Like any radio feature, this story contains multiple characters, and the full version, the one we really want to tell, won’t fit the prescribed format. It’s a story about stories—narratives young people produce for broadcast on local and national media outlets, through an organization called Youth Radio in Oakland, California. Youth Radio was founded in 1992 by broadcast journalist Ellin O’Leary. Students are recruited from economically abandoned, heavily tracked, and rapidly resegregating public schools. They come to Youth Radio after school to write commentaries and news features, produce and DJ music segments, host panel discussions and community events, and create videos and web content. They arrive at Youth Radio on a Wednesday and, by Friday of that same week, they’re on the air for a live public radio show, *Youth in Control*. After six months of introductory and advanced classes, students can move into paid positions in Youth Radio’s various departments. At any given time, approximately 35 young people ages 14 to 24 are on payroll. Their teachers are peers who’ve graduated from the program, and their circle of collaborators, producers, and editors includes adult media professionals attached to some of the world’s most influential broadcast outlets.

We focus here on a single Youth Radio story produced in 2004, called *Picturing War*, reported by Belia Mayeno Saavedra. In the story, young U.S. Marines respond to reports that detainees were being tortured at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. The reports featured photographs from the prison that pictured male Iraqi detainees, many naked, simulating sex acts, piled on top of one another, and attached to leashes and wires, with U.S. soldiers looking on, sometimes posing, sometimes with cameras. At the time, debates in the United States raged over who deserved blame for the acts pictured in those photographs—young prison guards or their higher-ups. It seemed like an ideal Youth Radio story—especially because we had already developed relationships with several young vets through our ongoing *Reflections on Return from Iraq* series, exploring the experiences of young military personnel adjusting to life back home. National Public Radio’s Morning Edition aired *Picturing War* in April of 2004.

In this chapter, Belia Mayeno Saavedra, the story’s reporter, is joined by two Youth Radio producers, News Director Nishat Kurwa, and Education Director/Senior Producer Elisabeth (Lissa) Soep. Belia and Nishat are both Youth Radio graduates who participated as high school students, and Lissa started working at the organization as a doctoral student in 1999. Through our positions in Youth Radio’s newsroom, we mentor young people through every stage of story production, and there’s one bit of advice we give again and again. Express yourself conversationally. Don’t write the story like an English class essay. Tell it like you’re talking to a friend. In this chapter, we aim to follow our own advice. We offer this story about the relationship between youth media production and social justice as a conversation among the three of us. Two years after *Picturing War* aired, we dug out the old interview logs, booked our own studio, and recorded our
reflections on what it was like to coproduce that story. We discussed moments that stood out to us as especially challenging and important, and we considered how this story relates to Youth Radio’s larger mission and model.

Why This Story?

There are stories in Youth Radio’s archive that have a much more straightforward relationship to social justice than *Picturing War*. A young man describes his deportation to Mexico immediately upon release from a U.S. prison. Young producers use slam poetry and street-corner interviews to comment on the effects of Oakland’s rising homicide rate. A high school senior contemplates whether to grow out her wavy hair or get it locked before heading off to a predominantly white college.

Each of these stories would seem a perfect candidate for a chapter like this one, examining how young people and adults practice social justice by making media. And yet stories like these make it too easy for us to sidestep some uncomfortable but critical questions that reveal why social justice education is so hard (see Fleetwood, 2005). And so we chose a story that continues to challenge us, several years after broadcast. As the world struggled to make sense of the prison abuse scandal at Abu Ghraib, Youth Radio sought out perspectives from young people who had lived and fought their way through the war in Iraq. But the views they shared were disturbing and difficult to hear. What does it take, this story made us ask, to engage “youth voice” in a meaningful way, when some youth voices are shaped by structures and policies that destroy young people’s lives?

Framing the Story

When the Abu Ghraib scandal hit, Youth Radio had already produced a commentary for NPR with a young Marine who went to UC Riverside. During that process, he told us about two college classmates who, like him, had recently returned from war, and he also talked about the archives of digital photographs they had taken throughout their deployments and circulated among fellow troops, family members, and friends. We contacted this young Marine, to see if he and his fellow vets could help us understand how widespread detainee torture was, what they saw as the root causes and ripple effects of the abuse, and how military personnel throughout Iraq were using digital photography to document their deployments.

Like any Youth Radio story, we approached this one with an audience in mind. Youth Radio has multiple broadcast partnerships, ranging from web radio shows with maybe 10 or 20 listeners to massive international outlets like iTunes and NPR, with its 27 million listeners. This story was an obvious contender for national broadcast, and Belia Mayeno Saavedra, the reporter, had filed several stories over the years for NPR. At the time, she occupied a dual status at Youth Radio. At the age of 23, her primary role by that point was as an associate producer and peer educator teaching younger students in the program. But occasionally she continued to report stories for the newsroom—especially stories like *Picturing War*, which required midday interviews and an incredibly fast turnaround time, two factors not hospitable to high school schedules.

Lissa and Belia headed down to UC Riverside to hook up with the three young Marines we hoped to feature in the story. We sat around a table in one of the dorms and started talking about what had gone down at Abu Ghraib. At the time, the Bush Administration was framing the detainee abuse as an unauthorized aberration carried out by a handful of misguided soldiers. There were many in the United States and elsewhere who balked at this argument, countering that torture is an inevitable byproduct of an imperialist
war (Puar, 2005). While the Marines we interviewed went to great lengths to distance themselves from the young Abu Ghraib prison guards, they seemed to endorse arguments that framed the guards’ actions as anything but exceptional, in what became the opening scene of Belia’s story.

Picturing War, by Belia Mayeno Saavedra

Part 1

Belia: A year ago, Former Marine reservist Ed [last name] returned from Iraq, after taking part in the U.S. invasion. Now he’s back at the University of California at Riverside, a 26-year-old art student. Here’s what he says about the stories of prison abuse coming out of Iraq.

Ed: It’s like Chris Rock said, I wouldn’t do it, but I understand. I’m not saying I approve of it, but I understand the conditions that led up to them doing it.

Belia: Ed’s buddy Luis [last name], a shy 21-year-old, resumed his freshman year at Riverside when he returned from Iraq a year ago. (Sound comes up... bit of quiet laughter, Luis: “Oh yeah, I remember that, but you know what happened...”)

Belia: Luis was a field radio operator for a logistics unit in Iraq.... He says sometimes they had to round up Iraqis and detain them. And that when you see someone as your enemy, and you feel like they’re going to kill you, you start to look at them with hate. At some point, Luis says, you’re going to lose your judgment, even if it’s just for a minute or two. And it’s up to you to know how to manage it, he says. He tells this story.

Luis: I think we picked up prisoners, and put barbed wire around them. I recall one of the corporals offering me an opportunity to go in there and abuse some of them. I think it was Corporal—

Belia: When you ask him about what happened at Abu Graib, Luis says the soldiers responsible should be treated harshly, possibly including higher ups. But like his buddy Ed, Luis says the abuses don’t really surprise him.

Luis: People see it on TV, they’re not living it, so they find it surprising, “Oh, this is obscene.” But then, you tell me one thing that happens during war that is not obscene.

Just weeks after the first pictures of prison torture came out, here the young Marines said that detainees were encircled behind barbed wire throughout Iraq, not only inside walled prisons, and that prisoner abuse was by no means isolated to Abu Ghraib or carried out by low-level renegades. At many points, Belia’s interview with the three young Marines felt more like a casual conversation, flitting among references to politics, masturbation, danger, fear, adventure, tourism, and popular culture. Belia sensed that the young Marines talked differently about what they had done in Iraq with her than they would have with an adult reporter:
Elisabeth Soep, Belia Mayeno Saavedra, and Nishat Kurwa

Belia: In terms of how he (Ed) explained it, and how open he felt, and the language he used to express—like the stuff about Chris Rock—that came out of me being in a similar age group, with a similar idiom, similar experience with pop culture. I was in between Luis and Ed, in terms of age. Clearly Lissa, you had a lot of assets and skills that I didn’t have, but inversely, I had some skills that I could offer in terms of my age and way of talking to them, and that’s a model for how people can be teachers and students at the same time.

Lissa: Right. And it’s not about, we as adults are mentors and the young people are apprentices, which in itself is progressive compared to a didactic instructor and passive student. But it really is more than that. As you’re saying, Belia, if an adult went in and did that story alone, we couldn’t have pulled it off. Likewise, if a young person had done that story alone, they couldn’t have pulled it off. So we depend on each other in nuanced ways. Now that can be misinterpreted to mean the kids have access and the adults have the analysis and wisdom. It’s not just that the young people use the same slang. It goes back to knowing how to ask the right questions, and knowing how to frame this whole set of issues and from where to build an analysis.

Belia: One of the things I noted looking over the log is that my job wasn’t simply to act as an inside “youth” agent to get the story. There’s a section of the tape that didn’t air. They (the Marines) spent all this time talking about how there was a whole lot of masturbation going on in Iraq, all the porn they brought…I think they were trying to scandalize us. I don’t know what your friendships are like, Lissa, but I was used to being around dudes that age who were constantly talking about that stuff. And I said, “Okay, you guys are saying it’s really hypocritical they don’t let you have porn there, but everybody has it. How does that link to other things, like the torture, that really happen, but nobody acknowledges?” And I think that because my initial response to them was rooted in an understanding of, “Okay they’re trying to scandalize us, but I get it, and it’s not something that’s freaking me out,” and I could then move on to make a connection between that and the larger conversation about hidden behavior in the military.

In the midst of that conversation, Luis was just about to reveal the name of the corporal who reportedly invited him to “go in there” and kick “one of those Iraqi guys.” G., his fellow Marine, stopped him: “No, don’t name him.” No surprise there—Luis was still on active duty. But that male voice is not the only one you hear if you listen closely to this moment in the story. You can also pick up a female voice—Lissa’s. She, too, is stopping him from naming names.

Lissa: I had to listen back to the tape a couple times to believe I had actually done that. We decided to keep that full bit of tape in the final story, unedited, so listeners could hear Luis being stopped from outing his corporal by name. But that doesn’t explain why I did what I did in the first place, and to be honest, I’m still trying to figure that out myself. I think I was afraid that as soon as Luis implicated someone else by name, he might get scared and pull out. I’d seen that happen before. And also, in other Reflections on Return stories, we’d had soldiers decide that they needed approval to participate, and then the public affairs office killed the story.
Still, Lissa inadvertently helped protect a corporal who reportedly invited Iraqi detainee abuse. Maybe she thought she was somehow protecting Luis himself. In Youth Radio’s production model, we approach young people as agents whose voices should be amplified, not vulnerable populations in need of our benevolent protection. But if the media production process itself creates risk for young participants—whether they are sources, as was the case here, or reporters like Belia—that complicates the question of responsibility. If an organization’s mission is to “serve” and “promote” youth voice, to what extent do we need to anticipate and prevent negative consequences for young people drawn into any given media story? It goes back to Youth Radio’s larger media production methodology:

Nishat: Our first consideration is, what is the potential effect of doing this story on this particular student, whether on their personal life, their family, their community. And then beyond that, then, the second level is the media literacy, where it’s like, I’m gonna try to find a way for you to do the story you want to do, but not without asking you to reflect on and question your motivations, and what informs your perspective. I try to communicate to the student, if you put something like this out in the world, the audience might not perceive it in the way you meant it. I ask them, what will bring a fuller view to show that you’re not blindly writing this opinionated story, without acknowledging that there might be people who feel differently? I just try to provide a framework for critical thought with any story that a young person wants to do.

Sometimes, that critical thought can revolve around a single word. After all, in a four minute radio story, every utterance counts. In preparing this story, we struggled to find the right adjective to describe the photographs Ed brought back from Iraq. In the popular discourse, “horrifying” seemed to be the word of choice to characterize the Abu Ghraib photos. Ed described his own pictures in the second half of Belia’s story:

**Picturing War, by Belia Mayeno Saavedra**

**Part 2**

(Bring up computer sound…)

Belia: And as we’ve seen over the past weeks, the graphic images of war are not only televised, they’re digitized. After Ed was called to Iraq, one of the first things he did was stock up on camera supplies.

Ed: We spent a lot of time patrolling, driving around, so I’d whip out the camera, real quick, take a picture. I mean, we wouldn’t be taking out the camera when we were doing anything mission critical or important. But I mean, half the time we spent on the road, we got to see a lot of Iraq…. But I just took the pictures as a record of my travels, I guess. Because me going to Iraq, going to war and back, was the only real adventure I’ll ever have. (laugh)

Belia: These reservists say, when they come home from Iraq, it’s normal for them to scan their pictures onto a computer, e-mail them around, or burn them onto a CD. It’s a digital yearbook of a military unit’s shared experience in Iraq. Ed put his photos on the web.

(Bring up sound…Ed, “Here’s—okay, we’re gonna go in, and it says—and here’s a link to it…”)

Belia: Some of the pictures are just pretty shots of the desert, and the ruins in Babylon. But many of them are graphic shots of charred dead bodies, or truncated
torsos lying in the sand. The photos show us what he saw, and the captions he added tell us how he saw it. Ed and his fellow Marines nicknamed one burnt corpse “Mr. Crispy.”

**Ed:** When I first saw dead bodies, I was like, I’ve never seen dead bodies like that before, so out of curiosity, I whipped out the camera and stuff. I was in the car, we were still driving the whole time, I didn’t get out and say, oh, Kodak moment. Just gave it to my driver, my guy on top, the gunner, take pictures, basically what it was, you find your photo ops when you can....

**Belia:** Ed points to another shot, one of Americans in camouflage giving candy to Iraqi children, and his caption reads “Hey kids, here’s some candy. Now make sure you don’t sneak up on me tonight or I’ll have to shoot you.”

*(Bring up sound: Ed, “So here’s a picture of blown up tanks, big old statue of AK 47s on an Iraqi flag, that’s pretty good...”)*

**Belia:** Ed’s grisly photos and captions are disturbing. And what may have started as a personal travelogue is now part of a growing stream of images soldiers are bringing home, changing the way the world sees this war.

Even with the deadline of a morning broadcast bearing down on us, it probably took more than an hour to compose the story’s final paragraph.

**Belia:** The thing that was hard for us was, that they (the Marines) did have responsibility for the words they used, the pictures they put up, the way they behaved. But in the interview, Ed kept saying, “You have to love the war, because if you don’t love the war, you’re gonna go crazy.” And I kept hearing that over and over in my head as I was looking at the things he did and his website, and the ways he talked about the war. His perspective was disturbing, it did disturb us. But the use of “horrifying,” something about that felt very removed, like, “Oh, look at that horrible thing that person is doing over there that I have nothing to do with.” Because even though I didn’t send him to Iraq, in the larger scheme of things, living as an American citizen and benefiting in certain ways from the military-industrial complex and all the “isms” and crazy things we’re all pulled into just by virtue of where we live and who we are, I think that “horrifying,” and other words that were more removed or felt more distant were maybe a little too passive. But we did have to choose something that showed [that] it’s not like this was okay with us.

**Implications for Social Justice Education**

As evident in this last comment from Belia, a whole lot of process hides behind youth media products—moments of fraught deliberation about how to tell a meaningful story that has the potential to upset assumptions and raise generative questions. As we noted in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, *Picturing War* is by no means the ultimate shining example of a Youth Radio story with a clean social justice message. Some of the ideas conveyed in this story conform to rather than challenge systems and institutions that make life more dangerous for young people who are already marginalized. And yet, at Youth Radio, we are not in the business of soliciting stories we agree with. The ones that challenge our own personal politics are among the most important we can produce:
Belia: The reason why those stories are so important is because they really illuminate the fact that our multiple identities allow us many different degrees of power and privilege. A lot of times, the way people understand things is, we’re the marginalized ones, and those people over here are the ones who have power. But when somebody comes out and they are marginalized in all these ways, like, “I’m Black from a working class family,” but they also say, “and I’m homophobic, and this is why,” admitting that they feel this way is very, very enriching to the dialogue about homophobia or racism. If we were just to say, “You can’t say that, that’s not the right thing to say,” if we didn’t let that get out, we can’t really tackle these issues in any substantive way, because nobody’s acknowledging and being accountable for the fact that they hold these views.

Our goal, of course, is not to allow young people to express whatever biases they hold, and then leave it at that. Difficult stories are valuable not only because they articulate the complex relationships among our different identities, but also because they provide a valuable opportunity to perform perhaps the most crucial work of the social justice educator—the cocreation of critical thinking in a reflexive environment.

And yet, as important as the learning environment can be for the individuals involved, the product is what circulates through the world in a very concrete sense. In the old days, a radio story like *Picturing War* essentially evaporated after it aired. Now, Belia, Luis, and Ed will likely come across this story years and years from now—and so might their friends, parents, love interests, teachers, and potential employers. As educators, then, we carry serious responsibility for helping young people feel confident about what they want to put out into the world, knowing that it won’t go away. That said, we also have the opportunity to recontextualize our products, to consider what more there is to say.

At Youth Radio, our website now routinely features converged media “build-outs” with photographs; links to research, resources, and referrals; and even free curriculum ideas as part of our “Teach Youth Radio” initiative to integrate high quality youth-produced content into school- and community-based classrooms.2 While we can never control how an audience hears the voices we broadcast, we can and do continually revisit stories like *Picturing War* long after they’ve aired. These stories keep us thinking, forcing us sometimes to clarify and transform our own instincts, as producers and educators, based on opportunities like this one, to question ourselves.3

Notes
1. In developing the concept of “social justice youth media,” we are indebted to Ginwright and Cammarota (2002).

References
