Stumbling in a Murky Place –
An account of a "tempting" methodology

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Abstract

In this paper, I take on a "post"-concept as the point of departure to reflect on a troubled thinking and practice of research. Struggling with making methodological decisions, I put deconstructivism to work within the limits of methodology and the presentation of methodology with a particular focus on their situatedness, contingency, and necessity. I conclude that a deconstructive point of view encompasses both ontological and epistemological aspects of research methodology, hence inviting a true sense of knowing or knowings.

I took a course at The University of British Columbia. The course, titled "Practicing Transdisciplinarity: Methodology in a Post-Foundational Age," was offered by Patti Lather from Ohio State University. Lather is a well-known feminist, post-modernist. "Post-" concepts were introduced in the course, particularly, the concept of deconstruction. Among the readings on post-modernism and deconstructionism, we read two books written by Lather: *Getting Lost: Feminist Efforts Toward a Double(d) Science* (2007), a book that marks the fifteen-year trajectory of her work as a feminist methodologist, with implications of the "post" for research in the human sciences; and *Troubling the Angels: Women living with HIV/AIDS* (Lather & Smithies, 1997), a book about her learning experience of "getting lost" in life and in research on life. *Getting Lost* is not only "a book about a book" but also it presents "a methodology about a methodology." This book focuses on the methodological learnings from her quasi-ethnographic study, *Troubling the Angels,* which Lather co-authored with Chris Smithies ten years earlier. This earlier work describes how the cultural group of women diagnosed with HIV live with their HIV/AIDS situation: how the disease affects these women's lives as they fight it, accept it, and live and die with it. The 'quasiness' of this study is attributed to the timescale of their research and interviews/observations for the data collection.

In such methodological learnings, Lather adds the "post" concept(s) to articulate a methodology of practice. This putting-to-work freedom of articulation in Lather's methodological learnings manifests what Foucault refers to as "the history of present," which for Lather is not actually a history of present (or authenticity) or a "vision of truth" (Cited as in Lather, 2007, p. ix; also see Foucault, 1984, p. 54), but it is only about a practice of freedom. In the same vein, the methodology of *Getting Lost*, a book about methodology, itself is a practice to bear the history and present, in that there is no certitude, no truth underlying or securing any present, but only "post" thinking and learning, a practice of open-ended freedom (*Getting Lost*).

In Lather's assertion, *Getting Lost* "brings a Foucauldian 'history of the present' to bear on feminist methodology and what it gives us to think in terms of doing inquiry in a postfoundational time" (Lather, 2007, p. iv). Thus, Lather contends that the purpose of thinking beyond the limits, which becomes one task in *Getting Lost,* is to produce different knowledge or to produce knowledge differently. In other words, it is to work with another logic. She writes,

> Derrida (1995) argues that knowledge that interrupts or derails
> absolute knowledge is knowledge that loses itself, "gets off the
> track" in order to expose itself to chance. This is Derrida's "as if
> to the being lost" (p. 289) in order "to learn by heart," knowledge
> from and of the other, thanks to the other, "where what it promises
> always leaves something to be desired" (p. 291). (*Getting Lost*, 2007, p. 12)

In this assertion, what is "desired" or "learned by heart" is always open to change, to possibilities, to danger (as I understand in Foucault's history of present, there is no "vision of truth" available to us, but freedom to uncertainty and peril), hence, "as if to the being lost" for Derrida. With such losses, we accept the disfiguration of language that interrupts or derails the true knowledge. As a result we obtain different knowledge, to refer back to Lather's post-positions. Or else, "getting lost," thus, entails acquiring knowledge, differently and invariably in the being lost.

Beginning in Murkiness

My own "getting lost" starts with the blurring present. I often find myself stumbling with my methodological wrestling when it comes to conducting research, especially in this post-modernist, post-structural, or post-foundational world in which I may constantly alternate my situated consciousness and unconsciousness in knowing and not-knowing, in the knowable and the unknowable. This, nevertheless, is not to suggest that I cannot come up with some idea of the method I find appropriate to the particular project in which I am engaged (say, if I am doing a conceptual work, a narrative inquiry or autobiography, come to mind). Rather, engaging methodology in the research of human sciences is far more complicated than it appears to be, because methods used as research tools are to address often nuanced aspects of social life, subtle effects of ideas in daily life, and complex feelings, and so on—such are often invisible and intangible. The issue of the methodological appropriateness always, to some extent, remains murky or troubling, even though I may want to have a distinct vision.

Reading the literature of feminist theory, deconstructivism and post-structuralism (Spivak, 2008; Lather, 1997, 2007; and others) prompts me to ask myself an imperative question: What does it mean to have a methodology that is appropriate in conducting my work, a work of mixed methods (e.g., conceptualizing, philosophizing, narrative, literary criticism, and so on)? And at the same time, it troubles itself in order to be free to unwarranted uncertainties (for Foucault), to be exposed to change (for Derrida) or to be in truthful dislocation in our knowledge (for Lather)? Or in another form of questioning: How do I make fruitful the methodological wrestling between work of humanities and work of social sciences, at the intersection of which my work is interplayed? In a more practical sense, how do I write subject matter of social sciences by using the tools of humanities? This involves an effort of what Lather (2007) calls "[s]hifting the imaginaries in the Humane Sciences" (p.1). Another related and reasonable question is, what methodological issues, ethical issues, for example, will I encounter in engaging with interdisciplinary and

transdisciplinary practices? Evidently, I am, like many others, "accountable to complexity" (McCoy, cited in Lather, 2007, p. 11) in making methodological decisions.

In a Situated Place

My proposed doctoral research was in moral and spiritual education, focusing on pedagogy that simultaneously "humanizes" humanity and resists oppression and marginalization of any form. In particular, I am exploring emancipatory pedagogy, and its necessity in a public education system that neglects, even if unintentionally, to empower children of immigrants and their parents who form a growing marginalized population in Canada.

The place in which I situate my inquiry is by no means an "innocent" place; it is a situated place of the sociocultural, the political, the economical, and the humanistic. I am here reminded of the German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1976) and his leading metaphor, a "fusion of horizons," which creates the situated relationship between the author and the reader. Gadamer is well-known for his work on theory of interpretation, according to which, the meaning of a text is never a function purely of facts about the author and his/her original public; it is equally a function of the historical situation of the interpreter. This fusing place or "blurring place", in Lather's words, is the meaning created by the historically situated author and the equally historically situated reader. So there stands room, a space or, simply, "a third space" (Bhabha, 1994, 1996) for constant reinterpretation and re-evaluation, as different meanings are projected upon the work concerned. This dialogical relation between the author and the reader accords the deconstruction in that there is always a blurring place wherein constructing and deconstructing take place. The idea is one fundamental element of post-modernism.

As it will involve two generations, my research focuses first on the adult immigrants who went through the Chinese Cultural Revolution and how they now interpret their then oppressive experiences. The work will describe how they encounter the conflicts, struggles, and confusion suffered by themselves and their children in their changed lives of immigration. The second focus

of my research will be on the second generation of immigrants: their struggles against being marginalized, and their feelings of inferiority amongst others of different cultures, manifested in schools and in every aspect of their lives.

This situated place for my research appeared clear to me at the beginning of my graduate studies, germinated from my MA thesis and centred at my doctoral research project (or before my engagement with the post-modernist and deconstructivist literature) in that I am one of the people who went through the Cultural Revolution and an immigrant mother in Canada. Presumably, this is a perfect standpoint from which I conduct this kind of research (and in some ways, I feel I am in such a position). It seemed to me at the outset as if I would not have any dilemma in conceptualizing my project, writing narrative, and so on (or at least I hadn't thought that I would). Even though I would have to do some qualitative research (collecting/analyzing archival data, interviewing immigrant people), most of my project, I thought, would be philosophical, narrative, and autobiographical. But the post-theory and perspectives prompt me to ponder some issues that I never would have considered before doing this work, such as whether or not to write my own narrative or autobiographical account will be of any ethical concern to me. I found myself in this blurring place, which, however, provided a necessary condition for my deconstructive action. As Lather says in *Getting Lost* (2007), "To situate inquiry as a ruin/rune is to foreground the limits and necessary misfirings of a project, problematizing the research as 'the one who knows'"(p. 11). I thus have recognized a "situated methodology," a concept introduced in Patti Lather's course, "Practicing Transdisciplinarity: Methodology in a Post-Foundational Age."

In further understanding of this methodology, I recall how Lather stresses that everything is situated. This "being situated," I believe, coincides with what Martin Heidegger (1953/1996) calls "being-in-the-world," when he turns to a phenomenological description of Being and being. According to Heidegger, "beings" are first immersed in the world before they can be thought of as separate subjects or isolated egos. Therefore, he calls human beings in this regard, Dasein,

meaning, "being there," similarly, "being-in-the-world." Heidegger describes this phenomenology of Dasein's *being-in-the-world* in the way that passes over the traditional philosophical categories of subjects and objects, and, for the present discussion, the researcher and the researched, the writer and the written. Moving forward from the notion of relationality, I situate my inquiry in the way that bears on the uniqueness of my research work, so as to have my work conducted with the methodology appropriate in an invariably situated context.

Between Necessary and Contingent Places

In understanding what it means to have a "situated methodology" in conducting my project, I situate myself in an open place for the "necessary multiplication of perspectives" (Lather, 2007, p. 17). This openness toward more possibilities allows me to work my proposed project, as well as its limits, which may arise from the project itself and/or from the varied contingent situations of the process. My research question is how the oppressed/marginalized people can be empowered to mobilize themselves and address their own challenges. The research focus is on the agency of marginalized individuals and how they can be empowered by education so to resist and overcome their own marginalization. This focus points to us that education for empowered agency allows us to be prepared to encounter for once and ever a "varied and unknowable future" (Rogoff, 2003, p.12) or to become "more fully human" (Freire, 1970/2006, p. 66). For true education comes through the stimulation of individuals' powers by the demands of the sociocultural and political situations in which they find themselves (Dewey, 1897). Thus, it is for the nature of my inquiry that a situated methodology is appropriate and necessary.

Appropriate to my research, autobiography is part of the mixed methodology that I will employ in my work. The writing of personal accounts will provide resourceful data of recollections and representations. Thinking of what Lather (2007) describes as "methodological responsibility and double(d) practices" (p. 33), I may engage deconstructive practice in my work by putting "post" thinking and practice to my work in the way Lather did in writing her methodological work,

Getting Lost. She let the book fold back to her earlier book, *Troubling the Angels*, by employing deconstructive action, which articulates a methodology out of practice. Similarly, narrative and autobiographical writing may serve well for my work by way of folding back to my lived experiences and recollections, as practice of working the limits of narrative and autobiography, a deconstructive approach within/against the Self (Lather, 2007).

In writing about myself and others, I will have to work the tensions between an insider and an outsider. On the one hand, I am an insider, one of those who went through the Cultural Revolution and immigrated to North America, and on the other, I am an outsider, a researcher who is to question other immigrants and ask them about their lives. Moreover, I also need to make a decision about what needs to be included and excluded in terms of my narrative writing, autobiographical accounts, and data collected from interviews. As such, "post" theory and deconstructive practice impel me to heed to the tensions, the limits in both concept and practice. Awareness of these tensions and limits allows me to see the relevance of my work to be both necessarily situated and necessarily open for a more "fertile ground," according to Lather (2007), inviting the "emergence of the impossibility."

Ending in the Possible Lost

The concept of "getting lost" serves as a deconstructive practice that is a practice of both "methodology and a mode of representation." While Lather "learned about getting lost from trying to simultaneously produce and theorize a book about these women" (*Getting Lost*, 2007, p. vii), I have learned about my own 'getting lost', my methodological freedom and imagination in the way that I bring my training of humanities (literature, linguistics, literacy, etc.) to social sciences, wherein the work I am doing is from economics, politics, social studies–ethnography; interviewing immigrant people. With such losses I certainly (dis)locate myself in a true sense of incertitude troubling, disfiguration, and even certainly so of possibility in gaining a true sense of knowledge–-different knowing or knowing differently. Thus, I would have to work within and against those

limits. In doing so, I take my first deconstructive move to face the challenge of the uncertainty and unpredictability my research might bring to me about each-and-cross boundary knowledge, for which I am to hold accountable. Here I refer to McCoy's expression of "accountability to complexity" or to use Lather's phrase, "methodological responsibility" or to refer back to Derrida's idea of being responsible for jumping into uncertainty. This move in my methodological endeavours to the unknown, the uncertain, or the unpredictable is key to deconstruction–working within and against the unknown, the impossible, or the "ruins/rune," for Lather, or "under erasure" for Derrida. This, working within such alternate frameworks, also shows that such postmodern practices in knowing/knowledge activate new relations between ourselves and others, between the knower and the known.

After re-"troubling" my previous methodological wrestling, I find my wrestling even more complicated, yet, paradoxically, in a clearer way. By saying so I mean that this more complicated wrestling, in turn, provides fruitful engagement with thinking and designing and conducting my proposed research. This may well affirm that I have experienced being "accountable to complexity" and that I continue to experience my "methodological responsibility." And meanwhile, the work I am doing is to bring history to inform the present, and to bring the present to reflect on the past, between which freedom alternates with change, possibility with danger, and, in turn, risk with hope. By looking at the intersection of the subjects of social sciences and humanities, I put a "post" perspective to work within my limits to knowledge, as viewed as a paradox to what Freire asserts as limiting situations, such as oppression, contradictions, or problems that require people to work through, in order to become "more fully human" (Freire, 1970/2006, p. 66). While Lather asks how writing others will or will not colonize others, I am asking how writing the self and the other, at the same time, will lead me to limit, delimit, or even colonize the written? The post-structural perspective leads me to think in a true sense of freedom for possibility and accountability for complexity, in that I always remember that there is limit to

language or the inadequate of language. Because dealing with getting lost and challenging the uncertainties means accepting the disfiguration of language (Cohen, 1998, p. 189, as cited in Lather, 2007, p. 12). And, for Derrida, there is a necessary violation of language that we cannot escape.

This is a short account with a thinking of the methodology that is deconstructive and "tempting." It is tempting because it is inviting openness for impossibility; it is tempting because it is also courting distrust, doubt and uncertainty. It is a methodology that will not culminate in any solid solution; rather it is a process, which reflects the nature of reality and of life – a forever process that begins and ends between life and death. I conclude that deconstructive point of view encompasses both ontological aspects and epistemological aspects of research methodology, hence inviting a true sense of knowing or knowings.

Then, I ponder further in the following ending lines:

> *Getting lost is getting to know*
> *A knowing of the Self in the lost,*
> *And a knowing to the Self from the farthest.*
> *Where to get lost*
> *Is yet a way to ask.*
> *Where there is the possible,*
> *There is It and Not-It.*
> *A knowing within the impossible*
> *And a rubbing against the double:*
> *Lather's double(d) of Derrida's double*
> *A gesture, an approach,*
> *A science, or a writing.*
> *A double(d) thing in knowing*
> *A way of both-ends*
> *Upon the groundless ground.*

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