

Conducting the Interview

Offering an Audience to the Voices of Student Inmates

LALITHA VASUDEVAN

As I hold my hand out for the lapel microphone that Kavon is unclipping from his white T-shirt, I remark that we have talked for over an hour. Kavon hands me the microphone with his right hand and with his left clutches the area of his chest in front of his heart. He holds his hand there for a few seconds, exhales, and says, “I guess I had a lot to get off my chest.” He then interlaces both hands behind his head, shakes his head back and forth a few times, and tells me that he hadn’t ever talked about some of what he had just shared in the interview. I ask him to describe the experience and he says that it felt good to talk about “all that stuff.”

“All that stuff” referred to an interwoven series of anecdotes, memories, and reflections on Kavon’s life over the last twenty years. The setting for our conversation was a classroom inside one of the five high school sites within Rikers Island Jail. The cinder block walls were coated in light grey paint, and posters of famous African Americans shared the same wall space with posters depicting the conventions of writing. Kavon and I sat in the back of the room, under the windows mounted high above, in chairs with attached desks; I faced the room and Kavon faced the back wall, and in that somewhat public configuration we managed to carve out a private space.

In the weeks preceding my first interview, I had been apprehensive about asking someone I’d never before met to share his stories with me. I felt like an intruder and was particularly self-conscious about the notion of asking young men—inmates at one of the most well-known jails in the country—to reveal themselves to me without yet having given them any reason to trust me. That is, would I be seen as merely another cog in the human wheel of surveillance with which incarcerated youth are all too familiar? Not all interviews are alike, however, and as a participant and facilitator in this oral history writing project I found a new appreciation for interviews as a way of initiating relationships, relationships that were beneficial not only to us but to the young men we interviewed as well.

The transcript of my conversation with Kavon presents only part of our exchange; it doesn't capture my nods and smiles or Kavon's gripping of the desk, his tentative and then more assured timbre, and the degree to which he slid down in his seat. The interview protocol we had created fostered the development of an open-ended conversation between us. At several points as Kavon progressed in his storytelling, he appeared to be both recollecting memories and forming new thoughts about his life. He had lived his life but, as he noted, he had not yet narrated his story for an audience.

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The stories Kavon told described finding strength from his longtime girlfriend, whom he identified as a leader; learning how to navigate aspects of his West Indian heritage that did and did not fit with his future goals; and the lessons he hopes to share with his young niece. We believed these stories held valuable insights into what kinds of education mattered to these young men, and offered important points of inquiry often overlooked in the ongoing dialogue about education and the justice system,

and Kavon's stories provided both. But telling these stories also gave something to Kavon. Over the course of this project, I began to rethink a practice that I had primarily framed through social science lenses, where the researcher or interviewer is seen as the main beneficiary of the interview. In contrast, I saw that the interview with Kavon was a meaningful experience for him, as well. The interview process created both an immediate audience for the young African American and Latino men we interviewed and, through the published transcripts in *Killing the Sky 2*, a broader audience for stories that are not often heard.

For the young men involved with this project and for many others—whose stories are too often told for them by the media, by lawmakers, and by the general public—the opportunity to make themselves known in their own words is not readily available. Because oral history recognizes and respects the narrative authority of the storyteller, it provides these young men the opportunity to do just this. In saying so, I don't want to romanticize the collaborative process of sharing, shaping, and constructing stories. The realities are that some of the young men we worked with were sentenced and moved to another facility, others released, and still others are going to serve out their sentence at Rikers Island. But telling their stories and making their stories accessible for multiple audiences—especially adolescents—offers these young men at least the possibility of a different ending. This moment of possibility is reflected in Kavon's words as he prepares to return to his cell dorm after our interview is over.

Before he gets up from his chair, Kavon looks back at me and asks, "Little kids are going to read this, right?" I say that the first book found its way into middle and high school classrooms and into the hands of teachers and students alike. He is nodding as I say this and underscores the message implicit in his question, "Yeah, cuz they need to know all this ain't what it's about. I hope someone learns from my story."