

2019

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Recommended Citation

Cooper, Sara (2019) "Book Review: Finding and Framing a Story," *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/jces/vol4/iss2/10>

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Finding and Framing a Story

Review by Sara Cooper

Soep, E., and Chávez, V., *Drop that Knowledge: Youth Radio Stories*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-520-26087-0

In 2002 Oakland neighborhoods were making headlines, but not for reasons residents would want to brag about. The city's homicide rates were on the rise. Local news outlets had "daily body counts running like sports scores across newspaper pages" (Soep & Chávez, 2010, p. 30). Reporters from the Oakland-based Youth Radio were in search of a counternarrative, one that would privilege not the death toll but the lived experiences of young people who had grown up in the neighborhoods under media siege. What emerged was "Oakland Scenes," a multigenre radio story mixing spoken-word poetry with interviews of Oakland residents, many of whom were also Youth Radio participants.

"I'm here today to tell a story," 19-year-old poet Ise Lyfe announces in Oakland Scenes' opening track:

A twisted story of ghetto glory. Now, I know you heard of Romeo and Juliet, but I bet you ain't heard of Rome and Net Net. See, their story's a bit different. A bit more explicit. So sad, almost all bad. They're young, beautiful and don't even know. Society told him to be a thug, told her to be a 'ho. They victims of a system placed on us years ago (p. 34).

The poem's opening lines are followed by Youth Radio graduate and mentor, Gerald Ward II, interviewing his student Bianca as they drive down Oakland's 78th Avenue:

Gerald: What do you see?

Bianca: Liquor stores, nail shops, there's a whole bunch of people.

Gerald: This your neighborhood?

Bianca: Yeah. I try not to go outside at night. Because you never know [when] you might get killed.

"Oakland Scenes" says there is more than one way of telling a single story. It comments on the cycle and repercussions of poverty in certain neighborhoods as experienced by those who live there. Appearing in Elisabeth Soep and Vivian Chávez's *Drop that Knowledge: Youth Radio Stories*, it is emblematic of the kind of work the book aims to describe and theorize. As Oakland Scenes refuses the master narrative about violence, so do Soep and Chávez refuse romanticized notions of projects that 'give voice' to young people. Instead, they draw from critical pedagogy and theories of media literacy to both advocate and complicate working with youth. The first task of a youth radio reporter is "finding and framing the story" (p. 50). The story told here is that of Youth Radio, an award-winning organization that produces youth-created stories for National Public Radio (NPR) and online venues. It represents a convergence of perspectives, including those of Soep, the program's research director and senior producer, of Chávez, a professor at San Francisco State University, and of many of the Youth Radio students. It is also metadiscursive (e.g., "metaphorically speaking") (Jung, 2005). It challenges its own assumptions. The authors are aware of their subject positions as producer, researcher, storyteller, and comment on the role this plays and ought to play in the building of narrative. They ask both how do we encourage young people to tell good stories and how do we talk critically about the stories they tell? What we find here is a book about process, both the students' and the authors', that achieves

that rare balance between theory and praxis, all the while giving students space on the page to tell their own stories. The text is accessible. Like Youth Radio, it prioritizes clarity and a good story, but never at the expense of critical engagement with the subject matter. Soep and Chávez draw from Henry Jenkins's (2006) conception of convergence, or the content that arises "through a range of technologies all housed in one place" (p. 21) and theories of media literacy (Kress, 2003; Ong, 1999) to describe the kind of learning they advocate at Youth Radio. "Convergence literacy," as they have coined it, brings together the ability to "make and understand boundary-crossing and convention-breaking texts ... draw and leverage public interest, and ... claim and exercise the right to use media to promote justice" (p. 16). Students face intersections, daily, between their own "intimate" experiences and "public" controversies (p. 27). Through radio stories written in hybrid forms, they probe these intersections in an attempt to represent themselves as political agents and reconcile conflicting notions of place, society, and self. This is in step with composition theorists and feminist scholars who insist on the value of theorizing the personal (Hooks, 1994; Hindman, 2004; Miller, 1996). Encouraging content that is complex and boundary-breaking requires challenging the very boundary that defines many learning spaces: that between teachers and students. To draw from Freire's (1999) emphasis on prepositions, adults participating in Youth Radio work with students, teaching them to "compose compelling stories" and "critique mainstream media products" (p.53) while listening to their takes on contemporary issues. To this end, the authors advocate "collegial pedagogy," defined as "two or more people jointly engage[d] in a significant task for a shared purpose" (p. 53).

The students in this text are three-dimensional. They have names and faces (pictured throughout the book). They are granted authorship, with an entire chapter dedicated to personal essays they have written about their experiences with Youth Radio and transcripts of the stories they have created. "Why should their names be replaced with pseudonyms, as is often the convention," Soep and Chávez ask, "when we are writing about the creative contributions to a field in which they already have to fight for recognition?" (p.8). These students also have critical and emotional responses to a process they take seriously. One student, 17-year-old poet Rafael Santiago Casal, wrote a poem for Youth Radio criticizing America's obsession with style and mass consumption. The poem included sexual references and explicit language. When told he would have to edit the poem for a radio audience, he opted

out of the project, suggesting "perhaps [Youth Radio] had missed the message of the poem ... which was about media manipulation of a personal truth" (p. 77). Another student, Rachel, in response to a suggestion from Soep that her story on standardized testing ought to include her own perspective as a student test-taker, responded, "It's a little condescending to ask me to make it a personal story, as if I don't have a political perspective that's not necessarily based in personal experience" (p. 75).

In other instances, Youth Radio mentors guide students through the process of revision, of finding or unburying a story's "lede." This is an active task that sometimes requires refuting a student's initial instincts. One cannot assume, the authors point out, students will produce meaningful, critical work just by expressing themselves and their opinions. They don't automatically produce counternarratives. It is a mentor's job to teach students to read a text and to build one. Intersections, between the personal and the political, between teacher and student, mentor and mentee, can also be defined as points of tension. Soep and Chávez push students to create work that is engaging and audience specific, to demonstrate "humility" alongside their "right to speak" (p. 20). And sometimes the students push back. That the authors are willing to share these points of tension is testimony to their belief in collegial pedagogy and converged literacy. The text refuses the idealized progress narrative (Carrick, Himley, & Jacobi, 2010) for a more nuanced story in which people and places are represented in all their complexity.

A question necessarily arises about the book's relevancy. In an age in which most students download and even create digital content themselves, what is the role of Youth Radio? The authors argue that in addition to the skills they provide students, such programs also provide "a platform for collective activity," "opportunities for local organizing" and a chance to "build leadership and advanced skills" (p. 15). Further, "they engage young people who are otherwise marginalized from digital privilege" (p. 15). The latter seems of particular importance as the gap continues to widen between those with technology access and those without. Whether or not radio is losing relevancy, the critical conversation Soep and Chávez introduce could potentially be applied to projects incorporating diverse media and technologies. Their insights are applicable to a wide range of educational settings, largely because they are based in both theory and the very real interactions, and tensions, between people with varying values. Another question is whether or not NPR, one of the central outlets for Youth Radio, provides an ideal audience for young people. Are the sacrifices

they occasionally must make to content and style ultimately worthwhile? Interestingly, this is something of which the students seem aware and even use to their benefit as a means of thinking about audience. Student Orlando Campbell writes of Youth Radio, in his reflective essay, “It was basically taking issues that might come up in my raps and delivering them in a way that a middle-class white public broadcasting audience could understand” (p. 166). Whereas it is common to hear adults speaking about how to reach a youth audience, Campbell in a sense turns the tables, identifying the challenges a young person faces in reaching a demographic different from his own. Youth Radio’s King Anyi Howell takes a different approach to the issue, insisting, after a version of his story is censored by NPR, that “multiple platforms means never having to compromise” (p. 97). In other words, what he can’t share with a national audience he can via iTunes, social media networks, and other online venues. Soep and Chávez remind us, however, that there is a difference between “actual and hypothetical audiences” (p. 98). They push back. In this intersection of voices—Orlando’s, Anyi’s, the author’s—readers are asked to recognize the complexity of adults representing students and students representing themselves. Ultimately what is important is students who come to Youth Radio with something to say have the chance to be heard. Sometimes this means changing the message to meet the requirements of a broader audience. The book’s appendix, a collection of resources for educators from the “Teach Youth Radio” online curriculum, draws creative exercises from successful youth radio stories. It includes writing prompts like this one, created after a piece by Youth Radio’s Evelyn Martinez conflating her mother’s memories of guerillas in El Salvador and her own experience of violence in East L.A.: Evelyn’s story starts with a striking visual image:

“My mom says she hated the night sky growing up. It was a place of danger.” Have students brainstorm images, and write them up on the board. Then hold a five-minute free-write that starts with this sentence: “I always hated (nighttime image—fill in the blank). It was a place of danger”... (182).

As an educator who works with youth on creative media projects, I found myself taking notes and marking pages to return to as I use Soep’s and Chávez’s concepts to think through my own pedagogies. The practical suggestions for the classroom are as useful as the theory that backs them up. The authors’ willingness to be critical of their own

work and refuse easy answers earns my trust as an educator who knows teaching is, at best, complicated. Our lives, students’ lives, are multidimensional. We require counternarratives to represent them. Soep and Chávez, and the students of Youth Radio, give us these narratives.

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About the Reviewer

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