Against Proper Objects: Toward the Diversely Qualitative

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March 2015

In what follows, I sketch the present conjuncture of qualitative research via a sort of genealogy of how I have mapped it over the years.

I begin with a few framing caveats: 1) following Foucault into genealogy and his interest in historical emergence of concepts (to counter essentialism) and to make intelligible our own framings (increase the circumference of the seeable, fish seeing water), 2) feminist post post (Braidotti, 2013) that so challenges the Enlightenment legacies of a willful, self-knowing subject and opens its idealizations to critique, and 3) to chart proliferations, migrations, circulations, all on the move, taking incommensurability seriously.

One part memoir, one part self-interested map of the lay of the land, my talk ends with reflections on how a carefully curated set of empirical work, both that done and that “to come,” might model what it means to make the changes in qualitative research today in regards to praxis and the subject.

**Memoir: What ushered me into my own thinking**

I was a feminist before I was a Marxist and that has made all the difference. This came about through some combination of life experience and teaching high school where I emerged fully into feminism in small town Indiana.

Stepping out on the feminist stage intellectually for the first time, I integrated women’s literature and, especially, history into my teaching in a combined two hour block called American Studies. Those were the days when an individually teacher designed curriculum was quite welcome and I spent many an hour at the mimeograph machine and typewriter. These were heady times that reinforced feminism in my high school teaching as well as in my life.

After an amazing opportunity to spend six weeks in Nigeria with a mixed race group of 20 other Indiana school teachers, I decided on doctoral work altho I did not know one end of a doctoral program from another. I chose “general secondary education” after failing my entry into social studies education. Not enough of a “researcher” I

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1 My title riffs off of Robyn Wiegman’s *Object Lessons* (Duke Univ Press, 2012) who riffed off of Gayle Rubin where Wiegman tracks the desire for critical work to make a political difference across Whiteness Studies, American Studies, intersectionality theory, Women’s Studies and Queer Studies. The title was first used in Judith Butler’s (1994) intervention into the territorial dispute between lesbian/gay studies and feminism in terms of “proper” objects across sex and gender.
came to find out later—which at that time meant I had no knowledge of or interest in statistics, or “research” for that matter, whatever that meant. The general secondary education faculty was comprised of former superintendents that I could never seem to find in their offices, so I looked around for another program, landing in “curriculum” largely because those guys—and they were all guys—were there and quite friendly. They also ran an alternative teacher education program which was a good match for my hippie leanings.

While being called an “organic Marxist” when I was an early doctoral student was one of the best compliments of my life, I did not know what it meant until I began to learn from other doctoral students what “critical” social thought was all about. I could not rely on my professors who were not conversant with the work of Henry Giroux, Michael Apple etc, but I could rely on my fellow doctoral students who introduced me to those critical educational theorists as well as queer theory, a la Bill Pinar, which was also not a part of my “formal” graduate training. What I did get more formally was women’s studies, and that, too, has made all the difference.

I was among the cohort at Indiana University that was the first to take advantage of a brand new PhD minor in Women’s Studies (1980, as I remember). I also benefitted immeasurably from being on the committee to organize the annual National Women’s Studies Association (NWSA) conference in, again, as I remember, 1981, at IU. Here I was introduced to feminist philosophy of science and nothing was ever the same again.

This feminist work on science, now called feminist science studies, combined with another stroke of luck during my IU years: Egon Guba was offering the first qualitative research courses. Between Guba and feminist science studies, I was “saved” from positivism and I converted accordingly, gratefully. Maybe I could be an educational researcher, after all.

This, then, was my academic training, including, importantly, the Women’s Studies minor that Egon Guba recommended against: “no one will ever hire you.” I remember Guba asking me how I got so smart and my answer was something about the combination of women’s studies and qualitative research and how they interrupted one another, a comment that came out of my work with Noretta Koertge, one of Karl Popper’s students, who taught me philosophy of science and was very hard on me, especially my writing.

My advisor, Norm Overly, took me to the Bergamo Curriculum Theory conference the fall of 1981 and there I began to see a life for myself as a critical feminist scholar. Bergamo was like dying and going to heaven. Critical theorists, phenomenologists, feminists, queers, race conscious white folks with a very sparse scattering of folks of color. There were even Canadians, including Deborah Britzman who then as now helped me entertain the idea of psychoanalysis without having a fit, a psychoanalysis “we could bear to learn from” to use Lisa Weem’s felicitous phrase in
a review of one of Britzman’s books that we co-wrote after I had gone to Ohio State University.

And it was at Bergamo, somewhere in the mid-80’s, that I was introduced to the “posties,” first through Jacques Daignault, a French Canadian who spoke “derrida”. I had no idea what he was talking about but after some years of critical theory, it seemed like a breath of fresh air. I first described this as the difference between being hit over the head with neo-Marxist theory and being tickled into awareness by the serious playfulness of French “postie” theory. While by no mean an easy read, poststructuralism was so much less heavy handed and morally directive and so much more in tune with my emerging sense that critical theory had its limits in making sense of what was rushing down the road: media culture, post-colonialities, and the blurring of disciplines way beyond the sort of interdisciplinarity of American Studies, all in a “post everything moment,” to quote Fred Erickson from a 2001 AERA paper.

I had found my own way to be uncomfortable with issues of imposition in emancipatory work, paralleling feminist discomforts as well as challenging some of feminism’s own blind spots. Especially attractive to me was the post-modern repositioning of critical intellectuals away from either universal spokespeople or academic heroes/cultural workers and toward opening up our privileged spaces in the production of a politics of difference that recognizes paradox, complicity and complexity.

I began my academic career in Mankato Minnesota’s women’s studies program where I had secured my first job after graduating from IU in 1983 (so much for Guba’s advice!). Teaching a course on Feminism and Postmodern Thought was very helpful in moving me toward the post as we asked questions like how can liberatory intentions become part of what Foucault terms “master discourses”? How can feminist thought and practice escape totalization and dogmatism? Who are all of these French white guys anyway, and why should a group of praxis-oriented feminists care?

After coming out of the gate with a rush around using feminist critical theory to rethink qualitative methods, especially issues of validity, I proceeded to NOT write for about two years. I read and read and read and then, slowly, began to try to write again. Everything was different. I hardly recognized myself in this new space of a less authoritarian sort of knowing. How did one both write oneself into the text and question the text at the same time? What was the ground for teaching in this new space? For political practice?

By the time Getting Smart was published in 1991, I was teaching qualitative research at OSU. This was a fortuitous turn of events for me. I landed in a job that had advertised for a feminist critical theorist who could teach qualitative research. I call this a dream job where what we read to teach is also what we read to do our scholarly work.
Getting Smart was completed in New Zealand while I was on a Fulbright Award. This was an especially formative six months for me as that part of the world gave me three powerful things. First is the awareness that one could possibly exist in a place/space where critical theory was the norm and the second was to learn to defend the “postie” part of my feminist critical theory. “Down under” was pretty well dominated by a male neo-marxism quite wary of the French theory of the time. Habermas was much more to their liking. On the other hand, the many feminists I encountered were quite interested in the French guys and girls and I found that interesting. Why was feminism so much more open to the intersection of postmodernism and the politics of emancipation than the neo-Marxists were? The third big thing I got from this experience was what Maori politics had to teach me about the ups and downs of American multiculturalism and, of late, indigenous methodologies or what Spivak terms “the new new” of “the indigenous dominant” (1999, pp. 67-68). This laid important groundwork for my engagement with the postcolonial and globalization theories of more recent times and the very contemporary turn to posthumanism, especially the Australian feminist variant that is so rooted in Aboriginal thought and practice. Here the work of Margaret Somerville, Vicki Kirby and Elizabeth Povinelli is key.

And now almost thirty years and four books later, I look back at what developed in my research career. I more or less fell into a project on women and HIV/AIDS (Lather and Smithies, 1997) that propelled my writing for several years and brought me back to the importance of empirical work in theorizing. I became part of the effort to move OSU’s foundational studies in a cultural studies direction. I was part of an effort to bring postie perspectives to AERA. [This was an especially fraught affair given the 2002 Scientific Research in Education Report which I made it my business, along with many other critical theorists, to not let go unremarked. We took this on and, actually, had more success than was expected, as evidenced by the 2009 Spencer Report out of Stanford.] I was, as well, part of an effort to bring educational matters to feminist scholarship, most recently the dangers of post-structuralism for feminist policy work, [including theories of the subject and agency, after humanism, and the critiques of standpoint theory and, more recently, intersectionality theories, including a re-engagement with feminist standpoint theory “after” the critiques of identity politics and the humanist subject (Hoale, 2009).]

Some of this is dealt with in my 2010 book, Engaging Social Science: From the Side of the Messy, but the edge of where I am working now is in a project I can hardly believe given these interests: the weight of sports on US secondary schools. As the daughter and sister of coaches, I want to investigate the question: do we hire teachers or coaches? My working title is The Sports and Schooling Project and my model is Walter Benjamin’s The Arcades Project (1999), an unfinished assemblage

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2 The lack of success of this is documented in a publication a few years back (JCT 2008).
that explores the intersections of art, culture, history and politics through the figure of the Paris arcades, a precursor to shopping malls.

This is my model as I stand poised on retirement’s edge, hoping to produce something that will make use of all my skills and interests and contribute to how we think in different ways about schools where I can but hope that following Benjamin into my sports project is quite the right thing to do.

**Mapping the succession of field-forming framings: From Paradigms to Proliferations**

I offer the following charts that I have accrued over my career in a context of the globalization, neoliberalism and imperialism of modern governmentality as well as the sort of climate change horrors that are the big picture of our time of Now (interstellar movie).

**CHARTS: a thousand tiny paradigms: 1.0, 2.0, 3.0**

To address what Bettie St. Pierre (2011) has termed the post qualitative is to enter a zone of futuring that is both already here and always tentative and transitory, a site of ongoing revision and differentiation, optimism and attachment but also predictable disappointment if not political despair and affective failure that is much framed by what Robyn Wiegman calls “my middle class middle age” that is so crabby, but it is also about the state of qualitative research today.

In this context, whatever the post-qualitative might mean, the move is towards glimmers of alternative understandings and practices that give coherence and imaginary to what is possible after the methodological positivism that has taken up too much of our time and attention since governmental incursion into scientific method.³ The “positivist qualitative” dominant unleashed by “best practices” and “scaling up” with calls for procedural transparency, handmaiden to the state sorts of policy usefulness and consequent fundabilities, evidence based this and that, and systematicities that reduce the wild profusion to the too rational-technical: all of this positivist qualitative work subsumes the “infinite” variety of interpretive research approaches. This surely includes the “mixed methods” discussions that are covers for positivist qualitative work.⁴

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³ That such governmental incursion has by no means ended is evidenced by recent efforts (FIRST Act, H.R. 4186) to use NSF reauthorization to cut social, behavioral and economic funding unless it can justify how it serves “the national interest” (AERA, March 2014).

⁴See the various NSF reports on workshops on qualitative research in Ragin, Nagel and White, 2004 (on 2003 workshop), Lamont and White, 2009 (on 2005 workshop) or www.nsf.gov/sbe/ses/soc/ISSQR_workshop_rpt.pdf. For the 2009 workshop, see www.ipia.utah.edu/imps/
In contrast to this disciplining reduction of qualitative research, the post-qualitative in which I am invested has to do with undoing. The passage of qualitative research beyond itself moves it deeper into complication and accountability to complexity and the political value of not being so sure (Lather, 2007). No more a progressive development, a replacing of one thing by another, the move is toward a research imaginary that finds shape and standards in what we are making in its name. This includes practices that no longer have such a hold on us where we struggle with ghosts as terms collapse.

One example of this is the work I am entering into with Elizabeth de Freitas, a math educator, and Ezekiel Dixon-Roman, a sociologist of education and quantitative policy analyst, who both take a cultural studies approach to quantitative research. Out of an AERA sponsored working conference this last July, we are assembling a special issue of Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies on “Alternative Ontologies of Number: Rethinking Quantitative Inquiry in the Social Sciences.” This is introducing me to the ideas of software analytics, data sciences, including “Big Data,” and measurement and statistics. I am reading such journals as Computational Culture on “algorithmic thought” and “critical code analysis” as well as the journal Big Data and Society on the challenges to standard epistemologies of new forms of empiricism.

Across the abstracts accepted for the special issue are such ideas as how the critique of the calculative power of postcybernetic control works against the advance of automated modes of thought, ethnography in relation to the nonhuman agencies of algorithms parsing big data, [the ontological intersection of indigeneity and re-thinking quantitative research,] the historical reformulation of calculation under conditions of incomplete information, how “datification” produces new governmentalities by way of new intensifications and embodiments, [how the lens of “dimensional incommensurability” (re)shapes the imperative to quantify,] the development of dialogal and situated quantitative measurements, [the scientistic turn in the social sciences as shaped by competition with economics, the politics of representation of machine-readability as ontology iteration,] and how software programs think they think and construct hidden architectures in the doing. Arguing for a counter-narrative of a (post)critical quantitative perspective, “we reject the algorithm” becomes a post-post kind of praxis.

Such work goes well beyond the “smart mixed methods” I have been tracking for some years and gives me hope for new ground in bridging the gap between

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5 This is part of the AERA Education Research Conferences Program, since 2009, designed to support conferences with promise of contributing to education research by breaking new ground, stimulating new lines of study and developing innovative methods. The July 2014 conference was led by Jerry Rosiek and Lisa Mazzei at the University of Oregon, entitled Beyond Reflexivity and Advocacy: Exploring the Ontological Turn in Education Research. The four days brought together 19 educational researchers for cross disciplinary collaboration, particularly across assumedly “incommensurable” areas.
quantitative and qualitative research in education in challenging positivism, empiricism and scientism. What begins to look possible is to interrupt the naturalization of empirical givenness in a science that seldomly puts “the real” in quotation marks, resulting in a “zombie positivism” with its incessant returns of objectivism and “the gold standard” of replication and generalization. What becomes intelligible is a social science adequate to the 21st century where a praxis 2.0 rethinks agency and the subject to which I now turn.

Praxis In the Ruins

My rethinking of praxis has been coming along for several years now (Lather, 2008). A recent “food for thought” instantiation comes from Catherine Conlon’s (2015) cross-disciplinary project combining music, philosophy and social theory concerning women’s concealed pregnancy in Ireland. Focusing on a relational ontology, Conlon transposes an interview transcript into a series of mini-operas about secrets and judgments performed using a confessional staging that includes a singer, a flautist and one audience member at a time as well as a wandering chorus. Through a “data as enactment assemblage,” both essentialized research subject and essentialized audience are broken down. Data is reframed as partial and always in process of “re-membering” via “sonic re-telling” that is “constitutive of an ontogenic re-enactment” that engages “the audience in an ongoing process of re-telling.” Addressing what policy research looks like after post-humanism, embodied analysis in "an entangled web of being, meaning and sound" de-centers all subjects involved in this study of surveillance, regulation and cultural appropriation of women’s fertile bodies. “Thinking with theory” (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012), Conlon materializes an engaged, collaborative social science that not only enacts the (post)qualitative in ways that are just what Deleuze has desired in his call for less critique and more invention but also delivers some hard truths in producing something devastating that you don’t get to not see.

Such a praxis project displaces the “heroic engaged author” and results in a reciprocally educative intervention that lets go of any command of meaning making. Indeed, showing how “meaning making is tricky” (Perselli, 2008: 237) might be argued as the very rigor of poststructural empirical work. Knowing full well that “giving voice to the voiceless” is no innocent act, the ensuing performance is one of knowings and not-knowings entangled in layerings of returns and reversals. This is a praxis that troubles our ideas of innocent counter-practices. It demonstrates a coming to practice by thriving on the tensions and instructive complications of an experience of the disciplining space of an emergent methodology. This is not the indulgent autoethnographics of the “vulnerable ethnographer” so much as an inhabitation of a post-humanist field imaginary as “if a methodology could speak” (Childers, 2008) of irreducible difference, incommensurables and disjunctive temporalities. Here the enlightenment legacy of a willful, self-knowing subject is quite undone as is the researcher as the one who knows.
Writing the post-qualitative and materializing practices that do not yet exist perform a different logic, a logic grounded in not knowing as a way of moving into a nonauthoritarian sort of praxis. The key question in all of this is what different politics becomes possible when projects are put at risk rather than positioned to claim a “better” vantage point that can “emancipate” some others. Here work is situated as ruined from the start, a symptomatic site of the limits of our knowing and the complications of our doing. The something that begins to take shape in such messier, trickier, less comforting stories is, perhaps, some new “line of flight” (Deleuze and Guatari, 1987) where we are not so sure of ourselves and where we see this not knowing as our best chance for a different sort of doing in the name of research as praxis.

Such a post-praxis is about ontological stammering, concepts with a lower ontological weight, a praxis without guaranteed subjects or objects, oriented toward the as yet incompletely thinkable conditions and potential of given arrangements (Levinson, 1995). This is a sort of “praxis under erasure,” moving toward practices that are in excess of subjects presumed to know about objects presumed to be knowable (Haver, 1996).

What Nigel Tubbs calls “decadent critique” might be pertinent to a sort of “decadent praxis” that recognizes it is part of the sickness it diagnoses in raising cautions about the use and abuse of research for political ends. As the West comes face to face with “what its mastery now means in the world,” Tubbs suggests the “rather enigmatic” idea “that the masters have to become more of what they are before they can also become less than they are” (nd).

Rather than some angst of displacement, this might be the effacement that I have been trying to track across Derrida for years. This is a demastering: “a work without force, a work that would have to work at renouncing force, its own force, a work that would have to work at failure, and thus at mourning and getting over force, a work working at its own unproductivity, absolutely, working to absolve or to absolve itself of whatever might be absolute about ‘force’” (Derrida, 2001, p. 144).

The key is to welcome decentering one’s discourse via the othernesses that always confront us as a way to cut across both mainstream and counter discourses. Across broken and uneven spaces, we have a chance to “unlearn more in the field” (Subedi, 2002) in the name of research as praxis by reading against ourselves in presuming not understanding but ourselves as incompetent readers reading for difference rather than sameness in order to be unsettled by otherness (Lather, 2000). Courting an uncontainable excess, a sort of multiplicities without end, this is working multiple othernesses as a way to keep moving against tendencies to settle into the various dogmas and reductionisms that await us once we think we have arrived.

[In sum, there is much to be said about how the crisis of neoliberalism requires an ontological insurrection of a praxis from below, what Antonio Negri calls the “centrality of common praxis,” a practical response within networked culture (2007,
p. 64). This calls for a kind of participatory research on steroids where we are
guided by what Negri terms “doing research according to a logic of immersion, of
situating ourselves inside the present, always starting from below where there is no
outside” (pp. 63-64). Negri calls this “joint-research” (italics in the original) that
“creates outlooks of struggle” by focusing on the commonalities of bodies and the
desire for a future democracy, where networks of constitutive learners “no longer
speak of taking power, but rather of making power” (p. 71, emphasis in the
original).6]

The Incalculable subject

[Nietzsche] asks what it means to think that the world is always making
itself while God is calculating, such that his calculations never come out
right . . . to think is not to be certain nor yet to calculate probabilities. It
is to say yes to what is singular yet impersonal in living; and for that one
must believe in the world and not in the fictions of God or the self . . .
(Rajchman, on Deleuze, 2001, p. 18)

Only when the world, teaming with anonymous and nomadic,
impersonal and pre-individual singularities, opens up, do we tread at
last on the field of the transcendental. (Deleuze, 1990: 103)

And so we arrive at my final point: re-thinking the subject away from the reason and
calculation of a willful, self-knowing subject. The post-subject as incalculable began
to take shape for me at the recent AESA conference in Toronto where Susan Talburt
and Ben Baez, among others, presented a very conversational session on Foucault
and governmentality. In thinking through the myriad of issues with them, the word
“incalculable” kept coming up.7 What would the “incalculable subject” look like that
was toward something not containable, in excess of meaning, rather than rational or
disciplined or socialized or interpellated? As a counter to neoliberal and Big Data
efforts to count and parse, capture and model our every move,8 how might we think
a subject outside the parameters of the algorithms? How does this map onto
Deleuze’s “becoming imperceptible” in the face of the ubiquity of new forms of
calculation toward retailing the world?

6 An example of this is On the run: Fugitive life in an American city, by Alice Goffman
(2014, University of Chicago Press), an intense, immersive, participatory
ethnography of life in a low-income neighborhood of Philadelphia and the systems
of surveillance and control that permeate lives and destroy relationships, families
and neighborhoods.

7 My ears were attuned to this as I had used incalculable as the “final word” of the
final chapter, ”What Kind of Science for What Kind of Policy?” in my 2010 book on
the messiness of educational policy.

8 Talburt told an evocative tale here of “messing with big data” in the way she makes
a point of clicking on advertising buttons and then not purchasing, claiming this
messes with the algorithms.
One resource in this effort is the queer theory used by Robyn Wiegman in *Object Lessons* (2012) where she foregrounds the concept of disidentification as a precursor to re-thinking the subject away from human centered willfulness. Based on the work of Jose Esteban Munoz, the theory of disidentification prioritizes the nonidentical, unassimilable, and anti-institutional “as a means to rethink not only politics and identity but political subjectivity itself” (96) in producing “a queer life-world that is, in Munoz’s words, “smokey, mysterious, and ultimately contestatory”” (97). Here we make incalculable bargains all the time in the face of regulatory failures and performative interruptions where we arrive at uncertainty in the “murky epistemes of desire and politics” (109, quoting Ian Halley). Think of dykebois and genderqueers where “profound unassimilable disidentification” is at work (130). Here affect is disruptive of imposed order by that which cannot be calculated by any measure other than its own becoming (Colebrook, 2014).

Beyond calculation the subject moves from reflexive knowledge to immanent embeddedness given “an insufficiency of calculus” caught in “a swarm of becomings” at odd with the lived order of the world (Colebrook, 2014: 59). Here “in the beginning is the relation” (p. 60), rather than the intending, perceiving and commanding style of subjectivism of humanism, as we become 1000 tiny relations, an “index of a multiplicity,” to use Deleuze’s words (2001, p. 30).

How might my in process work on sports and schooling help in this effort to undo the humanist subject and its capture by neoliberalism and Big Data? Using Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* as a model, I proceed configuratively like an archaeological dig into a montage book that functions as a social memory and historical index of an under-appreciated aspect of the shaping of American schooling in terms of teacher hiring practices in light of what I call the 6000 pound question of whether we hire teachers or coaches.

In addressing my methodological ambitions for my project, it has taken much for me to develop something more than reflexivity in regards to recognizing that which catches me up in limiting ways. Derrida’s (1981) concept of the pharmakon comes very much to mind—that which is remedy is also poison. Feminism has been such for me and, in their turn, structuralism and post-isms, including the latest, the new materialism.

I used to think I could not think or write without the word hegemony in every sentence. Then it was discourse. Now it is materialism and intra-relationality and networked entanglements. To see the water we fish swim in, to not be so obscure to ourselves, is to be betrayers of the worlds in which we are so deeply involved. To me, now, this rubber hits the road in the world of football where reflexivity is inadequate to the task and diffractive analysis becomes quite useful.

What one sees in diffractive analysis is how the “bodymind” of the researcher becomes “a space of transit” (Lenz-Taguchi, 2012:272), a reading “with” the data
that is an embodied engagement toward a thinking otherwise that enacts "intervention and invention; responsibility and ethics" (278, emphasis in the original). Here a new kind of object comes to attention, an object “pulled out of shape by its framings” and, equally importantly, “framings pulled out of shape by the object” (Rifkin, 2003). This challenges who you think you are as a researcher in a way that holds promise for advancing the critical edge of practice.

I tried this in my very short essay on the Penn State sex abuse scandal where I did, in fact, feel my way into a different analytic space that was not particularly comfortable (Lather, 2012). To enact what unexpected angle a “becoming feminist” diffractive analysis might provide, I found myself “intra-acting from within” in a way immanent to a particular event where we interrupt our usual “perceptual style and habits of seeing” (Jackson and Mazzei, 2012:134, emphasis in the original). My move was toward a “becoming with” in ways not already coded, where a researcher actively resists their own interpretation toward a “different subjectivity. . . a subject position not previously experienced” (Ibid:133). What was materialized in this “intra-relational” method was a fraught space where I became a fragile thinker as this nexus of issues pushed me places I was not sure I wanted to go in exploding the container into which sports and sexual abuse have been bottled up. All of this harbors caution for my inquiry into sports and schools in terms of what feminist analysis is and might become in such a space that may stretch me to the beyond of myself.⁹

This is where Steven Almond's 2014 book, Against Football, becomes quite useful as he well captures the divided nature of response from those who love the game of football as they engage with the “perfect storm” around it.¹⁰ Recognizing the “complicity of my own joy” (5) in any look at modern America “under the influence of sports” (79), the author is so divided that “two parts of me are often not talking to each other” (132).

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⁹ Childers, Rhee and Daza (2013) have theorized “promiscuous feminism” as a space for such work that, on the surface, has little to do with feminism. Barad says she frequently is asked “‘since your work is not about women or gender, what does it have to do with feminism?’ My answer, of course, was: ‘Everything’” (2012).

¹⁰ In Almond’s reading, the perfect storm around football is composed of “the twilight years of our imperial reign” where the US is losing global dominance,” the increasing costs of brain injuries and the long-running denials and junk science (from the NFL) involved, the “big dance of capitalism” with the staggering profits and tax-exempt status of the NFL, its links to perpetual war and various crises of masculinity, the “mythic and visceral” drama it provides on top of the “football porn” (18) that allows men to celebrate the eroticism of other men’s bodies, the deeply denied racial structures of an “extravagantly monetized plantation” (112), kiddie leagues with their “parasitic adults” (116) grounded in sport being part of the education system in a way Almond finds “pathological” (116), and the “bloated media cult” that feeds off it all.
[For a game that started out as an underdog to boxing and baseball, the question now is “how much bigger can football get?” (22)] Almond situates “trying to quit football” up against a “grid of devotion” (58) where it is a “central emotional event” of a life where he has paid more attention to certain plays than the birth of his own children (60). “This could be religion—or addiction” (65) he says, noting the “tribal affiliations” that govern so many lives around the game. He theorizes it is mixed up with “the shame of men whose dreams have collapsed” (119) and sees the most pressure for change coming from legal action where “concussion management plans” are the least of it (123). Forecasting that in the future, the game will “migrate to private leagues” (124), his hope is for a genuine debate that confronts football’s dark side. In this, he sees the need for some distress in rethinking Big Football, eroticized and racialized violence, dementia and death, and the degrading of our educational system. It is a “kind of refuge” (171) and this too must be faced, as we begin to (re)see football as “a beautiful savage game” (172) that is killing us.11

Perhaps this could be an imagined methodology in my study: like the Conlon exemplar, to deliver hard truths through some sort of multi-layered participatory design where fans like Almond can see themselves on their own terms through repeated viewings and enactments. I am thinking here of Gloria Ladson-Billings’ practice in *The Dreamkeepers* (1994) where she used group viewings of videotaped classroom observations by teachers coming to see their “necessary complicity” in setting up racialized advantages and disadvantages in their teaching. What would processes of not getting to not see look like in such a context? [Perhaps this instantiates Karen Barad’s (2012) call for an “iteratively reconfigured and enfolded” past and future “through the world’s ongoing intra-activity.”]12

11 To begin the change, Almond makes six recommendations:

1. revoke NFL tax-exempt status
2. require that allocation of public funds for sports facilities be approved by a public referendum and profit sharing
3. institute true parental consent (see p. xx)
4. recognize that there is no magic helmet, but better ones should be required
5. stop bulking up the players
6. include graduation rates in national rankings
7. prohibit tackles for under 16
8. apply fan pressure

12 Another instantiation is the documentary, “The Act of Killing.” Recently nominated for an Academy Award, this film interviews the leaders of Indonesian death squads active in the mid-60’s. Having them re-enact their now too long in the past to be prosecuted killings, a multilayered participatory design unfolds as a member check unlike any I have ever seen. Allowing the killers to see themselves on their own terms, through a sort of “drama therapy” (LaSalle, 2013) of repeated viewings and enactments, the filmmaker plays with fire in exposing a regime of impunity out of the actors’ own vanities, love of gangster movies and everyone’s
Conclusion: Ontologizing the Remains


My interest in this talk has been the development of a post-qualitative imaginary and its implications for empirical work. In addressing the thought to which all of this tends, what can be abstracted from (post) empirical work already in-the-making? What “narration of methodology” (Markussen, 2005) might move us away from the theories and practices whose grip on us we are trying to break?

It feels to me like the moment of attachment and detachment when those of us trained in ideology critique moved into deconstruction. What had to be let go of? Of what could we/would we not let go? What continues to haunt the (be)coming methodology?

Located as we are in neither what Bettie St. Pierre (2011) terms “conventional humanistic qualitative research” nor the deconstructive variant that, perhaps, was a transition into this differently ontological space, we continue to struggle with deconstructive troublings of a certain praxis of salvation narratives, consciousness raising, and a romance of the humanist subject and agency. And so we arrive, at this point in the “becoming” of the (post)qualitative, at the question of how we ontologize what remains in the next generation of qualitative inquiry as we collectively imagine sustainable possible futures via new thought and present-based practices of everyday life.

This is not about having the (post)qualitative research we want or getting everything we want from it. It is about foregrounding the anxieties of incompleteness and the animating attachments to social justice that Wiegman (2012) argues is the primary political gesture of contemporary fields of academia that will leave none of us who live in it alone. This is a kind of structuring paradox up against the new materialism and its many refusals of human centered willfulness where what (post)qualitative research offers is no match for what we want from it. And so I leave you with a final question: What kind of critical ambition makes sense in this space?

necessary complicities. The film was shown in Indonesia and, by some reports, has transformed its sense of history in a truth and reconciliation sort of format.

13 I remember Jane Kenway, for example, remarking at some conference that she had expected she would always do ideology critique. While I was glad enough to leave the strictures of Marxism, I think I thought I would be a social constructionist forever.
References


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