Promiscuous Feminist Methodologies in Education

Engaging Research Beyond Gender

Edited by
Sara M. Childers, Jeong-eun Rhee and
Stephanie L. Daza

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The book marks the circulation of the term "promiscuous feminist methodology" and registers its salience for educational researchers who risk blundering feminist theories and methodologies in chaotic and unbridled ways. The sexism embedded in language is what makes the notion of promiscuous "feminists gone wild" tantalizing, though what the book puts forth is how the messy practice of inquiry transgresses any imposed boundaries or assumptions about what counts as research and feminism. What can researchers do when we realize that theories are not quite enough to respond to our material experiences with people, places, practices, and policies becoming data? As a collection, the book shows how various theories researchers put to work "get dirty" as they are contaminated and re-appropriated by other ways of thinking and doing through (con)texts of messy practices. In this way, gender cannot simply be gender and promiscuous feminist methodologies are always in-the-making and already ahead of what we think they are.

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in/equity in education and society, her research examines institutions, policies, and practices. Her in-progress book on grant-science and STEM culture reflects six years of research on two National Science Foundation grants. Her new project explores digital affective technologies (DAT) as social science methodologies for a digital age of big data.

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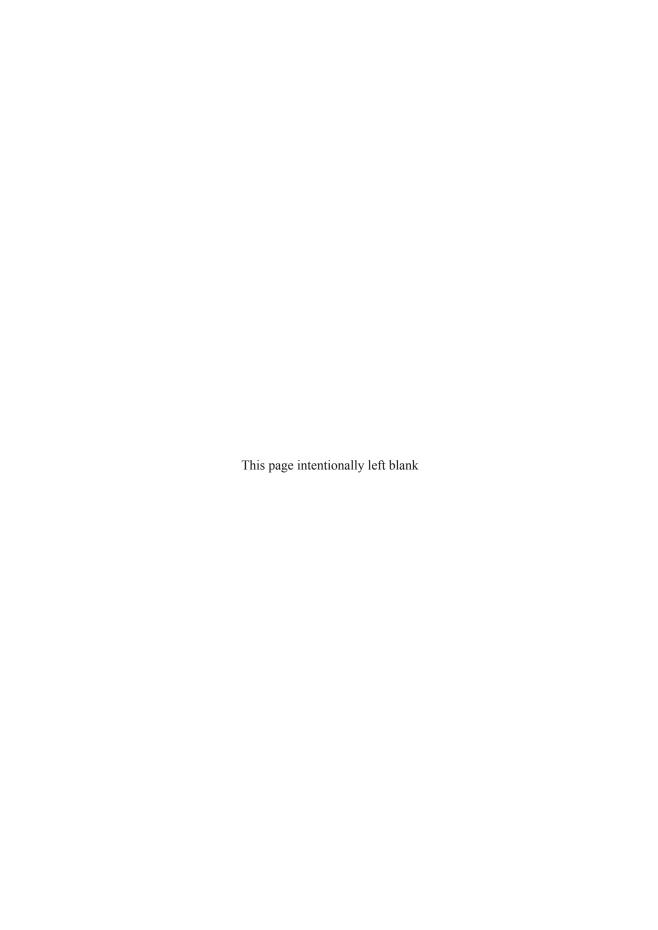
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INTRODUCTION

Promiscuous (use of) feminist methodologies: the dirty theory and messy practice of educational research beyond gender

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This editor's introduction narrates how we as researchers trained in qualitative and feminist methodology came to read our own work as promiscuous and interpret the terms "feminist" and "feminism" through both practice and theory. It marks the circulation of the term "promiscuous feminist methodology" and registers its salience for educational researchers who risk blundering feminist theories and methodologies in chaotic and unbridled ways. The use of the phrase "promiscuous feminist" to describe methodology is not merely an attention-seeking oxymoron, though we hope that its irony is not lost. The sexism embedded in language is what makes the notion of "feminists gone wild" tantalizing, though what we put forth is how the messy practice of inquiry transgresses any imposed boundaries or assumptions about what counts as research and feminism. Because the theories we put to work "get dirty" as they are contaminated and re-appropriated by other ways of thinking and doing through (con)texts of messy practices, promiscuous feminist methodologies are always in-the-making and already ahead of what we think they are. Set in motion by anxieties, disappointments, and frustrations of feeling out of place in the academy and in feminism, we examine our personal, academic, and political engagement with these contradictions that became the springboard for this special issue.

Introduction

What does it mean to claim a feminist position in educational research today? The researchers in this issue, whose work tries to understand the complexities of diverse (con)texts and practices, might not quite fit readers' (or even our own) taken-for-granted assumptions about what counts as feminist research – and that is the point. This issue demonstrates how the messy practice of inquiry transgresses any imposed boundaries or assumptions about what counts as research and feminism. Often re-appropriated through the (con)texts of messy practices, the theories we put to work "get dirty" as they are contaminated by other ways of thinking and doing. Methodologies-in-practice cannot be neatly defined or expected to stay in place on

a grid or continuum graphic (Lather, 2006). Methodologies, the integration of dirty theory and messy practice, are in the making and "on the move" (Childers, 2012). Because (fortunately) human beings continuously imagine and create fictions of all kinds, including stories that repeat, are mistaken, and extend ontological and epistemological engagements (Spivak, 2012, p. 121), methodology-in-practice is always already ahead of what we think it is.[1] Thus, rather than defining promiscuous feminist methodologies per se, this editor's introduction explores how we came to read our work as promiscuous[2] and interpret the terms "feminist" and "feminism" through both practice and theory.

The use of the phrase "promiscuous feminist" to describe methodology is not merely an attention-seeking oxymoron, though we hope that its irony is not lost. "Promiscuity" is a racy, sexy, pejorative, and even punitive term denoting "bad" girls. Around 1600, "promiscuous" meant "mixed and indiscriminate," but it was not recorded as referring to sexual relations until 1900 (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, n.d.; see also Voithofer[3]). The sexism embedded in language is what makes the notion of "feminists gone wild" tantalizing, though what we put forth is about the wild becomings implicit in feminist methodologies in-the-making. So, like deconstruction (Derrida, 1997; Spivak, 1999), promiscuous feminist methodologies are not necessarily a way to do research but a kind of a new metaphor, grounded in the engagement of materiality, for understanding what is always already happening.

Our notion of what it means to be promiscuous with feminisms worked its way through rhizomatic channels of casual conversations, business meetings, and conference papers over the last four years. As researchers trained in qualitative and feminist methodology, we were set in motion by anxieties, disappointments, and frustrations of feeling out of place in the academy and in feminism. Yet the illicit desire, excitement, and energy of experiencing/living out-of-bounds of the spaces we thought were our own catalyzed us and our work. While feminist methodologies partially liberated us, and some forms of knowledge production, from patriarchal ontology and male-dominated epistemology, it also relegated us to the margins of the academy. This we expected. But, in various ways, we found ourselves and our research (con)texts retrained, unexpectedly and perhaps unintentionally, by discursive boundaries of feminist methodologies (especially around gender). Our personal, academic, and political engagement with this contradiction has produced this issue. It marks the circulation of the term "promiscuous feminist methodology" and registers its salience for educational researchers who risk blundering feminist theories and methodologies in chaotic and unbridled ways.

At different points, we interrupt our narrative to exchange dialog. Sometimes taken verbatim from our discussions about this issue, the dialog is meant to interject our different voices and everyday positionalities. It shows how we came together to think about promiscuous methodology from different backgrounds and contexts. Because each of us came to this project from different positions, research trajectories, and ways of seeing the world, no one framework took hold. Our dialog may be too neat and confessional. While we wish it were more promiscuous, we also note promiscuity in re-appropriating "testimonial narratives" through standpoint epistemologies (Matias, 2012; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1984) to highlight our current working conditions when promiscuous feminism is expected to do otherwise.

Sara: I began rethinking how I conceptualized feminist methodology in 2008, while conducting fieldwork for my dissertation (see Childers). I cautiously presented

conference papers on what I was then calling a "not-so-feminist" feminist methodol-ogy. Trained and mentored by feminists inside and outside the academy, I somehow felt disloyal, because I was not researching gender/women/girls. I was surprised at how the tension and anxiety I struggled to articulate in claiming the feminist in my fieldwork resonated with others. Collaborations with other (feminist and not-so-fem-inist) feminist-identified researchers followed, and the term promiscuous took hold.

Stephanie: Although I considered myself a feminist by values and training, and was experiencing gender discrimination and sexism on a daily basis, I had all but given-up on doing any kind of research that I thought would be considered as con-tributing to feminist methodology in education. I thought I had "moved on" to queer theory and trying to read my research with NSF engineering grants through Gayatri Spivak. Then, Sara, who I absolutely considered one of those "real feminist feminists" hailed me as feminist, too (!) when she invited me to participate in a panel where we would begin articulating this promiscuous position.

Sara: When I organized the symposium for American Educational Research Association (AERA) in 2010 (*Promiscuous Feminisms: The Application of Feminist Methodologies and Epistemologies to Curriculum Theorizing Beyond Gender*[4]) that included some of the contributors to this issue, I had no idea that you felt this way. After the session, both you and Jeong-eun approached me about growing it into a special issue.

Jeong-eun: I have continuously and constantly used various feminist theories and methodologies in my work. Yet, I would not have participated in this project had it been framed as feminist research methodology sans promiscuity due to my ambivalent relations with feminist work in education, in particular and US femi-nisms, in general. My observation of feminist work in education has been predomi-nantly white. Go to any AERA session entitled with "feminism" and check out the presenters and audience. Also, US feminism of color can be very nationalistic (Alexander, 2005). During Sara and Stephanie's AERA session, I sensed a strange space opening up by your provocation with promiscuity, that I was willing to occupy to re-member myself as (promiscuous) feminist. At the same time, I still think we should publicly wonder about why another immigrant woman of color said no to this project despite her commitment to emancipatory research.

While our "upbringing" in the academy is produced in and through a legacy of feminist educational scholarship and a lineage of feminist mentors, we see ourselves as a new generation of scholars working within a different terrain, a terrain made possible by the work of those before us, and still (im)possibly different from their experiences. Many of the contributors to this issue express ambivalence with feminist research as an effect and affect of "living differently," after the ruins of feminism and research have been excavated. We also argue that while feminism has been undone by critiques from inside and outside of its discipline, a particular discursive construction of what counts as feminist research, in part an inevitable response to ongoing sexism, manages to re-territorialize its center. Our interactions with the field, material negotiations of doing grants and research, and of our lives outside of the academy have shaped our research practices as much as, or maybe even more than, our theoretical training and engagements. While ambivalence has been an effect of wrestling with such re-territorializations and (re)marginalizations, promiscuity is what keeps our wrestling continuous. Therefore, ambivalence is a potential symptom of our own promiscuous work.