Introduction

This chapter is the story of my ontological and epistemological journey as a researcher in a study on convivencia – the ideal of living together in harmony in diverse societies – as a technology of modern governmentality in the making of the other in contemporary education in Spain (Hernando-Llorens, 2019a, 2019b). It is the story of learning to do what I was told “good” research was about: letting your data “speak” to theory (Denzin, 2009). This chapter is situated in the “empirical turn” in the postfoundational methodologies in education, without lapsing into empiricism and within the postfoundational and feminist tradition in educational research (Britzman, 1997; Koro-Ljungberg, 2015; Lather, 2009; St Pierre & Pillow, 2000). My research answers the call of Elizabeth St. Pierre and Wanda S. Pillow’s (2000) to “work the ruins” after the postmodern and postfoundational shift in educational research in the 1980s and 1990s. I do so by depicting how I got my hands dirty, so to speak, with archival and ethnographic data (interviews, participant observation, focus groups, and so on), a task that was placed in the postmodernism’s empirical turn, “where theoretical concerns increasingly have become expressed in investigations of an empirical kind” (Seidman & Alexander, 2020, p. 23).

This chapter contributes to conversations surrounding the “politics and ethics of evidence” and the value of qualitative work in addressing matters of equity and social justice (Lather, 2006, p. 789). This contribution subscribes to a postfoundational and postcolonial tradition that interrogates the complicity between, on the one hand, faith in theory, truth, and evidence and, on the other, the fact that the racialized other has been described as incapable of truth telling, of giving evidence (Spivak, 1998, p. 214). Not-knowing as a method builds on the extensive work that postcritical and postfoundational feminists have done around the metaphor of not knowing and getting lost in research (Baker, 1999; Britzman, 2012; Davis, 2002; Lather, 2007, 2008a, 2009, 2012). By epitomizing the call for “epistemological awareness” in qualitative research, in the current climate, in which many “question the design choices, purposes, and trustworthiness of qualitative studies and other alternative research approaches” (Koro-Ljungberg, Yendol-Hoppey, Smith, & Hayes, 2009, p. 687), this is a story about learning to not know.
In this chapter, I examine the effects of my inquiry as a social practice, the ethical work of the kinds of research methods we use and the questions they allow us to ask – its ontological and epistemological effects on the object/subjects of study. In losing oneself and the presence of the research subject by engaging in a historical analysis, I’m less concerned with the melancholia of the loss in the presence of the subject, but with the epistemological and ontological implications of that loss. What happens when we decenter the presence of subjects of our research? What enablement can we imagine from loss? Does not-knowing as a way of knowing respond to the demands of academic work in making a difference in struggles for social justice? What is left of the political in anti-empiricist methodologies?

While there is a considerable amount of storytelling in this chapter, this is not a story with a happy ending in which I magically discover a “right” method at the end; it is not even a story with an end. I engage with the journey of not-knowing as a method of what John Law and John Urry (2004) call “political ontology” – methods not only discover reality but create it. I engage with my journey with not-knowing as a political practice of making worlds. But the most significant contribution is my proposal that not-knowing as a method can help us disentangle the civilizing agenda embedded in educational research methods and help create worlds that contribute to a more just society.

I start by situating not-knowing as a theory and method within three crises that dismantle the modern edifice of social educational research: (1) the crisis of voice, experience, and authenticity, (2) the crisis of identity and agency, and (3) the crisis of methods. Then I continue with an elaboration of the key tenets that ground not-knowing as a theory and method. And finally, I conclude with a metacognitive narrative of my own journey working with not-knowing as a method.

Working the ruins of educational research

In their edited volume, Working the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Theory and Methods in Education, Elizabeth A. St. Pierre and Wanda S. Pillow engage in the intellectual task of working the ruins of educational research to address the crisis of representation and explore the foundations in which humanism grounded its raison d’être and which also served as the core of its colonial enterprise – knowledge, objectivity, truth, reality, reason, science, progress, the subject, and so forth. After having dismantled the certainties that sustained the edifice of social sciences, they wonder: Is there any ethical practice toward justice and equity left in educational research? I examine how the task of working the ruins of educational research can be tackled by engaging with three “crises” – the crisis of voice, experience, and authenticity, the crisis of identity and agency, and the crisis of representation and its methods. This section is written less to review existing literature on how postcritical theories have tackled issues of methods in educational research than to draw on a range of scholarship about the tensions that erupted around how we construct objects/subjects
of educational research and knowledge about them. It is meant to intellectually orient the reader to how I discuss not-knowing as a method in subsequent sections.

The crisis of voice, experience, and authenticity

Feminism has traditionally relied on voice and experience as a reliable source of authoritative evidence in educational research. However, postfoundational and postcolonial feminists have drawn our attention to the limitations of the too-often “easy-to-tell story of salvation” of this research (Britzman, 1997; Lather, 2008a; Spivak, 2010; Wynter, 2003). Concerns with uncomplicated notions of voice call for caution and highlight the need to more carefully examine “what we are to do with what we are told in terms of listing for the sense people make of their lives without reverting to ‘too easy’ ideas about voice” (Lather, 2007, p. 147). Some scholars have challenged the factual approach to voice and focus on the limits of voice and how voice functions to communicate in qualitative research – what is not told, its silences, and what is lost and/or avoided in communication. The meaning of voice and the study of experience as a liberating and empowering strategy in educational research have been questioned. While the study of voice and experience in education has traditionally focused on how to include all voices and experiences, specifically those that have been historically marginalized (of Black and Brown students, undocumented students, etc.), scholars have pushed the boundaries of this kind of research. They invite us to rethink what voice and what experience are.

During the 20th century, voice, identity, and representation became synonymous, and experience became the site to study these conflated concepts. During this time, voice and experience were portrayed as either unproblematic and empowering expressions of unitary group identity (e.g., teacher voices, girl experiences) or essentialist notions of voice and experience that assume subgroups’ stable identities (see Beltrán, 2010). In her work “What Is Voice?” Baker invites us to consider how we know who is speaking in the first place, rather than only ask how we can include everybody’s voice (1999, p. 16). Drawing on Michel Foucault’s (1998) “What Is an Author?,” Baker suggests an examination of the historical terms that make possible the articulation of certain ideas, rather than reducing our reading of people’s voices and experiences to intentions and traits of the individual. By problematizing the “who?” – in other words, the speaker – Foucault invites us to shift the questions around voice from “who is speaking?” to “what are people able to say?” This shift requires examination of various discourses and regimes of truth and their effects on power structures that historically and culturally ground what people are able to say. This said, Baker challenges us to think, “if we speak discourses that we are born into and/or socialized to speak, then who is it that’s speaking?” (Baker, 1999, p. 380). In a similar vein, Gayatri C. Spivak has questioned what we consider we hear when the subaltern speaks. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak (2010) argues that the processes of imperialism have so contoured what can be said through
the substitution of the language of the colonizer for the colonized, that, when the colonized speaks back, what is being spoken is the colonizer’s worldview.

Similarly, with how voice has been challenged, experience as a trustworthy account of a personal event has also been probed. Joan W. Scott (1991) critiques what she calls the trap of the “evidence of experience.” For Scott, the trap lies in the appeal to experience as a category of indubitable evidence and its categorization as an original point to explain reality. By taking experience as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject becomes the corroboration upon which scientific explanation is built. Under this perspective, knowledge is gained through vision while questions about the constructed nature of experience – about how subjects come to experience issues in certain ways and not others, how they are constituted as different in the first place, and how one’s vision is structured – are left aside. Experience, Scott (1992) concludes, is not the origin of our explanation, but what we want to explain.

These challenges to studies of voice and experience are fundamental in working the ruins of educational research and in not-knowing as a method. Mainly because, after the crisis of representation, it “allows” us to work with individuals and their accounts of reality. However, these accounts are not the response to our research questions, but the beginning of our inquiry, what we want to explain.

The crisis of identity and agency

One of the main issues around how voice and experience have been created as a symbol of inclusion of different identities is that it purportedly offers a simple solution to inclusion while producing injustices and inequalities that it then aims to solve by talking about “different” voices and experiences. The foundational idea is that individuals have voices, not that those voices can be heard equally. The problem with this way of approaching the study of difference in which the inequities of voice and experience come into view, Baker argues (1999) is that the categories that make possible those histories of difference are left unchallenged and the conditions of existence that make possible those categories in the first place are left underexamined. The emergence of identities and concepts – like voice or experience – as historical events is in need of explanation. As Stuart Hall (1996) reminds us, “Black is an identity which had to be learned and could only be learned in a certain moment, in Jamaica that moment is the 1970s.” Identities, voice, or experiences, postfoundational scholars argue, have not always been there waiting to be expressed or told, but are the result of a certain historical moment and the emergence of that new voice, identity, or experience as a discursive event that should be the focus of our investigation.

Critical scholars of voice and experience in education have critiqued this approach as apolitical. However, what postfoundational scholars argue is that the study of the subject as a discursive event is not a way to introduce a form of linguistic determinism that deprives individuals of agency – their capacity for
action. It is actually a call to situate the discursive event of experience within the limits of the discursive contrition of the individual and not outside. Individuals have agency, but they are not autonomous individuals exercising free will but rather “subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred to them” (Scott, 1992, p. 34). Being an individual, then, means being subject to the definite conditions of existence and conditions of action. The study of these conditions of possibility ought to be the focus of the inquiry.

Questions of identity, voice, and experiences become the site to study and access the “real” in ethnographic studies. However, postfoundational scholars working the ruins of educational researchers invite us to tackle a different venue in our research. As Deborah Britzman proposes, it may be time to be wounded by thought as an ethical move. Incited by the “demand for voice and situatedness” (1997, p. 31), she asks how we come to think of things this way and what would be made possible if we were to think about research in another way, as a space surprised by difference into the performance of practices of not-knowing. What if our methods to “collect” data rather than discover truth and reality serve as some sort of savior narrative of scientific progress that in fact comes to produce the reality? What if there are not better or worse methods, but better ways in which our research gives accounts of the venues through which reality has been constructed? It is at the intersection of accounts of the real and difference where the method of not-knowing is situated.

In working the ruins of educational research, postfoundational feminist scholars who have challenged essentialist approaches to the study of identity and voice of minority groups have started working the ruins of voice by examining the interstices of voice, its silence. The division between voice and silence – what one does and does not say – and voice as liberation and silence as oppression has been forcefully challenged. There are many types of silences, as Foucault reminds us, and they are an “integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourse” (Foucault, 1990, p. 27). Silence entails many kinds of silences: the things that one declines to say, as well as what is forbidden to say or the discretion that may be required between different groups. This multifaceted conceptualization of silence makes it less the limit of discourse than the element that makes it possible for a discourse to exist. For example, as Foucault (1990) describes in *The History of Sexuality*, silences on sexuality were critical in forming the discourse of sexuality during the Victorian era. The taboos about sexual practices or sexual illness were as important in the working of the discourse as sexuality itself. There are many silences, and they are key in how discourses work – and also in governmentality.

**The crisis of representation and its methods**

The crisis of methods and representation in educational research cannot be dissociated from the two previous crises. One issue defines this crisis of representation and its methods and it involves the assumption that the modern edifice of social sciences is structured by a logic that separates research/writer,
text, and the subject. Under this assumption, the researcher presumes a world out there (the real) that can be captured by a “knowing” researcher through the careful transcription (analysis) of field materials (interviews, notes, etc.) and conveyed in a research text that depicts that reality in a scientific, precise way. The researcher/writer becomes the mirror of the reality and this reality represents the subject’s experiences through the researcher/writer’s accounts and observations.

Several questions follow from this assumption. To what extent can we ensure that our methods of “data collection” don’t come to reproduce and reiterate the same inequalities that have sustained the humanist modernist building of sciences and social sciences? What is the role of our methods in reproducing the legacies of coloniality, which have historically othered those who are located outside the grand narratives of belonging and the nation? In what ways do our methods replicate the extractivist economic model of the colony? From psychoanalysts and deconstructivist scholars who question even the possibility of representation of the subject, to postcolonial scholars who challenge the role of the social sciences in perpetuating visions of members of minority or marginalized communities as violent, to feminists who challenge quantitative methods as limiting to the accounts of women’s experiences – all of these actors have contributed to the crisis of methods.

However, postfoundational scholars challenge the traditional ethnographic and sociological notions of methods as being able to gather and extract reality and truth from fieldwork, and their critiques revise these methods as “ontological politics” (Law, 2004; Mol, 1999). “Ontological politics” designates a form of performativity in which any practice of knowing is seen as a contingent enactment of a specific version of the real, not the real in itself. John Law and John Urry (Law & Urry, 2004) caution us that this is neither a relativist nor realist claim, but actually an ontological one. They argue that reality is a relational effect – it is produced within relations. Reality is produced in the enactment of methods, and different methods make up different worlds. The question is what different realities are strengthened by different methods, and whether any methods are able to deal with the complexity of the material world we inhabit. New methods are needed to engage with the world and capture these complexities. One of these methods is simply not-knowing.

“Not-knowing” as a method

Inspired by feminist and postfoundational scholars of education working the ruins of educational research, this chapter assumes the practice of “not-knowing” as a valuable ethical and political practice in educational research. The expression “not-knowing” in this sense implies a disorientation where openness and the state of not-knowing are part of the process, a research practice that relishes conflicting interpretations – a permanent unsettlement of the research practice. It is risky for a junior and feminist scholar to draw a line between these two understandings of not-knowing: not-knowing as the lack
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of knowledge in the apprenticeship as researcher and not-knowing as what-is-not-known as the point of certainty of the investigation. I develop in this chapter the second definition of not-knowing, or, as Lather puts it, not-knowing as a notion where “the necessary exclusion is the very organizer of whatever insight might be made” (2007, p. vii).

Patty Lather’s (2009) metaphor and theory of getting lost serves as fertile theoretical/methodological ground to depict not-knowing as a theory and method. Despite its disorienting connotation, the metaphor of getting lost is less about not knowing what to do and more about deconstructing the categories that we know, are certain about, or familiar with. Here I put myself in the awkward position of telling a story, not so much about losing myself in knowledge, but about “knowledge that loses itself in the necessary blind spots of understanding” (2007, p. vii). Drawing on Lather’s invitation to getting lost, I probe “not-knowing” as a subversive method of certainty, evidence, and truth, in which not-knowing raises issues of “ontological methodology” (Law, 2004, p. 154) – it reflects my own concerns with the ontological and epistemological categories of experience in educational research and the methods we use to study these experiences. As Lather puts it, getting lost “is a science based less on knowledge than on an awareness of epistemic limits where ethics begins with an embrace of such limits as constitutive of ethical knowing: de-colonizing, post-imperial” (2008b, p. 60). I propose that not-knowing as a method is a necessary tool to disentangle the colonial legacies embedded in educational research methods. I tackle this task through the analysis of four tenets of not-knowing as a method: (1) interweaving the subject/object of research as the research event; (2) working the interstices of voice and discourse by focusing on their silences; (3) embracing uncertainty in the process of engagement with the world by paying attention to aporias; and (4) disturbing the categories of study as an ethical practice.

**Interweaving the subject/object of research as the research event**

The point here is that in not-knowing as a method, the researcher and research methods are as much an object of study as what/who is being researched. The reality under investigation is not simply out there to be discovered by the researcher, either in society or in individuals. If methods are performative and make up reality, then in doing research we enact multiple worlds produced in diverse and contested social and material relations. This idea that there are multiple realities is fundamental in not-knowing as a method for multiple reasons. Firstly, if we are working with methods that emerged as part of the humanist and colonialist project of the 19th-century social sciences, how are these methods going to let us approach worlds alternative to the ones that have been made and that are patriarchal, racist, and colonial? We need alternative tools to enact different, more justice-oriented realities than the traditional ones social sciences have enacted. Secondly, if methods produce reality, then whatever we as researchers do or tell, we are involved in the creation of the real. This practice
is not innocent, but political – methods enact difference and rank realities. As long as we conceal our “world-making” from what we as researchers do and tell, we’re presuming and performing an innocence that we don’t have. Thirdly, if social sciences have traditionally used methods that look for and assume the stability of the world and individuals, these same methods enact those stabilities, ostracizing realities that enact instabilities.

Not-knowing as a method acknowledges the role of the research process, its tools, and the researcher in the inquiry of research. The researcher’s task is not going into the “field” to “collect data” from its participants, to apprehend the reality. Actually, the researcher will be creating reality in the process of “collecting data.” The researcher then co-constructs reality with the study’s so-called participants. Not-knowing as a method, then, invites us to embark on a more uncertain journey of engaging with data, in which the end point is not to find the truth. On the contrary, it’s a more sinuous journey where the researchers (“researcher” and “participant”) attend to the inconsistencies, silences, or gaps in the accounts of reality. In this attentive process they decide what social reality will be made more real and to what ends.

In their experimental ethnography of women diagnosed with HIV, *Troubling the Angles: Women Living with HIV/AIDS*, Patti Lather and Chris Smithies (1997) tell the stories of these women living with AIDS. But in this study, as important it is the study of these women’s stories and the researchers’ examination of their epistemological and ontological journey in representing those stories and women. As the authors depict, “[o]ur task is not so much to unpack some real as to enact the ruins of any effort to monumentalize lived experience” (Lather, 2007, p. 40). In a way, both these women and the researchers themselves become a source of “data collection” and analytic inquiry.

**Working the silences of voice and discourse**

Discourses are inconsistent and incoherent, and the stiches that keep them together as logical narratives, as well as the silences they contain, are the matter of interest for not-knowing as a method. The focus of this method is less on what people say than on what they are actually able to say. For example, the conditions that make possible for Latina girls in my study to give an initial account of their experiences with citizenship in school in the terms of equality and rights, rather than in the terms of experiences of sexual harassment, point to a key dimension of examination. It is not that they are more correct or more liberated if they give one account or the other, but how is it possible for them to give one account or the other. What makes the experiences with sexual harassment, which became articulated only after several focus groups with the girls, remain in the silences of the unconscious, while discourses of equality of rights come to the forefront in the very first conversations? How is it possible for these girls to respond to the instances of sexual harassment by silencing and under-sexualizing their bodies, instead of attending to more institutional channels of bringing the matter to the students’ assembly or to the school.
administration? Once again, the silences that are palpable in girls’ responses to sexual harassment are not placed in the moral dichotomy of good/bad, more/less liberating, but on the questioning of how it is possible for these girls to respond in these bodily terms on silencing and under-sexualizing their bodies. What has been learned about and embodied in what citizenship is about is entangled with the individual’s capacity to say what each of them wants to say.

These issues of silences and voice are crucial as well in the analysis of institutional and policy discourses. What is (not) said? What is it that can (not) be said? Foucault (1990) told us about the importance of silences in discourses of sexuality during the Victorian period and of what is left outside of the gaze. Similarly, the silences in discourses of convivencia – the ideal of living together in harmony in diverse societies – in Spain were critical in the study of modern forms of governmentality. Specifically, the silences around convivencia policy in education in the 2000s that made it possible – in the name of conviviality – to allow the police to patrol schools or to suspend from school a Muslim girl for wearing the hijab. The disjointed edifice of conviviality that makes it possible to keep together a project for coexistence among different cultural groups and for those groups to then be the target of exclusionary practices is also sustained in its silences. Those silences are as important as the inconsistencies.

In my study, “Participation, Technologies of the Body, and Agency: The Limits of Discourses of Responsible Citizenship,” I examine the way a group of Latina girls responded to instances of sexual harassment in a public high school in Madrid (Spain) (Hernando-Lloréns, 2020). While in my initial stages in the study, I was expecting to give account to institutional participatory ways in which these girls responded to these instances, my ultimate focus ended up being their silent responses – silencing and under-sexualizing their bodies. I elaborate how they remained quiet after these incidents to avoid retaliation and under-sexualized their bodies to avoid these incidents. Rather than limiting my study to an account of these practices, I draw on ethnographic and genealogical modes of inquiry to examine the assemblages of these subjective capacities (technologies of the body) that were being developed by these girls in the attempt to respond to instances of sexual harassment. Ultimately, this study concludes that these silent girls’ bodily response to instances of sexual harassment in school cannot be dissociated from the historical production of the “regime of conviviality” that grounds educational reform, where dissent is displaced from democratic culture in favor of consensus.

Embracing uncertainty in the process of engagement with the world by paying attention to aporias

Here the focus is on placing incertitude at the center of the ethical work that entails working the ruins for educational research. By placing uncertainty at the core of the research process instead of validity, truth, or finding solutions to the issues we are investigating, we are putting front and center the vulnerability of
the researchers when confronted with the fragmented knowledge that sustains
grand narratives and the instability of the knowledge constructed during the
research journey. By embracing incertitude, we’re making visible the political
work that makes possible the modern edifice of scientific, political, and judi-
cial knowledge and that sustains the unequal grounds on which it is built. But
how do we actually embrace incertitude as a tool of inquiry? By attending to
aporias.

In her study with prostitutes, Turid Markussen describes aporias as “certain
kinds of gaps and deletions in bodies of knowledge or understanding” (2006,
p. 792). These deletions, she continues, “cannot be acknowledged without the
generalizations that hold together established knowledge falling apart” (ibid.).
The aporias I propose to confront can be multiple. For example, Markussen
focuses on “the method of the two researchers and in notions of sexuality play-
ning out in [prostitutes’] work” (ibid.). Lather (2006) proposes five aporias to
learn against technical thought and method: aporias of objectivity, complicity,
difference, interpretation, and legitimation. In my own work, as I depict next,
I’ve focused on the aporias of good intentions and of notions of citizenship
playing out in youth civic performances. But aporias are not expressed in obvi-
ous ways and, like in my own work, they are not obvious or explicit.

Not-knowing as a method of intervention in world-making processes entails
an intervention in reality that can turn those realities into objects of ontological
politics. Attending to the affective, or feelings of the engagement, in the con-
struction of reality is a key tool in working with aporias. But attending to the
affective doesn’t simply mean attending to emotions, but attending “in embod-
ied ways, interact[ing] perceptively with that which is beyond us” (Markussen,
2006, p. 293). The method of the researchers is involved in the affective work
of not just listening to what the girls had to say but attending to a variety of
scattered traces of their experiences, realities with citizenship discourses. The
aim in this kind of work, I propose, is to approach and analyze some of those
traces, as they appeared to me through some instances of the affectivity of the
research. This works as a method for “gathering” data but simultaneously serves
to enact citizenship in ways that helped me to disentangle the civilizing agenda
of this logic.

**Disturbing the categories of study as an ethical practice**

Disturbing the categories of study within our research requires approach-
ing them not as taken-for-granted excerpts of reality with ontological entity
(either the identities – the Black boy; the words of schooling – citizenship,
agency, or learning; or the experiences) but as historical assemblages of reality.
As such, not-knowing as a method invites the researchers to approach these
categories as historical events; as such, they can be traced as originated in a
specific moment and reassembled at different historical junctures. Exploring
how those categories came into being in the first place and how we came to
think of specific phenomenon in certain ways – either as a problem, a solution,
or a collectivity that needs to be saved or fixed – is essential in the ethical work that entails working the ruins of educational research.

I propose tackling this practice of disturbing and unsettling the categories of our research by historicizing them. The historicizing of the subjects and categories of schooling is, as Judith Butler (1993) argues, to challenge what is uncritically taken as natural in regulating and producing subjects. Disrupting the categories of our research by historicizing them entails “understanding change through exploring how the objects of thought and action assembled, connected and disconnected over time/space” (Popkewitz, 2011, p. 18). Within not-knowing as a method, the instability of knowledge concerns both the phenomenon studied and the process of gaining insight into it. The historical trajectories of the categories we maneuver today were not formed through a singular origin, nor did they emerge from an evolutionary progression.

Application: the journey

Path 1: historicizing experience

When I began this research (Citizenship, Diversity, and the Limits of Inclusion in Education in Spain: Disquieting Convivencia), I was interested in the experiences of immigrant girls with citizenship in schools in Spain, and gender justice was my main point of entry. I wanted to access and document how school discourses of citizenship transformed into young women’s identity and political agency. I also wanted to explore alternative understandings of citizenship and civic engagement that challenged liberal views of young women’s activism. I spent almost two months looking for a culturally diverse public high school that could serve as an example of “good teaching practices.” As a former high school teacher, I was deeply committed to avoiding teacher bashing and to focusing on this school’s good practices in relation to democratic and citizenship education. However, as my research unfolded, what progressive and democratic education in Spain is and what it means was increasingly put under scrutiny.

After two months of ethnographic research and the first round of interviews with the girls, I realized that they were embracing a form of liberal feminism in which values of independence, freedom, and equality grounded their own political positioning as women. While these liberal forms of feminism have characterized feminist theorization and activism, in the last decades transformations in the movement and the field have facilitated a paradigmatic shift bringing into the field voices and perspectives from the margins. Influenced by postcolonial feminists and the work of feminist anthropologists working with gender justice, I was sensitive to forms of girls’ activism that may challenge some of the liberal forms of feminist activism and known demands.

Furthermore, these girls were not participating in political events, not even at a politically turbulent time in which the Students’ Union of the school was
organizing in school assembly meetings, strikes, and demonstrations. Beyond what the girls were doing, at this early stage of my research I perceived their disengagement from the representative and deliberative spaces for democratic participation in school as some sort of “political apathy.” They did not seem to take advantage, I thought, of the possibility of having their voices heard. Were these girls, in the end, as disengaged from democratic life in school as the academic literature would suggest? At that time and now, I recognize how troubling my thinking about these girls was and how it aligned with much of the concerns that have been tied to ethnographic work since its early years (Behar, 2003a, 2003b).

After several months with a feeling of uncertainty, I wrote in my field notes:

I’m so lost! I’m not sure if this study makes sense, if it’s even worth being done. . . . I came all the way down here to see how these girls did citizenship, challenged the discourses available and . . . I do not see anything. In the end, is it true that they’re not that “political” after all? Also, it’s so problematic what I see in this school! I was coming to study “good practices” and all I can do now is write about how bad things are . . . great! Now I’ll reinforce what everybody already believes about this school, its teachers, and students.

– Field notes, 10/25/2013

I wonder if I could get out of a moral analysis of how I look at the school and its students (good/bad, political, apolitical) to start looking at them in a less judgmental way . . . why am I lost? What is that telling me? That life is complex? Aren’t my tools not complex enough for that task. . . . What am I asking in my questions? In the end, that’s what I’m doing, answering my questions.

– Field notes, 11/3/2013

These quotes capture how my thinking started to shift when I embraced not knowing as a legitimate path in my inquiry. I started to review the nature of my research questions and to wonder whether the epistemological and ontological groundings of my research were pushing me into the trap of what Scott (1991) calls the “evidence of experience.” For Scott, the trap lies in the appeal to experience as a category of indubitable evidence and as a point of origin to explain reality. By taking experience as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject becomes the corroboration upon which scientific explanation is built. From this perspective, knowledge is gained through vision, while questions about the constructed nature of experience – about how subjects come to experience issues in certain ways and not others, how they are constituted as different in the first place, and how one’s vision is structured – are left aside. In this way, according to Scott, experiential vision is conceived as a direct, unmediated apprehension of the world and seeing as the origin of knowing (Harroway, 2013; Scott, 1992). Scott suggests that making visible the experience of a
group that has been perceived as vulnerable exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, not their inner workings or processes that make them possible. To her, by attending to the historical processes that position subjects and produce their subjectivities we are able to engage with the constructed nature of experience. This historicizing, therefore, implies the critical scrutiny of the category of “experience.” Evading the trap of the “evidence of experience” allowed me to shift the epistemological and ontological groundings of my study and, with it, the kinds of questions I was asking. My questions shifted from an examination of the ways in which girls engaged in citizenship to an interest in the historical conditions that made it possible for these girls to talk about responsible citizenship in terms of rights and responsibilities and not in other ways.

This shift in the nature of my questions also changed the tools that I was using to engage with discourses and to start focusing on the aporias of citizenship, both in girls’ accounts of their experiences with citizenship and in my analysis of institutional discourses. Engaging with the aporias, silences, and inconsistencies of discursive accounts, instead of with what was known by the analysis, opened up fruitful ways to give a richer account of girls’ experiences with citizenship.

One of the first aporias of citizenship that I explored in girls’ accounts of their experiences with it was that while they embraced a liberal feminism in which values of independence, freedom, and equality grounded their own analysis of their experiences as women (by saying, for example, how they live in a more equal society compared to their grandmothers in the countries where they were born), the girls, at the same time, shared experiences with sexual harassment in school and they responded to these experiences by silencing and under-sexualizing their bodies. The celebratory liberal account of how women have accomplished so much in terms of equality and rights is in tension with the girls’ experiences with and responses to sexual harassment in school. The girls did not respond in accordance with expectations of liberal feminism, for instance, by bringing this issue to the students’ union or students’ assembly or the school’s administration – they did not go through any institutional channels of contestation. A realist analysis of these contradictions would have made me to get rid of one of them in order to give a coherent account of these girls’ stories. However, embracing not-knowing as a method and responding to the affective dimension of the discomfort that this tension generated in me allowed me to accept this aporia as the focus of the analysis. Why is it that these girls were responding to instances of sexual harassment by silencing and under-sexualizing their bodies instead of engaging in more liberal modes of civic contestation?

The historical journey of examining discourses of participation and citizenship in education since the beginning of the democratic period in 1978 led me to conclude that these girls’ responses to sexual harassment were entangled with a regime of conviviality where dissent was displaced from democratic culture (Hernando-Llorêns, 2020). This journey, in addition, allowed me to challenge a well-established tradition in educational research of notions of agency as synonymous with resistance to domination and to open up to other notions of agency that apprehend feminists’ accounts of resistance situated within the
historical conditions that make them available. Specifically, girls’ silencing and under-sexualizing their bodies as a response to sexual harassment needed to be understood within the conditions of possibility available within the limits of the regimes of convivencia. These responses, then, didn’t make girls more or less political, but situated their responses historically.

Path 2: haunting the subjects and bodies of the problems of convivencia

Studying experiences of citizenship in education in Spain, I soon realized that convivencia was the cultural thesis through which citizenship was articulated and legislated in education. The visions of national reconciliation after a traumatic civil war infiltrated in the 1980s the sphere of education through the policy of conviviality that came to legislate the rights and responsibilities of students in schools (Hernando-Lloréns, 2019b). There were two important events in the 2000s, a period of racial and cultural diversification of Spanish society, that focused my analysis on convivencia as a problem. First, the legislation of educational policy allowed the police to patrol schools and surveil students in order to “eradicate any violence in schools” in the name of convivencia (Ministerio del Interior y Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 2007). And second, a Muslim girl, Nawja, was suspended from school, in the name of convivencia, for wearing the hijab. The historical examination of convivencia in education helped me trace how problems of convivencia had shifted to make possible the production of the Latino Brown boy or the Muslim girl as a threat to public safety in school and society. I examined how problems of conviviality shifted from a concern with how to raise the responsible citizen after a dictatorship (during the 1980s and 1990s) into a problem of diversity, in the 2000s. This historical analysis proved how convivencia has functioned as a moving target in forming the ideal citizen and has embedded a division that differentiates human bodies by gendering and racializing their attributes through a civilizing agenda.

However, this necessity to historicize the problems of convivencia also brought with it other methodological and theoretical questions and issues. One of them was that, in the historicizing of the problems of convivencia, the embodiment and materiality of its subjects seemed to evaporate. What allowed me to engage with not-knowing as a method was examining the gray documents of the policy archive with an eye for its silences. In the case of convivencia policy, the silences were around the issue of the problem of convivencia in education and society. This subject was a ghostly presence in policy. For example, the preamble to the 2006 Organic Law of Education (Ministerio de Educación y Cultura, 2006) acknowledged that “[w]ith new groups of students in schools, the conditions under which schools develop their tasks have become more complex.” Little was said about who those “new” students were and why they generated conditions in school that were complex, but those “new groups of students” required a solution. The preamble continued, “[i]t is necessary, then, to respond to diversity among students and to equitably contribute to the new challenges and difficulties that this diversity generates [in education].” It is clear, that there was a group
of students that were a matter of concern and were generating enough problems to demand an educational reform. Little is said about how new this new group of students was and if the problems that this diversity generated were different from the experience with the Roma community in school. They were a disembodied presence in policy: (maybe) everyone knew who they were, so it wasn’t necessary to name or in the naming there was something obscene, probably something that was done in the past but not now. Those ghosts became the new aporia that require succinct scrutiny and investigation and alternative sites of inquiry than educational policy of schools.

Something in the effect of the encounter with those ghosts brought them alive in my mind into the body of the Brown Latino boy in the hood, the *chica de barrio*, the Moroccan young men, or the veiled Muslim girl. However, these ghosts were roaming, disembodied, like any ghost, indexing the remittance to an embodied being, but one inhabiting a disembodied existence in policy. For those of us who work not only in multiple sites of production of reality, but with gender and race as socially and historically constructed categories, this can be a big issue. How could I historicize these experiences and their subjectivities without tracing their bodies? The work of Susan Grosz (1994) on materiality and the research of Maria Tamboukou (2003a, 2003b) with genealogical ethnography allowed me to get lost by decentering the subject in my analysis of governmentality and to draw on the body as an ontological site of analysis. It allowed me to materialize the specters of subjectivity that haunted educational policy where discourse analysis and genealogy did not let me trace them.

Bringing together the strands of analysis outlined earlier vis-à-vis citizenship and subjectivization produced a key idea that shifted my study: that the process of governing and citizenship is a process that takes place in the body. Tamboukou’s ethnographic-genealogical work helped me to articulate this idea and to corroborate the limitations of my discursive tools of inquiry in examining who the subject of the problems of convivencia actually was. Specifically, my study draws on Tamboukou’s conception of the body “as a critical spatial site of interaction of materials and symbolic forces, a battlefield of power relations and antagonistic discourses” (2003a, p. 198). One example of this logic can be seen in how the media produced the bodies of Latino boys as the subjects of the convivencia problem and threats to public safety. Another example is the way the judicial ruling in Najwa’s case – a young Muslim girl who was suspended from school for wearing the hijab – produced her body as toxic and in need of being tamed in order to prevent a problem of public safety. A final example of this logic is the case of Latina girls who altered their bodies in response to instances of sexual harassment in order to achieve a sense of fulfillment in regard to equal rights. In these cases, bodies became fruitful sites for examining how modern governmentality functions through the mobilization of discourses of citizenship and convivencia.

But what is of more significance in these theoretical detours is that historicizing was limiting for approaching a more complex reality and, specifically, how gender and race came to intertwine in the study of the subject of the problems of convivencia. Paying attention to the aporias of silences made...
it possible to envision the need for ethnographic practices to materialize the ethical subjects of historization and “make them look and sound ‘real’” (Tam-boukou, 2003a, p. 210).

I found in printed media a site for the analysis of ethnographic accounts of the problems of convivencia in the 2000s. This new methodological shift entailed, once again, “getting lost” and pushing the traditional boundaries of what ethnographic data is and the issues of validity and authenticity. Like Lissa H. Malkki’s (1997) ethnographic study of political conflict in Rwanda and Burundi, I too found myself relying on the media to get information about the events around convivencia during the first decade of the 2000s. Not-knowing as a method provided me just enough latitude to trouble the notion of the “site” of my research and to occupy symbolic sites of culture production, like media. In this quest, I was less interested in the truth telling of a journalist about a so-called Latino gang member than in the account of “reality” created by the media around the “problem” of convivencia in a venue of mass media production like national newspapers. Once the sacred texts of anthropological research were desacralized, media accounts of social phenomena became crucial sites in the study of culture and sources of secondary ethnographic accounts.

To approach less traditional sites of educational examination, like the media, allowed me to examine not only the subject of the “new” problems of convivencia in the 2000s, but how those subjects were gendered and racialized. The demarcation of the other was drawn around race and gender: the Latino Brown and Black boy portrayed in the media as violent and as a threat or the Muslim girl presented as a problem of public safety. Not-knowing as a method allowed me to disentangle how discourses of convivencia in educational policy in the present are interlaced with a civilizing agenda of othering those who don’t fit into the grand narrative of belonging and the state. Specifically, this method to produce reality took place by examining the interstices of voice and discourse to focus on their silences (the ghosts in the problem of convivencia in educational policy), by embracing incertitude in the process of engagement with the world, by paying attention to aporias (aporias of citizenship and ghosts), and by disturbing the categories of study as an ethical practice (examination of convivencia). Postfoundational, feminist, and historiographical theories allowed to disorient, to not-know, the cultural thesis of conviviality as the ideal of living together in harmony in diverse societies that circulated in education to disentangle its civilizing agenda by othering those that distanced from normative notions of responsibility and citizenship.

Conclusions

The ideas ventured here about not-knowing as a theory and method are provisional and exploratory in spirit. By looking at how feminist and postfoundational scholars have worked the ruins of educational research I contribute to the theoretical rethinking of educational methods as a practice of world making, rather than of discovery.
I hope that the approach I lay out in this chapter will help us envision alternative methods to disentangle the colonial legacies in educational research. I have shown that these legacies remain embedded in the objects of educational research, either the voice, identity, experience, or the construction Latino Brown boy as a threat, as well as its methods. I have described how methods don’t “collect” data from the world, but actually create a world. Nineteenth-century social science methods are limiting for capturing the complexity of the world I wanted to talk about in my research on convivencia as a technology of modern governmentality in the making of the other. Not-knowing as a method allowed me to focus on the silences, the interstices, and the aporias of the modern edifice of citizenship to explain how convivencia actually serves to exclude in the name of inclusion by gendering and racializing the attributes of those who don’t fit into the grand narrative of nation belonging.

Not-knowing as a method proposes to interweave the subject/object of research as a research event, working the interstices of voice and discourse by paying attention to their silences, embracing uncertainty in the engagement with the world by paying attention to aporias, and disturbing the objects of study as an ethical practice.

Notes
2 For details of this study, see Hernando-Lloréns (2020).

References


