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To Be of Use: The Work of Reviewing

Patti Lather

Ohio State University

*The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.*

(Marge Piercy, 1973)

Fleshing out remarks first delivered at an invited session at the 1997 meeting of the American Educational Research Association, I speak to the work of reviewing from the perspective of poststructuralist feminist research. In a nutshell, this involves a focus on how practices often viewed as neutral in effect police, produce, and constitute a field.¹ Both within and against tradition-bound disciplinary norms and counter-disciplinary movements such as feminism, the problematic at issue is the usefulness of poststructuralism for rehearsing other practices out of our own confoundings regarding the difficulties and limitations of the categories we use to do our work. Such an effort is more about "the changing shape of the thinkable" (Gordon, 1991, p. 3) than it is about actually existing practices and thus asks how we might invent ourselves into "the surprise of what is not yet possible in the histories of the spaces in which we find ourselves" (Rajchman, 1991, p. 163).

In terms of what follows, my initial sense of task was to address the process of reviewing and being reviewed, a task I engaged at the AERA annual meeting a few years ago from a feminist perspective. After doing a mini literature review² and interviewing an editor's assistant and someone who had recently endured a sort of brutalization in the name of being reviewed, I began to realize I had the wrong task in mind. Instead, my task was to address the synthetic review, the sort of review of research that is the hallmark of *Review of Educational Research* with its 18,000 subscribers. Hence what follows intertwines my initial sense of task and the genre of published reviews of the research literature.

What is a Review?

A review is gatekeeping, policing, and productive rather than merely mirroring. In short a review constitutes the field it reviews. A stellar example is William Tate's (1997) review of critical race theory that brings that body of legal scholarship to the field of education. Via the necessary practices of including and excluding, Tate both polices and produces the transdisciplinary nature of both critical race theory and educational thought and practice. One example of this is titling his overview of the use of the courts to resolve racial injustice "one historical overview," noting that his own reading of the history "is subject to critique and debate. . . reflect[ing] my belief that it is possible to construct more than one history of this scholarly movement" (p. 237).

A review is not exhaustive; it is situated, partial, perspectival. I think of the review of research on Indian education by Donna Deyhle and Karen Swisher (1997) who write "We believe that it is not within the scope of work defined for this chapter to review each of the research citations, nor are all of the citations worthy of review" (p. 116). I think of Tate's review that announces itself as not comprehensive, but rather as outlining "elements of [Critical Race Legal Theory] especially relevant to educational researchers" (1997, p. 187).

This brings up another aspect of what a review can be: a critically useful interpretation and unpacking of a problematic that situates the work historically and methodologically. Listen for example to Deyhle and Swisher's section subtitles: "Research Guided by Assimilation Ideology," "Challenges to Assimilation and Deficit Thought," and "Research by Indians about Indians." This is not so much an exegesis of the truth of the text or a rescuing of some investment as it is a framing from an invested positionality that unpacks the problematic of power and knowledge in Indian education.

What Can We Know From a Review?

Whether implicitly or explicitly, we learn the reviewer's investments in knowledge-producing practices and get a sense of what contributes to the knowledge base of the field. One example of the practice of explicitly locating oneself is evident in a recent review of an article where I wrote, "I'm no easy customer here. I've never cottoned to psychology in any of its incarnations, good post-Marxist that I am. But I am entirely persuaded by the essay that this is an important and necessary intervention in rethinking the concept of resistance away from the philosophy of consciousness." A second example is in Tate's positing of strong distinctions between Critical Legal Theory and Critical Race Theory: "I am not attempting to represent the critical legal studies movement as a scholar in that movement might" (1997, p. 237). Whether specifying the reviewer's relation to the material is done implicitly or explicitly, the text bears marks of his/her presence. The point of both examples is to endorse the practice of *explicitly* locating oneself as an invested knower in the work of reviewing, implicating oneself in the process, and taking responsibility in the critique and its cultural reception.

A review can situate the studies under review by attending to what is involved in audience reception and how a work circulates in and shifts discursive networks. This analytically constructs an intertextual web that can help the

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reader see the field freshly, as in the case of Kathleen Casey's review of narrative research (1995), or, as in the case of Tate's aforementioned review of critical race theory, to see a fresh field.

A review can exemplify a non-mastery approach, what Deborah Britzman (1997) evokes in terms of a learning that can tolerate its own failure of knowledge and the detour of not understanding. This is about the reviewer's positioning as "the one who knows," the "expert in the field," versus the more situated, partial, and perspectival knowing that, while not knowing everything, does know something. I am particularly interested in the reviewer who uses the writing of the review as a way of knowing, the reviewer who writes himself or herself into what they both do and do not know by the end of the exercise. One example here is a review on validity discourses in qualitative research that I just completed for the *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (Lather, in press): "What I am writing about, it is clear to me now," as I proceed to summarize across the turns and returns of practices that have loosened positivism and put under theoretic pressure the claims of scientificity. Laurel Richardson (1994) terms this "writing as a method of inquiry," the process by which we come to our knowing through our writing.

Who Benefits from a Review?

One beneficiary is the editor who encourages "out of the mainstream" work, especially the break-out piece that challenges typical investments or categories. This is an editor who pays attention to the politics of what is being put forward in the journal, an editor who identifies centers and margins and asks reflexive questions about how the journal is contributing to the development of the field. Whether this risk works to benefit an editor depends on their sense of mission and, I would argue, the times. It is, I think, time for AERA journals to deal more explicitly with the proliferation of ways of doing educational research.³ The 18,000 subscribers of *The Review of Educational Research* may or may not actually read it. The benefit, then, to an editor, would be that their journal would actually be read across the many inquiry approaches that typify the field of educational research.

An author benefits from a review. Whether Hollywood is right that any publicity is better than no publicity, to be included brings one's work into visibility. If one can let go of the idea of the "correct reading" and, instead, see that every reading is a misreading, a partial, situated and perspectival reading (Lather, 1997), one can learn much about the intertextual nature of one's work, how it can be inserted into various assemblages. But I return here to my colleague recently brutalized by the review process. I would argue that the paper she has revised into being is the better for the peer review process, but that the process displayed its tears and jagged edges and the sort of brutalization that does the profession no good.

Hence, the profession benefits to the extent the review can become a site for constructing the very critical collegiality that is key to our academic lives. Here I think of something Carmen Luke wrote me in 1993: "I hate reviews, particularly of colleagues' work and especially of other women's work. There's this unspoken imperative not to take out each others work which I can fully appreciate; the flipside of this is that most feminist reviews of feminist work tends

blindly to valorize nearly everything written. I find this a problem and repeatedly find myself double bound by my own commitment to take a genuine stand on something and yet feeling that I cannot (and won't) pull the rug out from under. So, I want to be fair, not too harsh, not too mushy, and, really, I agonize over how to word some of the things that I think are a problem. I delete the critical parts repeatedly and then feel shitty that I am being untruthful and coming up with a wishy washy 'gee-whiz' review, so I put the text back in, then feel self-conscious. . . so, I tell you, I hate reviews."

The key, I think, is to see reviewing as work that can be of use in moving us away from what Deborah Britzman (1997) refers to as the wish for heroism and rescue through some "more adequate" research agenda and/or methodology. Instead, she argues, we may be in a time and place where we are better served by research if it is a means to see the need to be wounded by thought as an ethical move. Her case in point is research by a self-identified straight man on gay men (Rhoads, 1997). "Incited by the demand for voice and situatedness" (p. 31), Britzman writes about the curious history of research's mistaken identities as we "can't seem to get it right" (p. 35) in our research endeavors, in this case a sort of "heterosexual coming out origin story" (p. 36). How do we come to think of things this way, she asks, and what would be made possible if we were to think research otherwise, as not about "ontological claims of identity" (Ibid), but as a space surprised by difference into the performance of practices of not-knowing.

Actions Implied by Review

Hopefully a review can inform analyses of policy areas. This is particularly important in newer work that troubles standard understandings of science as objectivity. To paraphrase Michael Apple (1997) in his introduction to *The Review of Research in Education*, how might more engaged models of research inform policy in ways that exemplify the worth of value driven inquiry over purported "'distanced observer' model"? (p. xiii)

A review can recognize and foster quality published work. The critical review can provide a basis from which new work can spring in terms of both legitimation and the development of a social science more adequate to contemporary complexities. Tate's aforementioned review of critical race theory, for example, will, I expect, shift how we theorize race in educational research.

Finally, one might hope for reviews to help us break out of the sorts of theoretical and methodological competitiveness of "successor regimes" that has characterized social research of late. As but one example, as Britzman (1997) points out, qualitative research, positioned by some as a sort of savior, is, on the contrary, filled with sacred objects to be recovered, restored, centered. There is a tendency to avoid the difficult story, to want to restore the good name of research with these "new" and "better" methods. But research can't seem to get it right, and too often our efforts fall back into the too easy to tell story of salvation via one sort of knowledge practice or another. As Britzman goes on to note, what is at stake when research is at stake is whether research can be a mode of thought that refuses to secure itself with the consolations of foundationalism and nostalgia for presence, the lost object of the correct knowledge, the security of understanding. This is a move out of the sort of "devotional scientism" that

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underwrites the Christian-capitalist-industrialist creed and toward what Nietzsche (1968) termed a "gay science," a science based in the very splintering of the mechanisms of control and the resultant incredulity about salvation narratives of scientific progress, reason, and the over-administered world. Hence, my argument is that the reviews of most use are those that can help us address how knowledge remains possible given the end of the value free notion of science and the resultant lessening of optimism and confidence in the scientific project, a science "after truth" (Tomlinson, 1989).

Notes

¹ See Caputo, 1997, for a "nutshell" elaboration of poststructuralism. Feminist reinscriptions are many, but Gayatri Spivak continues among the best in terms of mining her early translations of Derrida to ask deconstructive questions toward the construction of complicated, disturbing answers regarding the weight of tradition in conceptual work and the ways current codes of both traditional and oppositional political problematics are insufficient. See, for example, her essay, "Responsibility" (1994) which takes on the issue of post-foundational ethics within the context of feminist and postcolonial struggles.

² My confusion was compounded by "Factors in the Peer Review of Reviews," by Frank Murray and James Rath, *Review of Educational Research*, 66(4), 1996, 417-421, which added even another layer in terms of reviewing reviews.

³ See Robert Donmoyer (March 1996) "Educational Research in an Era of Paradigm Proliferation: What's a Journal Editor to Do?" *Educational Researcher*, 19-25.

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Author

PATTI LATHER is Professor, Educational Policy & Leadership, College of Education, 121 Ramseyer, 29 W. Woodruff, Ohio State University, Columbus, OH 43210; lather.1@osu.edu.

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