

BOOK REVIEWS

Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern*. (Critical Social Thought Series). New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 212 pp, \$14.95 (softcover).

Patti Lather asks important questions about educational research in her new book *Getting Smart*. At the outset, the questions are bare-boned: "Why praxis?" "Why research?" "Why pedagogy?" (pp. 11 - 15). In her efforts to answer her own questions, she creates a text that propels the reader at breakneck speed into ambiguities and contradictions that have become inherent in the very posing of these questions in this "postmodern" age of the "displacement of grand narratives" (pp. 5-6). What we get in *Getting Smart* is the violent and refreshing (and, admittedly, disorienting and sometimes heartbreaking) opening up of these grand narratives that used to make life (well, *some* lives) so simple and straightforward: confidence in objective science and its salvational potential; assuredness in being male, in being white, Western, Christian. Bare-boned questions like those cited above now cut to the bone, for the old hegemonies will no longer hold as steadfast anchors for our work in education.

Anyone reasonably awake in the last decade or so realizes that things cannot go on as they have and realizes, too, that feminism, critical theory, postmodernism, and the interpretive disciplines (and we would add ecology) are re-posing deep questions about the nature and worthwhileness of our work and our endless profligacy. We are living out a logic that is centuries old, as Morris Berman put it, and Lather's text grabs this logic by the throat and attempts to shake some sense into it. When we witness the endless and effortless proliferation of "research" in the area of education, Lather's text gives us pause: What *are* we doing and is what we are doing sustainable, liveable, for those at stake in that work? For giving us pause in such questions alone, this is an important book.

Lather's breadth of research is breathtaking and her intense concern to "salvage practice" (p. 12) as a valid research project is reassuring and admirable, for it bespeaks the possibility of recasting research as a form of life, as a forum for the living of our lives. Her reading in postmodern philosophy, art, literature, educational theory and practice, neo-Marxist critical theory, and feminist theory encircles and names the inevitable ones: Atwood, Aronowitz and Giroux, Bakhtin and Barthes, Corrigan and Cronbach, Derrida, Eco and Eisner, Feyerabend and Foucault, Habermas and Kuhn, Lincoln and Guba, Lyotard and Polanyi, Rich and Rushdie, Said, Spivak, and Yeats.

A perusal of the 28 page bibliography reveals that feminist theory is of particular interest to Lather. This aspect expands *Getting Smart* into a broadly intelligent text aimed at launching a "new" approach to "validating critical research" in education. Lather's name for this approach is "catalytic validity" (p. x). Lather's arguments are well devised and she deftly executes a shrewd and telling blend of "feminist, neo-Marxist and postmodern theories and practices" (p. x).

But this work, perhaps partially because of its breadth, falls prey to a malaise that is not the property of Lather's work alone. It is a deep academic malaise too off-handedly called being smothered in "jargon." Jargon is from the Old French *jargon*, meaning the warbling of birds. Calling our work in the academy jargon does a disservice to birds.

We mention that this malaise is not the property of Lather's work alone in order to indicate that it is not precisely a *fault* of her work for which she is directly culpable. She, like all of us, is living out a logic which is coming to a violent end. In response to the death throes of this old logic, hermeneutics, phenomenology, critical theory, deconstruction, postmodernism, feminism, neo-Marxism, and ecology have blurred into a whirl of discourse that is, on the one hand, full of the dual pillars of Aquinas's definition of courage: rage and hope. But on the other hand, there is a timidity that has been borne out of the realization of the failure of the grand narratives in which we have had so much confidence in the past. What we get — what characterizes our work as much as Lather's — is a sort of aggressive withholding, a sort of bold hesitancy. These agonies define the postmodern age: the unwillingness to fall prey to the old ways and the inability to speak plainly without "bibbling" under a flurry of hyperliterate references and a sequence of s/ashes and g-ashes and b(racket)s which turn writing into a form of *textus interruptus*: an *especially* bad joke when we consider the reference in Lather to Barthes's notion of "textual pleasure."

Lather wishes, quite explicitly, to be liberatory in her work, but she (and we) are chained in this text to a language which, instead of offering different ways to understand the relationship between theory and practice, is overwhelmed by the warbling of not one but three heavily politicized forms of discourse — feminism, neo-Marxism, and postmodernism. The intent is to produce a sense of catalytic validity, but the language works directly and indirectly against this intent. Series editor Michael Apple assures the reader that Lather's feminism in particular promises to "enable us to find a way through" the maze of "barriers that prevent people from speaking for themselves" (p. xi). And then we are presented with an important, vital text that is precisely prevented from speaking by the very knotted convolutions that the discourse of postmodernism seems to demand. It is not Lather's having fallen prey to this convolution that is the worry: We *all* face this in our efforts to take seriously what is required of us in these last days of a logic which is centuries old. The problem is that the

convolutions of postmodern discourse are not taken up directly as *part of the problem of liberation*, rather than its convoluted solution.

Lather is concerned that women “gain self-understanding and self-determination” (p. x). Her intention is to show “moments of puzzlement, questioning and even exhilaration” (p. x) in the midst of practice in her women’s study class. Her questions are the kind that persist when educators struggle to understand why the gap persists between theory and practice. In the last chapter we are confronted with five of the most difficult questions:

1. “What is the status of scientific knowledge?”
2. “What work do we want inquiry to do?”
3. “To what extent does method privilege findings?”
4. “What is the place of procedures in the claim to validity?”
5. “What does it mean to recognize the limits of exactitude and certainty, but still to have respect for the empirical world and its relation to how we formulate and assess theory?” (pp. 124-125)

These questions surface early in the last chapter and set up expectations of being tackled directly. But instead of showing us her struggle to enter into an interpretive conversation with her data about her practice — small, intimate, fecund instances, here and here and here, and the real, living struggle to work through them — we are given a page on Foucault, another page on a theoretical discussion of the “limits and transgressions” of “situated pedagogies” and another page explaining a graph showing “Stages of Feminist Consciousness-Raising.” Even when we do come face to face with “tales” of classroom practice, literature reviews sometimes drown the voices of the participants — precisely those whom Lather wishes to be heard and understood. The meticulous detail of the real moments of struggle and the emergence of living, vivid interpretation and understanding that can erupt out of those details are replaced by (in their own way valuable) meticulous detail of her attempts to formulate those moments up into the swirl of convoluted discourses that the text avows as its own. The lack in Lather’s work is showing how to treat these small moments with generosity and love, a treatment that Lather clearly avows and desperately desires, but seems unable to show. The real work of “getting smart” seems to be missing.

Lather’s book is thus an ambiguous gift. It is generous and conscientious in its understanding and presentation of the literature of feminism, critical theory, and postmodernism. And it shakes some sense into the old, unvoiced adage of oppressive research work that begins by (not explicitly) telling its subjects “don’t get smart,” as if uppity teachers or students or children knew anything anyway or had anything worth listening to in the first place. The ambiguity of Lather’s gift is that she also undergoes what from the reader’s point of view is

an excruciating trial of letting herself be twisted out of shape by the blathering inherent in postmodernist discourse, which is itself becoming as grand a narrative as those it wishes to replace. It is truly a gift that she is willing to publicly go through these painful, painstaking, and often downright annoying convolutions on our behalf and on behalf of the women who are the hope of her book.

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Egan, K. (1990). *Romantic understanding: The development of rationality and imagination, ages 8-15*. New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 300 pp., \$16.95 (softcover).

Romantic Understanding is the second volume in a proposed series of four and is part of a project which rests on two important but controversial philosophical principles. The first principle, borrowed from MacIntyre, is that:

Human life has a determinate form, the form of a certain kind of story . . . it is not just that poems and sagas narrate what happens to men and women, but that in their narrative form poems and saga capture a form that was already present in the lives which they relate. (1981, p. 230)

The second is that, in history but also in other subjects, "abstractions are built from the reality of endless individual lives and their intentions, hopes, fears, etc. At the romantic stage it is this basic reality that needs to be grasped clearly" (p. 263).

Egan's project is nothing less than the replacement of the traditional model of curriculum selection and lesson planning (dating from the work of Tyler) with an "alternative or supplement" (p. 250) which "transcends" (p. 258) the false and unhelpful underlying dichotomy between epistemology and psychology (p. 183) — the former represented by Plato, the latter by Rousseau. Egan began reporting the results of this work in *Teaching as Storytelling* (1986) and continued it with the presentation of four kinds of understanding (mythic, romantic, philosophic, and ironic) in *Primary Understanding* (1988). In *Romantic Understanding*, Egan further develops the second of these four kinds; therefore, this book cannot really be appreciated unless the reader is familiar with these prior works.

Yet *Romantic Understanding* has its integrity and contains enough summary of the earlier volumes to be read on its own. Even for admirers of the general