and Photojournalism. Non-credited experience will also be an essential part of my aural education: working for KUGS as the News and Public Affairs Director will further my radio studies, as will continuing my work with the public radio service in my hometown. Visually, I will continue my studies with the photography program in Western's art department, by taking courses like the Advanced Photography Seminar, which will strengthen the skills needed to function as a professional in the art field. I am also excited to take an Independent Study Project called Portraiture without People, in which I will capture portraits by removing the physical human from frame to focus on their time and place. My study of the social sciences will be highlighted by a class called Death and Dying offered at Fairhaven which will give me more perspective towards a largely hushed topic that every society has to cope with.

## **Senior Project**

I am looking forward to the senior project as an opportunity to group all of my topics of interest into a single, yet expansive, project.

My project is going to be a collection of photographs and interviews of people that I find in Bellingham's community. Specifically, I'll be finding people with stories, stories that have given them eccentric worldviews. While people from every social group have these stories, I'll be focusing my attention on populations who deviate from societal norms: addicts, zealots, criminals, transients and others. I will conduct the interviews and portrait sessions with the intent of creating social portraiture at its finest—by attempting to capture the subject in the most intimate manner possible.

While I would consider the project to be a performance art piece, the presentation of it will be far removed from galleries—I plan on packaging the interviews (along with small photo prints) into cassette tapes and distributing them to strangers in the Bellingham community. My hope is to promote critical reflection for myself, the subjects, and the people whom I give the final product to.

### **Conclusion**

Primarily, my educational goal is to learn as much as possible about the social sciences, so that I have a large pool of knowledge from which I will inform my work with audio and visual. However, my secondary goal with education is to create a degree which gives me a set of tools relevant to the ever changing job market. The job market that I will be entering postgraduate will look vastly different from archetypes seen in journalism and art during my parent's generation. It becomes increasingly clear that members of my generation will need skills in many disciplines and learn to connect bridges between them. The recent proliferation of the internet has started the ball rolling for the restructuring of a media culture that focuses more on communication than commercials. While the prospect of a coup d'etat in the power structure of the media seems uncomfortable (perhaps even scary) at first, opportunities for the decentralization and decommercialization of the media are knocking at the door.

Art will be my vehicle, sociology my informant, journalism will be the nuts and bolts that bind the two, and radio and photography will be the application of it all. And, if all goes well, that application will be greater than the sum of these parts.

**Jeff Emtman, John Feodorov**  
**Art-Social Science-Journalism**

Institution	Course #	Course Title	Period	Credit	Grade
<b>Art</b>					
<u>Completed</u>					
WWU	FAIR300	ISP Wide Angle Portraiture	Winter 2008	3	S
WWU	FAIR352Y	Visual Arts Workshop	Winter 2008	4	S
WWU	ART390	Photography II	Spring 2008	5	B
WWU	FAIR453V	New Media Workshop	Spring 2008	4	S
WWU	FAIR300	ISP Studio Photography	Fall 2008	5	S
WWU	ART390	Photography II	Winter 2009	5	A-

To Be Completed

WWU	ART391	Color Photography	Spring2009	5	
WWU	ART495	Professional Practices	Spring2011	5	
WWU	FAIR300	ISP Photography Book	TBD	4	
WWU	FAIR336V	Art In Popular Culture	Spring2010	3	
WWU	FAIR400	ISP Portraiture without People	TBD	5	
				<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>48</b>

Non-Credited Experience

3 years of freelance commercial, fine art, and portrait photography  
 Public Affairs Correspondent and Music DJ for KUGS-FM 89.3

**Social Science**

Completed

WWU	FAIR201	Social Relationships/Responsibil...	Fall 2007	5	S
WWU	PSY220	Behavioral Neuroscience	Fall 2008	5	B-
WWU	FAIR336B	Political Psychology	Winter 2009	4	S

To Be Completed

WWU	SOC251	Sociology of Deviant Behavior	Spring 2009	5	
WWU	FAIR343R	Death and Dying	Fall 2009	5	
Three of the Following Five:					
WWU	SOC333	Aging In America	TBD	5	
WWU	SOC338	Sociology of Sexual Behavior	TBD	5	
WWU	SOC 352	Criminology	TBD	5	
WWU	SOC260	The Family in Society	TBD	5	
WWU	SOC397V	Visual Sociology	TBD	5	
				<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>39</b>

Non-Credited Experience



## Journalism

### Completed

### To Be Completed

WWU	FAIR223K	Personal Narratives: Interview	Fall 2009	4
WWU	JOUR207	Newswriting	Fall 2009	4
WWU	JOUR305	Photojournalism	Winter 2010	4
WWU	COMM430	Visual Rhetoric	Winter 2011	5
WWU	EDUC309	Storytelling	Spring 2010	4
			<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>21</b>

### Non-Credited Experience

Board Operator for Northwest Public Radio

Photographer for Klipsun Magazine

News and Public Affairs Director for KUGS

## Senior Project

WWU	FAIR 401a	Senior Project	Spring 2011	6
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Total Credits	114
ISP Credit	17
Non-Fairhaven	62
Upper Division	86-91
Proposed	68