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‘A friend who understand fully’: notes on humanizing research in a multiethnic youth community

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In this article, I conceptualize ethnographic, qualitative, and social language research with marginalized and oppressed communities as humanizing research. Humanizing research is a methodological stance, which requires that our inquiries involve dialogic consciousness-raising and the building of relationships of dignity and care for both researchers and participants. I offer evidence that such humanization is not only ethically necessary but also increases the validity of the truths we gain through research. Working from a 2006–2007 study of language, literacy, and difference in a multiethnic high school and youth community, I provide examples from fieldwork that led to research that attempted to humanize rather than colonize the youth I worked with. I draw on the work of others to extend a long line of methodological thinking in pursuit of representation and humanization in interpretive studies in schools and communities.

Keywords: qualitative research methods; African American; Pacific Islander; language; high school

From the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. (Paulo Freire 1970)

In the above quote, Freire (1970) was writing about the relationships needed between teachers and students in an oppressive world in the dialogic process of coming to reveal, reflect, and act upon that world. Yet, these words also describe a certain stance and methodology in educational research working with students in contexts of oppression and marginalization. Through participant observation and interview, the researcher’s efforts must coincide with the students’ to engage in critical thinking about the problems and issues of interest as both the researcher and participants seek mutual humanization through understanding.

To illuminate this methodological stance and process, I begin this article by meditating on the meaning of an email I received from Rahul, a Fijian Indian young man whom I did fieldwork with at South Vista High.1 South Vista is a public charter school in the urban West serving Latino/a, African American, and Pacific Islander students. I use Rahul’s email to describe the dialogic contours of relationship, understanding, and truths in ethnographic and qualitative social language research within and across difference. With these contours in mind, I present a discussion of some of

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the fieldwork moves youth and I made together and look to understand these moves as humanizing for both the participants and me as a researcher. Further, I seek to unravel how these methods in the field helped increase a kind of validity as I searched for understanding within and across ethnic and linguistic difference.

It was late August 2007, and the new school year had just begun. During the summer, I had been in contact with many of the case study youth from my study, but over two months had passed since the last day of school, since I had ended my year of ethnographic and qualitative social language work with them at South Vista High. I had spent the school year at South Vista investigating the ways Carla, Miles, Julio, Gloria, Rochelle, Rahul, Carlos, and Ela lived ethnic difference through their everyday language and literacy and theorizing with them what these things meant for their educations and futures. Over the summer, my occasional text messages, MySpace exchanges, telephone conversations, and visits with participant students continued to be very important to my understanding and relationships, but they were much less frequent than before. The intensity of my connections with these young people during the school year seemed some distance away as I worked through the summer months analyzing the ethnographic and social language data they had been so generous in sharing.

Yet, as was often the case that summer, these occasional interactions delivered powerful understandings that reverberated through my own emerging interpretations of the social, cultural, and linguistic worlds I was working to comprehend. I had spent several weeks letting the data settle and beginning to create ever-firmer categories of meaning and these summer interactions met my emerging sense making head-on. All of these unsolicited summer interactions not only pushed my own understanding further but also spoke to the strength of the bond the students and I had formed together. One interaction I had with Rahul spoke to this strength of relationship and, I think, to the validity of the sorts of truths youth shared with me over the year in formal interviews, informal conversations, and participant observations.2 Rahul emailed me on 27 August 2007, as I was sitting in my office coding interview transcripts. Rahul was an emcee who regularly wrote and recorded rap lyrics, referred to as ‘flows’ in Hip Hop culture. He ended his email with the following ‘freestyle,’ an unplanned flow displaying verbal (and here, written) agility and ingenuity.3

YO MAN THIS A SPITTA
RHYMING AND TWISTING IT UP FOR A HEAVY HITTA
D JIZZLE IS THE MANE
STANDING 6 4 YOU NEEDA UNDERSTANE
HE’LL LAY YOU OUT WITH THEM KILLAWATT PUNCHES
HE’LL TAKE A YOUNGESTER THAT COMES IN BUNCHES
D JIZZLE IS THE ONE AND TRULY
HE IS A FRIEND WHO UNDERSTAND FULLY
HE KNOWS WAT WE GO THROUGH
CAUSE HE’S BEEN THROUH IT
HE’S INSPIRED ME THE WAY AND TOLD ME TO DO IT, TO IT

THIS FLOW WAS FOR U DJANGO … LIL FREESTYLE FROM OFF TOP OF MY HEAD.

There is much African American language (AAL) and Hip Hop nation language to analyze in Rahul’s rap, and I have written elsewhere about the ways the textual and linguistic worlds of South Vista’s youth both challenged and reinforced notions of
My purpose in sharing these lyrics here, however, is to highlight the importance of relationship in ethnographic and linguistic anthropological research, and to give some evidence of the depth of my relationship with the youth whose worlds I have attempted in small ways to represent in my writing about South Vista. Deeply connected to this sense of relationship, I share Rahul’s rap to show how he felt I had grasped the cultural meaning of the youth world.

In essence, Rahul’s freestyle was a message to me about the trust I had gained and a message letting me know that I was getting it as right as an ethnographer can; that I was ‘a friend who understand fully,’ who ‘knows what we go through,’ who has ‘been through it.’ While I make no claim to coming close to fully understanding the complex linguistic and cultural world of South Vista’s multiethnic youth community, Rahul’s rap told me that he felt I did. Gaining such insider trust and grasp of the cultural meanings of participants is the major purpose of ethnographic work (Briggs 1986; Charmaz 2005; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Geertz 1973; Peshkin 1993).

Rahul’s line about my having ‘been through it’ deserves further comment. I was honest with youth about my own racial and ethnic identity as a Black/biracial man with a Black Jamaican immigrant father and a White American mother. I was honest with them about my own father’s years without documents, about his spotty presence in some years of my childhood, and about how we have grown an ever stronger relationship since my teenage years. And I told them about the years my single mother collected welfare to care for my sister and me. I was also honest that I did not grow up in the urban center like these youth – that I was born in San Francisco and returned there frequently to visit my father, but that I attended mainly rural public schools until college. I told the youth that my father had graduated college before he immigrated to California and that my mother was not the first in her family to graduate college when she returned in her mid-30s to get her BA, then MA. This is all to say that I shared with youth the many ways we were similar and the many ways I was an outsider. And I shared each of these things over time and relationship because they asked me. They demanded that I claim identities and experiences in the ways I was continually asking them to do in the somewhat dialogic process we call ethnography. This sharing of self in dialogic process, I believe, led youth to share their selves in more genuine and honest ways. This genuine and honest sharing led to richer and truer data than the model of the somewhat detached, neutral researcher that echoes across the decades from more positivist-influenced versions of qualitative inquiry.

Rahul delivered one more important methodological message in his rap that summer day; he showed me that he felt humanized by the experience of being a research participant. Our year-long relationship, filled with formal interviews about language, ethnicity, schooling, music, and violence, filled with email exchanges and conversations about his raps, his classrooms, and the distance between the two, filled with my participant observations of him inside and outside the classroom – these ethnographic events had been inspiring to Rahul. In the rap, he told me, ‘He’s inspired me and told me to do it, to it.’ Although I did not tell Rahul to do anything during our year, the manner of our interactions, my questions, and my genuine search to understand his understanding made him feel inspired to ‘do it, to it,’ to keep striving in the face of many obstacles. This is the terrain of what I have come to see as humanizing research, a terrain I only began to explore in this study and a terrain occupied by a growing number of critical qualitative, ethnographic, and qualitative social language researchers. Humanizing research is a methodological stance which requires that our
inquiries involve dialogic consciousness-raising and the building of relationships of care and dignity for both researchers and participants. Although such a stance is important in all research, it is particularly important when researchers are working with communities who are oppressed and marginalized by systems of inequality based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, and other social and cultural categories. This ethical need for a humanizing stance emerges as both researchers and participants seek to push against inequities not only through the findings of research but also through the research act itself.

Building relationships of dignity and care and glimpsing insider understanding across multiple borders of difference was a major challenge of my research in South Vista. So, too, was attempting to conduct my study in ways that avoided exploitation and colonization, in ways that were humanizing to the youth that had gifted me with access to what they did and thought about. Rahul’s rap is one piece of evidence of the ways I managed these complex border crossings somewhat successfully. In the remainder of this article, I will provide further examples of the way my research interactions with participants throughout participant observation and interviews attempted to help the youth and myself toward a deepened sense of how oral and written language worked at South Vista. I will attempt to provide a description of how my field methods allowed me in small ways to ‘understand fully’ and, in even smaller ways, ‘to inspire’ the youth in my study, to humanize through research rather than colonize by research.

**Humanizing through fieldwork**

Participant observation and interviewing have long been deemed the key methods of ethnographic and qualitative fieldwork in the social sciences. Within the social sciences, social language research has also embraced these basic research methods as necessary for describing and explaining the relationships between language, culture, and society. Yet, as many researchers have described over the decades, these ways of gathering social and cultural information are fraught with dangers for all stakeholders involved in the enterprise of coming to know through research. At every moment of my work with Rahul and his peers, I was faced with choices as the youth were faced with choices about how to share and build knowledge worth knowing.

‘You remember me?’: dialogic selection and *units of concern* While Rahul’s rap is evidence of the relationships youth and I eventually built together and the way such relationships at times inspired us, it does little to reveal how those relationships were built. One of the key elements of humanizing research is this building reciprocal relationships of dignity and care (see Lincoln 1995, for a rationale for such relationships). Only through such relationships can researchers and participants share and reflect upon the issues of interest in genuine dialogue. For me, developing these relationships within and across lines of difference required important moves in the early stages of my work. This included the critical but often oversimplified early stage known as participant selection.

‘Selection’ is itself a somewhat colonizing term as it implies unilateral power of the researcher to select. In my work at South Vista, the month and a half process of choosing whom to work with was somewhat dialogic. That is, participants chose to work *with* me in addition to being chosen *by* me. Although power differentials were
significant between me and the youth I chose to learn from, they (and their parents) had to be interested in working with me to agree to spend hours in interviews and to agree to allow me to spend so much time participating with and observing them. The month of getting to know each other and developing early trust, then, was a key part of selection that often goes unreported in qualitative social science. Two interactions drawn from my fieldnotes early in the school year will serve to display this dialogic process of choosing.

On a school day in early September 2006, I was wandering rather aimlessly through a sea of students who were enjoying a moment of relative freedom in between classes. It was one of my early visits and I did not yet know any students at the school. I was disoriented and nervous. Many of the youth in the community had been under constant surveillance by the law and by schools for many years and, understandably, my first visits to the school had been met with suspicion. Some students avoided me, others cast cautious glances, and one student even started telling his friends I was a cop and not to talk to me. Mercifully on this day as I waded through students who were then only strangers, two young men, both of them African American, approached me smiling. One of them asked me if I could jump up and touch the top of the hall, which was maybe nine feet high. I obliged, jumping up and, at six foot five inches tall, I easily tapped the cross beam. I asked him if he could touch it and he claimed an ankle injury, but said he could when he was well. We talked then, Miles, his friend Terrance, and me, about the upcoming basketball season and I told them I looked forward to running with them in practice next month.

Two weeks passed before I interacted with Miles again. I was sitting in the back of an algebra classroom taking general fieldnotes on 20 September, when Miles walked in and informed the teacher that he had been sent out of another classroom. The teacher told him to fill out a disciplinary slip in the back of the room and the class returned to its work. After a moment, I walked over and said, ‘Hey Miles, what’s up?’ He looked up, smiling again, ‘You remember me?’ I told him I did from that time in the hall. Over the next half hour (during somewhat appropriate moments when the class was loud), we talked more about basketball, the new coach, the position he played and the one I played, we talked about a junior college music class he was taking at the high school and I asked him about the Mac Dre T-shirt he had, and if that rapper was considered Hyphy (a local metro area rap genre of bass heavy club tracks). The ease to our conversation that day was the beginning of a close year for Miles and me.

By the time I officially asked Miles if he would like to join my study we knew some things about each other. And he understood that I was not out to evaluate him but, rather, was interested in learning from and with him. For other students, it was other early activities we shared as we decided to choose each other. For Ela, a Samoan young woman, our conversations about our families in Jamaica and Samoa – full of longing and memory – and shooting hoops after school brought us toward a place where I as an outsider became real enough to begin the deeper work of ethnography. So to say I purposefully selected youth based primarily on their ethnicities and language backgrounds, as well as on the language and literacy practices I had observed inside and outside the classroom that month, denies the initial humanization so crucial to respecting participants and to the sharing of lives that happens later. Although none of my early interactions with Miles, Ela, or the other youth in my work erased power differentials of race, ethnicity, age, class, gender, and education (among other power differences), these key moments allowed for a more genuine and dialogic selection.
There is a further complication in the process of choosing participants in ethnographic, qualitative, and social language case studies of individuals: we choose participants as individuals, yet cultural analysts are most interested in the ways that individuals are windows into the meanings and activities of cultural communities. This is not to say that individuals are not different and do not vary, we are all both individuals and members of cultural communities (Gutierrez and Rogoff 2003), but in cultural analysis (and linguistic anthropological analysis), ‘the individual child can be the unit of concern, but not the unit of analysis’ (McDermott, Goldman, and Varenne 2006, 13). Although I care deeply about each of the young people I came to know at South Vista, I cannot see my analysis as an analysis of them that would place too much of the analytic burden on them as free social actors. Rather, my analysis of their language and text and activities and the meanings they made of such practices is always framed within the cultural norms and expectations they received, perpetuated, and challenged. Much of the time I was certainly learning from individuals and my writing about South Vista attempts to honor individual youths’ cultural worlds, yet it is the way these individuals fit into and challenged those cultural worlds that is the center of the knowledge I seek to build. This is to say that even as I chose to work with students based on early relationships of care and dignity anchored in shared interests, the unit of analysis was none of these genuine attachments, but rather was facilitated through them.

During the year, Miles shared much with me about his views on the demographic and linguistic changes in South Vista, about his passions for basketball and Hip Hop and classroom learning, and about his views on the unequal treatment of African Americans in his community. Through this sharing, both Miles and I had chances to reflect on the ways language, literacy, and culture worked to challenge and reinforce ethnic differences at South Vista. This reflection throughout the year led Miles and me to consider anew how pluralism worked in South Vista and how it interacted with schooling. I do not believe this sharing would have occurred as deeply without a relationship of dignity and care from the very outset of fieldwork.

‘How Jamaicans look’: sharing understanding and self in the ethnographic interview

Interviews remain at the center of our work as qualitative, ethnographic, and social language researchers. We attempt to gain an insider understanding through talking with participants about their past, present, and future worlds. Much of the literature on interviewing in qualitative research not only describes the need to develop rapport but also suggests the need to remain somewhat naive and attempt neutrality so as not to bias participants’ responses (Glesne and Peshkin 1992; Hammer and Wildavsky 1993). Although I am careful to remain focused on learning from participants in interviews, I resist the notion that sharing about ourselves during interviews attains less genuine and valid responses. In many research contexts, the opposite is often true: we must share of ourselves as we ask people to share of themselves. This is especially true when we are asking our participants to share things that are close to the heart, private, and sometimes painful. Furthermore, relationships of power, inherent in any interview situation, are often heightened when working with students of color and others oppressed or marginalized in schools and society. In this section, I will offer an excerpt from an interview with Ela as evidence of what sharing of self can do to build relationships, enhance the truths shared in interviews, and offer a space for both
researchers and participants to voice marginalized identities that are too often silenced.

Attempting to understand the ways oral and written language challenged and reinforced ethnic difference among the youth of South Vista meant attempting to understand the activities and meanings of cultural life within which language and difference operate. These activities and meanings included the joyous and the painful. They included practices like basketball playing or church going or school life and the ways students enacted identities through these practices. For many youth, they also included the daily challenges of being a youth of color, of being poor, of being undocumented, and of speaking languages not held in high esteem by the larger dominant culture or, at times, by the school or their peers. I asked the youth in my study to talk about these things with me in interviews – both the joy and the pain associated with language, race, ethnicity, and identity. And at times, I shared the limited ways I understood these things through my own experience.

Even after many weeks of playing basketball together and discussing the similarities and differences between Ela’s native Samoa and my father’s native Jamaica, Ela and I were still working to try to figure each other out. One element of learning about each other that impacted my work with Ela and all the youth I worked with at South Vista was my own racial and ethnic identity. My light skin, curly hair, and biraciality were the subject of many implicit and explicit questions from youth. These questions took many forms, from the direct ‘Are you all Black?’ to the less explicit ‘What are you?’ My honest answers to these questions were crucial to gaining increasingly honest answers in return.

During a mid-year interview, Ela had graciously shared with me some of her thoughts on Samoan language, AAL, and the general racial and ethnic landscape of South Vista. Her thoughts on the uses of Samoan language and cultural practices were particularly important as these crucial parts of her identity were not often used at school and were in many ways silenced by her peers and classrooms. At the end of the interview, I turned some of the power over to Ela.

**Django:**
Do you have any questions for me? You can ask anything you like or if you think of a question another time, you could ask it.

**Ela:**
I want to know how Jamaicans look like.

**D:**
How they look like? Well, I don’t have my pictures.

**E:**
You know like – how Samoans look like and stuff like that?

**D:**
So in Jamaica most people are Black. So they’re mostly from Africa … and then there were obviously the White folks too, back in history, who were basically the slave masters. But there’s mixed people too, so there’s people that kind of look like me … I’ll bring you a couple of pictures so you can see what my family looks like there. Everybody’s darker than me ‘cause my mom’s white. So that’s why I look like this.

**E:**
All your [Jamaican] family are dark?
D: No, I said darker than me. They’re not super dark. They’re like – I’ll bring a picture, okay and then we can just settle it like that. If you saw them, you’d think they were Black until they talked and then you’d think they were Jamaican. (1 July 2007)

I had learned many things about Ela, her language, and her navigations through the ethnic and racial landscape of South Vista in that January interview. But my learning that day was but a glimpse of what I would come to know from Ela in the second half of the year, when she would open up more fully about her language, her culture, and her spirituality, and when she would invite me and my wife to her church and give me basic Samoan language lessons.

One key to this opening up, I believe, was Ela’s ability to place me within the ethnic, linguistic, and racial world I was asking her and her peers to reveal to me. On this day, when Ela was given the opportunity to ask me a question, she chose to interrogate my own skin color and how it connected to the island heritage we each shared. As the year progressed, Ela shared more with me about her views on race and ethnicity and language, knowing as she did so who I was and where I was from.

We often worry about how divulging information about ourselves and our views will condition and bias the responses of those we interview. Although this is certainly something to be cautious of, it is equally true that participants might not say something because we do not, because they do not know whom they are sharing with. We might ask, what makes us trustworthy and deserving of such information? To make the interview humanizing means, in part, looking to make it a more humane interaction – one where both parties are willing to share about the problems of interest as both parties, researchers and participants, explore those problems in the search for understanding and voice.

E taalo au basketball [I play basketball]: the participation in participant observation

Learning about cultural and linguistic worlds from participants means being a participant observer at times, an observer at other times, and a participant at still other times. That is, although we often pass all ethnographic work off as ‘participant observation,’ the fact is that such a research activity falls along a continuum. When I was sitting in the back of classrooms jotting down fieldnotes, I was primarily an observer, whereas when I was playing basketball at the community or school gym I was primarily a participant. In each of these circumstances, I was gathering understanding, but my role as a member of the activities shifted throughout my research. Yet, humanization between researchers and participants is not achieved through taking fieldnotes in the back of classrooms (however necessary such jotting may be). Genuine relationships and moments of inspiration are fostered in authentic participation in activities that matter to the participants.

One activity that I participated in authentically throughout the year was basketball. Basketball is a love of my life beyond research and it was a love of many of the youth I worked with as well. I offer the following vignette as evidence of mutual humanization and the depth of researcher learning through authentic participation.

By 7 February 2007, I had been practicing with the girls’ and boys’ teams several times a week since October and had attended many of their home and away games. The girls had just finished their practice and the boys were running a full court
scrimmage. Ela, her cousin Soa, and I sat on the scorer’s table beside the court, still in our basketball clothes. We watched the boys sprint from end to end, listening to their constant trash-talking and making comments about their play. There was some lament in the air. The two young women mentioned how sad they were that basketball season was almost over. They looked dejected and I felt the same. It was a sadness I remembered from my own high school seasons. Daily practices and weekly games, the camaraderie, having a common goal and focus with your peers, having something to look forward to all day during class. Then something happened that brought us out of our morose: Ela said something quickly to Soa in Samoan. I had heard very few exchanges between Samoan speakers over my year; this was somewhat remarkable.

‘You gotta teach me some Samoan one of these days,’ I said.

Ela suddenly beamed, a spark in her eye. ‘Right now!’ she demanded, ‘Soa, get the paper and the pen!’

We sat on the scorer’s table, the boys practicing in front of us: Ela writing down and pronouncing words and phrases in Samoan, me attempting to pronounce them in all their multi-stressed grandeur. Ela laughed at me when I struggled and nodded in surprise when I came close in pronunciation. A few minutes in and our list was 10 deep. Ela paused to think. ‘What else?’ she said. I asked her the phrase for ‘come here’ [sau‘ii] and the phrase for ‘go away’ [alu ese].

The boys were taking a water break and Soa was across the court practicing her three-point shot. ‘Sau‘ii!’ I called. She smiled and came over. I turned on her in the mock anger that was a common game among the players. ‘Alu ese!’ I demanded. She and Ela cracked up.

‘You hella mean!’ Soa said as she laughed her way back onto the court.

During the next 30 minutes, Ela wrote down an extensive list of words and phrases. She taught me how to say ‘beautiful’ [aulelei], ‘fuck off’ [ufa ese!], ‘Hello, how are you?’ [Talofa o ai lou igoa?], and the personal pronouns ‘I’ [au], ‘you’ [oe], ‘we’ [tatou], and ‘they’ [latou]. She told me how to say, ‘I love you’ [E alofa au la oe] and encouraged me to say it to my wife Rae when I got home that night (which I, of course, did). With ‘I love you,’ I even got a rudimentary introduction to Samoan syntax as she made a translation diagram of the sentence for me like this:

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Hello, how are you?
Talofa o ai lou igoa?
My name is Django
O lo‘u igoa o Django
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It was through basketball and our shared island heritage that Ela and I formed our early relationship. This relationship and the conversations and activities it centered on allowed us both to think about the place of Samoa and Jamaica in our current lives and about what basketball did to bring us together with peers across ethnicity. On this day as I took an impromptu Samoan lesson on the side of the basketball court, it was the authenticity of place and activity and relationship that allowed me a small glimpse into a language that had few spaces for voice in school and the community (Ela and many of her Pacific Islander peers spoke AAL as their everyday language: see Paris 2009). Even though Ela would later invite Rae and me to the Samoan church where the language was used in song and service and conversation, for both Ela and I the confluence of basketball and language and our identities created a public space in school for her to share her linguistic knowledge. In later interviews, we would continue to push this understanding about the role of Samoan and AAL in the life of her community and I would continue to practice and use Samoan words and phrases with Ela.

At heart, the authenticity of participation allowed researcher learning that would not have otherwise occurred (nothing close had happened for five months to that point). Furthermore, Ela felt she could share her understanding of language in ever more complex ways as our work went forward, letting me into a cultural and linguistic world she was deeply connected to, but had few outlets in school to share and to consider.

**Toward humanizing inquiry**

I did not go far enough in my work with Rahul, Ela, Miles, and their peers. My relationships with them were strong and each of them told me explicitly that they learned much from our time together, that they enjoyed the process of research with me. And I remain connected to many of their lives, attending their high school graduations now two years after the study, writing letters of recommendation for jobs or college, texting about relationships or fights or college admission, checking-in when crisis...
or transition happens: for humanizing research does not end when the study does. But I continually question whether it was worth it for them, whether those months of humanization between us influenced their lives in important enough ways.

I also must remind myself that ending the colonizing inquiry of looking for deficits in the cultures of oppressed communities, of treating participants like subjects, of pretending like our relationships with them did not change us, of seeking to take but not to give, that ending colonizing inquiry is a movement and I am one small member. Many in the research community have done a far better job than me and I will continue to grow as a humanizing researcher. For many researchers, relationships of care and dignity and dialogic consciousness-raising during the research make far greater an impact on participants and on the community than me made. For now, I must reckon with how I can continue to humanize the cultural communities of my work as I myself was humanized by the young people in those communities.

One important step in this direction is in the way I represent myself and the youth in the work I share with the professional community. Others will judge whether my research writing about South Vista represents the youth and their worlds with the care and dignity I experienced as I conducted fieldwork. And others will judge whether the knowledge I share in my work is helpful in improving teaching and learning in schools serving multiethnic communities. But I can control how I represent the youth as I argue for change and understanding as a result of what I learned from them.

Last June 2009, two years after my fieldwork at South Vista, I went to see Rahul and Ela and other students in the study graduate from high school. It had been more than a year since I saw them and there were many embraces and handshakes to go around. Rahul and I took a photo outside after the ceremony. In the photo, we are both staring ahead smiling, proud of his accomplishment and, I think, proud of being there for each other. As I finish writing this article, there are great distances between me and Rahul. I sit at my desk looking at that photo of us at his graduation. As I consider the photo, four lines from that rap he sent me back in 2007 echo through my head:

HE IS A FRIEND WHO UNDERTSTAND FULLY
HE KNOWS WAT WE GO THROUGH
CAUSE HE’S BEEN THROUH IT
HE’S INSPIRED ME THE WAY AND TOLD ME TO DO IT, TO IT

We can be friends with our participants. We can, in small ways, come to understand. We can inspire them as they inspire us. We can humanize through the act of research.

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Notes
1. All names of places and people are pseudonyms.
2. See Eisenhart and Howe (1992) for an early review and discussion of alternative conceptions of validity in interpretive research.
3. I have preserved Rahul’s spelling and capitalization.
4. As Geertz told us long ago, ‘Cultural analysis is intrinsically incomplete’ (1973, 29).
5. See Peshkin (1993), Guba and Lincoln (2005), Charmaz (2005) and Howe (2009) for discussion dedicated to the positivist influences and ongoing tension on questions of rigor, validity, and truth in qualitative inquiry.
6. This general belief is becoming widespread in the literature on critical ethnography, critical qualitative research, and critical social language research in communities of color and other marginalized and oppressed communities. See Guba and Lincoln (2005) for a discussion of the connections between validity, social impact, and relationship building. Zentella (1997) for a discussion of anthropological linguistics as social language work that honors survival and pushes for social change, and Morrell (2004) for an example of urban youth of color participating in the research process as a means to gain critical consciousness.
7. The notion of units of concern was introduced by McDermott, Goldman, and Varenne (2006).
8. See Paris (2009), Paris (2010a), and Paris (2010b) for other published work from this study.

Notes on contributor

References


