

## Chapter 8

# Thinking Critically About “Social Justice Methods”: Methods as “Contingent Foundations”



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**Abstract** This chapter offers reflections on emancipatory research methods and examples of maneuvers in feminist qualitative methodology that are oriented toward social justice, crystallizing in the specific space, time, and moment of inquiry. In the spirit of Lather’s (*Getting lost: Feminist efforts toward a double(d) science*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2007) advocacy to keep methodology “alive” and “loose” (p. 27), I argue that inquiries with emancipatory aims, and that conceptualize, conduct, and represent research aligned with those aims, must work against defining and freezing any method, tool, approach, theory, or representation at the outset of a study as inherently just. Casting a critical eye on “social justice methods,” I argue that all researchers are subject to shifting forms of normalization and that we should work toward keeping methods as contingent and dynamic, to serve educational projects with varied allegiances and aims.

This chapter offers some reflections on socially just research methods as well as examples of maneuvers in qualitative methodology that are oriented toward social justice but are project specific, crystallizing in the space, time, moment, and trajectory of inquiry. As part of this larger collection of papers that recount journeys of *becoming* justice-oriented researchers—a project that to me always seems in process, never complete—and exploring what socially just methods might look like, I describe elements of my thinking over the years grounded in my feminist commitments to poststructuralist approaches in educational research (e.g., Lather, 1993; Richardson, 1997; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000) and over a decade of teaching diverse qualitative methodology courses to graduate students. My purpose is to draw from feminist theorizing to emphasize the importance of keeping methodologies “open, alive [and] loose” (Lather, 2007, p. x; see Bailey & Fonow, 2015).

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I begin by discussing the shifting norms shaping the horizons of research, thought, and practice in our post-truth era, including those shaping the practices that might constitute socially just inquiries. As many have argued (see *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2004, Vol. 10, Nos. 1–2), the broader context of politics and power influences research terrain, methodological possibilities, and researcher choices. Being aware of the norms and debates governing research practices and methods courses are important aspects of inquiry. I then turn to a foundational premise in my thinking about research endeavors that has crystallized over the years: that inquiries with justice-oriented aims and that conceptualize, conduct, and represent research aligned with such aims must work against what I call the “methodological taxidermy” (Bailey, 2016, 2017) of conceptualizing and freezing any given method, approach, or representation at the outset of a study as inherently just. In other words, a certain interviewing practice, the use of one theory or another, or enacting a method such as auto/ethnography or photovoice often associated with emancipatory inquiries, does not ensure emancipatory aims, processes, or outcomes. A variety of forces shape what “justice” or “equity” might look like in a given context. As forms of power constantly shift, emancipatory practices must remain dynamic and supple. This stance includes keeping open the vision of practices aligned with such inquiries, from considering the context of production, the research imaginary, the micro-practices and decisions researchers make during the inquiry, to the analytic processes and final re-presentation. In fact, as I’ve noted elsewhere (e.g., Bailey & Fonow, 2015), choosing not to proceed with an inquiry may be the most fitting ethical choice. Third, I fold into this discussion a variety of inquiry examples, writing primarily from a feminist and qualitative perspective. In the spirit of Lather (1986a, 1986b, 2007), researchers seeking more humanizing and emancipatory approaches—those that work *with* rather than *on* people—are always working within/against contemporary discourses and practices toward the horizons of the not-yet.

## Horizons of Research Thought

Decades of development in methodology have expanded the horizons of researchers’ imaginaries for “producing different knowledge and producing knowledge differently” (St. Pierre, 1997, p. 175). This productive proliferation has emerged in the wake of critiques of, and resistance to, positivism and other theoretical perspectives as onto-epistemologies have expanded and flourished. Those who consider positivist framings limiting, even authoritarian and hegemonic, have developed a range of feminist, critical, and decolonizing participatory, arts-based, visual, and auto/ethnographic approaches for exploring social and material phenomenon, that significantly are intended to create more “liveable” (Lather, 1993) and “bearable worlds” (Ahmed, 2017). In its diversity, this body of work shifts away from seeking “knowledge for knowledge’s sake” toward embracing inquiry as a vehicle for connection, disruption, change, and resistance. In this vision, inquiry practices should reflect and further those justice aims.

These shifts reflect some common characteristics associated with this “eighth moment” of qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2015) that are well known among qualitative researchers oriented to inquiries that have emerged within contemporary “paradigm proliferation” (Lather, 2006). For the purposes of this essay, I mention several here. First, contemporary methodology is a dynamic, rich field of thought and practice constituted by diverse and contested allegiances and expressions; second, researchers have many options for undertaking their inquiries emerging from their diverse ontological, epistemological, and axiological grounding and aims; third, power relations shape the orchestrations of inquiries on any topic, with any approach, which makes the researcher’s work in contemplating and interrogating the methods they choose constitutive of the knowledge they produce; and fourth, researchers’ historical, contextual, and personal positionings are always implicated in inquiry. Feminist emancipatory research aiming to disrupt gendered = racialized = classed (and other) norms and relations of power thus takes many forms depending on the researcher’s epistemological, ontological grounding and focus of inquiry. For decades, scholars have worked to unsettle entrenched norms and assumptions, to reflect and critique, to build community, to resist injustice, and to enact change (Denzin, 2010; Denzin & Giardina, 2018; Lather, 1986a, b).

Central to the art and science of emancipatory research projects is the context in which issues and methods arise and the awareness that, like the justice issues they take on, research methods, paradigms, and choices are situated in power relations. No inquiry space or tool transcends its context and time. Lincoln and Cannella (2004) detailed the “dangerous” discourses that have recurred to champion a limited set of evidence-based practices for conducting inquiry. As part of a broader collection of essays interrogating the power dynamics that legitimize some research approaches over others (grounded at the time in the National Research Council report issued in 2002, see *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2004, Vol. 10 (1–2)), Lincoln and Cannella argued that championing a rigid set of “gold standard” methods reflects dangerous epistemologies shaping academic discourse. These rigid norms—what they called “methodological conservatism” at the time—have profound implications for research, including which methods are taught and supported, which research imaginaries are cultivated, which projects are valued, which are funded, and which understandings of the world are nourished. They note a key danger that is worthwhile to consider in a methods collection because of its salience to researchers’ very identities. Lincoln and Cannella (2004) argue that researchers immersed in such discourses of “good research” can become disciplined as good subjects in ways that shape their/our embodied sense of researcher competence. We absorb messages about the standards of “good research” and the behavior of “good researchers,” and then discipline ourselves to those practices that can direct and constrain the trajectories of our knowing and doing. In this sense, learning methods is tied to cultivating a vision of a “possible self” (Marcus & Nurius, 1986) a future version of ourselves we might imagine becoming, a good researcher in formation.

I regularly observe the power of such discourses in my work with graduate students as they learn the terms, tools, concepts, and skills necessary to conduct research “well,” to do it “right.” Developing a sense of competence as “good researchers” can

manifest in compliance to dominant approaches that saturate almost all fields in research, including education, rather than exploring context-based questions and experimenting with diverse approaches to keep possibilities open. Methodology courses, in general, are designed for this very purpose. All researchers are vulnerable to shifting forms of normalization and prescription, to discourses that champion hegemonic standards, or even “new” and “better” methods, including those oriented toward social justice. Claims about any methods can become prescriptive, associated with a “right” and “good” identity to embrace as a researcher, whether through dominant or feminist and critical approaches. These forces necessitate that researchers continually analyze research norms as part of their methodological practice.

Yet, recently, Cannella (2014) and many others (e.g., Davies, 2005; Denzin & Giardina, 2018) have written with a degree of urgency to highlight how renewed neoliberal dangers are shaping every fiber of the contemporary academy and threatening the successes of emancipatory research developments over the last three decades. As one field opens, another can become threatened. These shifts are accompanied by sustained attacks on science and higher education. Cannella writes:

[F]orms of backlash ...are ...impacting life in academia, from patriarchal challenges to diverse perspectives such as feminism, to the construction of hegemonic discourses that co-opt and reinscribe such as mixed methods and evidence-based practices. Underlying all of this are both local and global neoliberalism that locks one into forms of governmentality through which all aspects of human functioning are interpreted as related to capital. (Cannella, 2014, p. xvi)

Institutional pressures toward accountability and privatization shape the way academics can use our time and, accordingly, engage in research. To paraphrase Rhoades (1998), academics in some ways have “become managed professionals under the control of professional managers” (quoted in Denzin & Giardina, 2018, p. 3). Codifying “gold standards” of research risks directing scholars away from a broad, flexible base of theoretical and methodological approaches that serve emancipatory ends in compliance to dominant forces. Others suggest working within the contemporary academy itself reproduces hegemonic power relations antithetical to justice projects because even the act of producing scholarship in the amounts, genres, and forms demanded to sustain our institutional roles in present circumstances often have little purchase outside the academy, which few—including academics—have time to read or access.<sup>1</sup> Denzin and Giardina (2018) detail the creeping presence of the “research marketplace” in which all scholarship can become products in a colonizing, competitive, corporatized, and privatized system. In a post-truth, violent, politically troubled time, they recommend that researchers take seriously how to serve the public sphere, “beyond the boundaries of the research marketplace” (Denzin & Giardina, 2018, p. 7). Brown’s (2014) “disruptive” theatrical work with black girls celebrates that very goal. She writes, “wreckless theatrics means the new ideas and meanings we perform about black girlhood circulate beyond traditional academic sites of the classroom, beyond the printed word and go much further than a small group of elites” (p. 48). Turning a critical eye to the paradigms governing academic practices (as Dillard’s, 2006, 2012 demonstrates) to nourish black feminist spiritual epistemologies aligns with that call.

Cumulatively, that these external forces shape the horizons of inquiry serves as a reminder for researchers engaged in emancipatory projects to consider power and politics in the orchestrations and transformations of research terrain as *central* to the practice of methods. This is a broader sense of methods than choosing a theory, who and how to interview, and whether and how to conduct member checks. This sense of methods includes cultivating the spaces and conditions in which emancipatory projects might flourish and fostering dialogue about the broad shifts and ideals that shape research thought and practice. It necessitates resisting instrumentalist discourse and efficiency mandates to support diverse questions, onto-epistemologies, and methodologies. It involves nourishing an open stance to what emancipatory inquiries might look like as forms of power shift and morph, including the entrenchment of new discourses in education that curtail research imaginaries and support conventions that police the boundaries of what is possible. It also means cultivating collective support for embodied researchers who take up this work. Researchers are of course not simply efficient instruments of methodology but embodied actors in a network of intra-acting relations, materialities, contexts, and responsibilities that constitute methodological practice. For example, Dillard’s (2006, 2012) work interrogates the politics of inclusion and exclusion of scholars of color in discussions of research paradigms and methodologies. She offers a rich framing borne of her lived experience and reflections that she terms “endarkened transnational feminist epistemologies,” emphasizing spirituality of global black feminist inquiries as acts of “responsibility and reciprocity” rather than quests to fix research “problems” (2012, p. 59).

Cannella (2014) reminds readers that emancipatory practices can have embodied costs. In her foreword to the edited collection, *Disrupting Qualitative Inquiry*, Cannella (2014) expresses that there are “intellectual, emotional, and bodily struggles and pressures of being a critical researcher who wants to survive in, while transforming, a society (and institution) that has, despite the work of the previous generation of scholars remained patriarchal, oppressive, capitalist, and competitive” (p. xvi). Considering the researcher’s embodied, emotional labor and their logistical struggles are personal and methodological necessities for justice work (see Blee, 2018; Brown, 2014, p. 48). That means that emancipatory research is much more than using the right methods, terms, or theoretical frameworks; from a feminist perspective, the embodied labor of the researcher is always part of the “body” of approaches for social justice and equity in education. Self-care and care with our research communities are justice-oriented acts that resist patriarchal corporate academic cultures that demand more and more from embodied scholars. Feminist scholars of color have long framed self-care as a necessary, radical act in their political work. As African American feminist poet Audre Lorde wrote decades ago in *Burst of Light* (1988), “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (p. 131). She wrote these words in the context of caring for herself while living with cancer and continuing her activist writing work in hostile conditions for women of color. Her powerful words have broad resonance in post-truth times, suggestive for considering radical self-care and reflection as fundamental—and just—aspects of the work of inquiry.

## Resisting “Methodological Taxidermy” (Bailey, 2016, 2017)

All norms have power to fix thinking, to occlude and foreclose conceptual possibilities, and to reproduce hegemonic power relations. In that spirit, what constitutes a justice-oriented approach cannot be decontextualized, fixed, or prescribed, but it must remain dynamic, supple, and project specific. No tools or methodologies can bear stable meanings or inherently emancipatory uses. To mobilize any such tool or concept as fixed in meaning or potential enacts a form of what I call “methodological taxidermy,” stuffing once dynamic entities into fixed forms that hang glassy-eyed on a researcher’s wall; frozen in meaning; decontextualized from their animated, embodied, pulsing context of production; or potential creative use (Bailey, 2016, 2017). Instead, questions, tools, approaches pulse with potential in relation and context. The forms and systems of class, gender, and racial power, among others, that justice-oriented scholarship addresses are supple, dynamic, and diffuse. For example, in Alexander’s (2012) incisive text, *The New Jim Crow*, she underscores that racism is a “highly adaptable” force (p. 21), taking different forms at different historical moments. In contemporary feminist work, it is thus vital to keep questions and approaches productive, “promiscuous” (Childers, Rhee, & Daza, 2013), “alive,” and “loose” (Lather, 2007, p. X) for responding to supple and shifting forms of power.

As many have noted, “social justice,” “emancipatory,” and “decolonizing” concepts appearing in literature for decades are at times so common and ambiguous that their meaning and power is lost. What does one mean by social justice? For whom and for what purpose? How does intent, design, twists and turns in the field, or representation matter in enacting justice-oriented projects? Must a researcher identify his/her project as a social justice inquiry to be so? How does one “measure” or assess the effects of one’s research in terms of accomplishing justice aims? Does a project need to effect critical consciousness with participants or produce change in a targeted group or an audience? Must it thus enact “catalytic validity” (Lather, 1993) moving beyond traditional correspondence theories of truth in validity claims to assess a project based on whether it enacts the change or affects the participants in the ways the research intended? Must a project produce a product at all (see MacLure, 2013)? Or is the dynamic created through the human, animal, material research entanglements—even shifts in the researcher’s awareness, connections with others, and belief systems—enough? Responses to these questions are ever-shifting and project specific.

A set of processes have become common for researchers to use in emancipatory projects. Such tools and stances include careful attention to power dynamics in conducting, analyzing, and representing research, including researcher reflexivity, peer dialogue, peer analysis, and member checks among many others. Yet, in the case of member checks and collaborative analysis, for example, the very tools scholars have posed to disrupt researcher authority and increase equity in the research process can also burden participants with more tasks than they care to have. Numerous students have shared over the years that their quests for member checks from busy people—all undertaken for the laudable and ethical reason to ensure

participants have a “voice” in checking and expanding the data they shared—have met with little interest, even dismissal, as a way they want to spend their time. Scholars have noted how validity processes such as inter-rater reliability and peer analysis reflect reductive and homogenizing impulses (Kvale, 1996): the analytic hunt for common themes and researcher consensus of any kind can tyrannically impose a kind of interpretive violence as it directs researchers’ attention to common denominators and homogeneity rather than difference as signifiers of valid findings and sound analysis. The point here is not that researchers should discard member checks or peer analysis, or that transparency and participant choice are not ethical orientations; rather, homogenized prescriptions associated with any method and under-theorized extractions of techniques from one ontological or epistemological field to another are not inherently “emancipatory.” Such approaches can fix and reproduce rather than unsettle power relations in research.

Recent turns to arts-based approaches, auto/ethnography, and photovoice, among others, reflect researchers’ excitement about the “new” as more promising approaches to undertaking their work. Yet, neither dominant experimental design reflecting one side of the epistemological continuum nor photovoice and auto/ethnography, on the other, can be frozen as either inherently problematic or adequate emancipatory approaches. Methodological potential is context specific. For instance, in an educational initiative undertaken in Afghanistan to expand women’s visibility in an agricultural high school curriculum, a focus group with stakeholders involved in the project, women and men alike, objected to even the most modest changes to make curriculum more inclusive and representative of family labor. They objected to including photographs of any women of child-bearing age in the textbook pages and felt uncomfortable with the term “gender” because of its Western connotations. Using photographs of working women for the laudable purpose of representing women as agricultural workers and agents in the curriculum was not possible because they rendered women too visible and subject to the scrutiny of unknown others (Salm, Mukhlid, & Tokhi, 2018). However emancipatory visual data and photography might become as a curricular choice, as a site of analysis (see Tavares, 2016), as a critical, decolonizing method, or as a research outcome in a range of contexts, a project that includes women’s visual representation as a vehicle for equity could actually be antithetical to emancipatory aims, even dehumanizing, because of the cultural and gendered meaning photographs can accrue in a given space and time.

Pillow’s (2003, 2015) ongoing critique of the use of “reflexivity” in research provides another example of resisting methodological taxidermy (Bailey, 2016, 2017) in research practice and keeping approaches open and dynamic. The concept of “reflexivity” has varied expressions (e.g., reflexivity on audience, data, researcher positionality, see Fonow & Cook, 1991; as discomfort, interpretation, and genealogy, see Pillow, 2003, 2015), but for decades has been recognized as one necessary analytic practice to signal “good” (generally non-positivist) qualitative work. When I teach any form of qualitative methodology, I provide varied examples of the productivity of reflexivity as a stance in research. Indeed, in their early work, Fonow and Cook (1991) described the practice of reflexivity as a key tenet of feminist

inquiry. In the wake of this important feminist move and the diverse analytic layers and trajectories it has inspired (Bailey & Fonow, 2015), researchers have fueled an incitement to “reflexivity” that suggests the importance, even urgency, for researchers to work the research hyphen (Fine, 1994), to reflect on their subject position in relation to the people, topic, and/or circumstances of inquiry, and to acknowledge and explore researcher investments. Such reflexivity is oriented to rendering researchers’ subject positions visible and transparent as gendered, racialized, and otherwise historically situated producers of knowledge in contrast to the “omniscient” researcher position expected and championed with positivist epistemologies of detachment and objectivity. The approach embraces a researcher’s responsibility to critically reflect on all aspects of the inquiry (Bailey & Fonow, 2015; Fonow & Cook, 1991).

Yet, despite the productivity of reflexivity as a stance, there is nothing inherently justice-oriented about reflecting on one’s subject position in relation to a given project. It depends on a variety of issues, including one’s view of oneself, one’s view of the subject, one’s focus in research, one’s political allegiances, and the work such reflexivity enables. Pillow (2003) details the sense of “catharsis” and “cure” that “confessional” reflexivity practices can produce—the sense for the researcher that she or he has accomplished or resolved something tangible through reflecting on and “confessing” one’s investments. We are always positioned in networks of power in which our reflexive labor may be limited, perfunctory, or personally cathartic rather than transformative for the project. Considered in relation to Lincoln and Cannella’s discussion of “dangerous discourses,” of the subtle ways in which research norms become inscribed, engaging in reflexivity can similarly fuel the researcher’s sense that she/he is doing “good” justice work. Pillow (2015) theorizes additional ways of putting reflexivity to work, working against its conceptual stasis and taken-for-granted understandings.

All concepts and approaches such as reflexivity, voice (Jackson & Mazzei, 2008), empowerment, or others widely accepted and even cherished in the practice of emancipatory research are produced at a given historical moment in conversation with other concepts and forces (Bailey & Fonow, 2015). Such practices can become static and coopted, part of a perfunctory validity checklist, rather than transformative and nourishing analytically. Many of these techniques have invited productive critique, underscoring the importance of continual revisiting and unsettling taken-for-granted practices in methodology rather than codifying them as inherently emancipatory. Concepts and approaches in any research endeavor, including those commonly oriented toward social justice, might best be thought of as “contingent foundations”; always temporary, shifting, and contestable “authorizing grounds”; and conceptual springboards (Butler, 1992, p. 7). Butler used the phrase “contingent foundations” in considering how to imagine a feminist politics in the wake of post-modernism that doesn’t rely on the concept of “woman,” or other stable conceptual platforms for action. Similarly, researchers can consider engaging in diverse projects for their justice potential, however defined, and consider methods as unstable “authorizing grounds,” that are always subject to dismissal, dismantling, revision, and new understandings in new contexts.

Embracing a justice-oriented stance in research practice may, in fact, mean choosing not to use a set of methods typically associated with emancipatory practices. It may mean engaging with long-standing positivist-imbued quantitative approaches to accomplish research aims. Some feminist researchers, for example, freely use quantitative methods and experimental designs to explore a range of phenomena (see Reinharz, 1992). They might not articulate a “social justice” purpose or detail practices commonly associated with emancipatory approaches such as reflexivity, member checking, participant collaboration, or creative methodologies. For such studies to be intelligible to funding agencies and in policy circles, in fact, might necessitate that researchers use conventional methods and reporting styles. An auto/ethnography would not have the same purchase for readers in those contexts.

A researcher might decide the most socially just path would be to discontinue a given research project, limit the material shared, or experiment with various representational styles, recognizing the (im)possibilities of re-representation. Choosing what to represent in research is fraught with political implications. For instance, in Blee’s (2002, 2018) important anti-racist work on white supremacist groups, she recognized the women she interviewed often wanted to use her research to promote the mission of their groups. They believed her publications would provide them greater visibility. As a result, Blee chose to use pseudonyms for the groups in her research reports so as not to fuel their racist missions. Similarly, Richardson’s (1997) impetus to shift from traditional sociological methods in the 1990s to embrace poetry and narrative emerged from her perception that traditional research representation might enact a form of violence on her participants. She describes abandoning conventional sociological methods to use poetic analysis and representation as a feminist style most aligned with her data and her work. Dillard’s ongoing work theorizing endarkened feminist epistemologies relies on ineffable concepts of the sacred and spiritual and the practice of (re)remembering to “create a world that does not yet exist for African ascendant people” (2012, p. 115). She writes with a questioning, poetic, narrative voice that resists fixed notions of identity or methodology (p. 111).

For Lather and Smithies (1997), they hurried to publish an early version of their book on women living with HIV/AIDS to ensure its speedy availability for the participants and their families. Recognizing the complexities of the women’s embodied condition and their temporal vulnerability, the authors’ push to publish allowed the community members to see their stories in print quickly while the researchers finished the final version of the book for the academic community. For Brown (2014), some experiences she has working with girls in “wreckless theatrics” never made it to a broad audience; she noted that those details were kept only for the girls’ own pleasure. As a final example tied to images, feminist science scholar Anne Fausto-Sterling (1995) considered how best to represent her critical analysis on the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scientific practices of exploiting Saartjie Sarah Baartman’s body. Baartman was a South African woman whose body was exhibited publicly on the stage during her short life and, later after death, in museums. In Fausto-Sterling’s published analysis of the scientific racism fueling Baartman’s

treatment, she chose not to re-present any images of Baartman to resist sustaining in scholarship into the twenty-first century the racist and sexist objectification to which the medical community subjected her in the nineteenth century. Each of these feminist decisions is project specific, grounded in the unique topic, purpose, participants, and field of representation the project enters.

## Thinking Contextually About Emancipatory Practices

My comments in this essay are musings rather than manifestos, emerging from my interest in working against the freezing of research practice that codifies norms, hierarchies, and prescriptive inquiry practices. When one fixes a methodology as inherently emancipatory, a kind of “method-fetishism” results, a potentially decontextualized championing of a given method, tool, or approach. Bartolome’s (1994) use of the term “method-fetishism” in the context of teaching is productive. She critiques the broad quest in education for the “right” methods to “fix” and improve academic achievement for struggling students. She sees this fixation on the right methods as illusory and “myopic” (p. 174). Similarly, we need a range of methods that emerge through intersections among field, participants/researcher, purpose, and questions.

Here, I turn to varied examples in research practice focused on embodiment as another way to keep methods “alive and loose.” I see these practices as “contingent foundations” rather than prescriptions as I, like others, grapple with how to enact work that remains committed to unsettling norms while pursuing questions arising from my specific context and endeavors. Varied practices have emerged in contemporary methodology from the growing calls to focus research on neoliberal threats to the academy and the “dangers” and struggles for critical researchers detailed earlier (e.g., Cannella, 2014). As one example, I’ve been concerned about the erasure of the embodied aspects of faculty labor from contemporary discussions: that thinking and writing and teaching and research are not simply intellectual acts but always of and through the body. These concerns led me to consider how to better foreground embodiment in research practice focused on higher education.

### *Collaborative Auto/Ethnography*

One important expression of this feminist commitment to embodied inquiry emerged through working with a friend and colleague on a collaborative auto/ethnography (considering self-in-culture through writing) that explored her experiences with postpartum depression. This narrative gradually unfolded to focus on the production of academic-vulnerable-gendered-selves-in culture. The methods unfolded utterly in context and collaboration. We used data from our emails, journal reflections, and unsettling memories to detail the emotional aspects of negotiating the pressure and culture of higher education with a gendered, misunderstood, and vulnerable

condition (Kearney & Bailey, 2012). We worked in partnership to make visible the felt effects of an intense, neoliberal, masculinist culture for her body and life, and we did not label the work methodologically until close to its completion. Looking back, I’m still not sure the category of “collaborative auto/ethnography” fully fits the work, and I’m not sure it matters. The piece had several transformative effects, all of which were modest and contextual: first, the process was emotionally cathartic for her and for us, deepening our understanding of the events; second, the process of thinking, writing, and revising together deepened our relationship as critical colleagues and friends; third, even though the essay focused on “her” experience, the piece relied on creatively narrating a collaborative “I” voice to blur boundaries and to render visible shared gendered politics affecting women in our context more broadly; and, finally, the essay became part of a body of work on academic mothering salient for other women negotiating gendered vulnerabilities in higher education.

### *Embodied Data Analysis*

In another project, I began envisioning interview data as embodied to disrupt my normative engagements with “data” and heighten sensitivity in analysis. This project emerged organically. How researchers imagine their interview data matters fundamentally in how they approach analysis and what they believe it can tell them about the phenomenon of interest (if it can tell them anything at all, see Lather & St. Pierre, 2013). Researchers may see transcripts as vehicles for capturing individual voice, as co-constructed narrations, as identity performances, as signals of broader discourses, or as material that intra-acts with the researcher, place, time, and other aspects of the inquiry, among other possibilities. For one project focused on embodiment, I adopted Kvale’s (1996) warning to “beware” of transcripts. While his caution was not rooted in an emancipatory orientation, I put the warning to work with that spirit. Kvale argues that transcription is a form of re-presentation, an act of transferring a person’s spoken words through a recording, then a taped/digital representation, and then to a textual page for extraction and use. Rather than simply a mechanical process, the work of transcription transforms, decontextualizes, and flattens the original utterances. It does not represent the real; to Kvale, it is a translation and “co-authored” construction (p. 281). Other scholars theorize transcription in complex ways as well; for example, see Poindexter (2002).

With this caution in mind, rather than typing transcripts of some “data” I had gathered, which is a standard validity practice in qualitative inquiry, I tuned in to the breath, pauses, and subtleties of movement I could hear as I listened to audio tapes of interviews. I imagined the data as embodied, pulsing, alive, as extensions of the participants’ physical being when we had talked in place. My interest in enacting this stance was less to divest myself of the responsibility to represent or to convey that such a stance would provide a better, more authentic representation. Rather, the process helped me engage with the data differently, considering the location of

its heart or soul and breath, and which parts of the data I should slough off lightly, like skin, or sever entirely, for the health of the body as a whole. Listening *with* participants to the co-authored (Kvale, 1996) “data” as a form of member checking and collaborative meaning-making opens additional possibilities as well (Bailey, 2012).

This engagement expanded as I added context and movement to the analysis process. As Ellingson (2017) has explored recently, researchers’ embodied experiences and context can enrich meaning-making in data analysis. In my work, I organically moved in different places to listen to and read the data—playing tapes in my car as I commuted between campuses, slumping over transcripts on bus rides home, underlining, listening, reading and rereading—this approach entangles my embodied labor and subjectivities in the encounters with the text or the sound, foregrounding place and space, where I sit, how I experience the “data.” I have listened to the data as I have traveled through space; its contours different in a classroom than riding on a bus in the dark late at night after teaching. In a study situated in Oklahoma, I listened to participants’ voices as I drove on Oklahoma highways, long stretches of pitted pavement between cattle ranches, amber plains, and skies dotted with glistening white windmills. The process heightened my awareness of how place shaped the original material I called “data,” expanding to include the place/space where it was produced, experienced, and processed, helping me think differently about what mattered to me and to participants.

### *Negotiating Representation*

Exploring the experiences of underrepresented groups in Oklahoma required other methods (Bailey, 2012), including long-term incubation and immersion with the data as I grappled with the politics of representation. A diverse and complex state (Joyce, 1998; Joyce & Harris, 2007), the indigenous territory now referred to as Oklahoma is suffused with a history of colonialism and resistance and an economic base of oil, natural gas, aviation, and agriculture. While the state’s dominant racial/ethnic group is non-Hispanic whites, the land is home to over 60 Native American tribes, who constitute about 10% of the demographics of the state, in addition to African Americans (8%), people of Latino, Hispanic and/or Spanish descent (8%), and a small percentage (around 1%) of people who identify as Asian in census categories. The area is known for its socially and politically conservative views and voting patterns. It is also a state with representatives who have garnered national attention in recent years for, among other issues, their reductive confluences of Muslims and gays with terrorism (see Mason, 2015). The politics in this state have in fact, as Mason (2015) explores, energized the LGBTQ movement at the national level. In one project, I intended to contribute a small offering to more geographically-grounded analyses and more complex representations of the experiences of minoritized groups in education. Geographically grounded and diverse

representations, I hoped, would contribute to unsettling further the “controlling images” (Collins, 2000) in which many groups are constituted.

Yet, the project has periodically stalled in its complexity for me as a researcher. It has crawled along, transforming only my own thinking at this stage, the hope of meeting “catalytic validity” criteria merely a faint goal in the distance as I figure out how to analyze and frame data so saturated with constructions of, for example, people of color as “outsiders” in science, technology, education and mathematics (STEM) fields and sexual minorities as sinners, terrorists, diagnosable, or simply, victims, that my own representations will likely do little to unsettle them, or worse, because of the slippages of language and the data participants have shared, might only solidify and thicken existing problematic constructions. Pausing to ponder and reflect has been imperative.

I blur over details of the data here to emphasize the central message: the traumatic or complex events of people’s lives can easily map on to constructions of vulnerable subjects as damaged, and their life experiences reduced to narratives of victimization rather than layers in a structurally shaped multidimensional life. Researchers in relation and in context must take time to consider how to represent their work and its implications. I’ve also been aware that peeling these layers away from the body of data I am responsible for “transforming into findings” (Patton, 2002) and shedding it in a discarded data pile may silence experiences that, for some participants, were transformative in the telling and inextricably woven with other aspects of identity. Accordingly, like Richardson’s (1997) turn to poetic representation, Fausto-Sterling’s (1995) careful parsing of her representations, and Wilson’s (2004) decision on how to represent sex tourism in Thailand in a voyeuristic and overdeveloped field of representation, I believe that a just choice regarding some data I have collected might be not to represent those experiences at all. The telling may be enough. In such a case, bearing witness (Lather & Smithies, 1997) in the research *process* and the relationships we formed *through inquiry*, rather than representation in a broader field might be the just choice. Narrating one’s experiences, as Lewis (2018) underscores, can be thought of as far more than static data to extract from context. In Indigenous inquiries, stories are utterly ontological—they are sites and methods of being, existence, critique, and resistance.

## ***Historical Research***

Historical research provides other contexts for keeping embodied methodological questions and practices in motion in feminist research. A long-held feminist argument has been that “history is written by the victors,” which has often oriented feminist historical research to recovering the stories of people less visible in dominant accounts. Those sites and voices, in turn, function to nourish and reshape the historical record. The very existence of material artifacts is tied to politics and power—who could write, who could preserve objects that mattered to them, which materials

represent legitimate sites of history—as well as the inevitable losses, erasure, and deterioration that shape which archival materials survive over time. Archival materials connote a fixity that differs from contemporary interview data and yet necessitate similar onto-epistemological and ethical questions. What do feminist inquiries look like with historical work? What is a humanizing method in a historical study? What are the conceptions of history with which we are working? What is our purpose? Conventional emancipatory tools are not a fit: no member checks are possible in historical work; there is no embodied access to historical context in which the data was produced.

Feminist scholars have used a variety of methods to engage in histories that stretch or disrupt those written by victors. Jennifer Terry's work on "deviant" historiography has provided a crucial method for engaging in feminist archival research. Because Terry's subjects had left no known archival materials to make sense of their lives, Terry turned her attention to dominant accounts to look for traces of marginalized subjects through those accounts. Terry (1991) sought glimmers of resistance female sexual minorities demonstrated historically through some of the only records available—dominant medical accounts that sought to photograph, measure, and scrutinize their bodies to locate the exact site of their presumed "deviance." This practice of looking to the body to find and fix the site of human character has recurred historically in varied forms (see Terry & Urla, 1995). While the scientific accounts Terry analyzed essentially objectified the embodied subjects under study, she sought through those dominant accounts to mark and interpret resistance from the women who were subjected to the scrutiny. Such work brings different theories to bear on archival materials to open interpretation in layers.

What constitutes feminist methods is produced in the dynamics, relationships, and context of a given study, all shaped by broader methodological forces and conditions. Social justice methods must remain "contingent foundations." These practices might involve an array of new questions about existing paradigms governing inquiry, new methodologies, new onto-epistemologies, new tools that open dominant practices to fluidity and creativity oriented toward change. These practices might involve conventional methods and academic products in forms that will be recognizable and intelligible in dominant practices. They might involve moving outside the academy to engage directly with local, collaborative endeavors (Denzin & Giardina, 2018) that are never published in academic journals. They might involve projects in which people engage in arts-based and visual methods focused more *on process* and relationships than *product*. They might involve displacing the human subject entirely as the central site of inquiry to consider intra-actions with non-human beings, environments, and material entities (see Lather & St. Pierre, 2013; Taylor & Hughes, 2016). As this volume of essays shows, the practices are diverse, contested, and always unfolding—and it serves feminist emancipatory ends to keep them that way.

## Suggested Readings

Dillard, C. (2012). *Learning to (re) member the things we’ve learned to forget: Endarkened feminisms, spirituality, & the sacred nature of research and teaching*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Lather, P. (1986). Research as Praxis. *Harvard Educational Review*, 56(3), 257–278.

This essay brings a critical perspective to social justice research methods by underscoring the importance of researchers’ awareness of broad political and academic discourses shaping inquiry, of keeping methods varied and flexible, and offers examples to demonstrate these points in action.

## Note

1. For example, one article noting the proliferation of journals and scholarly outlets cites 1.8 million articles produced yearly, an impossible mass to read, conceptualize or grapple with, while academic demands continue to rise. See Eveleth, R. (2014). “Academics write papers arguing over how many people read (and cite) their papers.” *Smithsonian.com*. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/half-academic-studies-are-never-read-more-three-people-180950222/>. Retrieved July 31, 2018.

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