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# Strategic Authenticity and Voice: New Ways of Seeing and Being Seen as Young Mothers Through Digital Storytelling

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**Abstract** This paper presents the Ford Foundation-funded Hear Our Stories: Diasporic Youth for Sexual Rights and Justice project, which explores the subjective experience of structural violence and the ways young parenting Latinas embody and respond to these experiences. We prioritize uprooted young parenting Latinas, whose material conditions and cultural worlds have placed them in tenuous positions, both socially constructed and experientially embodied. Existing programs and policies focused on these women fail to use relevant local knowledge and rarely involve them in messaging efforts. This paper offers a practical road map for rendering relevant and modifying notions of voice as a form of knowledge with the potential to disrupt authoritative knowledge. We present the context and method behind the four digital storytelling workshops that served as a venue for transforming assumptions about young parenting women and producing novel understandings of teen pregnancy and parenting. We end by suggesting an intervention for what we call "strategic authenticity" as it plays out in storytelling, meaning making, and voice, and implications for policy concerned with social justice and equity.

**Keywords** Digital storytelling · Teen pregnancy and parenting · Young mothers · Youth sexuality · Strategic authenticity · Voice

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## Introduction

Instrumental approaches to teen pregnancy and parenting produce some of the loudest voices in the public sphere regarding youth sexuality. Teenage motherhood—itself a product of specific historical, cultural, and social processes that work to provide "calibrations of ideal motherhood" (Smart 1996, p. 46)—is conceptualized in terms of outcomes, insofar as teen mothers are framed as psychologically immature and incapable of being good parents (Mulongo 2006; Smart 1996). A focus on the medical, psychological, and physical aspects of teenage pregnancy invokes an authoritative voice that at once decontextualizes young mothers' sexuality and ignores power relations that influence how they experience their sexuality, motherhood, and selfhood.

Likewise, pregnant and parenting young women are simultaneously silenced and overrepresented by raced and classed social narratives on adolescent childbearing. Social policies and discourses produce subjects, creating public ideas about who people are and telling public stories about groups of people. One subject produced is that of the (poor, single) "teen mother" (Barcelos and Gubrium forthcoming). Language used to produce this subject often relegates young mothers to a position of "being just another statistic" (Gubrium 2007). Implied is a cycle of poor decision-making on the part of young people over the course of generations, with the outcome situated as an unequivocal social, health, and economic problem.

Derived from a long history of stubborn, hyperrational mentality in family planning (Krause 2012; Luker 1999), the voice of instrumentality emphasizes numbers of condoms distributed, quotas of long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs) fulfilled, or fidelity of evidence-based sexuality education curricula imparted. The deeper grooves of young people's lives—the circumstances they grow up in/under, the

sense they make of these circumstances, and the related ways these meanings are deployed in their sense of self and orientation toward the future—are largely left out of the conversation. Fix-it solutions override the felt joys, sorrows, desires, and traumas of life. Instrumental logics such as "we just need to get contraception into the hands of young people, and we'll lower the rate of teen pregnancy" are oriented toward the provision of commodities at the expense of a dignified recognition of young people situated in complex and often unforgiving social worlds.

In "Hear Our Stories: Diasporic Youth for Sexual Rights and Justice," a two-year project funded by the Ford Foundation, we intentionally prioritize uprooted young parenting Latinas, whose material conditions and cultural worlds have placed them in tenuous positions, both socially constructed and experientially embodied. The project is situated in a multifaceted reproductive justice framework, which connects the biological and the political, the local and the global, and the intimate and the institutional (Roberts 2014). Our project is located in the interstices of these locations, as we aim to shift the focus from individual choices, decisions, and behaviors related to sexuality and reproduction, to one that includes a broader analysis of the systematic (economic, cultural, and structural) production of power and emphasizes the need for social and structural supports for family making with dignity. Guided by another key principle in a reproductive justice orientation, the project is also designed to amplify marginalized voices by "bring[ing] people made vulnerable by issues into the center" (Luna and Luker 2013, pp. 344–345).

We aim to make a more dignified recognition of young people as agentic interlocutors situated in complex social worlds and to transform assumptions about young parenting women through digital storytelling. Digital stories are used to create a "narrative jolt" or an "aligning moment," to focus productively on teen pregnancy and parenting as it is more fully contextualized (Sharf et al. 2011, p. 46). We broaden the definition of voice to consider visual and sonic elements, such as still photos, video, and sound effects, key sensory elements of digital stories, and how these resources help to amplify voice above and beyond just the spoken word or written script.

In what follows, we discuss context and methods of the Hear Our Stories project and then turn to one digital story produced from the project to demonstrate the ways that the digital storytelling process viscerally evokes subjugated knowledge/s. We highlight the importance of voice in cultivating trust, theorize what the genre of digital storytelling can offer in this regard, and suggest an intervention for what we call "strategic authenticity" as it plays out in storytelling, meaning making, and voice (Krause 2007). We end with implications for policy concerned with social justice and equity.

## Context

The Hear Our Stories project research site is an alternative education (GED prep) program for pregnant and parenting women that we call here "The Center." The Center serves young women between the ages of 16 and 21 and their children. We focus on structural violence as it is experienced and constrains agency. However, we also acknowledge the potential irony of our focus on "structural violence," as it currently plays out as an authoritative conceptual tool among critical social scientists engaged in health inequities and social justice research and advocacy. While we maintain this focal point in our analysis, we anticipate that digital storytelling and other participatory research methodologies can deliver the transformation needed to undermine structures and players who are ultimately the beneficiaries of a current neoliberal system that subjugates young parenting Latinas and other disenfranchised groups. The system is predicated on numbers (i.e., decreased numbers of teen mothers, babies born to them, and state dollars spent to support them and increased dissemination of commodities in the form of contraception) rather than on supporting human dignity through meaningful engagement.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2004) writes "Structural violence refers to the invisible 'social machinery' of social inequality and oppression…that reproduces pathogenic social relations of exclusion and marginalization via ideologies and stigmas attendant on race, class, caste, sex, and other invidious distinctions" (p. 14). Forms of physical and structural violence permeate Center students' lives, whether experienced through intergenerational histories of intimate partner violence, housing and food insecurity, or ghettoization in the public education system. All of these are common experiences.

Over the past 5 years, Center students have reported a household income at or below 50 % of the poverty level, and nearly two-thirds have been pushed out of high school by the tenth grade, the majority before becoming pregnant. Histories of dispossession underlie these inequities. The Center is located in a postindustrial US city in western Massachusetts,[1] a former mill town, which experienced considerable economic depression with the decline of manufacturing in the early to mid-twentieth century. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the town experienced several waves of im/migration; today, nearly half of the population in the city is Latino/a, and the majority of whom are Puerto Rican and speak Spanish as their first language. Historically and currently, many citizens in the city-at-large face disadvantage. For example, it is noted that

[1] As anthropologists, we name the general area of the research site, as we believe that it is important for readers to better understand the cultural specificity of location, which is linked to intergenerational histories of migration and movement.

30.6 % of people live below the federal poverty level compared to the state level at 11 %. For children under the age of 18, 46.1 % live below the poverty line compared to 14 % statewide. The official unemployment rate is 11 % compared to 7.5 % statewide, and the annual per capita income in the city is $20,294 compared to $35,485 statewide (US Census Bureau, 2012). The high school graduation rate is 53 % compared to 84 % statewide (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2013).

In terms of health indicators, the city has the third highest age-adjusted mortality rate in the state, influenced by a disproportionate burden of diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and HIV/AIDS (Massachusetts Department of Public Health 2011). While teen birth rates in the state (15.4 per 1,000) are significantly lower than the national average, the city has the highest teen birth rate in the state (83.6 per 1,000 in 2010). Latina teen birth rates (32.6 per 1,000) are reported as being above the national average and almost three times higher than white teen birth rates (11.3 per 1,000) (Hamilton et al. 2012).

Leading health indicators often edge out considerations of disadvantage and inequity as policy makers highlight the need for teen pregnancy prevention. A high teen birth rate, especially among Latinas, is positioned as a taproot of health disparity in the city. Used to situate the need for a particular policy or prevention aim, statistics elide broader dimensions of lives or the ways that those targeted make sense of their experiences, which may belie an alternative understanding of circumstances and ways to promote well-being (Yanow 2013). Statistics also fail to lend credence to more process-oriented endeavors geared toward bolstering the lives of the people they are meant to address. What health statistics succeed in doing is stigmatizing young women as unfit mothers. Young women commonly internalize and normalize these authoritative forms of knowledge. We suggest that digital storytelling offers a model for recalibrating conversations concerning young parents.

## Method

While Center students share common histories of material dispossession and young parenting, they differ in how they make sense of their experiences and voice or construct selves in relation to stigmatizing discourses. In collaboration with participants, we analyze the problem-oriented and stigmatizing discourse(s) of young motherhood, especially as they relate to structural violence, notions of fit parenting, and youth-directed sexual politics. Between August and October 2013, we conducted four, 4-day digital storytelling workshops, recruiting thirty-one women to participate. Criteria for recruitment were that the interested participant be enrolled as a student at The Center. All participants produced digital stories.

We conceptualized the digital storytelling workshop as a setting for the collection of potentially transformative ethnographic data, to see how such a setting might provide a framework that not only "reflect[s]…multi-sensorial sense-making," as Sharf and colleagues (2011, p. 45) have suggested, but also creates a context that triggers participants' felt sense of having come into sexuality, motherhood, and emerging adulthood. Our approach to the digital story-making process enables participants to reconnect with, recollect, reconfigure, and act upon lived experiences. Specifically, we see digital storytelling as a new modality for *sensing* sexuality research (Vannini et al. 2012; Waskul 2009). It allows us to conceptualize sexuality not just cognitively but through the many sensory channels of experience. Particularly pertinent for youth sexuality research, it provides a source of information not readily offered or fully articulated by others—parents, schools, peers, and the media (Vannini et al. 2012). As "sense-making" intimate objects, we are interested in exploring if/how digital stories can serve as transformative artifacts of understanding, pushing the production of social science knowledge—and just what constitutes this knowledge—in new directions to inform the field as well as policies (Krause and De Zordo 2012).

Digital stories were crafted within the structure of a workshop that featured talking and writing prompts, individual and group script work, a story circle, script editing, voice-over recording of scripts, storyboarding, image selection, and digital editing and assembling. All of this was done with guidance from trained facilitators. We used story prompts to encourage participants to "write about a time" when they learned about sex and desire, understood what love is all about, felt like a good mom or a bad mom, realized what home means, felt really strong or really helpless, or felt like they were (or were not) part of a family. We have used similar prompts in previous workshops and find that they help to provide a guiding point for storytellers who are struggling to pinpoint a topic for their stories.

While we did provide guiding prompts in the workshops, we also tried to avoid forcing the topic to sexuality, as our experience has been that this produces canned stories and deviates from the original intention of digital storytelling: stories told about an experience that is meaningful *to the storyteller* (see Gubrium et al. 2013, for ethical issues arising from power dynamics and story shaping). Participants received feedback each step of the way—from peers during group work and from workshop facilitators in one-on-one contexts. Their stories evolved as they worked with feedback. Proceeding through the digital storytelling workshop process and especially during the story circle, when participants shared their stories for the first time with the group (some for the first time with anyone), the storytellers were able to choose what to share or not to share, to string together fragments of ideas, and to consider which parts of their story

might leave the circle and enter the public domain (Hancox 2012, p. 70).

The team aimed to make participant voices as resonant as possible, the stories as strong as could be. This aim extended to when the participants considered images, video, and sound to include in their stories. We asked participants to use their own images—whether these were hard-copy photos stored in old family photo albums, digital images uploaded to a Facebook site, or those taken in and around the Center over the course of the workshop. Participants were discouraged from using sound effects or music that was not self-generated or performed by someone they knew. They sat in a room alone with a microphone and a facilitator, who coached them in reading their scripts for a voice-over recording. Sometimes a number of takes were required to get the "best" reading possible. Outside noise—the blare of a siren or the rumble of a bulldozer—was disruptive. The quavering of a nervous voice was less than ideal—unless the texture served to make the story seem somehow more authentic. It was a strategic move on the part of the facilitators to aim for a natural-sounding audio recording. The process is much like theater, and hence, there is a significant performative element that goes beyond mere "providing" of a voice.

Social science research produces a lot of knowledge, yet that knowledge rarely reaches a broad audience or has much influence on public policies (Krause 2009). We ask how a single project such as Hear Our Stories might provide a model for rendering relevant forms of local, subjugated knowledge that are typically discounted and drowned out by authoritative and erudite forms of knowledge. Specifically, how do the voices in young mothers' own stories modify how they are seen and see themselves? In response, we turn now to a discussion of one digital story produced in the project and then consider the role of voice in the process.

## Lydia's Story: "My Precious Jewel"

Lydia[2] produced her digital story in our third workshop. She joined the workshop midmorning, later than the other participants, and in an effort to catch up, quickly began writing a script. During the group story circle, Lydia shared the story she had written—a story about her laboring experience during childbirth—but expressed that this *really* was not the story she wanted to tell. Although it was a meaningful story to her, she had also internally negotiated the intention and potentiality of her story if it were eventually shared in the public domain. Lydia knew with certainty which one of her stories was appropriate and purposeful for this project, and she shared a synopsis of what she was going to write: the story of her son being taken away from her. Other participants agreed that this was a "better" story because it resonated with their own experiences, and they saw sharing this story as a way to speak to local notions of "fit" parenting and the judgment from others that they encounter.

That night, Lydia went home and rewrote her story in the basement, away from distraction, while her two young children slept upstairs. She returned the next day with a new script, and shared it with one of the facilitators, asking for feedback. They worked closely together, identifying her narrative voice, piecing together her story, crafting her message. The result is an approximately two-minute digital story with eight still images and three short video clips. Most of these images are photographs taken by Lydia or by her close friends or relatives, and the short videos were filmed using a cell phone during the digital storytelling workshop. To render the story through a multisensory lens, we use an intertextual transcription method (Tables 1, 2, and 3). This transcript style allows a verisimilitude of the visual, chronological, aural and oral, emotional, gestural, and textual components found in the digital story (Gubrium and Turner 2011). Limited by print, we first provide Lydia's script and then reference the intertextual transcript to trace and analyze the story.

> "My Precious Jewel"
> It was the worst day of my life. Jaxon was 6 months old. When I picked him up, he cried. Something was wrong with his arm. We were living in a shelter at the time. Me, him, and my husband. I called the doctor, and she said to take him to the emergency room. But I didn't have any money for transportation so I had to wait a day for someone to take us. The ER was crowded and noisy. I waited for the tests. I was so nervous and scared to eat. The results came after two stressful days. The doctors didn't find anything wrong with his arm. They found something else. But they wouldn't show me the x-rays when I asked. They said they were too busy. On the third day, some people came to ask me questions. I will never forget the accusing looks or how I cried when they tried to pull him out of my arms. And sent me home without him. The x-rays showed a fractured tibia and hip. What was happening? I would never hurt my son. Was I going to miss out on his first steps? His first teeth coming in? His first everything? How could this happen to me? I love my son. A year later, without an apology, we got him back. The hospital had mixed up the x-rays. I guess Jaxon was a popular name.

Lydia's story "fluoresce[s] with imagery" (Murray 2010, p. 120). She uses both color and black-and-white still images; some are slightly blurry, others are clear and highly contrasted, but they all convey a sense of being deeply personal. For example, one image shows Lydia kissing her

[2] Pseudonyms are used for the storyteller and her son.

**Table 1** Sample of intertextual transcription segment of Lydia's digital story

| | |
|---|---|
| Image |  |
| Time (s): | 104–113 |
| Location represented | Birthday party |
| Script | "The hospital had mixed up the x-rays…I guess Jaxon was a popular name." |
| Emotion conveyed from script | Shock, confusion, and injustice |
| Features of visual objects | Posed photo of the whole family standing under a multicolored banner that reads "Happy Birthday." Present are Lydia, her husband, three children, and an additional person standing in between Lydia and her husband. In the background, the camera's flash has created shadows of the banner and posed people against a gray wall. Lydia and her husband are smiling slightly and appear uncomfortable, while none of the children are smiling. |
| Emotion conveyed from visual | Forced, unnatural, and discomfort |
| Soundtrack | None |
| Voice quality | Thick voice, hesitant and interrupted, sarcastic, and facetious |
| Special effects | Still image; fades to black |
| Text on screen | None |

smiling son as he gazes up at her, his dark eyelashes stark against his soft skin; and another, an image of him sitting on a bed smiling as bright daylight filters into the bedroom. In the section of her story where she speaks of living in a shelter with her family, a facilitator has video recorded Lydia's right hand as she stacks wooden rectangular blocks on a table. Around the stack lie four of the same wooden blocks, creating an enclosed and sheltered center. The final still image of Lydia and her family standing together under a Happy Birthday banner is perhaps one of the most compelling (see Table 1).[3] The camera's flash has created shadows of the banner and the people posed in the image against a gray wall in the background. Lydia and her husband are smiling, somewhat unnaturally and uncomfortably, inviting the viewer to wonder, among other things, about the consequences of that year apart from their son.

Lydia also uses movement with purpose and complexity. When narrating her experience at the hospital, she slow pans an image showing the hands, legs, and feet of people sitting closely in a waiting area (see Table 2). The panning movement of that image reveals to the viewer, almost pace-like, the complex emotions of anxiety, helplessness, and invisibility among so many other people who, like her, are also waiting. Additionally, Lydia's purposive use of transitions such as fading to black or dissolving (crossfading) between images, effectively reveals the developing "plot" and aids in dynamically moving her story along. She times selected still images with questions of how this could happen to her family and what it means that her son is taken away. The result is the viewer carried in sync with Lydia's journey. We, too, feel the loss and confusion of her being denied those treasured experiences of her son's first milestones.

[3] We have used a mosaic effect on the faces in the photo to maintain anonymity. The same photo in the digital story does not contain this effect. While we recognize the potential use of the digital stories as strategic communications material for organizing and advocacy purposes, here we present the digital story as part of a research project that is governed by our institutional human subjects review board, which expects that we protect potentially vulnerable participants' anonymity.

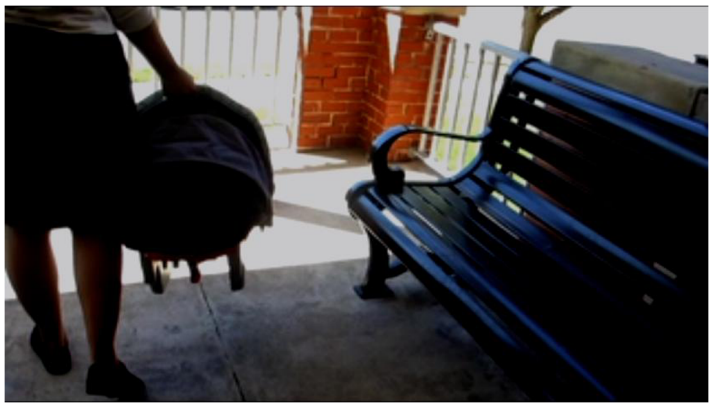
**Table 2** Sample of intertextual transcription segment of Lydia's digital story

| | |
|---|---|
| Image |  |
| Time (s) | 33–47 |
| Location represented | Hospital waiting area |
| Script | "The ER was crowded and noisy. I waited for the tests. I was so nervous and scared to eat. The results came after two stressful days." |
| Emotion conveyed from script | Anxiety, helplessness, and stress |
| Features of visual objects | Hands, legs, and feet of people sitting in approximately ten hospital waiting chairs organized into U-shape. One person is sitting in a hospital numbered wheelchair in the center of the "U." People are waiting with legs crossed, feet resting on top of knees. One person is reading a newspaper; one chair holds only a black, unzipped purse. Only one chair is empty, but someone's arm is overreaching the armrest, cutting into the extra space of the empty chair, showing how tightly packed the chairs are and how little space is available. |
| Emotion conveyed from visual | Invisibility, confusion, being trapped, and immobility |
| Soundtrack | None |
| Voice quality | Thick voice, hesitant, and interrupted |
| Special effects | Slow pan of still image in black and white; fades to next image |
| Text on screen | None |

The viewer is left shocked, angry, confused, and with more questions than answers. Lydia's story offers, perhaps, a layered glimpse of structural violence. Most visible is the effect of poverty on her family and her struggle to access healthcare for her son, and the tragedy of Lydia's son erroneously (and illegally) being taken away from her by the Department of Children and Families, the state agency responsible for child protection services. The less visible elements of her story, such as the everyday violence of the weighted assumptions of young Latina mothers as hyperfertile, overly sexual, psychologically immature, and incapable of being good parents, are elicited through other sensory modalities. For example, Lydia creatively uses shadows in one short video where she is pacing on a porch, carrying an infant car seat, waiting for someone to take her to the hospital (see Table 3). The sun shines aggressively through the rails of the porch, casting inquisitive shadows on the concrete floor and creating contrasting folds of darkness and lightness. Clutching the car seat, Lydia paces within the confines of the black shadows, toeing the bright, prying lightness. This brilliant manipulation leaves the viewer wanting, urging Lydia to step into the sunlight as if that could somehow reveal the inequity and injustice of her experiences.

Lydia deliberately does not use a background soundtrack. It is this silence in the background that highlights her voice, that makes visible the unsaid, the not shown. The viewer internalizes the warmth and visceral presence of her voice, central to the story's power. The cadence and rhythm with which she pronounces words like "apology," or that she is sure to enunciate every letter of "-ing" in words like "living," strengthens the felt authenticity of her story. The result is that her voice is at once raw and constrained; there is pain and indignity in her words as she struggles to control her inflection at times, but there is also clarity and purpose in her speech. We, as viewers, have become active participants in the story. We do have more questions than answers, but now we *demand* answers, we demand accountability and justice because Lydia's story balances the personal with the universal, the individual with the familiar. The story shifts our sense of concern from worrying about teenagers becoming pregnant to real families dealing with institutions whose presumed erudition allows free rein for unjust acts without due process.

**Table 3** Sample of intertextual transcription segment of Lydia's digital story

| | |
|---|---|
| Image |  |
| Time (s) | 25–32 |
| Location represented | On porch outside home |
| Script | "But I didn't have any money for transportation so I had to wait a day for someone to take us." |
| Emotion conveyed from script | Despair, sadness, and helplessness |
| Features of visual objects | The back of Lydia—we see only her lower body as she carries a baby in an infant car seat, pacing on a porch in rhythmic steps, presumably to soothe the baby, waiting and looking for someone. A black wrought iron bench sits on the right; brick pillars connected by wrought iron fencing surround the shaded porch. The sun shines, creating shadows and darkness on the cement of the porch. |
| Emotion conveyed from visual | Physical tiredness and helplessness. Contrast of lightness and darkness evokes feelings of right and wrong, warmth, and coldness. |
| Soundtrack | None |
| Voice quality | Slow and deliberate and overpronounced glottal stops |
| Special effects | Color video; fades to black |
| Text on screen | None |

## Voice and Controversy

We do not see digital storytelling as merely *providing* a voice or giving voice, or *representing* participants. We see it as a process that entails the cocreation and coconstruction of new narratives, complicated voices (see Krause 2009; Palevsky 2000). The digital storytelling workshop itself takes place in a particular context, one that is mutually created through the participation of young women, social science researchers, graduate students, and professional facilitators. All become intimately involved in the creation of each story. The resulting dialogues are not insignificant.

The voice metaphor has attracted a good deal of controversy over the past several decades in social science, literary, as well as activist circles. An ideological chasm separates those who atone extreme, believe in the existence of an authentic voice that reflects the true self, and those who, at the other, criticize such notions as nothing more than an illusion in a postmodern age in which there are only multiple roles and shifting selves. This dynamic has played out among poststructuralists who, with Barthes (1977), celebrated the death of the author and warned that we not be "'fooled' by the writer's character or the music of his [*sic*] language" (Elbow 1994, p. xiii). Indeed, in a more recent essay, writing and rhetoric theorist Peter Elbow observes that it is pretty tough to find critical literary types arguing for voice; it has been discredited. But, it has not gone away, either (Elbow 2007, p. 170). Arguments about voice live on, perhaps secretly, in conversations that social service providers have with recipients, on websites, in activist groups, and in new media such as digital stories.

Social scientists face some particular problems when it comes to issues of voice. First, we work in the shadows of the crisis of representation's legacy, best represented in the classic anthropological volume *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986). This crisis made us very aware of the uneven relations of power that infused our projects. Quandaries of who could speak for whom vexed ethnographers. Yet, they have avoided paralysis. Working on human rights' issues in a context of a great deal of pain and suffering among HIV patients in Brazil, Pereira (2008) advocates a position of sharing speech or silence; he combines embodied compassion through touch with narratives to create "converging voices" (p. 50). In detailing lived experiences of addiction among residents of the Hispaniola Valley, especially as they align with histories of dispossession, Garcia (2010) draws on

Wittgenstein (2001) to see language and voice as an "evolving practice, where the meaning of a word is not in its objectified form but in its usage" (p. 152). Similar to Pereira, she also encourages research participants and researchers to remain "in the face of one another's unshared vulnerabilities…[as] it is through this common vulnerability that we can begin to understand the possibilities for a kind of care" (pp. 67–68). Ethnographers continue to author despite attacks on authorship.

As the poet and essayist bell hooks reminds us, the dead-author position ignores the fact that all authors were not equally able to speak in the first place. For hooks and others writing from the margins, "coming to voice" was a tricky act of navigation, creativity, and politics. The commonplace position among teachers of writing, that voice embodied "the distinctive expression of an individual writer," raised issues for hooks. As the only African American student in her classes, when she would read a poem written in black southern dialect, the teacher and students would praise her for using her "true," authentic voice. "They encouraged me to develop this 'voice,' to write more of these poems." Similar to the stickiness of participants being authentically represented through digital storytelling, hooks was troubled. She felt the comments masked racial assumptions about what her "authentic voice would or should be" (Hooks 1994, p. 52). Inspired by black musicians' versatility with musical voicing, she looked to poets who challenged the insistence of settling on one voice and, instead, embraced a dynamic notion of self, upending assumptions of universality and pushing a politics of difference. She did so powerfully. We remember reading her essays in graduate school. Unlike chapters in *Writing Culture*, hers resonated like heartfelt songs. Voice shot through them.

Social scientists face a second problem, of a hypersensitivity to power relations and representational politics. Our ears suffer from a dissonance that rivals those of creative writers who must shift between the literary canon and vernacular street speech. To rise to the rank of professional anthropologists, we have had to foster an ear for the theoretical canon. When we do our fieldwork, most of us must cultivate an ear for the vernacular in whatever setting we find ourselves. Our field notes reflect those voices. But, all too often something happens in the process of translation and conversion. When we come home and write our dissertations, our journal articles, and our books, the voices of theory end up trumping the voices of the vernacular.

The effect on readers is mixed. On the one hand, through our standard disciplinary practice of situating our works within the conversations of other theorists, who are typically more renowned than ourselves, we increase trust through authority. We sound erudite. Digital storytelling places the social scientists behind the scene—although that may vary depending on the viewing context. In any case, the stories offer another tack at the painstaking efforts at merging erudition with subjugated knowledge. We would like to argue that such methods offer another, popular strategy in challenging the bullying character of "totalizing discourses" (after Foucault 1980, pp. 78–81; see discussion in Krause 2007, and Krause and de Zordo 2012, p. 140). The digital stories are designed to build audiences and complement other forms of writing and modes of discussion. Beyond the tired explanation of accessibility, we would like to suggest that such collaborative strategies enhance the trustworthiness of voice and, potentially, their messages.

## Strategic Authenticity

Inroads for the voice project have been paved in a number of places: Rosaldo (1989) on emotion, Behar (1997) on vulnerability, Abu-Lughod (1986) on poetics, Seremetakis (1994) and Stoller (1994) on the senses, and of course Geertz (1973) on the thick description. Behar (1997) suggests that "a personal voice, if creatively used, can lead the reader, not into miniature bubbles of navel-gazing, but into the enormous sea of serious social issues" (p. 14). In an influential and poignant counterargument to objectivity dogma, Rosaldo (1989) invoked personal experience more than two decades ago as an important analytic category (p. 11). His argument targeted the limitations of detached science. In bringing emotion to bear on analysis, he enriched understanding and created a deep sense of empathy. Such strategies remain essential for sensitizing our ears to voice in writing.

Merging experiences as writers, social theorists, and engaged social scientists, we suggest another way for speaking of voice: striving for a *strategically* authentic voice. Hackles generally rise with the word "authentic." In a complex world, how can the self be "authentic"? As anthropologists, we are skeptical of rigid claims of an essential self. We have been raised on too many theorists who convincingly demonstrate the sway of ideological conflict on vulnerable, shifting and desiring selves. A quest for origins—the implication of authentic to mean "genuine," as with an authentic antique—contradicts a postmodern or poststructural sensibility of the self. If, however, by authentic we intend what can be believed or accepted, what is trustworthy or reliable, we may be moving our voice project in a productive direction. Surely, storytellers, like writers, want their interlocutors to believe them.

As ethnographers, we are particularly interested in meaning making around youth sexuality—even when direct reference to sexual practice is silent. As noted in our project proposal, we believed that silences and lack of knowledge would affect participants' ideas of what to voice regarding sexuality and reproduction. For example, we figured that political and religious views, as well as silences and lack of knowledge, would affect their sense of what is appropriate regarding sexuality and reproduction (Vidal-Ortiz 2010).

The title of the project, "Hear Our Stories," suggests a beckoning presence of the tellers themselves. One of the major features of digital storytelling is that the participants write and produce their stories. Their voices are front and center. They are meant to be heard. We do not wish to suggest, however, that their voices are pure and authentic. We complicate the notion of giving voice, acknowledging the deeper issues of authenticity, identity, moral, and ideological stakes (Hill 1995; Ochs and Capps 1996), and ambivalence that may arise in participant-produced media. Indeed, we would like to argue not for the production of authentic voices but for *strategically* authentic voices.

In a strategic use of authentic voice, the digital storyteller makes use of her voice to serve a particular purpose. She believes in this voice. It is an appropriate and trustworthy voice for the occasion. It is not necessarily an easy or comfortable voice to achieve. Very likely, the storyteller, like the writer, will have to cultivate this voice and arrive at it through patient nurturance and ample practice. Our digital storytelling workshops aimed to provide such nurturance.

A strategically authentic voice should not be mistaken for a simplistic or unitary voice, no more than the "strategic essentialism" of postcolonial studies (Spivak 1985; see also Eide 2010, for a recent assessment) should elide the fact that strong differences may exist between members of various subaltern groups. Yet, they may find advantages in temporarily "essentializing" themselves to put forth a relatively simplified group identity in order to act and achieve certain goals. A parallel here is that we are suggesting that certain types and modes of voice do instigate action. Our critics might point out that a strategically authentic voice runs the risk of an oversimplified voice. Here, we suggest that Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogic voice be used to temper this possible tendency.

The techniques that Bakhtin observes in Dostoevsky, one of the great masters of voice, may be instructive, not just for theoretical expansion but also for writing and storytelling inspiration. Bakhtin draws our attention to a dialogic or polyvocal quality among as well as within certain voices. In this view, language is not the speaker's own but rather is ever populated with the intentions of others. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin (1980) underscores his view of language as a living expressive system in which differences constantly collide: "it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth" (p. 291).

Our approach is to complicate voice and recognize inter-subjective and intertextual meaning making in the project. We argue for an approach that manifests new ways of seeing and being seen by recognizing understandings as informed by digital storytelling facilitators, storytellers, project partners, research site staff, viewing/listening audiences, and the circulating discourses on youth sexuality and teen parenthood. In this, we acknowledge polyvocality in storytelling: that "narratives rarely, if ever, have a solitary existence. They operate concurrently in relation to other stories, and may reinforce, indirectly compete with, or actively confront and resist one another…in ways that shape our understandings" (Sharf et al. 2011, p. 40).

Digital storytellers are therefore always making choices about how to appropriate language and how to orient their multisensory texts. Because of the pressures of science and the pressures to make conclusions with confidence, the tendency for many social scientists is to appropriate language in a way that strips out the texture and the ambiguity. Nuance and conflict are commonly eliminated in the service of science (to say nothing of health promotion and prevention agenda). This is a very different strategy from that of the poet or novelist or storyteller, who welcomes heteroglossia and linguistic diversity, finding that the dynamic does not weaken their work but intensifies it (Bakhtin 1980, p. 298). There is a tendency for social scientists to purge words of intentions and tones that are alien to them, to destroy the seeds of social heteroglossia embedded in the words, to clean up language, to sanitize it, and to eliminate peculiar linguistic characteristics and speech mannerisms that might risk "detracting" from the essence of the point being made. It is a method designed for authority and efficiency. Or so, we have been told. Yet, at what cost to voice?

Through the coconstruction of multisensory narratives in the context of the genre of digital storytelling, we find the potential to revitalize the texture and ambiguity of voice—the heteroglossia, if you will. We find new possibility in the resonant voices that emerge, strategically, through the Hear Our Stories project. What marks Lydia's and other participants' stories is the way an interconnected system of policy and practice "regulates people's reproductive futures through assessments of worthiness originating in assumptions about race, class, and [ability] (among other dimensions)" (Luna and Luker 2013, p. 329). Made not only visible but *visceral*, the digital story viewer is made to feel how structural violence reverberates through dominant cultural understandings and hierarchies that circulate about young parenting women (Ginsburg and Rapp 1995).

Ultimately, we see digital stories as putting a human face on policy. We see our process as giving space to those who are often positioned as passive objects, to agentically respond to these practices. Workshop participants define relevant issues as they go from being objectified as part of an "at risk" or "oppressed" population to creating a strategically authentic media product that grabs and potentially influences policy makers and the public alike. Repurposed into multimedia strategic communications materials, the stories are intended to trigger new conversations as future interventions on sexuality, health, rights, and justice issues.

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