

To Appear Other to Itself Anew: Response Data

Patti Lather
Ohio State University

September 2006

Dear Victoria:

Sometimes a book writes us. While Chris and I wrote *Troubling the Angels* (Lather & Smithies, 1997) with a great degree of intentionality, we also made it up as we went along, often driven by very pragmatic circumstances. And some of it worked below the surface of our efforts to do our knowing from our doing. In excess of subjects presumed to know about objects presumed to be knowable, we were “out ahead of ourselves” in the format. For this, I have greedily attended to reader response to learn what comes about when readers are positioned as thinkers and writers know they are in over their heads. Here we are enriched by the Deleuzian “fold” of what Elizabeth St. Pierre (1997) calls “response data” where “the audience teaches you something,” perhaps particularly that “we need other people to help us think.”

Hence I/we especially appreciate you as one of the more “astute” readers of the place of the angels in the book and the pages they take up and whether their presence is justified or even ethical. The angels as bad (girl) behavior is just one of the best readings ever for how the angels are (mis)read in ways that bring their work in the book “to containment within the personal.” That you situate this reductionist reading of the angels within Beauvoir’s understanding of what happens to women’s dissident thinking is on target, I think, and contributes to understanding a sort of rationality that is embodied and perspectival, quite other to “a hidden isomorphism with our cultural structuration of masculinity” that so shapes dominant rationalities (Hass, 2002, p. 71). Here where there is only room for a very complicated truth, an entirely different logic is called for, a logic grounded in not knowing as a way of moving into a nonauthoritarian sort of (im)possible future.

Things that Chris and I were aware of but that you express so well:

- The subject matter was inherently rhizomatic. We learned from it that a subversive disease required a subversive format. Just as the AIDS virus is constantly shifting, so is the knowledge produced about it. This creates what I termed a “stammering knowledge” that recognizes the limits of what it can know. It was also about the “text as epistemology” making a larger point about what can be said and known about the lives of others and, perhaps, even more grandly, the nature of knowledge itself and the possibilities of certain meaning and knowing.

- The women's voices taught us this as well, including the enriched collaboration that comes from using differences as a resource toward a more complicated knowing.
- As we thought of addressing many audiences, particularly the women themselves, we wanted a format that enacted a respect for readers that gave them space to breathe while setting up resonances to move toward thinking about meaning in history within the crisis of representation and the violence of the gaze.
- The misstep of my unintentional "undercover" identity at the retreat provided for tremendously rich learning and set me up in the project to "get smarter" as opposed to being an expert. Here the women were positioned not as objects of exchange and spectacle, voyeurs, or eavesdroppers on a conversation not meant for them but rather as interlocutors of our storying of their lives.
- The refusal, mostly, to analyze the women's words, to say "what they really meant" worked not so much as a "failure of interpretive responsibility" as an ethical move that had to do with creating a multiply voiced text that accumulated meaning as the text proceeded in a way that goes beyond the pages of the book. Here no one has the authority to make final pronouncements on what things "really" mean and researchers are positioned as a kind of seismograph, intentional agents and vessels of history writing us in ways we did not and do not fully understand.

Ways our learning from our practices deepens in your hands include,

- The book is, in its way, sexuality research, a genre I would not think of including it within.
- The angels worked to disrupt technical-rational treatise/polemic. As "the deconstructive 'something else,'" they are, indeed, about "Lather the learner," where methodological structure and representational choice are ratcheted up in terms of how to "think about big things" in our empirical/field work. This maps exactly on to my growing interest in what I am terming "ethnography-philosophy" to explore how a postepistemological scientificity might contest the displacement of philosophy by social theory in terms of the legitimacy of an engaged social science. Spurred by this work on women living with HIV/AIDS, this larger project rethinks the relation between empiricism and philosophy by positing an engagement with not knowing as an ethical and political move. This is a negotiation that structures the empirically graspable as not not philosophy by functioning as a careful displacement of a philosophy of presence. The goal of such a project is a double(d) science that works the necessary tensions that structure contemporary social science as fertile ground for the production of new practices toward the barely possible where a different politics might arise.
- Securing a place in history for the women's stories was my biggest hope. To the extent this happens, we honor the original charge of getting the story out. But we all moved well beyond "informed consent" in that journey. None of us could know the adventure on which we were embarking. *Getting Smart* (Lather, 1991)? *Getting Lost* (Lather, 2007)? All I know is that I was thrilled by your last sentence where the women's names have pride of place, in conjunction with the angels as enhancers and messengers of their stories. Many an ethnography has its brief moment in the sun; some few live on, usually because they are methodologically rich. I knew this and so what you say in your last sentence maps on to what became my intention as the work proceeded: to create some widened space beyond our means from which to enter their voices into history so that they would be listened to across time and place for years to come. This is a combined, aggregated ensemble: the women, Chris and myself, the angels and, as your work shows, our readers, in and out of alignment, both resonating with and interrupting one another across similarities and differences: to help us think not only *with* but *in* our actions.

So thanks.

References

- Hass, M. (2002). Fluid thinking: Irigaray's critique of formal logic. In R. J. Falmagne & M. Hass (Eds.), *Representing reason: Feminist theory and formal logic* (pp. 71-88). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy within the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.
- Lather, P. (2007). *Getting lost: Feminist efforts toward a double(d) science*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Lather, P., & Smithies, C. (1997). *Troubling the angels: Women living with HIV/AIDS*. Boulder, CO: Westview HarperCollins.
- St. Pierre, E. (1997). Methodology in the fold and the irruption of transgressive data. *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 10(2), 175-189.

Patti Lather is professor of education in the School of Educational Policy and Leadership at Ohio State University, where she teaches courses in qualitative research, gender in education, and cultural studies. She is also associated faculty in women's studies and comparative studies. Her book, *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy within the Postmodern* won an AESA 1991 Critics' Choice Award. *Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV/AIDS* (coauthored with C. Smithies) was designated a CHOICE Outstanding Academic Title for 1998. Lather's research interests are in (post)critical pedagogy, feminist ethnography, and poststructuralism. Her latest book is *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Toward a Double(d) Science* (2007).