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To Give Good Science: Doing Qualitative Research in the Afterward

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Abstract: This article explores the “afterward” for qualitative research in the ruins of NCLB and its failure to deliver. In the space opened up “after” the dominance of the gold standard bullying and “metric mania” of neo-positivism, I articulate a post-retirement project on the weight of sports in U.S. secondary schools out of a re-engagement with the work of Walter Benjamin. Here my interest is to imagine forward out of troubling the narrow scientism of the recent past of educational research toward a post-qualitative future.

Keywords: post-qualitative; neo-positivism; Walter Benjamin; neo-liberal governmentality; United States; schools and sports policy; “becoming feminist” analysis.

Dando buena Ciencia: Haciendo investigación cualitativa en el futuro.

Resumen: Este artículo explora el “después” de la investigación cualitativa en las ruinas de la ley NCLB y su falta de resultados. En el espacio abierto “después de” el predominio del estándar “dorado” y la intimidación “manía métrica” del neo-positivismo, este artículo presenta mi proyecto de jubilación sobre el peso del deporte en las escuelas secundarias de los Estados Unidos, un nuevo acercamiento con el trabajo de Walter Benjamin. Aquí mi interés es de imaginar un futuro fuera de molestar el cientificismo estrecho del pasado

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reciente de la investigación educativa hacia un futuro post-cualitativo.

Palabras clave: post-cualitativos; neopositivismo; Walter Benjamin; gubernamentalidad neoliberal; Estados Unidos; escuelas y política deportiva; estudios feministas.

Dando boa ciência: Fazendo pesquisa qualitativa no futuro.

Resumo: Este artigo explora o "depois" da pesquisa qualitativa nas ruínas de NCLB e sua falta de resultados. No aberto "depois" a predominância do padrão "dourado" e intimidação "mania métrica" do neo-positivismo, este artigo apresenta espaço meu projeto de aposentadoria no peso de esportes do ensino médio nos Estados Unidos, uma nova aproximação a obra de Walter Benjamin. Aqui o meu interesse é o de imaginar um futuro fora do cientificismo estreito perturbar a pesquisa educacional passado recente em direção a um futuro pós-qualitativa.

Palavras-chave: pós-qualitativos; neopositivismo Walter Benjamin; governamentalidade neoliberal; Estados Unidos; escolas e políticas esportes; estudos feministas.

Introduction

What do qualitative researchers do now that the Science Wars have ended is the question of this special issue. While I am happy enough to address what qualitative researchers might do in this moment of the ruins of *No Child Left Behind*, given its failure to deliver (Viteritti, 2012), and the not unexpected unexpected outcomes of its decade at the top of the reform food chain, I am not at all sure that the Science Wars have ended. I also think the moment of policy might be coming to not so much an end as its end as the dominant ascendant.

All of this is much addressed in a special issue of *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* that Bettie St. Pierre and I have co-edited. There we make much of what Bettie (2011) has been calling “post-qualitative” for the last few years, ever since we felt like we could breath out from under the SRE/SRB monolith. Deciding to “just say no” to the hegemonic repositivization of the last decade, we turned to theoretical practices and research imaginaries across the cutting edges of other disciplines, particularly feminist theory and science studies, and found much ado about the material turn (Alaimo, Hekman and Hames-Garcia, 2008). We have used this to begin thinking about the ontological turn in qualitative research as a moment in the “fieldwork in philosophy” that I have been much interested in ever since I stopped feeling like we were going to be “scienced” away by the goings on in Washington. Shifting from objects to assemblages and from proliferating and competing paradigms to meta-method across paradigms, Karen Barad (2007) and all those who have put her to work across so many disciplinary formations have become my new theory girl- and boyfriends.

Barad, speaking out of physics, has her own ideas of what the “new materiality” might mean in terms of a shift in the Science Wars. Her concepts of agential realism and her strong critique of social constructivism might enable a reapproachment between and among the social sciences, the humanities and the “hard” or “natural” sciences. New times indeed, if any of this should come to pass. And a much more attractive sort of re-engagement across the sciences than that fostered by the “gold standard” bullying that we in education have just gone through with its proliferation of standards and rubrics as part of neoliberal governmentality.

The inspections and surveillance and disciplining are not over by any means, but a new breeze blows that might make room for this thing called post-qualitative and even, in some spaces, post-neoliberalism.¹ What would it mean to “imagine forward” (Gaventa, 2006) out of troubling a narrow scientificity and enacting an “after” of neoliberalism?

While I am much taken with Joseph Viteritti’s (2012) genealogy or history of the present and how we have come to think this way across the shifts from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) to Race to the Top (RTT), it is the space of post-qualitative work that I want to occupy in this paper. I cannot, however, resist a short summary of Viteritti’s masterful delineation of what has gone wrong in the evolving federal role in school reform. I even played with a title something like “the what does NOT work clearinghouse.”

Viteritti’s list of what has gone wrong includes an enormously useful review of the literature documenting the lack of a research base for key priorities, the “serious doubts” about the efficacy of test based incentives to improve educational performance (2012, p. 2108), and evidence that high school exit exam programs *decrease* graduation rates without increasing achievement, as well as the “lumbering along” of states in terms of professional development, teacher evaluation systems and lag in test development in synch with what is taught (p. 2109). If this is not enough, “value added” studies yield “conflicting evidence” and are, at best, a “crude indicator” of teacher effectiveness; turn around strategies for failing schools have run into a myriad of practical problems including the lack of school principals to replace the ones who are in failing schools; and the very mixed research base for charter schools that indicates no differences in performance at the high school level (p. 2013). Hence “best practices” on the “what works” list have come down to rounds of waivers, seemingly endless scandals around both test scores and, at least in Ohio, tutoring programs,² competitive strategies that direct monies to those schools that need them least, and the continuation of the achievement gap in spite of billions of dollars invested.³

All of this is quite enough to return me to the arms of the German Jewish cultural critic, Walter Benjamin, with some great relief (Lather and Kitchens, in press). As addressed in the following section, my relief has to do with how Benjamin models both a “mash-up” sort of text and the pleasures of theorizing culture and politics, in this case the culture and politics of sports, schooling and the hiring of teachers.

The Sports and Schooling (Arcades) Project

As I face retirement, I am engaging in a project I can hardly believe given my interests in theorizing feminist policy analysis under conditions of post-neoliberalism, post-feminism and the tensions of the intersection of feminist policy and post-structuralism,

¹ I go on at some length about post-neoliberalism in Lather, 2010.

² The Atlanta scandal where 35 black teachers are accused of racketeering, conspiracy and making false statements includes charges against 44 of the 56 schools in the city and “placed public education squarely at the nexus of race and politics. . . expos[ing] the city’s racial fault lines” (Copeland, 2013, p. 3A). For Columbus Ohio tutoring scandal, see State Gets Go-Ahead to End Federal Tutoring Program, 10TV.com, May 30, 2012.

³ A new addition would be the opt out anti-testing movement, reported in its nascence in the *Washington Post* on April 15 (Layton, 2013) where parents are organizing on-line and, increasingly, students are refusing to take tests.

including a re-engagement with feminist standpoint theory “after” the critiques of identity politics and the humanist subject (Houle, 2009).

My new project is the weight of sports on U.S. secondary schools. As the daughter and sister of coaches, I want to investigate the question: do we hire teachers or coaches? My model is Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, an unfinished assemblage that explores the intersections of art, culture, history and politics through the figure of the Paris arcades, a precursor to shopping malls. Drafted between 1927 and 1940, *The Arcades Project* was published in Germany in 1982 (Rolf Tiedemann, editor), over four decades after Benjamin’s death. The English version was published in 1999. A study of dominant motifs that concretely immerses the reader in a milieu, the book is a vast montage, a palimpsest, a fragmentary wealth of perspectives and methodological inventiveness, an exemplar of the demand that writing be reinvented for each topic and every occasion. A meditation on an ethos, it works to strip away the lies we tell ourselves—unmaking deceptions, it portrays the demented rationality at work in the construction of early modernism. Its focus is on images of desire, dream factories. Choppy, it is a sort of anti-book assembled across a variety of editorial interventions, particularly those of Theodor Adorno after it was found in the Bibliotheque Nationale de France after WWII, hidden there by Georges Bataille after Benjamin fled Paris to his death on the Spanish border during the German Occupation.

The Arcades Project is a culmination of Benjamin’s interests and skills, “a theatre of all my struggles and all my ideas,” (1999, p. x) that collects thirteen years of research. Epic and interminable, it is a sort of archive or assemblage of collectibles and interpretive angles, including drafts of early iterations. A patchwork of citations and commentary, rather than a “mere notebook,” Benjamin’s book enacts the “ruin” of a project that, while a blueprint, is also what it is: a sort of diary of when a research project becomes the “thing itself” and, perhaps, transcends book form.

Like Benjamin, I plan a “mash up” sort of text that combines 1) field work, including both U.S. and international, 2) an archive of what we do and do not study in conceptualizing excellence in teaching, and 3) my father and brothers’ stories who all went into the coaching/teaching business. All were deeply driven by coaching, invested in using athletics to “save” kids in one way or another—and save themselves, more or less—many “redemption” stories that would bring some complication to my more critical, feminist eye. My goal is to bring these disparate parts together in an assemblage at the intersection of U.S. schools, sports and the elusive goal of a quality teaching force in a way that instantiates the post-qualitative and explores what a “becoming feminist” analysis might perform in such a space.

This is a shift from asking what a feminist analysis would add to something more performative and more deeply rooted in a (post)feminist ethic and politic. It is an active process of taking up a position in-between the “continual production of difference immanent within events” (Deleuze & Guattari, quoted in Jackson and Mazzei, 2012, p. 87). It is 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. p. 133).

The goal is to produce a “different typology” via what Jackson and Mazzei (2012) call “a diffractive reading” that is not about *intervening* from outside but *intra-acting* from within (p. 134, emphasis in the original). Its movement is toward a different “spread of knowledge” that is a fractile sort of splitting and then splitting again, not unlike the splitting of the self under conditions of trauma.

. . . reading diffractively . . . requires an emphasis not on how discourses function, but on how they materialize. A diffractive reading is not about what is told, or experienced – it is about the ways in which what is experienced is formed in the intra-action between the material and the discursive. (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 130)

Intra-actionally speaking, installing the self in the event that emerges out of a diffractive reading produces something beyond interpretation, beyond autoethnography, beyond reflexivity, intentionality and rationality. Feeling the affect, what “happens” in the event and our sense-making of it blur as researchers are positioned otherwise. Folding texts into one another, a flattening of subjects and objects occurs in a sort of differential becoming. This engagement reconfigures the world and “how we are becoming as researchers” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 132) as we insert the self, from the inside, to explore how an “entangled becoming” (p. 135) is constitutive. What different questions emerge? What is differently seeable? What differences are enacted?

I have always liked to work “against myself” and my particular way of looking at things and this project is ripe for opening up layers of contradiction and complication in how we might think in different ways about schools, sports and education research. It is, as well, quite timely given the focus on teaching excellence as the new “nut to crack” in reforming American secondary schooling. Bill Gates, for example, is now focusing 4 billion dollars on this. After a decade of work on small schools, his Foundation is investing in “effective teachers in every classroom.” Studies are being done in several cities to see what good teaching and support resources look like. While the focus on using student test data as diagnostic for teacher professional development makes me quite nervous, I have learned from a former student working with a Gates initiative in Houston that qualitative work is increasingly appreciated in this drive to understand what makes for quality teaching. My study might well be situated in this larger effort in ways both critical and dialogic. My “Sports Project” is also, unfortunately, timely in the face of the Penn State sex scandal (Lather, 2012) and the question of what it is about “Big Sports” that makes such things possible. Additional timely elements include the work of Amanda Ripley, both “The Case Against High School Sports” in *The Atlantic* (October, 2013) and *The Smartest Kids in the World and How They Got That Way* (2013), a comparative case study of schooling and academic achievement as measured by the international PISA test with a focus on Finland but as well includes Poland and South Korea. Ripley’s book addresses how sports is embedded in an “unholy alliance” (p. 119) in U.S. high school culture compared to other “superpower” schools.⁴

Maybe just saying no to the endless permutations of governmental incursions into education research and, instead, following Benjamin into my sports project is quite the right thing to do.⁵ Let me end by exploring what that might look like, especially under conditions of a ruptured cerebral aneurism that I suffered in December of 2010.

⁴ For a critique of PISA and its role in international education policy, see Meyer and Benavot, 2013.

⁵ One example of my ambivalence about “just say no” is an April 15, 2013 “national conversation” on “Reframing Reform: Achieving Equity and Excellence in Public Education,” Chicago. My interest here is in “The Finnish Phenomenon” and language such as “evidence-based drivers proven to enhance student achievement, key barriers. . . and strategies for moving forward.” A mix of academic and Congressional folks speak about “lessons learned” in trying to get education reform “right,” especially “changing expectations of testing,” “cloaking inequity” and “teacher pipeline,” although

Most noticeable in *The Arcades Project* is Benjamin's use of the future pluperfect: "...the investigations that one would have to undertake in order to illuminate the subject further" (p. 469). Other such phrases that evoke a sense of, "If I were to do this study": to be underlined, still to be established, say something, compare, this work has to develop, outline the story of. Along these lines, I have actually written a "shadow proposal" of a study that is more imagined than done. With Benjamin's *Arcades Project* as a model, its components would entail:

- A "No Sports" as Curriculum Policy
- B Benjamin
- C Do We Hire Teachers or Coaches? The Elephant in the Room: An Issue Too Big to See?
- D pop culture and the meaning of sports
- E a cultural studies methodology
- F
- G Multiplying CAHS (Columbus Alternative High School): Scaling Up as Policy, with Sara Childers
- H
- I Effective Teachers
- J feminist methodology: In the Afterwards
- K Finland: A cross-cultural comparison
- L A critical qualitative approach to policy: Policy as a Practice of Power
- M the pleasures and politics of cheerleading—review of *Complicating Cheerleading* by Natalie Guice Adams and Pamela J. Bettis, with Lu Bailey
- N Uncertain Objects and Non-traditional Texts: Ethnography of Things that Are Not Present
- O Academics + Athletics: student performance and sports participation: in search of a fugitive research base
- P sports as redemption/salvation narrative
- Q Deconstruction of Empirical Spaces: A Research Design
- R An Ethos of Self Erasure: An Autoethnography of a Methodology
- S LeBron James book & movie; Hoop Dreams movie
- T Measures of Success: A Validity of Layerings and Foucauldian Rigor
- U Friday Night Lights
- V Coaching and the Attraction of Men to Teaching: My Father's Story
- W Necessary Fictions
- X Teachers as Intellectuals
- Y The Afterlife of Works: To Be Freer Than We Think/To Think Freer Than We Be
- Z Bill Gates and the reform of U.S. Secondary Schooling
- a Smart mixed methods?
- b CloudGate: Toward the (Post)Qualitative
- c
- d Working Against Ourselves: Feminist Methodology as the Obligation to Hear
Dissensus: Brothers 1-3, Nephew 1

the "Equity and Excellence Commission" makes me nervous as does sponsorship by the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability. See Sahlberg, 2011, for Finnish education reforms.

e
f
g	Ranciere: Modifying the Regime of the Visible by Enacting Democratic Equality
h
I	Philosophical Ethnography: The Object as a Philosophical Entity
k	Undoing Victory Narratives: A Feminist (Post)Critical Research Imaginary
l	
m	“To Be in Trouble and Of Use”: The Messy Work of Coming to Policy
n
o
p	A Scientificity of Imperfect Information: QUAL 1.0, 2.0, 3.0
q
r	Imagining Forward: Toward a Theory of Democratic Agency and the Political Subject/The Subject of Politics
s
t

We’ll see how I do in getting this done and if I can find a “new way of writing” post-aneurism. I have tried NOT to be consumed with reading (and writing) about this “incident,” but I have taken comfort in and inspiration from *Under Blue Cup* by the feminist art theorist, Rosalind Krauss, a performance of her recovery where she intends “to disappear into this narrative’s commitments to the art of the present” (2011, p. 129). What I particularly value about this book is that she focuses on getting on with her academic theorizing, with enough threads of her recovery work that the reader never forgets the conditions of production entailed in a book that has found a “form” that fits the circumstances of memory loss, problems with cognitive endurance and what Krauss refers to as “the puddles in my brain” (p. 51). In a format that includes alphabetized aphorisms in a “fugal” organization to represent “the master narrative of the brain’s remembering and forgetting” (p. 48), Krauss displaces the “wooden and unbearable” writing that she first could manage “after the flood” of the aneurism (p. 64). She wanted “an automatism” that could be “a pattern generated from the rule of remembering” (p. 75) that would, like the work of artist Ed Ruscha, produce out of “a fantasy rule in my mind that I knew I had to follow” (p. 78). This is what she can “summon,” this network of twenty-six aphorisms that bring her back to writing after the attack on her powers of scholarly presence.

Conclusion

New work always involves objections to the old, but these objections are really relevant only to the new. (Donald Judd, 1965)

So what might post-qualitative mean in the context of my re-engagement with Walter Benjamin? Drawing on the Deleuzian language of Brian Massumi, perhaps it is a “pure virtuality, barely thinkable” where the present practice of qualitative research carries the seeds of its own collapse and where a virtual metalogic is called for in thinking within and

beyond it.⁶ Whatever the post-qualitative might mean, the artist Donald Judd's thoughts on sculpture gesture toward a thinking of the new where "there hasn't been enough time and work to see limits" but it is "a space to move into" where its "characteristics are bound to develop" and where it can "be only what it is now which means that if it changes a great deal, it will be something else; so it is finished." Like Judd's new forms of art, it will have preliminaries and beginnings and "as if" moments of coming into being rather than the "set forms" of conventional qualitative research. It will be "as powerful as it can be thought to be," hopefully interesting, "intense, clear and powerful," producing "strange objects," perhaps, in being "not diluted by an inherited format."⁷

Dominant ideas of qualitative research assume a modernist self, transparent methods, and reflexivity as a "too easy" solution to whatever problems might arise. While the illusion of neat and tidy research has long been troubled, methodological examination tends to set up either-or dynamics in terms of "old school" and "what-comes-next" sorts of practices. Yet in the complex ecology of qualitative research in the present moment, the task is to move beyond the capture of a narrow scientism where qualitative research is reduced to an instrumentalism that meets the demands of audit culture, to move, rather, toward inventing practices that do not yet exist.

Every field is heavily fractured and contested around such issues these days. "Deep critical rumblings" abound, with political science perhaps, the hottest at present.⁸ Shared standards and other such "assimilating moves" (Mihic, Engelmann and Wingrove, 2005, p. 484) appear to have peaked and maybe even blinked in the face of resistance from post-foundational advocates. Talk of post-neoliberalism is beginning to be heard in some corners of South America (Macdonald and Ruckert, 2009) and US art speak (MacLellan and Talpalaru, 2012).⁹ Evidence based practice seems to be sputtering on its own failure to produce. Even Bill Gates is newly enamored of stories (*Newsweek*, Feb 13, 2012, p. 5).

On the other hand, while counter movements abound, the National Science Foundation continues to spend millions a year on the importance of hypothetic deductive research (Clark and Primo, 2012). The "age of big data" and the "march of quantification" are not going away (Lohr, 2012). But the ascendance of reflexive knowledge is a more general pattern (Mihic, Engelmann and Wingrove, 2005, p. 524) and even "metric mania" is up against its limits, leaving space for hope that our love affair with numbers is beginning to run its course in the public imaginary (Kohn, 2012).

Structured by relations of difference and ontological troubles, across a variety of angles and different registers, we "imagine forward" out of troubling a scientificity that claims that objectivity is not political, empiricism is not interpretive, chance can be tamed via mathematization, and progress equals greater governmentality. In my reading of the tea leaves, what appears to be amassing is a wide-spread recognition that to do less than a kind

⁶ This is a gloss on Kaufman (1998) who draws on Brian Massumi who draws on Gilles Deleuze regarding the collapse of capitalism in the face of the blurring between peace and war in current interventional efforts around the globe (p. 9).

⁷ This phrasing has been adapted from Donald Judd's 1965 essay, "Specific Objects," on how to get clear of old forms in new work in painting and sculpture.

⁸ The NSF cancelled the August 2013 political-science grant cycle due to Congressional targeting of the field unless its research benefits either national security or economic interests (Mole, 2013).

⁹ See www.banffcentre.ca/programs/program.aspx?id=1068.

of performing forward, an enactment of the “after” of neoliberalism, is to court not just a narrowed science but a narrowed future.

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