



Off the Record: Police Surveillance, Muslim Youth, and an Ethnographer's Tools of Research

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ABSTRACT

Surveillance practices are becoming increasingly insidious, finding their way into nearly every aspect of public and private life in the United States. Surveillance by state policing agencies have particularly targeted and criminalized communities of color. Such practices are not simply a new context, but are part of a broader carceral state, structuring all aspects of social life. Drawing upon a year and a half of ethnographic fieldwork with Muslim youth in New York City, I attempt to engage in a practice of “uncomfortable reflexivity” to ask how living within a carceral state that actively surveils Muslim communities affected the ways in which Muslim youth engaged me, a social researcher, and the tools I used to collect data. This research recognizes that youth are not simply there for researchers to take knowledge from, even if “insider” researchers have meaningful relationships with them. Rather, this research depicts that young people are carefully engaged in thoughtful and creative ways to ensure their own safety is protected. Ultimately, this study points to the necessity of research that is both self-reflective in its design as well as in its ability to make claims about youth experiences.

With locks of black hair that shot out from his undersized kufi and an oversized black wool jacket that hung off of his lanky frame, Ibrahim was animated with hope as he talked about his family, service work, social, and spiritual life. He showed both joy and freedom in his stories. Ibrahim glowed with the love of serving those around him, but his face tightened when the New York Police Department (NYPD) was brought up. Ibrahim, then a 20-year-old undergraduate at Brooklyn College, was involved in a number of community service programs that provided for the basic needs of some of the most economically challenged in New York City. As a first-generation college student who took his academics seriously, he also served as an organizer in multiple local service projects, regularly ran errands for his family, and spent his social time thinking about how to create a more just society. Ibrahim employed his scarce free time utilizing the privileges he has accessed in the service of others. In short, Ibrahim might be seen as a model emerging adult within the U.S. liberal democratic political structure.

Ibrahim, though, is the primary demographic the NYPD (and FBI) have targeted as “at risk” (if we want to use the language of the War on Drugs) of committing acts of political violence in the United States (Apuzzo & Goldman, 2013). Like thousands of other Muslim community members—specifically youth—in New York City and throughout the United States, Ibrahim has been the direct target of police surveillance through Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and similar programs. Ibrahim was one of the 30 or so high school and college students with whom I spent a year and a half in New York City as we learned about and attempted to build a student campaign

against the New York Police Department's Demographic Unit's program of surveillance of Muslim communities. In previous research, I discussed how NYPD surveillance of Muslim students affected social and academic relationships for college students (Ali, 2016). In this article, I continue to consider this context of surveillance of Muslim youth in NYC while I shift the focus to explore how the subject-object relationship of the ethnographer and her tools mediate and elucidate the notion, or might I say, the aspiration of Muslim political subject (and not object) in the United States. To explore these tensions, I utilize my engagements with two of these young people: Ibrahim and Halima.

This article takes up Wanda Pillow's (2003) notion of uncomfortable reflexivity, which she describes as scholarship that "continue[s] to challenge the representations we come to while at the same time acknowledging the political need to represent and find meaning" (p. 192). In this work I share a "messy example ... that do[es] not seek a comfortable, transcendent endpoint" (p. 193). Specifically, I examine how youth with whom I worked shifted their conversations based upon the presence of a recording device. Through this, I explore the complex and shifting subject positions of both the researcher and the participant in light of data collection tools that may be seen as part of the state surveillance matrix. To examine this concern, I share the context in which my research was conducted, as well as provide an overview of the research itself. I then explore the tensions and concerns of the relationship of an "insider" ethnographer and the tools of research. I query my data to move beyond looking for what young people say and do, and I attempt to pay careful attention to how, who, and what was done, where it was done, and most importantly, what was not done to begin to posit a possible "why" of actions and interactions. By drawing from a Freirean (2000) model of praxis as "reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed" (p. 126), and Hannah Arendt's (1958) conception of praxis as a practice of freedom—as the ability to materially wrestle with ideas, I believe this article attempts to do just this—reflect back upon active work in the world. Such efforts are essential for social justice educators who should consider not only how they enter communities, but how their tools mediate access and engagement with youth. This article elucidates some of the tensions in navigating the complex nature of community-oriented ethnography when the researcher is connected to participants in multiple ways beyond the role of the researcher.

Such critical self-reflection is essential to a research pedagogy that Pillow (2003) is imploring us to look for—reflection upon that which happened in order to improve and redo it. Furthermore, data help us recognize the critical, careful, and thoughtful ways in which young people engage us as social researchers and make active choices about what to, and more importantly, what not to reveal to us at any particular moment. These data remind us that beyond embodied subjectivities of participants and the researcher, the larger carceral context shapes not only the research context, but the subjectivities of all participants in a research project. These findings suggest that critical, community-oriented, and responsive researchers who cultivate mentoring and community-based relationships with youth must be careful, self-reflective, and critical in what they report as data.

The research project

The temporal moment

This article draws from a year and a half of ethnographic fieldwork with Muslim youth in New York City conducted in 2011 and 2012. Although this article primarily addresses the context of the NYPD surveillance program, this time period also coincided with the 10-year memorial of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in addition to the concocted controversy by right wing activists over the building of Park 51 Islamic Cultural Center, erroneously dubbed the World Trade Center Mosque (Marbella, 2010). Amidst these heightened anti-Muslim

sentiments, this study illuminates how youth engaged me, and each other, after the public came to know of the NYPD surveillance of Muslim communities.

Setting and context

New York City in the summer of 2010 was hot. The city's heat was not felt solely from the sun, but in the thickness of the air, and from the asphalt radiating up. Long hot days, followed by sticky nights. It is easy to think about New York City as a place of diversity where difference is celebrated and global communities have hobbled together homespace in the midst of U.S. empire. This vision of New York ignores the draconian policies of the NYPD, the increasing gentrification of the city, and the racial violence embedded in the financial center of the center of the world's most powerful empire. Summer 2010 saw a storm gathering with right wing activists descending on New York City to protest the building of the Park 51 Islamic Cultural Center. On September 11, 2010, anti-Muslim and right-wing activist Pamela Geller was the lead organizer of a rally, which brought thousands of people to lower Manhattan for a rally "loaded with inflammatory anti-Muslim rhetoric, images and smears" (Berrier, 2010) with speakers and participants from a host of far right organizations from the United States and Europe (Content, 2015). The building of a religious institution became a point of national political debate. Scores of elected officials from across the U.S. called for the mosque to not be built (Slate, 2015), and the governor of the State of New York attempted to move the mosque from its proposed location (WNYC, 2012). Muslim communities felt the collective fear, guilt, and punishment levied toward Islam, generally, and Muslims globally and locally.

This issue is an example of how Muslim communities throughout the United States are treated wholly as a suspect community. A decade after 9-11, "post 9-11 backlash" had turned to anti-Muslim vitriol manifesting in local zoning, political, and legislative challenges to Muslim worship spaces nationwide, cultural suspicion, targeting, and hyper-surveillance policing efforts. Although Muslim communities have been surveilled in the U.S. for over a century (Gomez, 2005; Lincoln, 1994), the current manifestation has developed as part of the surveillance economy in the years since 9-11. Muslim communities are wholly targeted, surveilled, and treated as a suspect class in the United States regardless of their political affiliations or identities (Rana, 2011). What came to be known less than a year after the summer 2010 mass protest was that Muslim communities were being actively surveilled by the NYPD for at least the previous nine years. The New York Police Department's Demographic Unit was actively surveilling Muslim communities in the tri-state region and beyond. This surveillance included spies in mosques, community informants, and undercover officers in Muslim communities and on college campuses (Apuzzo & Goldman, 2013). Furthermore, Muslim students were a defined and specific target of the NYPD police, including students who were part of this research project (Ali, 2016).

Just weeks after the news of the NYPD surveillance surfaced, New York City saw the birth of a global political protest movement against global economic inequality on September 17, 2011. Protesters gathered in Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan in order to Occupy Wall Street (Occupy Solidarity Network, 2014) and soon after saw the birth of the Occupy movement globally. Building upon anarchist (Bray, 2013; Hammond, 2015) models of organizing and political leadership, this protest expressed a rejection of the social and economic inequalities resulting from global capitalism and neoliberal economic models (Earle, 2015). The protests in Lower Manhattan resonated across the world, and the Occupy movement spread from Zuccotti Park to more than 750 cities globally (*The Guardian*, 2011). Uptown, black and brown communities shared many of the same grievances as those in Lower Manhattan. These organizers coupled a critique of neoliberal capitalism with a critique of racialized policing practices that targeted communities and youth of color throughout the city. As Stop and Frisk policing policies became normalized in the early 2000s, thousands of black and brown youth were being stopped, questioned,

and searched by police as part of daily life. In 2011, nearly 700,000 individual stops were made with 87% of them targeting Blacks and Latinos, and more than 50% on youth between 14 and 24 years old (NYCLU, 2015). Among the numerous demonstrations of critique of such policies, the June 17, 2012 “End Stop and Frisk” Silent March in Harlem stands out—tens of thousands of New Yorkers gathered “to call for an end to racial profiling and stop-and-frisk abuses of the NYPD” (Communities United for Police Reform, 2012).

Between these larger stories of activism in New York City emerge local stories of individuals being harassed by police officers, informants working in specific communities and mosques, and activists facing spurious charges. These narratives of the politics of the city reveal what Hegel might have referred to as “the spirit of the time”—moments that reflect a broader set of beliefs that are animating particular communities in this moment—in this case communities of color in New York City. These perspectives help us understand the policing matrix and the panoptic gaze of surveillance agencies as we attempt to understand the particular experiences of a specific community. Additionally, the intersections of these moments are not presented simply to provide context for the study, but rather to aid in the analysis of how young people were reading and engaging with the ethnographer, the tools of ethnography, and the project of formalized academic research. The following vignettes reveal nuances in interactional dynamics that lead us, as social researchers, to see the careful meaning-making processes youth are engaged in—in real time—as they decide what to reveal to whom, where to do so, and why particular choices are made.

In a broader context of increasingly invasive state surveillance that utilizes emerging technologies, such questions about research practice are becoming increasingly relevant. Educational ethnographers have addressed some of these concerns by examining technologies of data collection, youth silence, and research refusal. Martinez’s (2016) study examines how youth participants engaged his digital recording pen while collecting data in a community and high school with numerous video cameras present. He examined how the use of this particular tool may have prompted the youth with whom he worked to question his positionality within the school context and his relationship with institutional authority. Moving beyond the use of technological tools as a manifestation of surveillance, San Pedro (2015) argues that young people may resist dominant discourses “through silence as a way to protect one’s identity from damaging and dangerous discourses” (p. 148). Although this is a different potential utilization of silence, it points to the fact that young people are actively making thoughtful decisions about when to maintain silence and when (and how) to speak. In theorizing a framework of refusal, Tuck and Yang (2014b) point toward refusal as “multidimensional, in dynamic relationship between communities who refuse, the researched who refuse, and the researcher who refuses—or who do not” (p. 244). This dynamic and shifting relationship among participants, researchers, trust, sharing, and “on the record” speech provides a fertile groundwork to critically self-examine the more subtle ways in which researchers engage in damaging research practices.

In this study, the digital pen was seen as a tool of potential teacher classroom surveillance, as well as a reflection of the policing matrix encompassing much of the schooling and community lives of young people in urban spaces. The implications of this research are of central importance to community-oriented social researchers who have “insider” connections to the communities in which they learn. Furthermore, the study provides insight and reflection on how the carceral context of surveillance mediate the subjectivities of all participants in the research process.

Conceptualizing research subjectivities and taboo topics

There was a layer of complexity in defining what one could say “on the record” to the researcher (me) and what was said that was audio taped—the official and marked record that exists as a material artifact beyond the researcher. In these instances of marking a separation between the researcher personally and the tools of research, I believe the youth with whom I was working

were engaged in complex planning, trust, and meaning making. It is easy to reduce such analysis to findings via the gestures young people engage in to demonstrate affirmation or negation, for example. Nonetheless, I believe my data reveal something far more complex than looking for discrepant cases. Through engaged and participatory ethnographic study, we are sometimes taking notes, and at other times we are not. There are times we are listening as researchers, and times we are listening as friends, mentors, or as community members. Nonetheless, these multiple roles and identities are never whole—for we are always engaging in with our participants in multiple ways—this is part of what produces rich scholarship. Likewise, the youth with whom we engage understand themselves, and us, as researchers in multiple ways—recognizing that different identities are more and less present at different interactional moments. I am interested in exploring how these shifts in roles are mediated by our tools of research and what we can learn from examining how our particular tools mediate how and what we understand is being said and, more importantly, unsaid.

Multiplicity of researcher subject positions

Much of the scholarship on insider research draws upon post-structural notions of hybridity and in-betweenness. Such work on the hybridity of social positions often decouples these notions from the larger context in which social researchers operate. This decoupling often results in the elimination or reduction of class, political, and social hierarchies and relations not only between researchers and participants, but within the larger social and political context structuring academic scholarship and production. On the other hand, scholarship that navigates the nuances of interactional dynamics points to the intimate relationship between talk and social/political/historic context in which it occurs (Erickson, 2004; Villenas, 1996).

As a person who occupied multiple subject positions, both as university researcher and as an insider within the community she was “researching,” Villenas (1996) noted that she “did not want to be complicit with the colonial administrator” (p. 725). She stated that she “was unaware that this was how [she] was being positioned” (p. 725) by her research participants. In this discussion, Villenas aptly discusses her disdain at serving as an interpreter and translator for the educational and political colonial establishment for and to local Latino communities. Villenas takes the notion of the colonial administration as a material reality in the contemporary world. In a similar manner, Tuck and Yang (2012) remind us that the process of decolonization is a lived reality based in material conditions. Villenas places the colonial project within the context of contemporary social and educational policies that describe the unfinished project of European colonization of the “New World.” The material reality of colonial administrations is all too relevant within global Muslim communities as this is neither a metaphor, nor a recalling of historic narratives onto peoples’ contemporary lives. Rather, this is what is happening globally and domestically in the United States as part of the War on Terror. In this context, the bodies and minds of colonized people are themselves betwixt and between the colonial administration. Speaking of myself in the third person, both the subjects of the research and the researchers themselves, exist under the gaze of the colonial administrator, and in turn, they are all subject to sanctions by the administrator.

In the vignettes I share in this article, subtle and significant shifts represent fruitful areas of exploration and elaboration. I return to Villenas’ (1996) provocations, 20 years after they were written, because they continue to resonate; through the context of my research, I offer an alternative to the comprador elite model (a proxy of the national bourgeoisie) of the native informant or the “insider” researcher, which Villenas draws upon. The young people with whom I worked trusted me with their words because, I believe, they saw me as someone trustworthy. The notes I took were mine, but the audio record—even with promises of confidentiality—were not treated as an extension of me. The pen and pad were treated as extensions of my body, while the audio

recorder was treated as a separate object. By abstracting the audio recording from my personhood, it was given an existence in the world outside of me and had a reality outside of my control. The youth with whom I worked, I posit, believed my “insider” status allowed me to discern and make decisions about what was “appropriate” data to discuss publicly when I (and the extension of myself, the pen and pad) were the instrument. But, when the digital audio recorder was the instrument (in addition to me), participants neither extended nor granted their trust in my “insider” status. Thus, in this study, the abstracted tool of the digital recorder might be seen as a tool of the colonial administration, while the researcher himself was seen and engaged (over time) as an insider.

The object of research

Debates persist about what is acceptable discourse, to which Villenas (1996) alludes: “I was nevertheless buying into the discourse of fear of separatism” (p. 717). Villenas notes this is a combination of social fear of isolation and intellectual fear of being outside of discursive communities of the academy. These are fears of engaging in taboo discourses (Douglas, 1966) or those that step outside of dominant or hegemonic social orders. In Villenas’ case, it was questions of political separatism. These issues of taboo discourses also were apparent with the youth with whom I worked, as evidenced by their active aversion to publicly discussing critiques of the U.S. state. In this regard, it is both a social taboo as well as a political taboo, as both the youth and the “insider” researcher (myself) must negotiate with the coercive state political apparatus, which has convicted Muslims in the U.S. for engaging in speech acts—literally, language translation—as providing material support for terrorism.¹ Notions of Muslims and violence and how we “solve” the issues of radicalization are not lost on “insider” researchers within Muslim communities. The costs for Muslim communities to discuss “taboo” topics may not simply be social, but rather political, legal and economic. Nonetheless, the social costs also appear in that many students do not want to be seen as “too radical” to turn the gaze of the surveillance state toward themselves. Youth decisions on what to say and not to say can serve as important lessons on what is acceptable discourse and what discourses might have material or ideological constraints. In the following section I provide information on the study, design, data collection, and analytic tools used in this study.

Research design and background of participants

I collected the data for this study between August 2011 and December 2012 with Muslim secondary and undergraduate students in New York City in the wake of the revelations of NYPD surveillance of Muslim communities in the tristate area. This study emerged out of the work of the New York Muslim Student Coalition (NYMSC), which was facilitated by two community activists and myself. This Coalition was developed by and with students who wanted to build a network to develop a broad based and community oriented political campaign in opposition to the surveillance and policing of Muslim communities in New York City (Ali, 2016).

This research was intimately tied to the political organizing project and finds its conceptual roots in the work of activist, humanizing, and community-oriented research, which calls for research to respond to the material conditions of social life and local community needs, and to, in particular, respond to social movements (Fine, 1994; Irizarry & Brown, 2013; Jocson, 2013; Kirkland, 2014; McCarty, Wyman, & Nicholas, 2013). Through extended and in-depth engagement as a facilitator and participant in political communities and activities, I developed meaningful and accountable relationships with students. The trust that the students and I built allowed us to critically discuss this study’s particularly sensitive issues. Nonetheless, the trust built was not

absolute, nor was it full. As trust is constantly built, eroded, and negotiated, trust also is tied to history—which I did not have with the youth and the Muslim communities in New York City.

The study served to document the work of NYMSC, and their campaign. Data included field notes taken at community meetings, community centers, student meetings on campus, within community locations, and informal meetings. Five meetings were video recorded and structured with the youth as focus groups addressing broader political and social concerns about Muslim life in New York City. Finally, 15 of the youth participated in one-on-one interviews with me. Some of the youth I interviewed multiple times, while others were only interviewed once (primarily dependent on their length of involvement and depth of participation in the NYMSC).

All students who were part of the NYMSC were given the opportunity to participate, but if they chose not to, I did not do individual interviews with them, nor did I include their participation in focus groups or ethnographic observations in my data. Because of the unique and politically sensitive nature of the data, all of the youth who chose to participate were given pseudonyms in my study and particular identifying information was removed in order to protect their anonymity.

Coding and contextual discourse analysis

The work of data analysis can be reduced to the technocratic actions of labeling, coding, pattern finding, and thematic development. But, social researchers who engage closely with their data know data analysis is as much art and inspiration as it is technical (Hertz, 1997; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Developing salient and rich patterns and themes from etic codes often determines the depth of insight a study provides (Strauss, 1987). We also know that data can be constructed to make nearly any argument we wish (Maxwell, 2005; Saldaña, 2015).

For this article, I did not label and code the scores of hours of video tape and hours of interviews with 15 young people. This work was already done and discussed in a previous article (Ali, 2016) and included over 50 hours of video and audio data from focus groups, interviews, and organizing meetings. The data were coupled with field notes from community events, organizing meetings, and community programs. Rather, months, if not years later, going back and reading through these notes again, I fleshed out Ibrahim's conversation about feelings of being always surveilled. In re-reading my data, and re-reading it again, I saw something new, something I had not noticed as I pattern-coded (Coffy & Atkinson, 1996)—I noticed that although the moments in which Ibrahim spoke openly to me were not on my audio tapes, they did still exist within my hand-written notes and memos. Through this recognition, I looked not at the words of Ibrahim—or the young women and men I worked with—but rather, I looked at where, how, when, and examined why the words were said. I might consider this a contextual discourse analysis.

(Critical) discourse analysis examines lexical properties of language (Rogers, 2011; Van Dijk, 1998). Such scholarship guides social researchers as we explore how individuals use words, grammar, and metaphor to understand how linguistic features elucidate what we might call the social grammar of our lives (Fairclough, 2003; Kroskrity, 2004). Drawing upon these linguistic tools of analysis, I look at what and how words were said, and in this article, in addition to examining the words participants said, I aim to locate the words of my participants in their specific political and carceral moment to ask how they are making meaning of me, the researcher, but more importantly, the tools I am using to conduct my study. In this inquiry, I complicate both the notion of research subjectivity as well as youth agency in social research. The young people were both reading me and my tools and then making decisions on what to reveal to me as a person—and social researcher—along with making decisions on what to reveal and discuss in the context of specific recording technologies. In a moment of hyper-surveillance of Muslim youth bodies, it

is exceedingly clear from this study that young Muslims are keenly aware of how their words may make them susceptible to the reach of the carceral state through local and national policing agencies. In this context, this directly pointed to the NYPD.

Drawing upon research memos

In addition to the analyzing data as discussed above, I draw upon research memos I wrote while conducting this study. Beyond a traditional role of research memoing to engage in preliminary data analysis (Strauss, 1987), I wrote memos in order to understand my own subjectivity in relation to the data collection. Although the goals of this project intersect with some aspects of autoethnographic scholarship, as this is “a self-reflective narrative that critiques the situations of self with other in social contexts” (Spry, 2001, p. 710), I did not conduct this study as an autoethnography. Rather, I designed it utilizing a participatory action ethnographic design (Winn, 2014) to address pressing and important issues that the youth with whom I worked were experiencing. As noted earlier, I draw upon Pillow’s (2003) notion of “uncomfortable reflexivity” to critically self-examine my project of research and, specifically, the process of data collection. In the following section I provide a brief overview of the ways in which ethnographic scholarship has explored Muslim identities, and the lessons educational ethnographers have taught us about Muslim youth in the United States to understand the broader scholarly discourses and debates which this research is situated.

Ethnography and the Muslim other

Anthropological scholarship exploring Muslim identities has often responded to Orientalized notions of the Muslim. In this context, the Muslim serves as an existential other upon which the project of the Euro-American West has defined itself (Said, 1994). Asad’s (2003) scholarship specifically focused on turning the anthropological gaze from defining/categorizing the “Muslim Other” to examine the Western world. This scholarship has provided inspiration for ethnographic research on Muslim experiences. For example, Abu-Lughod’s (2013) scholarship challenges the idea that Muslim women need to be saved from the “barbarism” of Muslim societies. Rather, she contends that liberal values are historically, geographically, and culturally contextual. Likewise, Mahmood’s (2004) ethnography of a women’s religious movement in Egypt depicts the powerful ways in which notions of western liberalism fail to understand women’s experiences in non-westernized settings.

In the United States, the emerging field of Critical Muslim Studies has produced ethnographic scholarship exploring the intersections of transnationality, race, cultural production, and identity construction within diverse Muslim communities (Abdul Khabeer, 2016; Grewal, 2013; Rana, 2011). For youth and educational ethnographers in the U.S., multi- and cross-racial Muslim identities have emerged as an area of research over the past two decades. This scholarship points toward the idea that the term Muslim is serving as a significant cross-racial primary identity category for young people from Muslim communities (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012; Joshi, 2006; Naber, 2005). Such scholarship has addressed questions of political perspectives, belonging, citizenship, and negotiating American identities in the wake of post 9-11 anti-Muslim discrimination and violence (Abu El-Haj, 2015; Ali, 2014, 2016; Maira, 2009; Mir, 2014). Ultimately, this study contributes to scholarship addressing questions of youth identity and citizenship, but pays particular attention to the context of policing and surveillance in order to understand how social research is mediated by the fear of a panoptic surveillance matrix.

Researcher positionality and ethnographic visibility

I am South Asian American Muslim male. At the time of this study, I had been living and working in New York City as a postdoctoral researcher. This work led me to work with various community-based and youth organizing groups in the city. As a non-native New Yorker, who did not have roots in the city, or history with its activist, organizing, or Muslim communities, I was clearly an outsider in a number of important and significant ways.

Prior to this study, I had conducted my research with youth in communities where I was closely connected over the course of my life and notions of trust extended far beyond a temporal research project. Although I did not personally know the youth who were part of my prior research in Southern California, I was known within the communities from which the youth came—I knew siblings, cousins, and parents. I had meaningful connected relationships with community leaders and activists. In changing settings to New York City, I was nervous engaging in research with Muslim youth in a new location. Nonetheless, my engagement with a handful of youth activists, service providers, and organizers helped me not only “gain entry” but also develop meaningful and connected relationships with youth and community members in the city. Beyond scholarly research, I was actively a part of Muslim community life in the city. Furthermore, I was actively working with youth in an afterschool program in Brooklyn—many of whom became interlocutors for this article and the broader study this article draws from.

And yet, I cannot say I was “fully” a member of the local community; it is dangerous for researchers to believe this of themselves. I never lived in Bay Ridge, Astoria, or on the Lower East Side—the communities from which the youth whom I worked lived. I did not have a history in these communities. I did not know peoples’ families outside the context of my research, and more importantly, no one knew my family. I believe what gave me insight to conduct research in a community that was aware of the hyper-surveillance, and to work with youth who were organizing against this surveillance matrix, was my presence and active engagement, and my connectedness with people who had local histories who trusted me. I believe that for the youth, seeing me at local events and in community spaces outside the context of my research, but as part of my social and personal life, was a meaningful way in which they made sense of me and trusted me to some extent.

In addition, my linguistic abilities (or lack thereof) served important roles. My elementary fluency in Urdu and Arabic allowed me the ability to have basic conversations and share idiomatic phrases with youth and parents. Second, being a male served to gain access and entry, but also prevented access in specific domains. Nonetheless, being an unmarried/non-partnered male in my early 30s also positioned me as someone to be potentially watchful of. I attempted to mitigate this through my familiarity with community gender norms, as well as my engagement with parents and adults in the community. In the next section of this article I share some data and findings that help elucidate the ways in which young people with whom I worked made active choices to not be recorded.

Subject positionality and active moves to not be recorded

In previous research I have discussed the panoptic effects of police surveillance on the lives of these young people in New York City, specifically addressing the themes of self-censoring, broken trust, and attempts at invisibility (Ali, 2016). Muslim youth in New York City were cognizant that the NYPD was listening to their conversations. In this article, I shift the focus from the youth themselves to consider how youth engaged me (the social researcher) and the tools which I entered their communities with—namely my body, notepad, and my digital audio recorder. I explore how these tools mediated conversations and explore the ways youth differentially engaged each of these tools. I argue that we must examine the tools of the social researcher as

closely as the actual researcher to understand how the response to the researcher is mediated equally by tools and the person themselves. In this research, I depict the active choices young people are making to ensure their voice is not recorded, while allowing me to continue taking notes by hand. Such evidence points to the youth's recognition of their potential vulnerability of a researcher's data archive to the surveillance state.

Ibrahim and the recorder

Ibrahim and I initially met in New York City when community members and students were attempting to build a political campaign against the NYPD surveillance program, namely the NYPD Demographics Unit. Nonetheless, it was not until after a young man—who stated he “was just pretending to be friends” with Muslim youth throughout the city, including Ibrahim, and who was an active participant in my research project—publicly came forward as a paid NYPD informant that we developed a more engaged relationship. Ibrahim and I began meeting regularly to discuss his experiences with surveillance and his community work. From our initial meeting, Ibrahim knew me both as a social researcher studying Muslim youth political identities and as a community member who was deeply concerned not only about the NYPD surveillance program, but also about how Muslim communities were making sense of these state-sponsored programs.

Aside from our initial one-on-one meeting, I brought an audio recorder to all of our meetings, which I would readily use by placing it between us, sometimes on a table, at other times on a park bench or another convenient location. Although, as social researchers we often say that after prolonged use, the recorder fades into the background. As I reflect on my data with Ibrahim, although there is evidence that his trust in me as a researcher increased over time, his relationships to the formal audio record seemed to stay more stable. In October 2012, during one of my earlier conversations with Ibrahim, we spent an autumn afternoon in a quiet West Village diner discussing his community service, activism, and how he made sense of someone his own age pretending to be his friend to spy on him and his community on behalf of the NYPD's counter-terrorism program. As stated in the introduction to this article, although Ibrahim's affect visibly changed, as evidenced through his furrowed brow and a more somber, quieter affect, he openly talked with me about his feelings of betrayal. Ibrahim stated that he feared that even those he grew up around would now be suspicious of him:

Of course, how could they not be? I was the one who brought him around, so yeah, I think people are looking at me and thinking “what does *he* really know? ... What is he about?” But what can I do, you know? I mean ... it's like you never know.

Ibrahim incisively explicated how the surveillance of Muslim communities in NYC complicates relationships within close knit communities. In the conversation above, Ibrahim explored the insidious outcomes of a community member revealing himself as a police informant—trust within communities is eroded and individuals do not feel safe even among those whom they grew up with.

In speaking with Ibrahim, I was not only engaging him as a social researcher in an attempt to understand how he felt, I also was trying to make sense of my own sense of safety. In addition, I was making sense of my own feelings toward the young man who turned out to be an NYPD informant. I was engaging with Ibrahim as a researcher to understand his sense making, but at the same time, I also was trying to understand what I thought and felt. It is likely because of this that I was afraid to push Ibrahim to speak. As a community member, like Ibrahim, I felt vulnerable and violated; I, too, feared the surveillance apparatus of the NYPD. As Ibrahim, the youth with whom we worked, and Muslim communities in New York City, we were all targets of the panoptic gaze of NYPD surveillance not in an abstracted sense, but rather through specific individuals whom we knew and engaged. Nonetheless, in this context I was who Vygotsky might

have referred to as “a more experienced peer” in my relationship with Ibrahim—I was someone older and more experienced with whom Ibrahim engaged. Thus, in my role as social researcher, I was simultaneously a community member and a likely mentor. There is little to no distance between researcher, mentor, and community member roles one occupies as an engaged social researcher. Rather, these roles and identities are layered and add to the complexity in relationships in data collection, reporting, and developing scholarship in the context of young peoples lived experiences.

Additionally, though, I believe Ibrahim also was looking for direction in how to make sense of his own feelings and concerns, and if his fears were warranted. This is among the places where the multiplicity of roles as a community member and researcher bump up against each other. As a community member, Ibrahim was looking to me for guidance, but as a researcher I was attempting to understand his thought process and feelings. One might reflect on this with the idea that good social science requires the researcher to not direct “the participant” and a good mentor should provide a framework for young people to be able to make sense of their feelings. The liberal/multicultural researcher response to this dilemma is that a good researcher listens and asks questions in order for the young person to understand him- or herself. Nonetheless, in asking questions, directionality is always implicit. As Tuck and Yang (2014a) state:

Youth development models want youth resistance to look like “empowerment” within the circuits of conventional political participation, and the rubrics of self-discipline and self-governance. Thus youth voice and visibility coincide with sounding and looking like good citizens.” (p. 9)

As a mentor and more experienced peer, posing questions that would help push Ibrahim to understand his experience, and that of Muslims in the United States, as road bumps on the shaky road to full democratic citizenship felt both disingenuous and dishonest. This place of loss, of confusion of how to proceed, and how to intercede was looming as I continued my conversation with Ibrahim. Ibrahim stated with resignation the inevitability of the government’s surveillance of Muslim youth:

It’s because I am Muslim. There is no other real reason to why they are sending NYPD informants. I think it’s nonsensical. We are just a bunch of Muslim teens—17, 18, 19. We are all young. We are not doing anything wrong. We are active in the MSA [Muslim Students Association] but it’s not like we are doing anything. We are not doing anything wrong ...

As Ibrahim spoke, he repeated multiple times, “we are not doing anything wrong.” He was frustrated and truly at a loss for his treatment by the state—he believed he had been criminalized simply because of his identity and community. Nonetheless, as I directed the conversation to question why he believed Muslim students who were actively involved in community, campus, or political life were targeted by the NYPD, Ibrahim swiftly but quietly ended the discussion by slightly nodding his head to the right and raising his shoulder to indicate a shared understanding with me. In this moment I felt the clear pull of being a researcher take hold. Although I did not know what Ibrahim felt about the question of “why” Muslim students were targeted by the surveillance matrix, this was not the central issue at hand for him. Rather, I believe he was primarily concerned with making sense of his own thoughts and feelings. In this moment I asked a question that did not serve his needs or interests, but rather the question was only asked to serve mine (in the role of the researcher)—for it would provide important “publishable” data. It is clear from the way I asked, and how Ibrahim responded, that the question was both out of place and eroding to our relationship. This is a moment where the role of the researcher becomes clearly distinct and in contradiction to that of a community member or mentor. The focus on collecting data provides evidence of the insidious nature of “insider” research as a tool to gain access to communities and extract knowledge at the expense of young people.

In moments such as these, Ibrahim would, at times, make a declarative comment in the form of a question, such as, “I don’t really want to talk about that, you know?” In response, I might

offer a slow nod noting affirmation and reply with, “Yeah ... yeah, for sure.” In this particular moment, feeling unsure of myself, and feeling on shaky ground for even asking such a question, I worried that I may have pushed Ibrahim to where he was not comfortable engaging. I was lost. As I fumbled with words and pauses in order to turn the direction of our conversation, I shifted us back to discussing his community service work and how he had become involved in it. I returned to the role of a social researcher and went back to interviewing him, rather than having a conversation with a young man who was making sense of a jarring experience. As I have been working with young people who are fearful of the state surveillance apparatus, moreover, I have recognized that when young people state they do not want to talk about “politics” or particular issues, it is seldom an indication of simply being tired or unengaged, but rather alludes to a well-founded fear. For these nuanced reasons, I did not push on with the topic. Nonetheless, as a researcher who was trying to understand the context of surveillance, I wanted to pursue this line of exploration; I wanted to find another avenue into this discussion. Again, this is a moment where the multiplicity of subject positions comes to bare on conducting ethical research with young people. As a social researcher I had particular goals, but as an engaged community member there was no need to pursue this line of inquiry. As responsible, community engaged social researchers, we should ask, “For whom and what purpose does such questioning and research serve?”

A few weeks later, as Ibrahim and I continued to meet and talk, our discussion of state politics arose again. As we discussed domestic surveillance broadly, Ibrahim named high-profile U.S. domestic terrorism cases. As I turned our conversation to the War on Terror globally, Ibrahim signaled with his hand for me to turn the recorder off while saying, “Just don’t know you, you know ... where things ... where things go.” After I turned off the recorder, we continued our conversation without missing a beat. Ibrahim went on to discuss an anti-imperialist critique of invasion and occupation. Without an attempt to minimize Ibrahim’s comments, he was not stating anything one could not find in a Chomsky reader. And Ibrahim certainly was not calling for or justifying political violence by state or non-state actors. Yet, Ibrahim did not want to be audio-reordered; he continued to speak and I continued to take notes with a pen and paper during this conversation. In this moment, I was not actively trying to guide our conversation as a researcher, but, rather, I was responding and engaging conversationally. I cannot say I lost sight of the audio recorder, but, rather, I did lose sight of the potential comfortability Ibrahim experienced. Furthermore, in this moment, in signaling for me to turn off the recorder, but continuing the conversation, Ibrahim was clearly demonstrating that although he maintained trust in me personally, he does not share the same trust for the digital recording. In this moment Ibrahim does not engage me as a member of the colonial administration, as Villenas (1996) states, but rather as another person who is functioning under its’ gaze. Furthermore, Ibrahim was aware of the taboo nature of particular discourses engaged in by Muslim youth, particularly young men. Such politically taboo topics were not to be discussed on tape on a medium that could be easily altered.

Ibrahim’s decision on where, when, and what to speak about, and more importantly, what to not speak about, tells us volumes about the agentic and careful choices young people are making in real time. It helps us understand the complexity of young people lives, what they choose to tell social researchers, and what they decide to not tell us. Furthermore, beyond the complex meaning-making in which Ibrahim was engaged, there was a deep complicity between the researcher (myself) and participant (Ibrahim) on what could be and could not be discussed. In addition to the question of comfortability with the audio recorder, Ibrahim’s ease in continuing the conversation without a recorder are important to note. He actively moves away from having an audio record, but is comfortable with me hand recording notes. Nonetheless, I was not transcribing his words—had I done that, might he have responded differently? In these conversations with Ibrahim, the multiple roles one occupies as a social researcher are occurring in the same moments. Engagement is not separated by research times and mentorship times. Rather, the

project and goals of social research, if not interrogated and carefully navigated, can themselves erode the very relationships that produce rich engagement and learning with young people.

Halima does not go on the record

Halima and I initially met when she was a high school senior. As an Egyptian American young woman, Halima was not simply responding to the context of being a targeted Muslim woman in the United States, but just months after the Egyptian Revolution, she was concerned about both U.S. and Egyptian policing agencies.

I discussed research participation and consent not only when I formally enrolled Halima in the study. Rather, in each moment of formal data collection, I would remind her, and the rest of the youth, that I was recording (sometimes with video and other times without). Additionally, I would write memos after informal observations, meetings, and times just chatting with the youth. Our consent forms did not limit data collection to the formal moments of recording—informal interactions were explicitly included as well. But, I did not formally announce I was collecting data in these moments. In retrospect, I realize that Halima may have believed there was a formal “on the record” times versus other moments when we were not “on the record” or some version thereof. I did not realize she had made a distinction in how she engaged with me until I had completed collecting data and only when I went back to do analysis for this article (as opposed to the first analysis of the data). Like most of the young people with whom I worked, Halima and I got to know each other well. I knew her not simply as a participant in our youth program (and research project), but as an emerging adult as she transitioned from high school to college. I had a strong sense of her political perspectives and views on social change.

But, I could not find the words that expressed her political perspective directly on my tapes, nor in my videos. They did not fall into my primary and first source of data (from which I triangulate to memos, notes, and more). I clearly recalled what she had said, as well as specific interactions we had. I remembered the contexts she had expressed particular perspectives. But Halima’s words had escaped my first analysis, and thus far her words have not found its way into my scholarship. This did not happen because she did not have important things to say, but rather because she chose not to say things when they were being recorded. In this example of what was missing from my formal data, we can see how political and social taboos function to mediate youth discourse. As I describe in the following section, Halima does discuss her political perspectives directly and clearly. Both with her friends and with me. But, she does not do so when the recorder is on.

As part of the Community Activist Literacy Program (CAL), (Ali, 2016), I helped facilitate an existing program at the youth center where I was conducting my research. The Arab World Politics (AWP) discussion group met on Thursday evenings. I did not video or audio tape the AWP meetings, as I was already taking field notes and collecting audio or video records two to three other days a week. I continued to memo during these AWP weekly meetings during which five to nine youth would attend with all but two participating in other programs I was involved with at the Center. Over time, I became well-acquainted with the group, as I would see the majority of the youth multiple days each week. In Spring 2011, AWP was focused on the protests and demonstrations in multiple Arab countries that would be labeled Arab Spring. For this group of youth, the most significant events were the Egyptian Revolution, which began in late January 2011. The young women and men spoke of these events not as outside observers watching from afar, but rather as individuals who, although not directly participating, were excited about the potential for radical political change in nations they had deep familial and personal connections with. The Egyptian Revolution and the Arab Spring were not political mobilizations that were viewed in isolation, but instead they were seen by many of the youth as “their” manifestations of the Occupy political actions. As Basima, one of the youth involved in the AWP, said in an

interview, “It’s like when we saw Occupy we thought, ‘That isn’t really for us,’ but after Tahrir, it’s like we were able to change our country.”

The students in AWP shared stories of excitement about the developing Arab Spring and the potential promise that offered not just for those countries, but to inspire the Arab and more broadly Muslim world. The excitement over the developing Arab Spring protests also prompted students to talk about social change domestically and internationally.

Within the context of my research, the AWP conversations spilled over into the focus groups that addressed what it meant to be a Muslim in New York City. The conversation topics included everyday acts of anti-Muslim bigotry such as people engaging anti-Muslim rhetoric on the subway or streets directly or indirectly with the youth, as well as topics such as hate crimes against mosques, and of course, NYPD surveillance. Halima was present in the focus groups; yet, she rarely spoke. As a researcher, I did not notice that her presence in various spaces was segmented in her forms of engagement. Looking back at audio tapes and video recordings, Halima did not seem to actively avoid participation, at least on the surface, she affirmatively made a choice to attend the focus/discussion group meetings. Furthermore, she never directly stated she did not want to talk about a specific topic, as some of the youth did. She often engaged with an occasional nod of her head or cosigned frequently and said things to the effect of “Yeah, I think that, too” when being recorded. Generally, I have found that many young men and women do not share in focus groups especially on topics that are politically sensitive. As a researcher and youth worker, I read this as sign that young people were thinking critically about what they say, and where they say it. I believe this is potential evidence that they are cognizant of the panoptic gaze of the surveillance matrix. This is a part of the work of doing research on and with young people on issues of policing, surveillance, identity, and community. Some young people are more forthcoming, and others are not.

As I look back at the data from the July 11 focus group, Halima shared but a few words and a handful of cosigns. Nonetheless, I also wrote in a memo later that evening that states:

I walked back to the train with Basima, Halima, and Noor and we had a really rich conversation about organizing, community change, and activism in their communities. They have a complex understanding of not only of their community, but also of local politics. I am excited to see who they become.

This memo, although lacking detail of what was discussed (although if I did record it I would not disclose it as it seems clear that Halima did not want to share her views in the context of my study), clearly states that as a researcher I was impressed by these young women’s astute observations and analysis. Such direct expressions were often not expressed in formal moments of data collection. Likewise, later in the month I ran into Halima at a community meeting in Manhattan about the NYPD policing. I was there taking field notes on the meeting and trying to understand how multiple and contradictory political alliances were present in a single meeting where all of the facilitators and speakers seemingly shared similar concerns. As the meeting concluded, I chatted with a few friends, but then saw a group of the youth with whom I worked. I walked over but refrained from interjecting, as the conversation was already in mid-form. In my field note from this date, I noted:

... was livid and said, “the liberal politics of our *leaders* is B.S. They care more about what these people [elected officials] think that what is happening.” ... [three of the youth] all seemed to agree with her. They had regular eye contact and were engaged in the conversation ... [a young man] tried to jump in once, [seemingly to cosign or offer a comment/story in agreement based upon the tenor of his attempted interruption, but it was a failed attempt].

The young people were not only more readily talking about community leaders in this context, but they were expressive, passionate, and engaged. These young women and men, with whom I had engaged and connected relationships, clearly saw that I was taking notes both at the event and afterward as we spoke together, but they also were acutely aware that there was not a video

or audio recorder present. They were aware that their discourses might be read as “radical” in light of the political context of New York City and that the cost of even talk about such “taboo topics” was exceedingly high. Nonetheless, my presence was not a deterrent to the conversation. This could have been a result of the emotional charge of the moment, but their level of openness was notably different. This shift in communicative openness also could be the result of young people talking about politics on their own terms, and in this moment, they may potentially have seen me a community member and mentor. But, I believe, this moment of openness may be a recognition from the youth that we are both subject to the gaze of what Villenas refers to as the colonial administration, or the surveillance matrix. Both myself as the researcher, and her as the research participant, might have different levels of official power, but Halima recognized that the tools of recording that I used may potentially compromise her and her safety regardless of who I was, or my subject position, in relation to her. Villenas (1996) noted being the multiplicity of subject positions she occupied as a Chicana ethnographer placed her in the role of being “complicit with the colonial administrator” (p. 725). I was not in this role, and I have no evidence that the youth believed I was complicit with the policing agencies. Nonetheless, even if I give my word, in her eliminating the possibility of a digital record to exist, Halima assumed, rightfully, that no matter our individual relationship, we both function under the gaze of what Villenas references as the colonial administration.

Surveillance, ethnography and being connected to communities: Lessons for research

Implications for critical social researchers

In the context of the service programs and ethnographic research in which I engaged, the ways that youth changed their interactions based upon the presence of a recording device was not readily apparent. Through this research I found these differences in interaction as a manifestation of the state surveillance matrix. Nonetheless, these differences would not exist (in the world of scholarly writing) unless they were searched for. Otherwise, Halima would remain particularly visible in my mind as a deeply engaged, careful, and thoughtful young woman, but her forms of engagement would not find themselves legible for the world of social research. This, I believe, is of particular importance for justice-oriented, critical, radical, and de-colonial scholars and researchers. Halima’s words were not simply made invisible by the instruments of data collection and the researcher. Rather, I believe she was actively making choices to be less visible on the formalized record. This research depicts the subtle ways in which the carceral context of surveillance mediates the subjectivities of all participants in the research process.

Furthermore, “insider” researchers must recognize the complexities of the surveillance state and the ways in which data are produced, stored, and reported may increase political vulnerabilities. Such evidence points to the research participants’ recognition of the potential vulnerability of a researcher’s data archive. In a context where police informants are sometimes community members themselves, “insider” scholars can easily be actively colluding with policing agencies, or unwittingly providing intimate data and information to them.

In this manner it is increasingly important for social researchers to not delude themselves about their role and relationships with the communities whom they work with. In my case, regardless of the relationship I developed and the access I was granted, I was never “fully” a member of the local community; it is dangerous for researchers to believe that they are. I posit a primary way for critical researchers to recognize their connectedness to the communities with whom they engage in research: We must ask how much our level of engagement changes after a research project concludes.

Critical social researchers must work to be self-aware and transparent in their research process. This may occur through more actively bringing the self into ethnographic writing. As a community member, I feared the surveillance apparatus, too. Nonetheless, it would be easy for this fear to never show up in my scholarly production. This vulnerability certainly structured my data collection, the ways I engaged with communities, and also mediated the ways in which I maintained some suspicion that members of the communities with whom I was working might be surveilling me. Critical researchers must be keenly aware not only of the surveillance context, but aware of the ways a research project, no matter how potentially benign, may comprise the feelings of safety of participants and themselves. Carcerality is not simply a theoretical discussion of a social context, but rather it shapes all forms of social engagement.

Implications for critical youth researchers

For critical youth researchers, the question arises, *should our goals be to develop opportunities for youth to be increasingly visible in research when they are choosing to be unseen/unheard?* As San Pedro (2015) teaches us, youth are often strategic, creative, and agentic in their use of silence in learning spaces. In a similar fashion, I believe the examples of recorded silences help us recognize the agentic engagement with the instruments of social research. The youth in this study did not benefit and saw a potential challenge of digitally recording their political perspectives. A community responsive research methodology must prioritize the needs of participants and youth over the research goals of a study. In considering my own research pedagogy in these examples, there are clear moments where I was not prioritizing the youth and their needs. In ethnographic literature, there is often the desire for “rich” moments, when the role of the researcher becomes less apparent and young people speak more freely. As engaged youth researchers we should ask if our invisibility (or that of our tools) produces the context for people to speak openly, then might it also be important for those moments to stay invisible to larger audiences.

These questions are important in order to understand how youth “show up” in social scientific scholarship. These data show us that young people express themselves in careful and important ways, but these ways are not always legible to researchers. Second, it helps us recognize that youth are not simply there for researchers to learn from—even if we have meaningful relationships with them. Rather, young people are carefully engaged in thoughtful and creative ways to ensure their own safety is protected, particularly in the moments we do not notice. Politically active young people are not waiting for scholars to protect them. Ultimately, this study points to the necessity of scholarship that is both self-reflective in its design as well as in its ability to make claims about youth experiences.

I recognize the multiplicity of subject positions in which youth participants in research also occupy and engage. Halima was not as explicit as Ibrahim in her movements away from the digital record. She never asked me to turn the recorder on or off. She was subtle and, in many ways, not noticeable in how she deflected, turned, and shifted conversations. Her words were off the official record for a reason. I did not report these comments or conversations, but I have them in my memos, and the traces of them in my memory. More so, I know Halima from our work together and have a clear sense of her politics, beliefs, and perspectives at that time. While she and I shared conversations and she wanted me to know that she held particular positions, she did not want them on the “official record.” She and Ibrahim made active choices in what and where they shared their words—even with someone who had some level of “insiderness” with them. I believe this to be true because of the evidence shows that both of these young people were comfortable talking with me while seeing me take handwritten fieldnotes in moments of more political openness.

Nonetheless, the multiplicity of subject positions I, and the youth, occupy provide a complex matrix of relationships not only to navigate while collecting data, but when narrative accounts of

research are being constructed. For critical youth researchers and scholars who engage as mentors or community members with the youth with whom they conduct their research, utilizing these relationships to gather data should be carefully considered. These multiple subject positions may allow a researcher to learn more, but leveraging relationships to take more from youth than they are willing to share is spurious research practice. For critical youth scholars, our research pedagogy must recognize the deep meaning making practices, active choices, and decisions young people are making. Recognizing the need to highlight the deep-thinking young people are engaging in, in real time, we also must recognize the small acts of what Tuck and Yang (2014b) refer to as research refusal. Such actions of young people must be respected and honored in a community-oriented research practice. As responsible, community-engaged, critical youth social researchers, we should ask first, and last, “For whom and what purpose does such questioning and research serve?”

Note

1. See Ali (2018) for a more thorough discussion of the ways in which students responded to Tarek Mehanna’s case.

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