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978-1-107-61396-6 - Language across Difference: Ethnicity, Communication, and Youth Identities in Changing Urban Schools

Django Paris

Excerpt

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# I Beginnings: shouts of affirmation from South Vista

*It's our culture, we have to ...*

– From an interview with Carlos

*True Hamoz gurl fo lyph* [True Samoan Girl For Life]

– From a text written on Ela's backpack

*Blacks, Mexicans, and Polynesians; we all gotta stay together ...*

– From an interview with Miles

In an essay written near the end of his life and career, Pulitzer Prize winning playwright August Wilson (2000) described the motivation at the heart of his cycle of epic dramas which depict the Black experience in twentieth-century America. Wilson wrote that his characters are “continually negotiating for a position, the high ground of the battlefield, from where they might best shout an affirmation of the value and worth of their being in the face of a many-million-voice chorus that seeks to deafen and obliterate it” (p. 14). What Wilson sought to reveal in his work were these shouts of affirmation, shouts of identity and cultural worth in the face of the vastness of oppression. I seek similar revelations in this book. I seek to reveal how Carlos's belief that the cultural ways of his community had to be voiced, Ela's statement of her eternal Samoanness, and Miles' sentiment of shared marginalization were shouts of affirmation in the face of a dominant society that did not highly value the youth I worked with.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the considerable task of revealing youth strivings for voice, and self, and power, I also seek to understand how the processes of these strivings worked in a changing multiethnic youth community to challenge and reinforce lines of ethnic and linguistic difference. Further still, my goal is to show the ways this understanding can help us re-vision language and literacy learning in schools.

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At heart, this book is about difference, division, and unity as it played out in a multiethnic high school of color during the 2006–07 school year and into the summer and fall of 2007. It is a book about a small group of youth in particular, their ways with language and text and their forging of ethnic and linguistic identities in the face of continued segregation and racism, in the face of poverty, in the face of a changing community, and in the midst of their high-school years. It is a meditation on how their shouts for affirmation of cultural worth were often at odds with the dominant societal and school expectations and how these cries for validation often went unheard. And, finally, it is a book about how the search for linguistic and cultural affirmation within and between ethnic groups at times maintained ethnic divisions and at other times created conditions for interethnic unity.

In order to provide an initial sense of the context where I pursued this understanding, let me briefly introduce the fieldsite. I conducted fieldwork primarily at South Vista High, as well as in the broader city of South Vista. I had worked in the South Vista community for three years prior to the study, engaging in research and teaching at South Vista High and at a local middle school. So although I officially conducted this study over one school year and into the fall of the following school year, I had been engaged in learning and teaching in the South Vista community for much longer.<sup>2</sup>

South Vista is a small city located in one of the major metropolitan areas of the West Coast of the United States. For over four decades this small city has been predominantly a community of color. From the 1960s into the 1990s, South Vista was mainly an African American city. In the 1980s the Latino/a population began to grow rapidly as immigrants flowed in from Mexico and Central America and a transformation began taking shape which continues to the present. A significant Pacific Islander population from Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji has also continued to flow into South Vista since the 1980s. In 1990 the US Census reported a population of 42% African American, 36% Latino/a, and 6% Pacific Islander. A decade later in

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2000 the numbers had shifted dramatically to 59% Latino/a, 23% African American, and 8% Pacific Islander.<sup>3</sup>

I could say much more about South Vista, about the grand history of Afrocentric education and politics there, about the lack of a supermarket or a traditional public high school, about the community leaders who continue to fight for respect and resources from the wealthy neighboring cities, about the many community organizations doing good work there, and about its years in the 1990s with one of the highest murder rates in the United States. Yet this is not a book about a city, though you will learn much about South Vista in the following pages.

South Vista High School, where I spent the bulk of my research hours, is a small public charter school serving students exclusively from South Vista. The school is the only public alternative to a busing program that takes South Vista youth into the public high schools of neighboring affluent communities. During the time of my fieldwork, all of the students at South Vista High were students of color and, like the broader community, the school was undergoing a dramatic demographic shift. Just two years before my study in 2005 the school served 55% Latino/as, 34% African Americans, and 11% Pacific Islanders. In 2007 the numbers were a startling 74% Latino/a, 16% African American, and 10% Pacific Islander.

I should note briefly that the demographic shift in this city and school are not an anomaly. Many urban communities throughout the United States are now home to larger numbers of Latino/as in addition to African Americans and other ethnic groups of color from South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands (among other places).<sup>4</sup> African Americans, in fact, are experiencing an ever smaller urban presence in US cities and South Vista is certainly a case in point. Understanding the experiences of young people in such changing multiethnic communities and schools should be a top priority for all of us in the social sciences, particularly those concerned with language and education.

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South Vista High boasts relatively high graduation and college acceptance rates. Many South Vista High students are the first in their families to graduate from high school. Almost all of those that attend college will be the first in their families to do so, and by most estimates many of these youth were headed toward becoming high-school dropouts or worse. The teachers at the school are caring, hard working, and well qualified. By standard measures of success, South Vista High is doing well. And I could go on in this positive vein.

It will be easy in the following pages to forget this early favorable characterization of South Vista High. Much of what I came to understand about language and text and difference at South Vista was not well attended to by the school. In fact, some of my most important findings about division and unity went unnoticed or were ignored in my observations of the official life of the school. Yet my critiques of what was not happening at South Vista High are not leveled at the school or the teachers. The school and the teachers were doing good work within policy constraints and macro systems of inequality, many of which were beyond their control. I have larger targets in mind, namely our urban public schools, how we prepare teachers for them and, more broadly, our societal conceptions of ethnic and linguistic difference. My critiques, then, should be read as criticisms of the vital opportunities schools and society continue to miss in multiethnic and multilingual contexts, rather than as criticisms of a single school or the dedicated adults who worked there. And yet this is also not a book about school success or failure, or of teachers and teaching, though the implications do land on the practical ground of pedagogy and curriculum.

It was the students I worked with over the year that allowed me to hear their shouts of affirmation, to glimpse the workings of difference in their school and city. I am after big things in this book, and to come even close to realizing my goals I relied on the big hearts and minds of eight young people who were my focus participants over the year. There was Ela, a fifteen-year-old Samoan who immigrated to South Vista from American Samoa just three years

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before my study. And there was Miles, a fifteen-year-old African American who had lived all his life in South Vista. I also worked with Carla, a fifteen-year-old Latina who immigrated to South Vista from Michoacán, Mexico at the age of three and remained undocumented during our work together. There was Julio, a seventeen-year-old Latino, who also remained undocumented during our work together, even though he had come to South Vista at the age of two from Sinaloa, Mexico. There was Rochelle, a fifteen-year-old African American, who had lived in South Vista all her life. Rahul, a fifteen-year-old Fijian Indian, had also lived his whole life in South Vista, though his Hindu parents were born and raised in Fiji. I also worked with Gloria, a Latina fourteen-year-old, who had lived nearly all her life in South Vista and the neighboring communities, though she had spent a couple of years in Michoacán in early childhood. And finally there was Carlos, a seventeen-year-old Latino, who came with his mother to South Vista from Michoacán in 1999 to join his father who had been living in South Vista since the late 1980s.

In the following pages you will come to know the ways these young people used and thought about oral and written language within and between ethnic groups at South Vista High and in their broader youth and family communities. And you will come to know how these facets of their social and cultural selves participated in reinforcing and challenging lines of ethnic difference in positive and difficult ways. You will hear, I hope, a chorus of shouts for cultural and linguistic affirmation within and across ethnicity. It is through this chorus that I attempted to understand difference, division, and unity at South Vista High, in the city of South Vista, and further, if readers will allow, in the multiethnic and multilingual fabric of American society.

## DEVELOPING A HUMANIZING RESEARCH STANCE

The process of coming to understand the workings of ethnic difference with the youth in my study, of coming to hear their shouts of affirmation, involved developing a humanizing research stance

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throughout my fieldwork. It will be helpful for me to introduce this stance as it allowed for much of my learning at South Vista. I will use an email I received from Rahul toward the end of my study as an initial description of this humanizing stance in ethnographic and social language research across 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 ethnography and social language research 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, Ela, and their many peers lived ethnic difference through their everyday language and literacy and theorizing with them about 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, they 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

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me over the year in formal interviews, informal conversations, and participant observations.<sup>5</sup> Rahul emailed me on August 27th, 2007, as I was sitting in my office coding interview transcripts. Rahul was a Fijian Indian 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.<sup>6</sup>

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

There is much African American Language (AAL)<sup>7</sup> and Hip Hop Nation Language (HHNL)<sup>8</sup> to analyze in Rahul's rap, and I dedicate Chapter 5 to a thorough analysis of the textual worlds of South Vista's youth. 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 this book. 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

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as right as an ethnographer can; that I was “a friend who understand fully,” “Who knows wat 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,<sup>9</sup> 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 and cultural social language research.<sup>10</sup>

Rahul’s line about my having “been through it” deserves further comment. I was honest with the 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 and to Oakland 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-thirties to get her BA, then MA. I also told them about my years as a classroom English teacher in California, the Dominican Republic, and Arizona. 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 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



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echoes across the decades from more positivist-influenced versions of inquiry in applied cultural anthropology.<sup>11</sup>

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 and linguistic anthropological 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 ethnographers and social language researchers. 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.<sup>12</sup> Although such a stance is important in all research, it is particularly important when researchers are working with communities that 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 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

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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. Throughout this book, I will provide further examples of the way my research interactions with participants attempted to help the youth and myself toward a deepened sense of how oral and written language worked at South Vista. 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.

THE NEED FOR INTERETHNIC LANGUAGE AND  
LITERACY RESEARCH IN US SCHOOLS

When I arrived at the fieldsite in the late summer of 2006, I came laden with particular categories of race, ethnicity, and language as they applied to Latino/a, African American, and Pacific Islander students. And I came to South Vista wanting to know how youth from each of these ethnic communities negotiated the cultural distance between their everyday practices and those of school. What became apparent within the first months of fieldwork was that such lines of ethnic and linguistic difference and division operated far differently, and in far more complicated ways than I had read about or researched as a scholar or understood as a teacher. Sure, I came with knowledge of multiple identities, cultural dissonance, and even cultural hybridity. My own life as a Black Jamaican/White American biracial man, fused with reviews of decades of literature had prepared me for that. But the intensity of solidarity, of exclusion, and of interethnic sharing in linguistic and textual practices was beyond my expectations.

As I spent more and more time in the sociocultural worlds of young people, my focus on the youth/school tension became less prominent and I began to fix my research gaze on the thriving multi-ethnic youth cultural space. It was here that language and literacy was practiced and contested between youth both inside and outside the classroom. It was here that youth strove for power and voice in