The concept ‘posthuman’ appears to imply an understanding of human being different from Descartes’ invention that helped launch the Western Enlightenment: his spectacular cogito, the knowing, epistemological subject who, through the right use of reason, can produce foundational truth. Rorty (1979) called Descartes’ approach to philosophical thinking ‘methodological solipsism’ (p. 192) because it invents and then installs a particular description of human being, the ‘I think’ and ‘I know’, ahead of the world, separate from the world. Then, in a feat of magic, this cogito invents the world – a stunning onto-epistemological project. It could be argued that such arrogance inevitably calls into existence its own resistance; and, indeed, a counter tradition in Western thought has always resisted Descartes’ knowing subject. In the 20th century, his description of human being was refused by scholars we have labelled ‘postmodern’ because of its devastating epistemological projects in the name of progress and science. Over time, to be became equated with to know, and empirical science was privileged as the superior path to true knowledge. Lyotard (1979/1984) critiqued the supremacy of scientific knowledge with his statement ‘Knowledge is not the same as science’ (p. 18), a critique supported by those whose knowledge has been deemed unscientific and then dismissed.

In these first decades of the 21st century, the critique of the cogito has gathered strength and produced various ‘new’ approaches to thinking about what counts as human being. Perhaps fatigued by an over-abundance of epistemological projects, scholars in a variety of disciplines have shifted their focus to ontology, intensifying the decentring of the epistemological subject. This new work organizes itself differently as affect theory (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010), thing theory
Rethinking the Empirical in the Posthuman (Brown, 2001), actor network theory (Latour, 2005), assemblage theory (De Landa, 2006), the new materialism (Coole and Frost, 2010), the new empiricism (Clough, 2009), the nonhuman (Grusin, 2015), the posthuman (Braidotti, 2013) – the project of this book – and other formations I have no doubt missed or that are in the making. This is an exciting time as some of us try to make the ‘ontological turn’ and to think differently about the nature of being and so to live differently.

This new work promises educators a way out of theoretical, material and empirical structures that seem to strangle us. The new approaches listed above offer different descriptions of human being and of the nature of being more broadly. They also offer different approaches to inquiry informed by different descriptions of ontology and of empiricism.

What I have learned in the last few years, however, is that making the ontological and empirical turns required to be/live/do something different is not easy. Our ambitions seem to exceed our capacities. Why are these turns so hard? Why is it so difficult to think of ourselves differently – as posthuman, as assemblage? And, given that I am an educational researcher, I wonder why it is so difficult to inquire differently? What is the relation between a focus on scientific method and methodology and difficulty in making these turns?

My trajectory as a qualitative methodologist in the US from 1991 to the present is illustrative, I think, of the inadequacy of an empiricism grounded in Cartesian theories of epistemology and ontology. Preoccupations with particular epistemologies and their empiricisms (empiricism and rationalism are two branches of epistemology) as well as the rush to application (to methodology), especially in applied fields like education, can sideline ontology. I would argue that, in general, doctoral training in educational research in the US not only bypasses the relation between ontology and epistemology (and empiricism) as well as the philosophy and history of science and social science and, instead, leaps to methodology, to the ‘doing’, to ‘practice’, as if practice is not always normed by theories of knowing and being.

When I began my doctoral studies in 1991, qualitative methodology had just been invented as an interpretive critique of and alternative to positivist educational research methodologies. What I’ve been calling 1980s qualitative methodology in the US (e.g., Denzin, 1989; Erickson, 1986; Lincoln and Guba, 1985) seemed to offer radical possibilities to, as I wrote in 1997, ‘produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently’ (p. 175). Over the years, qualitative methodology became popular and was elaborated and structured in journal articles,