

## Methodology, Praxis, and Autoethnography: A Review of *Getting Lost*

***Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Toward a Double(d) Science.*** Patti Lather. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. 215 pp., \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7914-7058-9.

Reviewed by  
Sara M. Childers

*Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Toward a Double(d) Science*, by Patti Lather, is the follow-up to her 1997 *Troubling the Angels*, an experimental ethnography cowritten with Chris Smithies to document the lives of women in Ohio living with HIV/AIDS. Conceived “before, during, and after” the writing of that book, *Getting Lost* is a follow-up of a different sort (p. ix). Although it does, at moments, reconnect the reader with the women who participated in the original project, *Getting Lost* endeavors to fold back in on that study to deconstruct the practices of research and begin to articulate what it might mean to do feminist post-structural work in “response to the call of the wholly other” (p. ix). The result is a textual articulation and performance “of what getting lost might mean as both a methodology and a mode of representation” (p. 11). In an effort to write a methodology from practice, Lather exposes the research process of *Troubling the Angels* as a methodology unknown to itself that stumbles and bumbles along the way, makes mistakes, and loses itself in the name of science. It is in the articulation of this loss and of being lost in her practice of research that Lather explores a

philosophy of inquiry ethically grounded in not knowing.

### A (Temporarily Imposed) Framework for Reading

#### *Doing It and Troubling It Simultaneously*

In disregard of the post-structural call for a complicated reading, I have attempted to make some sense of the book. The structure itself is both an enactment and an effacement of the call for clarity—a structure that Lather and Smithies wrestled with in the writing of *Troubling the Angels*—making *Getting Lost* also somewhat of an experimental text. Each of its dense philosophical chapters is followed by an “Interlude” with material that is more accessible to the reader, such as an interview or an update on the women represented in *Troubling the Angels*. The interludes serve as breathers if a break is needed from the theoretical text, and they also provide a personal view of the author. An excerpted interview provides some clarity as Lather talks about the research and writing of *Troubling the Angels* from a personal perspective. The interlude titled “Naked Methodology,” although critiquing the desire for naked truth, provides a glimpse of a researcher attempting to position herself as necessarily vulnerable and her practices as necessarily exposed while she is literally naked. Similarly, an update from Chris Smithies and e-mail updates from research participant Linda B add to the feel of research as lived or living experience. The interludes, in a sense, breathe life into the academic writing and remind us, if we forget, that again this book is about the methodological experiences that result from trying to tell the stories of women living with HIV/AIDS.

The structure of the book lends itself to interrupting the Deleuze-inspired, rhizomatic theoretical paths (which might otherwise engulf the reader) by means of interludes that nevertheless fail to give themselves over fully to an easy read. Thus the book is structured to perform textually the double(d) move of doing and troubling itself simultaneously.

#### *“Working the Ruins” of Feminist Methodology and the Human Sciences*

Admittedly, *Getting Lost* is a mix of new material and revisions of previously published material, synthesized to engage with the questions of inquiry in the human sciences. As such, the chapters do not necessarily fall into a tidy lineup of explication, one building and leading to the next. In hindsight, however, I can establish a bit of readerly framework that straightens out the rhizomatic pattern of connectivity across the book.

Chapter 1, “Shifting Imaginaries in the Human Sciences: A Feminist Reading,” introduces concepts integral to thinking about the human sciences, precariously situated on a shifting terrain of methodology as practice. These concepts might serve as the book’s “necessary imaginings” in order to move forward. Chapter 1 is the only one divided into thematic plateaus that attempt to fold and layer the concepts for a more multivalenced approach to definition work. For all of its effort to be complicated, chapter 1, like the book as a whole, provides many footholds for the reader. Classic definitions are supplied for common and still complicated theoretical terms. *Postmodern, post-structural, deconstruction, post-critical, erasure, praxis,*

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*double(d)*, and *getting lost* are some of the terms laid out in a graspable way for the moment of introduction. Delimitations of Lather's argument are littered asymmetrically through the chapter (and the book) but are rhetorically signaled and easy to locate. The chapter serves as a not-completely-transparent articulation of concepts that are defined and simultaneously troubled.

Chapter 2 uses Judith Butler's notion of subversive repetition to explore the practices of methodology that perform and undo in trying to do science that recognizes its responsibility and complicity. Feminist methodology is situated within its own crisis and loss in response to the troubling of its assumed innocent counterpractices of knowing. As Lather explains, she uses Butler's subversive repetition

as a way to keep moving within the recognition of the noninnocence of any practice of knowledge production. . . . The argument is that agency exists in the possibility of a variation within a repetition. In order to be intelligible, we need to repeat the familiar and normalized. The task is not whether to repeat but how to repeat in such a way that repetition displaces that which enables it. . . . [I]t can be used to rethink practices of feminist methodology in displacing the idea that the work of methodology is to take us to some non-complicitous place of knowing. Instead, the work of methodology becomes to negotiate the "field of play" of the instructive complications that knowledge projects engender regarding the politics of knowledge. (p. 39)

*Troubling the Angels* is the opening up of such risky practice. Lather discusses the "double(d) practices of representation" (p. 39) that work "via a movement toward the sort of double(d) practices that would allow us to neither assume transparent narrative nor override participant meaning frames" (p. 39). Lather and Smithies experience and practice "disappointment as a rubric" (p. 47) as a consequence of the necessary failure of trying to tell other people's stories. Subsequently, in later chapters of *Getting Lost*, Lather discusses the critiques of *Troubling the Angels* from students and research participants who read as selfish her insistence on an experimental layout that textually performed its methodological practices of disruption.

Chapter 3, "Double(d) Science, Mourning, and Hauntology: Scientism, Scientificity, and Feminist Methodology," is the crux of the book. It presents Lather's newest and most energized material based on tensions in the human sciences and the neoliberal accountability movement in education. Aiming at articulating what Michel Foucault meant by counterscience, she explores science after the critique of science. The chapter leads the reader through to the implications for a feminist methodology of a "more capacious sense of scientificity" (p. 60). The critique is "directed more toward a philosophy of science than science itself" (p. 63). "Scientificity is about the constitution of science as science" (p. 68)—that is, the characteristics that make a practice sciencelike and the situated intertwinings of power and knowledge that define it. Lather sees the possibility for a "Foucauldian scientificity" (p. 68), an eruption of multiplicities and contingent scientificities that produce an "arena of struggle in broadening the definition of science" (p. 69). She is arguing for "a sort of post-methodology that bespeaks an end of grand narratives about research" (p. 69); such a methodology also offers a recuperative move for the social sciences, such as education, that are under attack in the age of accountability. "Another type of scientificity is needed for the social sciences, a postpositivist, interpretive scientificity that takes into account the ability of the object to object to what is told about it" (p. 71). Objectivity is resignified in response to the call of the wholly other. "The thingness of the thing has to be taken into account . . . a new respect for the adequacy of objects. . . . [H]ere objectivity renders objects capable of resisting social explanation" (p. 71).

A different respect for the subject of research is called for, not a recentering of the subject but a different response to the crisis of representation that thrives on a tension between trouble and love. This thing-object-subject-participant returns through a post-critical practice that performs a doubled move of both respecting and troubling the voice of the other. Both the subject and the researcher wrestle with an authority defined by failure—a failure to know or to be known. These ideas are powerful for thinking about feminist methodology as practice that fails and disappoints in its knowing of the other. This failure is the mark of a

science with room for the folds and interruptions of a doubled practice.

### *Responding to Readers and Critics*

Moving into the second half of the book, the reader finds more of the sense of a piecing together. Chapter 4 delves back into *Troubling the Angels* to discuss textuality, the textual mode of representing the (not) knowing of women's experience with HIV/AIDS as another form of praxis in research. There is an immediate sense of tension between making the accessible book that the women wanted for a broad market and Lather's desire to produce a book that, in not assuming transparency and easy access, becomes more complicated.

How do I reconcile myself to palpable costs in terms of time and the ethics involved in using the site of this inquiry to wrestle with what it means to move toward a less comfortable social science? As one woman in the study wrote, "When are you guys going to publish? Some of us are on a deadline, you know?" (p. 89)

These questions propel Lather toward a second reading of the AIDS work in light of the responses of readers and participants. Lather's students and readers take her to task for her insistence on the use of "angels" (images and intertexts that serve to break the flow of the book), for the experimental and fragmentary format of the book, and for the resulting frustration, anger, and insult they experience in reading it. In response, Lather situates the readers' experiences with the text as a pedagogical move that the text performs to shake up and disable preconceived desires for transparency and understanding. The format and intertexts do their work here, interrupting an assumedly unobstructed transcript of interviews and focus groups at the tops of the pages and the researcher's countertext and analysis running at the feet of the pages. Lather argues that she owes her subjects this complicated representation. The reader, rather than assumed to be unable, is constructed as an engaged thinker ready to wrestle with "the monstrous" text. Trying to give weight to the criticisms of the book and still hold on to the work of getting lost for both the researcher and the reader, Lather states: "Chris and I cannot reconcile the contradictions that traverse this book

about bodies of knowledge and knowledge of bodies. Rather than a resolution, our task is to live out the ambivalent limits of research” (p. 95).

Chapter 5 rehashes a persistently recurring critique of the postmodern from the left of critical theory in education. Risking a proper reading of Derrida, Lather outlines moments of (mis)readings of the post-structural move within education. She uses her AIDS research to demonstrate a kind of “applied Derrida,” where desires for a transformative praxis are put under erasure. Praxis is resituated as a ruin and fiction of privilege, an impossibility that moves out of paralysis to doing work in response to this knowing.

Chapter 6 is a summation of work on validity after post-structuralism, an admitted obsession of Lather’s during her career. Transgressive validities become another example of methodology as practice, the subversive repetition of science in its doing. The works of former dissertation students and other researchers are cited as moments of iteration when we see the provocation and reinscription of science from the margins.

Chapter 7 serves as a conclusion to getting lost as a methodology, a final opportunity for the author to assert her political and ethical hopes for the interpretive and textual practices of her work within the context of destabilization of her own investments. Through this double(d) move she travels toward a discussion of what this practice might mean for the ruins of feminist methodology in this historical moment.

### **If a Methodology Could Speak, This Would Be Its Autoethnography**

In *Getting Lost*, Lather enacts a multileveled genealogy of the present: the present of her own work and her field and the present of the philosophy of the human sciences. It is in this practice of articulation out of deconstruction that Lather foregrounds the idea of double(d) science. She traces and logs the moments when this double(d) science has announced itself within the broader horizons of research—in the work of her students and colleagues and in her own projects.

In the afterword, Lather mentions being critiqued in the past for writing in a way that exhausts and stalls any other

reading, as it seems to account for all potential analyses. She states that in writing the afterword to expose her stuck places and questions, she is attempting to mark the places where she is still lost and, in that sense, up for critique and rereading. I find this response to be an interesting approach to the critique in that it offers many openings into thinking about the present historical moment of feminist research. Although the afterword was intended to function as an overexposure and make her more available for critique, one reading is that through the structure of the afterword Lather controls the parameters of critique by laying them out separately from the text and inviting critique on her own terms. But what seems to be getting in the way of an opening-up for other readings is indeed the practice of getting lost. Getting lost as a methodology, because of its inherent reflexivity coupled with the necessarily stubborn desire to keep moving, manifests its own requirements for an exhaustive self-critique. Part of the double(d) move is turning the gaze on the self with such intensity that all practice comes under erasure. The double(d) move is part of the ethics of research. Part of its trouble is its own exhaustion, and this might be a point of danger. How can research/ers move forward if the methodological practices delimit their own intentions for openness? How might getting lost as a practice and methodology need to be troubled? But then again, how much doubling and troubling can we do before we forget our work in the first place?

I think also that getting lost as a practice is symptomatic of doing feminist work in the human sciences in a historical moment when scrutiny has been both internally and externally generated. Chapter 2 does an excellent job of delineating the loss of innocence within feminist research and the resulting necessary critique of how to do work with others differently. Externally, for example, feminist education research like Lather’s has had to think ahead to counter the possible criticisms of its work in a moment when neoliberal accountability already fails to see the value of qualitative inquiry. In these ways, getting lost is about finding the breaches and excesses so that qualitative scholars might be protected for the work they do in the face of positivism. To

poorly paraphrase Foucault, if nothing is innocent and everything is dangerous, then I think this situation might necessarily hold true for a postfeminist, post-critical methodology of hope as well.

Possibly to the author’s chagrin, *Getting Lost* might also be read as (a subversive repetition of) autoethnography. It immediately reminded me of Shulamit Reinharz’s 1979 book *On Becoming a Social Scientist* in the way that it mines the practice of research for data to articulate methodology. Like the previous case studies and field journals used by Reinharz, the data for *Getting Lost* consist of research experiences and materials gathered over the years since the *Troubling the Angels* study began. Letters and e-mails, reader responses, taped discussions and interviews about the book, and all published and unpublished materials become a sort of data corpus for analysis in explicating a methodology of practice. I find autoethnography to be of particular use under these conditions when the research experience constitutes not only the site but also the data for an engaged critique and articulation of practice.

In a simplified definition, autoethnography might be perceived as a first-person account of the research experience by the author to disrupt the dichotomy of self and other and to trouble conventions of representing culture (Atkinson, Coffey, & Delamont, 2003). It is at this point that Lather severely diverges from the genre. As mentioned earlier, the interludes and some textual moments in *Getting Lost* dance and toy with the idea of the vulnerable researcher but never give over fully to the expectation and trouble any desire for such transparency on the part of the reader. Lather tells us she cried twice during the AIDS research and then questions why people need or want to know that she cries. The methodology does get very naked, as it is stripped bare and articulated through a deconstruction of practice. If the methodology could speak, this would be its autoethnography, as its language, textuality, and representation are the central focus throughout the book. In this move, the author as a subject in the ongoing process of *becoming a social scientist* gets backgrounded and moves in and out of the way as necessary to make particular points and then get on with the

work of philosophy. It is vital to note Lather's statement that this book "wrote me as much as the other way around" (p. 96). As a young feminist researcher in education, it is important for me to see not the exposed and vulnerable side of my mentors but their complicated wrestlings in the field and their coming to practice. *Getting Lost* in this way charts the stumblings to put the self to work in complicated times and puts a mark on what it means to practice at this historical moment in feminist research.

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## AUTHOR

SARA M. CHILDERS is a doctoral candidate in Social and Cultural Foundations of Education at Ohio State University, School of Educational Policy and Leadership, Ramseyer Hall, 29 West Woodruff Avenue, Columbus, OH 43210; [childers.23@osu.edu](mailto:childers.23@osu.edu). Her dissertation research focuses on an ethnographic case study of a high-achieving, high-poverty urban high school and the role of race, sports, and policy in defining academic "success" for its students.

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