
(Dis)orderly Potential

Ways Forward in “Post-truth” Social Studies

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I RECENTLY MET WITH a high school history teacher named Tim¹ to discuss the role of “post-truth” in his classroom. After settling on a working definition for our conversation (“an uncaring attitude towards facts...privileging emotion and opinion over facts”), I asked Tim if he saw “post-truth” pervading his classroom—“Do you see your students engaging in ‘post-truth’?” Tim began his response by stating that he didn’t think his students had changed in the past two years. His curriculum was pretty much the same as it had been for the past 15 years, and classroom engagement with current events (Tim teaches World history) was kept to an intentional minimum.

Then, an anecdote came to mind. The previous month, a senior male student had signed into an online classroom discussion forum as “Trump,” a move that “instantly divided the classroom between the girls and a lot of the boys...it didn’t last long, but tempers flared...with lots of laughing from the boys.” I asked Tim how he responded to the student. He replied,

I crossed it out and asked him to make one that wasn’t political. In thinking back on all my years of teaching, starting with Bush and through Clinton and another Bush and then Obama—after the election you never heard their names come up while we’re talking or doing activities, you didn’t get the jingoism. And these are juniors and seniors! I’ve dealt with Trump’s name being weaponized two or three times already.

Tim’s conflation between “post-truth” and the President of the United States is interesting to note, and the weaponization of Trump’s name is a phenomenon I have witnessed in classrooms of my own. But what resonates for me is Tim’s frustration, a feeling that was palpable in our conversation—an understandable emotional response to the myriad anxieties, feelings, and opinions he feels tasked to police and regulate. This frustration cultivated a nostalgia for a past time he confidently locates, a lengthy period he remembers to be free of jingoism and triggering uses of the president’s name, when unruly classroom disruptions were less frequent and order was more easily maintained.

I would wager that most social studies teachers can identify with Tim’s story and his response—I know I can. The “post-truth” era has vitalized a host of anxieties attached to teaching and learning. The recognition of particular opinions instead of others is entwined with the

maintenance of order, and the ever-present possibility of Trumpian outbursts fore-fronting white supremacy or misogyny is a threat to that order. The arrival of “post-truth” symptoms in Tim’s classroom, ones he synonymized with Trump and ensuing classroom discord, demonstrates a particular resistance to the opinions and emotions fueling such moments. Such a disavowal of student opinions and emotions imagines their impossible erasure, and while resistance to the opinions and emotions of students is not unique to the “post-truth” era, this messy entanglement between “post-truth,” (dis)order, and the inconvenient but inevitable presence of opinions and emotions forms a fascinating dilemma for teachers.

On the one hand, Tim’s response protected students from the harm of the President’s name—it’s implicit association with white supremacy, violent misogyny, and other painful realities. On the other hand, Tim’s literal erasure of “Trump” works within a fantasy of removal and disavowal. The spontaneous conflict that erupted was deferred rather than addressed, and although the student who wrote “Trump” was publicly rebuked, something ineffable was brushed over to reestablish order. I am not suggesting that Tim’s response was *wrong*; rather, I am interested in the impossibly tangled phenomenon that is “post-truth,” the inner-lives of teachers and students, and the social studies classroom. What risky pedagogies might engage with the “post-truth” era in different, more life-giving ways?

This article presents a study I conducted with three teachers on “post-truth” in their social studies classrooms, and I argue that one such “risky” way forward might center an acknowledged engagement with the inner-lives of teachers and students, a focus that has been superseded by pedagogies of certainty, orderliness, fact-finding, and evidence-based argumentation. While I am not arguing against these aims, I am concerned by their cost—what is ignored, lost, or deferred in an exclusionary embrace of these products of modern social science? Because education is frustratingly interminable and inherently uncertain (Farley, 2009; Felman, 1982), this article argues that the “post-truth” era might be usefully disruptive of joyless, un-relational, and “certain” methods of teaching and learning.

The “Rise” of “Post-Truth”

The “post-truth” conversation seems to be everywhere. The Oxford Dictionary’s new word of the year in 2016 describes circumstances in which “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Midgley, 2016, n.p.). Crucially, the etymological development of “post-truth” was entangled with real-life politics. In 2016, an unprecedented amount of “fake news” and “alternative facts” saturated electronic media (Thurston, 2018). The Brexit vote on June 23 and the election of Trump on November 8 sealed a particular narrative, one that conflated both events as “manifestations of the same underlying trends; the promulgation of fanciful claims...at worst the peddling of lies, at best the assertion of emotional truth at the expense of expertise and knowledge and an outright contempt towards rationality and evidence” (Thurston, 2018, p. 153).

The work of Bruno Latour (2004b, 2007) and Karen Barad (2007) in science studies precedes the “rise” of “post-truth,” but their demonstrations of the *discursivity* of facts are often cited as “post-truth” origin points (McIntyre, 2018). On the one hand, Latour and Barad have been blamed for the rise of “post-truth” because of their focus on the ways in which scientific facts are discursively-constructed products of an *entanglement* between the scientists, tools, elements, and a myriad of other actants (Barad, 2007; Latour, 2007) This does not mean that “facts” don’t exist;

rather, noticing their constructed nature highlights the unavoidable costs attached to method, measurement, and claims of certainty.

On the other hand, Latour, Barad, and other science studies scholars might be characterized as postmodern salvage-artists—scientists conducting inquiry amidst always-partial truths and socially-constructed facts, pushing towards a refiguring of objectivity and the possibility of intervention in a real, material world. For Latour and Barad, the mythology of truth is old news—a given; the “post-truth” era has always been with us, a latent, uncomfortable instability lingering below artifices of fact and certainty. A more pressing question might be, what now? How do we navigate a clear-sighted, less-illusioned embrace of an inherently “post-truth” world?

I argue that a “post-truth” discourse that is critical of the mythology of truth and soberly aware of the limitations of facts and evidence might lead towards a reimagining of numerous practices of everyday life. One of these might be teaching; in the context of the social studies classroom, how might a pedagogy that stays with the many troubles of living in this world together revitalize classroom relationality and interiority?

Methodology

The study presented in this article centers on moments of “post-truth” in social studies classrooms, and my methodology operates from a foundational attention to the role of “truth” in social studies curriculum and the emotions and opinions of teachers and students.

(Un)certainly

One important component of my methodology is a critical focus on the relationship between certainty and moments of “post-truth” in social studies classrooms. The practice of teaching is a relationship imbued with ambiguity and uncertainty. Felman (1982) asserts that since Socrates there has been something about education that makes us nervous, a nervousness attached to the demarcation of learning as *started* and subsequently *finished*—these are uncertain, arbitrary lines. Contemporary demands for the quantification and evaluation of learning only exacerbate the nervous worries of teachers—they attach a currency of certainty to outcomes and answers that are inherently uncertain and ever-evolving (Garrett, 2017). This troubling juxtaposition between prevalent models of certainty-based schooling and theoretical arguments suggesting the impossibility of these aims constitutes one foundational tension fueling my methodology.

The poet John Keats (1817/2005) understood the ethical and pedagogical value in tolerating uncertainty, a learned skill he called “*Negative Capability*” (p. 43, emphasis in original). Similar to Haraway’s (2016) notion of *staying with the trouble*—the ability to tolerate uncertainty, partiality, entanglement, and the inescapable germs of discursivity—negative capability is antithetical to many contemporary models of teaching and learning. Resolute certainty might prevent the reconsideration of ideas or defend against the unknown weight, responsibility, or personal implication that might accompany a painful encounter with new knowledge. I argue that these shifts are in line with a “post-truth” acknowledgement of the mythology of truth; an epistemologically-diverse classroom might be one disruptive way forward in the “post-truth” era—a pedagogy that is more concerned with the lived experiences of teachers and students than with the rote dissemination of facts and rigid maintenance of order.

Difficult Knowledge

If the “post-truth” era is, in fact, reconfigured as a confrontation with the mythology of truth, then subsequent interrogations of previously-certain facts or truth-claims are potentially painful. In this sense, “post-truth” becomes a form of difficult knowledge (Britzman, 1998), and my methodology aims to examine the numerous implications and attachments surrounding its arrival in classrooms—confrontations with the mythology of truth, (un)certainty, and the inner-harm that occurs when one’s constituting notions of truth, belief, and dependability are put into question.

On the one hand, my methodology grants that “post-truth” moments like climate change denial are a societal problem—it is imperative that teachers and students continue to discuss such important socio-political issues. On the other hand, I disagree that climate change denial demands a doubling-down on fact- and evidence-based social studies lessons. The phenomenon of climate change denial transcends an individual’s acceptance or rejection of evidence; rather, I suggest that climate change denial and “post-truth” are two manifestations of difficult knowledge—they threaten the protected safety and stability of one’s inner-life, our footing in this world. Particular pedagogical methods might, paradoxically, lead towards the ossification of an individual’s opinion in the face of endless facts—might “post-truth” encourage a thoughtful, pedagogical consideration of the psychical and emotional pain attached to the difficult knowledge of irreversible climate change?

Intellectualization

In many ways, the affective and emotional capacity of the difficult knowledge of climate change is mediated away through graphs, charts, and facts. Britzman (2003) refers to this as intellectualization; difficult knowledge is often encapsulated within comfortable “units,” kept at arms-length and mediated, mushed down into un-meaning through its instrumental use within a unit as an object of learning to encounter, master, and move on from. Facts are often seen as a rejoinder to “post-truth”—it is believed that off-base, emotional opinions are easily shot down by a fact-filled response. In turn, those emotional responses that might ignore facts and evidence are denigrated and silenced, yet they linger. My methodology is interested in this dynamic, in the cost of this silencing and the resistance to the threat of particular emotional responses, ones that reflect inner-pain and harm.

One provocation my methodology offers is the conviction that these forms of difficult knowledge should be embraced in social studies classrooms. Emotional responses to climate change are resisted in the interest of maintaining order and privileging particular narratives (those deemed *right*) over others (those deemed *wrong*). Staying with the trouble (Haraway, 2016) rejects the erection of illusory, comforting notions of truth and the disciplinary strategies meant to maintain an orderly status quo, however pragmatic. While the difficult knowledge of climate change and “post-truth” is existential and frightening, its disruptive capacity might be realized by imagining a social studies that acknowledges the limits of truth and facts and forges forward in listening more attentively to one another.

Listening

This facet of my methodology is concerned with listening—the ways in which subjective experiences, emotions, and opinions are resisted in “post-truth” classrooms. Building from Thurston (2018), my methodology attempts to consider the subjective experiences and opinions that have been relegated to the outside—experiences and opinions that have been silenced and aren’t welcome in what Thurston (2018) calls a “post-truth/post-crash” world. Lyotard (1984) argues that postmodernism signaled the end of the metanarrative—hegemonic notions of Western progress were replaced by a variety of counternarratives, a multiplicity of voices. Thurston (2018) posits that a new metanarrative has risen to power, one that is sourced by the market-based solutions of globalized neoliberalism, a world-wide capitulation of the State to late-capitalism and the continued privatization of the commons. This metanarrative perpetuates particular opinions and renders others backwards, uninformed, and out of date. In Thurston’s theorizing, “post-truth” is refigured and redeemed, not as *wrong*, but rather as those opinions and lived experiences rendered abject by the metanarrative of globalization, neoliberalism, and social science. His advice is to listen to opinions and experiences that have found themselves on the margins of a new metanarrative, one that seems to have succeeded in melding the palatable progressive politics of the center-left with the market-based solutions of neoliberalism and urban austerity.

Method

This project is based on a series of interviews and observations I conducted over a five-month period (early 2018-mid 2018) with three practicing high school social studies teachers—Lauren, Tim, and Brett. I met the teachers through email—each teacher responded to a general call I distributed stating that I (a doctoral student in a college of education) was recruiting participants for a study focused on teaching social studies in a context of heightened partisanship and “post-truth” confusion. In the end, Lauren, Tim, and Brett responded with an interest in participating; I chose to work with them based on the locations of their respective schools, the subjects they taught, and their schedule flexibility.

At the time of this project, all three participants were full-time, high school, social studies teachers. Lauren was the most experienced (21 years at the same school), and her teaching background was also the most varied (sociology, race & gender, World & U.S. history). Tim (20 years at the same school) and Brett (19 years at the same school) both teach various sections of U.S. and World history. All three teachers are white and taught in suburban high schools in the midwestern United States with similar student demographics. In Lauren’s school, nearly 65% of the student body is white, while the remainder of the population is evenly split between black, Latino, and Asian students (the demographic signifiers utilized by the school). Brett’s and Tim’s schools are 68% and 70% white respectively with nearly the same ratio of other populations.

My work with each teacher was divided into two stages. First, I conducted an initial semi-structured interview with each teacher lasting between 70-90 minutes. During these interviews, I asked them several questions regarding moments of “post-truth” in their classrooms, as well as their own sense-making regarding “post-truth.” After agreeing on a working definition of “post-truth,” I asked, “Do you see ‘post-truth’ pervading your classroom? If so, how have you and your students responded? Finally, do you think ‘post-truth’ might possess a positive potential?” I realized that this question required me to provide an example, so I shared my own thoughts with

the teacher, usually thinking-aloud and wondering about the chance to move beyond disciplinary structures of truth and objectivity.

The second stage of this project was my observation of a lesson following our initial interview. During the observations, I wrote field notes and memos before conducting follow-up interviews with each teacher after their lesson was complete. I analyzed the data from the interviews and observations using a whole-parts-whole (Van Manen, 2014) cycle to work through particular sections of each interview and observation before returning to the entire transcript. I read each transcript closely, looking for similar themes within multiple discussions, and then re-read each transcript from a more holistic vantage point, attempting to decipher the larger stories present in the texts.

Findings

Beliefs, feelings, and subjective experiences are crucial components of the emotional dimensions of human life. In schools, these are too-broad signifiers for the complex and opaque inner-lives of teachers and students—the vast interiorities of the self and others. My findings will aim to demonstrate the ways in which the inner-lives of teachers and students became synonymized with “post-truth” confusion. In essence, the emotional opinions and beliefs of students were feared and resisted—a reliance on facts, evidence, routine, and order were the primary mechanisms teachers used to prevent the arrival of “post-truth” and emotional discord in their classrooms, and while this suppression is impossible, it proved to be comfortingly effective in particular moments (Tim’s erasure of “Trump” above is one example of this expeditious response to potential disruption). In addition, all three teachers doubled-down on social scientific appeals to fact, objectivity, and certainty in their social studies curriculum. I argue this response to “post-truth” passes over its most constructive potential—“post-truth’s” subtle, less recognized confrontation with the mythology of truth. I suggest that a critical *deconstruction* of the transcendent Truth so common in curriculum might provide new ways forward in the “post-truth” era, making space for epistemological pluralism and more equitable, attentive classrooms. While this pedagogical and curricular response from the teachers was not surprising—they are vigilantly defending against incursions of Trumpism and violent language in their classrooms—they also failed to provide a reasonable basis for this fear. I don’t mean to suggest their protective instincts were wrong—far from it. Rather, I wonder if future work in this area of study might collaborate with teachers in devising ways to more thoughtfully, ethically, and creatively attend to the emotions of students and the destabilizing discursivity of truth.

Emotion(less)

All three teachers equated moments of “post-truth” with the “problem of emotion.” Lauren described a divisive, post-election, Black Lives Matter rally that disintegrated into death threats on Snapchat—the “emotions and outrage were off the charts on both sides,” and she spent the remainder of the semester barring discussion of the event in her Race & Gender classroom. Tim’s story above led into another anecdote—he stopped teaching the 2016 election in early-September because discussions were inevitably interrupted by whispers and spontaneous shouts of “Trump!”—a volatile fuse that instantly ignited a flurry of emotional responses, raised voices, and

“even more division between the girls and boys, blacks and whites.” Brett summed it up by saying that the key to avoiding “post-truth’s bullshit is getting kids to think without emotion.” Brett’s voice rang with frustration as he discussed responding to a particular moment in his classroom. He continued—

I have a student in my third hour that is very bright and very smart but completely immature. He just continues to get all emotional whenever a kid gives him a look or when someone doesn’t agree with something he brings up. It’s usually the whole, “The government’s out to get you” conspiracy sort of stuff. He’s obviously an outlier, but I do see more and more of it now.

I offer this as a “post-truth” moment because it is marked by a fascinating interplay between facts (hiding beneath the signifiers “bright” and “smart”) and emotion. Brett’s student is smart and bright but his “immaturity” and “emotional” behavior seems to counteract his intellect. While it is suggested that the student’s immaturity is displayed through emotional responses to looks or disagreeable responses from other students, it is also implicitly and suggestively tied to the initial appearance of emotion in Brett’s classroom. If Brett’s goal is getting kids “to think without emotion,” the uncomfortable appearance of emotional knowledge is bound to disrupt, and such appearances clarify both the rationality and futility of this goal in the first place.

I suggest that Brett’s desire for the separation of emotion from thinking might be thought of as a “post-truth” symptom. In Brett’s view of “post-truth,” emotions distort facts and evidence—this vantage point necessitates the cultivation of an emotion-less classroom, however impossible this task might be. To bring psychoanalytic theory to bear on this example, it is a given that all of Brett’s students carry emotionally-fueled personal beliefs into his classroom. These collections of knowledge are precious to them—they are constitutive—and in this sense, the process of learning new knowledge is painful—it necessitates breaking down and rebuilding old and new knowledge—this is a difficult process, one that is resisted. Moreover, these emotional outbursts often surface in conjunction with a *defense* of a particular type of knowledge, one that is not well-respected or considered to be valid. As Brett says, “It’s usually the whole, ‘The government’s out to get you’ conspiracy sort of stuff.” This knowledge is based on conviction, intuition, and emotion—Brett’s student knows, and clings to, countless stories, opinions, and beliefs. These stories, these subjective “facts,” are precious to the student. They are life-giving, constituting, and inspiring in an unparalleled way.

Factually Disappeared

A second method of defense against “post-truth” moments is the disappearing of “post-truth’s” disruptive potential through intellectualization (Britzman, 1998). The generative potential inherent to “post-truth’s” troubling of the mythology of truth and attention to interiority is rarely realized in schooling because this new knowledge, that which might *deconstructively* provoke and re-shape one’s closely-held knowledge, is kept at arm’s length and mediated, mashed down into un-meaning through its intra-action within what I’ll call the fact-evidence apparatus. This is a tool of modernity and social science—one way in which the social scientific values of validity, generalizability, and certainty have found their way into contemporary social studies curriculum. The various screws, swivels, clamps, and bars of this apparatus are reified in schools in diverse

forms: encapsulating “units,” long-term plans, textbooks, the four steps of thinking like a historian, graphic organizers, dates, names, place, memorials, etc. While this apparatus is not working *against* the flourishing of a given student, it does manage to further mediate the distance between the “content” (also a flattening and mediating word) and the student. This snuffs out the potential for meaningful intra-actions within classroom phenomena—the student, “post-truth,” the past, and difficult (new) knowledge—an intra-action that might be transformative.

As Tim said later in our conversation,

So “post-truth” is this idea that facts aren’t facts and facts are debatable...like I agree, there’s plenty that’s debatable, but to use it as a cat-call to just kind of undermine things in general, or present alternative facts that could be blatantly disproven, I find it to be totally absurd. Still though, it’s a reality that people are responding to and they perceive that they have proof and they’re acting in accordance. Because of this, I double-down on the burden we have to our students—we can’t take a *laissez-faire* attitude for students providing evidence, doing research, and objectifying their evidence. I forefront the idea of evidence now. I push them—“How can you support this?” That type of thinking I may have taken for granted in the past before all this stuff with “post-truth.”

Tim conveys a very nuanced and insightful understanding of the myriad dynamics of “post-truth” in this excerpt. He notices the ways in which facts might be “debated...to just kind of undermine things in general.” This is interesting—despite his staunch positivism, Tim slips into an admission of the duplicitous nature of facts within the imaginary context of a debate—he seems to suggest, “Facts might appear to be on our side, but in the wrong hands? You never know.” Tim hopes to preemptively counteract this undesirable outcome via the fact-evidence apparatus. He tells me that he has “doubled-down,” refusing to take a “*laissez-faire* attitude” when it comes to asking his students to “provide evidence” and “objectify their evidence.” He “forefronts the idea of evidence now”—he pushes them. This is intellectualization at its finest—students will likely learn something about the past (flattened content), but most importantly, they will be protected from falsities, fake news pretending to be factual, or emotional appeals that can’t stand up to a rigorous, scientific examination.

Hidden in the middle of Tim’s grappling with “post-truth” and the fact-evidence apparatus is an interesting admission—the “post-truth” he sees is “a reality that people are responding to, and they perceive that they have proof, and they’re acting in accordance.” Although he follows this with his commitment to “doubling-down” on making his students provide evidence, there is another direction his curriculum might wander in the “post-truth” era—an inclusive engagement with these lived realities and experiences in his social studies classroom. Might an attendance to these realities and experiences bring to bear alternative ontologies and epistemologies, ones that might challenge a new metanarrative of globalization and neoliberalism (Thurston, 2018)? Tim hardly alludes to this as a curricular possibility, but his simple act of giving voice to this noticing of his suggests a new way forward in “post-truth” social studies.

Tim’s aim, and the purpose of the fact-evidence apparatus, is to make it impossible for an emotionally-charged “post-truth” kernel to squeeze through. And yet, doubt remains. After our interview, I watched Tim teach a lesson on the Armenian Genocide, a topic infested with “post-truth” rhetoric. Debates over the Armenian Genocide still rage today, infecting geopolitical and domestic relations. It is a topic imbued with emotion—each side possesses its own set of facts, dates, numbers, and convincing arguments. It was clear that Tim understood his lesson’s unique

vulnerability to an unwelcome moment of “post-truth” during that period. As a response, he saturated his lesson with quantitative data. Dates, numbers of Armenians killed, the locations of those killings, more dates—it went on and on. Two photographs were shown, but they were blurry, and the students were kept busy working with their numbers, a corresponding graphic organizer, and inquiry prompts. There was no emotion in the room—only facts and the scratching of pencils on paper.

I am not aiming to question the reality of the Armenian Genocide; rather, I am hoping to highlight the all too common futility of exclusive and narrow appeals to *truth* and *facts* in matters of history and painful pasts. The “post-truth” insistence on the mythology of truth and an attendance to interiority in relation to traumatic histories might recalibrate the desired outcomes in teaching difficult knowledge. On the one hand, is it about getting the facts straight? If so, which facts? On the other hand, a “post-truth” focus might move beyond a dependence upon facts and evidence—it’s privileging of interiority might cultivate a renewed acknowledgement of relationality and our inescapable vulnerability to one another in this world (Garrett, 2017). It is certain that a pedagogical shift of this type, one that is vulnerable to and welcoming of emotions and feelings, will be messy and initially scary. Still, I suggest that such an epistemological reorientation might be one more way forward for social studies curriculum in the “post-truth” era.

Constrained by Discourse

One promising way forward for social studies in the “post-truth” era is a confrontation with the mythology of truth—a clear-eyed look at truth’s discursivity. Importantly, this focus requires caution and nuance—I am not suggesting that declaring, “Truth is a social construct!” will lead towards epistemological pluralism; rather, I am advocating for a rejection of the social scientific values that have been encroaching upon humanities curricula for decades (Heilbron, 2001). I suggest that the modernist, assembly-line, pedagogical values of validity, generalizability, and certainty have no place in a social studies classroom; rather, social studies curriculum in the “post-truth” era might center the lives of teachers and students—their lived experiences, their vast interiorities, and lessons that *listen* and *attend* to the ways in which we might live together in more fair and equitable ways.

The third method of defense against “post-truth” is paradoxical in its aims and results. I found that a troubling level of certainty is often attached to discussions of the discursive, as though discourses, the socially-constructed facets of culture, are simply another object of reductive study. In one example, Lauren began her lesson on the social construction of race by saying, “We all know race is a social construct, right? We’re biologically the same...got it guys?” Her statement was met with weary nods and scattered murmurs of agreement. I wonder what it means to “know” that race is a social construct? What would this mean for one of Lauren’s students—what can they do with this information? Does this realization implicate a white student in racial injustice and inequity? Is there political weight or capacity behind this realization? What ethical obligations might they uncover? Is Lauren’s question grasping for anything more than either a mechanical head nod or an awkward acknowledgement of false consciousness? In short, Lauren’s admirable appeal to discourse and the instability of social “truths” like race is taken too far; the uncertain and constructed becomes stable and ossified—the potential of “post-truth” as a disruptive force is mediated through a most ironic partner—discourse.

Lauren’s predicament is relatable—I’m sure many social studies teachers have started lessons with similar statements (as have I). Unfortunately, appeals to discourse in the “post-truth” era put teachers in a double-bind. If there is no transcendent Truth (one tenet a disruptive embrace of “post-truth” might reinforce) and racial difference can’t be located in the natural realm, then how might classroom conversations respond to the racist beliefs of teachers and students? Should they be silenced or ignored? In some cases, yes—I am not arguing for the airing of vulgar prejudice. Rather, I remain interested in the tactics we use, often unintentionally, to avoid the difficult knowledge that “post-truth” embodies—there is no easy answer, no easy truth. I am arguing that appeals to discourse and social constructivism *as certain* are two of those easier answers we might move beyond.

Returning to Latour (2007) and Barad (2007), a critique of social constructivism and its profound inability to respond to the painful materiality of racial violence doesn’t mean race is *not* a social construct. Rather, I wonder what is ignored and brushed under the rug by simple appeals to social constructivism? How does the emotional core of “post-truth” figure into this? I would argue that social constructivist frameworks represent an outright denial of the embodied and materially-structured racial violence (e.g., de facto segregation) students notice. Race might be a construct, but what does that mean for how Lauren’s largely-white students see racialized others? The very *real* optics of race might be theorized (Tuhkanen, 2009), as might the very *real* material embodiment of race (Fanon, 1952/2008). Moreover, these embrasures of materiality do not work from a deficit—like Latour (2007) and Barad (2007), these are products of salvaging the material body from the confines of language. Such moves towards materiality encourage critique themselves, as should any project worth its salt, but it is worth considering these particular limits of discourse before an appeal to the social-constructed nature of race becomes our only answer to police brutality and other racial violence.

To be clear, I am not arguing for a rejection of discourse and the foundational precepts of social constructivism. Racial categories are discursive—I am not disputing that. Rather, I am interested in generous critiques of poststructuralism and postmodernism, ones that are interested in both solidarity and a redemptive salvaging of the material body from totalizing conceptions of discourse (Bennett, 2010). Just as discourses might be essentializing, hegemonic, and overtly-transcendental, an attendance to *matter* provides new openings for critique. How might an ethics of materiality, one that seeks retribution for the real-world cuts, scars, and wounds inflicted on black and brown bodies through racism, be in a better position to adjudicate racist discourses? I suggest that these questions implicitly call for a more attentive epistemological framework, one that is more attuned to the experiences, emotions, and “truths” that have long been marginalized. Again, a disruptive embrace of “post-truth” proves useful here; epistemological pluralism and myriad truths have always been with us, but they are too often drowned out by the voices and opinions deemed *right* by a new metanarrative (Thurston, 2018)—“post-truth” provides an opportunity to finally *listen*.

After the bell rang, Lauren and I discussed her lesson—I asked her about her approach to teaching race and what pushback she might have received in the “post-truth” era. She responded by sharing a frustrating interaction with a student; she said—

In this post-factual world, it’s really hard to teach facts. I’m finding it very difficult to teach my race class because I will say things like, “Race is a social construct,” and I’ll have someone say, “No, the Bible says there are races,” and I’m like, “Well, the Bible’s not science, and we know this because of science and skin color has evolved,” and I’ll give

them a whole bunch of evidence about interaction with the environment and the sun, and they will say, “I don’t believe in science.” I don’t even know how you deal with that. This is something new in teaching, and so I guess it’s a challenge, but I don’t know how to deal with that.

Many social studies teachers have been in Lauren’s position. Clearly, the presence of religion in her classroom is troubling to her, and the affective intensity of this moment was palpable—I could sense the sharp pain inflicted on each side by both emotional responses. It is not just the student, but Lauren as well, who resorts to what was likely a painful attack on the student’s faith and scripture. Likewise, Lauren experiences the pain that accompanies the rejection of knowledge in the teacher-student relationship. She is right to conclude that she doesn’t know how to deal with this style of dialogue—I don’t either, but shouldn’t this be an ethical imperative? The inner-lives of our students will never evaporate, just like emotion(less) teaching and learning is a fantasy. Moreover, this harkens back to the paradoxes attached to discourse—Lauren’s framing of social construction *as certain* is bound to fall short; her student’s faith, along with their optical perception of racial difference, will not be stamped out; so then, what is to be done?

Perhaps another valuable outcome of a disruptive embrace of “post-truth” might be an acknowledgement and inclusion of the classroom’s multiple truths. Lauren seems to allude to this when she says, “it’s something new in teaching,” and while it’s not really new, she is correct to say that a cessation of continued resistance to the numerous emotions and opinions each student carries into class might be a radically new interpretation of “post-truth,” one that gives up the project of disseminating the same old facts and mythology of truth and, instead, *listens* and pays attention to opinions like the one above. I am not suggesting this student’s opinion is correct—again, a disruptive embrace of “post-truth” allows us to move away from the endless adjudication of right from wrong. Rather, it is the case that many teachers and students carry faith with them into the classroom. Braidotti (2008) is attuned to this dilemma, and, in turn, pushes us to think about religious difference positively—how might the emotional and opinionated differences of teachers and students, ones that are often disregarded as “post-truth,” be included positively in a pluralistic classroom?

Discussion

It seems quite possible that “post-truth” will remain in bad company; all three teachers associated “post-truth” with the alt-right, “fake news,” and “alternative facts,” and none of them showed an interest in redemptive “post-truth” projects (Fuller, 2016; Horsthemke, 2017), ones that, similar to this project, argue that epistemological pluralization and disorderly confrontations with the mythology of truth might be useful, even radical, methods of disruption—tools of destabilization upon the ever-encroaching social scientific values of validity, generalizability, and certainty into the humanities.

Teachers are fearful of “post-truth” and the emotional opinions attached to classroom disruptions. It seems that futile attempts to eradicate emotions, beliefs, and opinions from social studies classrooms will lead towards the continuation of rote, skills-based lessons in joy-less classrooms, and the reluctance to engage with the inner-lives of students will foster further classroom division. Furthermore, the mythology of truth stands strong in social studies, serving to validate a singular, onto-epistemological framework (Thurston, 2018) at the cost of countless

others, an act of ignorance and chutzpah that has led us to, among other catastrophes, the brink of ecological collapse. While this article argues the “post-truth” era might be reconceived as a time of onto-epistemological renewal, it is unlikely that a sea change in listening and attendance to the inner-lives of our neighbors is on the horizon.

This vein of skepticism was prevalent in my conversation with Brett, especially in our discussion regarding communication and the possibility of civil debate in the “post-truth” era. He said, “You know, there are just so many instances of diminished communication...a student says something is true, the other person doesn’t trust the source they’re getting it from, whether it’s FOX News or whatever, and the conversation just ends.” Brett’s short anecdote rings true—a rupturing of communication many of us have witnessed, whether at school, work, the family dinner table, or on social media. While this article has argued in favor of unbridled, communicative engagements with emotional opinions and feelings, the “post-truth” era has also highlighted the extent to which the beliefs and opinions we hold are emotionally-cemented and immovable. So what gives?

Perhaps Latour (2004a), Butler (2001), and Kirby (2011) provide one way out of this debacle of collapsed communication and vitriolic critique. They encourage an engagement with “others more generously through interconnection...to avoid the more murderous maneuvers of dialectical reasoning that negate another’s position as wrong in order to affirm our own position as right—as *the* one (and only) position” (Kirby, 2011, p. 83). This ethos of engaged critique aims to build *from* and *with* instead of *against*. It is more open to listening and attending to previously-silenced voices and epistemologies, a stance I argue is attuned to the disruptive potentials of the “post-truth” era. In addition, this abandonment of adjudicating right from wrong displays a willingness to *stay with the trouble* (Haraway, 2016), an admirable desire to exist within a state of entangled uncertainty—a refusal to settle for the false stability provided by facts, certainty, and other products of the mythology of truth.

This article presents several implications for future scholarship, projects that might continue to grapple with the entanglements between social studies curriculum, “post-truth,” and the interiorities of teachers and students. First, this article attends to teacher and student interiorities, a focus building from the work of Britzman (1998), Segall and Garrett (2013), and Garrett (2017). In addition, the potential for curricular engagement with student opinions builds from the work of Parker (2010) and Hess (2009). In this vein, future projects might consider social studies curriculum that is less interested in the dissemination of facts and “truths” about the past than it is with social studies’ most important question: how might we better live in this world with one another? Garrett’s (2017) work in this area is an important start; future projects might continue in imagining a more relational social studies pedagogy, one that is attuned to the vast inner-lives of students.

Second, future projects might utilize this article’s reconfiguration of “post-truth” to further explore what I consider to be the double-sided crux of this article’s argument—a false attachment and a phantasmatic sundering—the wayward emphasis on *certainty* in education and the bracketing of emotion from learning. While these points are crucial to my argument in this article, more work is needed in determining the entanglement between the mythology of truth, social studies, and the positivist values of the social sciences. What are teachers doing to combat an ever-increasing focus on skills-based social studies instruction?

In conclusion, this study has attempted to show that contemporary attempts to assign quantitative measures of certainty, learning results, and other data-driven methods of instruction have only contributed to a disavowal of classroom emotions and opinions. I argue that these

resistances have carved out an opening for a disruptive refiguring of “post-truth,” a reconstruction that recognizes the mythology of truth and the vital importance of teacher and student emotions and opinions.

Conclusion

The “post-truth” phenomenon is far from new. It has always lingered beneath the modern artifices of social science—certainty, validity, generalizability, and other truth-making practices. This paper argues that moments of “post-truth” challenge these modern heralds of truth—their measurements refuse to align with the powerful reality of lived experiences. I suggest that these moments shine a light, however briefly, on the mythological nature of truth—the tools of modern social science are found lacking when applied to the vast, varied, and epistemologically-diverse realm we might call *a life*. Problematically, contemporary American schooling embodies these values of social science, operating under the guise of data-driven certainty and generalizable methods that will produce particular results—“post-truth” works against such aims, and I suggest that an open engagement with this tension might produce new openings in social studies education, ways forward that are more attuned to the inner-lives of teachers and students and less interested in doubling-down on modernist, assembly-line schooling that centers certainty and relegates emotion and opinion outside the classroom.

This article argues that “post-truth” itself is a symptom of the joyless, anti-aesthetic, and rote process we call learning. As I’ve repeated throughout this paper, the project of learning is far from a process that can be replicated on an assembly-line—we might be wise to consider which came first—“post-truth,” the impossible-but-attempted extraction of emotion from schools, the intellectualization of difficult knowledge until there’s nothing left but abstract information and numbers, or the reliance on unsophisticated structural explanations for violent societal problems of injustice? Lost in all of these is subjective experience—the inner-lives of teachers and students that don’t have to continue down this punishing road. I suggest a serious and intentional re-inclusion of the emotional and affective components of the human in the interminable project of learning—a disruptive reconstruction of “post-truth” that rejects the mythology of truth and acknowledges the multiplicities of emotion and opinion in social studies classrooms. It is possible that an attending to the complex, conflicted, and vast inner-lives of teachers and students might rid us of some neurotic malaise.

Notes

1. All proper names are pseudonyms.

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