

Patti Lather

Paper presented at AERA, San Diego, April 12-16, 2004

Symposium: Shifting Imaginaries in Curriculum Research: Feminist Poststructural Modes Toward Enhancing Visibility and Credibility

Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Toward a Double(d) Science

Preface

I must destabilize the structures of foreclosure in order to allow passage to the other. . . With the word *with* commences then this text. . . Nevertheless, I do not make the other come. The call and the coming comes from the other direction, from the other. . . the wholly other. It cannot be invented except by way of the other, by way of the coming of the other who says “come” and to which the response of another “come” appears to be the sole invention that is desirable and worthy of interest. (Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, 1992, 60,342)

With a move from *Getting Smart* (Lather, 1991) to *Getting Lost*, this book marks the trajectory of my work over the last fifteen years. As a feminist methodologist, my interest in both books has been the implications of the “post” for research in the human sciences. While the first book took a particular interest in what the post might mean for emancipatory research (and pedagogy), this book focuses on the methodological learnings from my co-authored quasi-ethnographic study, *Troubling the Angels: Women Living With HIV/AIDS* (Lather and Smithies, 1997).

With women living with HIV/AIDS, I first began to learn about getting lost in terms of what it means to not be in control and to try to figure out a life, given that. Perhaps more precisely, I learned about getting lost from trying to simultaneously produce and theorize a book about these women. There I put myself in an awkward position that was not so much about losing oneself in knowledge as about knowledge that loses itself in the necessary blind spots of understanding. This is Walter Benjamin/Jacques Derrida territory, what Paul de Man termed blindness and insight, where the necessary exclusion is the very organizer of whatever insight might be made and critical texts always turn back on the very things they denounce/renounce (de Man, 1983).

The distinction is important. The issue is not the phenomenology of the researcher negotiating difficult fieldwork. The “proceed haltingly” of my Deleuzian stuttering knowledge is about the construction of the research object as what might be termed “concepts of a lesser ontological weight.” Bataille captures this move as “including the night from which [knowledge] proceeds only in order to enter it again,” (1988/1954:110). This is also captured in the movement of my book titles. While *Getting Smart* dealt much with the fundamental tensions between the Enlightenment and postmodernist projects, its

very title evokes faith in the knowledge that will set us free via the powers of the reasoning mind. Located at the site of emancipatory research and pedagogy, the book argued that both the seductions of and resistances to postmodernism can help us to “get smart” about the possibilities and limits of critical praxis.

Getting Lost is a more disabused text. Working the limits of deconstruction, getting lost is theorized as a fertile space and an ethical practice in asking how research based knowledge remains possible after so much questioning of the very ground of science. In this book, feminist qualitative research is situated as seismograph of sorts, an index of more general tensions in the human sciences. Grounded in efforts to tell the stories of women living with HIV/AIDS, I explore a logic of mourning and haunting in the context of feminist research methodology. Asking hard questions about necessary complicities, inadequate categories, dispersing rather than capturing meanings, and producing bafflement rather than solutions, I put deconstruction to work in unpacking what getting lost might mean as both methodology and mode of representation.

This book is inscribed into an intertextual web that is enspiriting in being something to rub up against in charting my own course. My sense of web includes, surely, the work of Deborah Britzman. Offering “a psychology I can bear to learn from” (Weems and Lather, 2000), given my post-Marxist leanings, she is much evident in these pages. The male euro-pantheon is also much evident, particularly Derrida, Benjamin, Foucault, and Nietzsche.¹ And, situated “on the interventionist, critical edge of deconstruction” (Niranjana, 1992:161), I draw from feminist ethnography, qualitative inquiry in the social sciences, and various (post)critical theories, particularly queer theory.

As those familiar with the tensions between the critical theories of feminism, postcolonialism and the post-critical moves of deconstruction know, this is no easy place to inhabit. Much of the work collected in this book seeks to mine such tensions as fertile ground for formulating a kind of feminist research not yet overcoded in the face of received understandings. In a 1993 keynote for the Ethnography and Education Research Forum, I spoke to the early stages of an in-process *Troubling the Angels* and anticipated this second and subsequent book as follows:

More long term, a methodologically oriented text is envisioned that deals with such issues as narrative strategy and the negotiation of meaning within feminist inquiry; the operations of multi-layered data analysis; the politics and ethics of doing research on/for/to/with people in general and with PWA's (Persons With AIDS) in particular; and experiential versus interpretive authority, the honoring of participants' voices in a way that problematizes confession, testimonial and the intrusiveness of much social research and how this project has wrestled with such issues. (Lather, 1993)

This “two-book plan” was not well received on several fronts, not the least being concerns that a vulnerable population was being used and abused by

¹ See Weiler, 2001, for discussions of feminist uses of male theorists.

deconstruction twice over. As Selby notes, “The paper was an irritant to many” (2004, p. 152) who perceived it as narcissistic navel-gazing at best, unethical at worst. This was by no means the only time my work in *Troubling the Angels* troubled my audience and I will draw considerably in this book on response data across a variety of venues. What is important by way of introduction is that, in attending to how feminist methodology disciplines us with its possibilities, limits, pleasures and dangers, *Getting Lost* moves in a way that is a search for a form that is pre/simultaneous/post *Troubling the Angels*. Written before, during and after that book, as an effort to articulate methodology out of practice, my central question in this book is what would practices of research look like that were a response to the call of the wholly other. Some term this “the ethical turn” in the human sciences (Derrida, 1999; Irigaray, 1993; Ziarek, 2001; Critchley, 1992; Gerber, Hanssen and Walkowitz, 2000). As feminist research has never sought to be anything else, I prefer to think of it as gesturing toward the science possible after the critique of science.

“What will have been said” is the future pluperfect tense of the post, its valuable lesson of attention to how that which has been lost in the past might transform the future out of the work of the present (Duttmann, 1993). In addressing “what will have been said,” *Getting Lost* brings a Foucauldian “history of the present” to bear on feminist methodology and what it gives us to think in terms of doing inquiry in a post-foundational time.

Early in the project, after a discussion with Mimi Orner, I wrote the following:

Second text [*Getting Lost*] will fold back into first text [*Troubling the Angels*], but can first text fold forward into book that is not yet? What would that allow me to do? The gesture of revisiting former text as a form of research is not unusual. But to fold forward, to speculate about an as-yet-not-produced text, showing a work in the making, would be new ground, a sort of dialogue across texts, time and researching selves. (August 31, 1994)

This articulated exactly the sort of future pluperfect thinking that has shaped this project. What is being brought into being through the elaboration of particular practices, the “persistent effortfulness that makes a ‘present’” (Spivak, 1993:156)? What are the inclusions and exclusions at work? What uses does feminist methodology see for itself? How does it delimit, constitute, unbind, disharmonize, pervert, rupture or fit into already established continuums? What are its internal differences and what self-knowledge does it not seem able to bear? What are we “surprised at becoming, pleasuring in this gift of alterability” (Cixous, quoted in Spivak, 1993:156)?

Inhabiting such a polytemporality was not without its discomforts. Functioning as both author and critic of books that did not yet exist, my goal was a reading of my in-process work that produced rather than protected. To this end, the writing assembled here is a sort of etch-a-sketch writing erased imperfectly before being written on again. Beginning where I was, where I believed myself to be, my move was toward the need to surrender

myself to future deconstructions, given the limits of any knowledge. In Derrida's "The Exorbitant. Question of Method" from *On Grammatology*, he explicates his choice of subject and lets us in on the lesson learned but, as Spivak notes in the Preface "in the long run a critic cannot himself present his own vulnerability" (1976:lxv). *Getting Lost*, then, is a palimpsest where primary and secondary texts collapse into trace-structures of one another that fold both backward and forward into books full of concealments, not knowings and an uncanny time of what "will always have already taken place" (Keenan, 1997:171).

At its heart, *Getting Lost* situates feminist methodology as a non-innocent arena in which to pursue questions of the conditions of science with/in the postmodern. Here we are disabused of much in articulating a place for science between an impossible certainty and an interminable deconstruction, a science of both reverence and mistrust, the science possible after our disappointments in science. Against tendencies toward the sort of successor regimes characteristic of triumphalist versions of science (Harding, 1991), this book asks how to keep feminist methodology open, alive, loose. Such thinking is within and against Enlightenment categories of voice, identity, agency and experience so troubled by incommensurability, historical trauma and the crisis of representation. Given my interest in the science possible after the critique of science, my central argument is that there is plenty of future for feminist methodology if it can continue to put such "post" ideas to work in terms of what research means and does.

Chapter One introduces the major concepts that under gird a shifting imaginary in how we think about methodology in the human sciences. Chapter Two delineates double(d) practices via Judith Butler's concept of subversive repetition. Here, the very idea of science will be explored from the vantage point of feminist poststructuralism. Chapter Three unpacks the idea of textuality as praxis by probing an excessive textuality that performs what it announces. Chapter Four reads the reception of the "post" in educational research and then turns to the uses of deconstruction in policy and practice by way of a reinscription of praxis under conditions of postmodernity. Chapter Five fleshes out the intelligibility of validity after poststructuralism via an exploration of the usefulness of categories of transgressive validity—ironic, paralogic, rhizomatic, and embodied—and the larger debate about the conditions of science with/in the postmodern. Chapter Six raises three "postbook" issues: the ruins of ethnographic realism, the masks of authorial presence, and the work of a recalcitrant rhetoric. It concludes with a "methodology of getting lost" by looking at the intersections of research, theory and politics. Chapter Seven probes the politics and ethics of feminist research with/in the postmodern, research that asks questions of narrative authority and the possibilities of generative research methodologies.

Each chapter is followed by an inter-text designed to elaborate/complicate some aspect of the preceding chapter. These include interviews, response data from various readers of *Troubling the Angels*, and, finally, a meditation on what the angel to philosophy of science might be made to mean. This final inter-text draws on Michel Serres' (1995) theorizing of angels as "quasi-objects" that evoke the anxieties that follow our triumphs when foundations collapse. It draws, as well on Walter Benjamin's (1968) angel of

history as a way of thinking a non-teleological history, a history thought against the consolations of certain meaning and knowing and toward the thought of the limit as a way to make a future.

As a final layer, each inter-text is followed by a textual move intended to break any illusion of mastery via a provocation of something unknown/unknowable, something “still lost” given the nature of the task of representation. Here I present the “riddling quality” of a work-in-the-making that engages myself as reader as much as any audience in the inferential process of solving the puzzle of its meaning. These “intra-inter-texts” include epigraphs, poems, pictures, and typographical play that elicit questions and awkward evocations of things I don’t understand about my work.²

This sort of Bakhtinian polyphony or multi-voicedness grows out of a “Girlie Day” that I was part of in Copenhagen in the fall of 2003.³ There, a small group of feminist researchers traded on the stuck places in our work in ways that were particularly fruitful for the structure of the book. My stuck place was whether to write the “easy text” (a collection of already written papers) or the “hard text” that positions the already written as data in working the limits of deconstruction in the context of feminist research methodology. Their urging was toward a both/and form that would identify points in the already written where I did not persuade myself, stuck places that I love/hate, the ruins and runes of the work, stumbling toward a form that deconstructs mastery, including mastery of one’s ability to deconstruct the stuck places in one’s own work. Hence the movement of the text is from the already written to something messy that invites further thinking and doing.⁴

Calling on the debates between archeologists and architects on what to do with ruins, the Girlie Day women sent me to Copenhagen’s Danish Architecture Centre for the Ground Zero show, the first place outside New York City to exhibit the full model and plans for Polish-American Daniel Libeskind’s winning entry in the World Trade Center Design Study. There, particularly struck with the holding power of the retainer wall that held out the Hudson River in the 9/11 attack, I thought much of the mix of memory and foundations entailed in building the new out of ruins.

I returned home to filter through the files I had kept over the almost fifteen years since the HIV/AIDS study began. Letters and e-mails exchanges, packets of student writing in response to reading versions of *Troubling the Angels*, transcripts of taped discussions about the book, interviews, all in conjunction with my published and unpublished writing since *Getting Smart*: this was my data. Spanning over a decade, situating this work as a ruin/rune, my goal is to keep put the post to work to produce useful practices of getting lost as fertile space for shifting imaginaries in the human sciences.

² See Katriel and Sanders, 1989, for how epigraphs can be used in this way.

³ Participants included: Ann Phoenix, Dorthe Staanaes, Jette Kofoect, Nina Lykke, Tine Frstrup, Susan Wright, Yvonne Moreck, Dorte Marie Sondergaard, and myself, Danish Pedagogical University, Copenhagen, September, 2003.

⁴ Laurel Richardson’s *Fields of Play* is also a model as is Alice Walker’s *The Same River Twice*.

References

- Critchley, Simon (1992) The ethics of deconstruction. Oxford: Blackwell.
- De Man, Paul (1983) The blindness of insight: Essays in the rhetoric of contemporary criticism. Mpls: University of MN Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1992) Acts of Literature, ed. Derek Attridge. NY: Routledge.
- Derrida, Jacques (1999) Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Duttmann, Alexander Garcia (1993) What will have been said about AIDS? Public 7, 95-114.
- Harding, Sandra (1991) Whose science? Whose knowledge? Thinking through women's lives. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Irigaray, Luce (1993) An Ethics of Sexual Difference, trans. Carolyn Burke & Gillian C. Gill. London: The Athlone Press.
- Katriel, Tamar and Robert E. Sanders (1989) The meta-communicative role of epigraphs in scientific text construction. Pp. 183-194 of Rhetoric in the human sciences, Herbert W. Simons, ed. London: Sage.
- Lather, Patti (1993) The politics and ethics of feminist research: Researching the lives of women with HIV/AIDS. Paper presented at the Ethnography and Education Research Forum, Philadelphia PA, 20 February.
- Lather, Patti and Chris Smithies (1997) Troubling the Angels: Women Living With HIV/AIDS. Boulder: Westview/HarperCollins.
- Niranjana, Tejaswini (1992) Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism and the colonial context. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Richardson, Laurel (1997) Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Selby, Jane (2004) Working divides between indigenous and non-indigenous: Disruptions of identity. Qualitative Studies in Education, 17(1), 143-156.
- Spivak, Gayatri (1993) Outside in the teaching machine. NY: Routledge.
- Walker, Alice (1996) The same river twice: Honoring the difficult. NY: Scribner.
- Weems, Lisa and Patti Lather, 2000, A Psychoanalysis We Can Bear to Learn From [Review of Deborah Britzman, Lost Subjects, Contested Objects: Toward a Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning, SUNY, 1998]. Educational Researcher, 41-42.
- Weiler, Kathleen, ed. (2001) Feminist engagements: Reading, resisting, and revisioning male theorists in education and cultural studies. NY: Routledge.
- Ziarek, Ewa (2001) An ethics of dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy. Stanford: Stanford University Press.