Lesson Plans as Objects of Cruel Optimism and the Rhizome as a Way Out

ALLYSON COMPTON
Teachers College, Columbia University

TEACHING SOCIAL STUDIES often provokes discomfort, in teacher and learner alike. The difficult histories that punctuate social studies curricula do not always produce a pleasant learning environment, nor should they. Garrett (2017) reminds us that teaching about the social world means asking students to confront histories that are "populated with violence, suffering, loss and devastation" (p. 19). While addressing difficult histories can feel profoundly unsettling to bodies in a classroom, the alternative to doing so—returning to the majoritarian tales that obfuscate the often ugly realities of the past—reinforces oppressive institutions and further marginalizes students whose lives have been shaped by those events and systems deemed too uncomfortable by some to discuss. Miles (2019) notes that, in the face of difficult knowledge about the past, there is a natural inclination to seek out "knowledge that is comforting and reinforces our existing attachments and investments" (p. 476). In the United States, this impulse has manifested in a spate of recent legislation that aspires to discourage the teaching of history deemed controversial, restricting or outright banning "curriculum, lessons, professional development, and equity and diversity efforts addressing a broad but often loosely defined set of ideas about race, racism, diversity, and inclusion" (Pollock et al., 2022, p. vi). While such efforts have emerged in the past (Nash et al., 2000), the current political climate heightens the danger, even violence, provoked by political overreach into classrooms.

My purpose in this article is not to provide a solution for the ongoing entanglement of problematic circumstances that face educators, administrators, policymakers, and educational researchers—indeed, such a task is well beyond the scope of this (or any single) inquiry. However, I suggest that, in light of this context, teacher mentors, teacher educators, and school administrators have a responsibility to reconceptualize the expectations around certain pedagogical tools and strategies—in particular, lesson plans/planning—in ways that encourage teacher flourishing amidst complex, volatile, and uncertain times. To this end, I seek to explore the effects of the panopticon-like state in which many teachers find themselves when they endeavor to write a lesson (Bushnell, 2003) and to suggest how individuals who are positioned to supervise and/or support teachers might (re)frame lesson planning in ways that are both fortifying and humanizing.

Though social studies teachers are the focus of this article, I believe similar analysis applies to educators across multiple subject areas. Regardless of discipline, teachers in the United States are not only asked to teach content that has been "decontextualized and recontextualized" (Apple, 2014, p. 71) as it moves through filters of power and knowledge constructed by the state, but are then monitored and evaluated based on the fidelity of their instruction to linear, hierarchical, prescribed lesson plans. In other words, as Apple (2014) writes, "teacher development, cooperation, and 'empowerment' may be the talk, but centralization, standardization, and rationalization may be the strongest tendencies … [with] reductive accountability [and] teacher evaluation schemas" becoming the norm (p. 71). In the next section, I outline the current challenges facing educators, in particular social studies teachers, as a way to provide context to the issue of teacher job satisfaction or, more pointedly, the lack thereof.

Education is the Fray

A recent *New York Times* article about the rising swell of panic around Critical Race Theory (CRT) in schools quotes a teacher who succinctly captures the current atmosphere: "Education is not above the fray; it is the fray" (Powell, 2021). Undoubtedly, the latest educational gag orders are affecting teachers across subjects and disciplines (Pen America, 2023). Indeed, a study by Pollock et al. (2022) reveals how recent legislative efforts have affected teachers' pedagogical and curricular decision-making:

> Describing feeling "terrified" to teach "in this polarized environment," some teachers indicated that they and colleagues intended to remain silent on an array of issues that they otherwise would have taught, on topics as broad as "race" and "race and gender." Some said that as teachers were "left wondering" what they could do and "unsure what I am allowed to say and teach," many were "choosing to avoid" "controversial" topics and specific texts. (p. viii)

Teachers in 2023 are navigating a volatile and potentially treacherous terrain, littered with manufactured controversy (Wallace-Wells, 2021) about the ways in which critical and social theory informs education. Perhaps unsurprisingly, social studies education is firmly situated in the nexus of the most recent instance of this well-worn debate around how and what to teach about the past.

Social studies education has, once again (Nash et al., 2000), become a battleground—a contentious landscape upon which policymakers, academics, educators, and parents clash over curriculum and instruction. Certainly, the debate over how to teach about the past is not new, but recent legislation has dangerously concretized the ideological wars around what counts as history (Blight, 2021; Silverstein, 2021). This latest iteration sprang, in part, from the tumultuous and polarizing events that defined the years during and after the Trump presidency. Hill-Jackson et al. (2022) argue that this moment has brought about a "climate change" in education that has created an unsustainable environment for many teachers. Ladson-Billings (2021) describes this new climate confronting educators and students as being produced by "four pandemics—COVID-19, systemic racism, pending economic collapse, and environmental catastrophe" (p. 352). Social studies teachers attempting to address these issues and equip their students with the tools necessary to tackle disinformation and injustice have come up against forces that seek to undermine their

efforts and shore up traditional structures. What began as a conservative movement against teaching CRT (Sloan, 2022) has metastasized into a wave of state-level legislation aimed at preventing teachers from discussing issues deemed controversial, such as systemic racism, LGBTQ+ histories, settler colonialism, and indigenous erasure (see Ferguson, 2022; Hanshaw, 2023).

One such example is House Bill 1134 in Indiana, which requires that schools publish educational activities and lesson plans up to a year in advance as a way to "censor what's being taught in the classroom" (Whiteleather, 2022) through regulating curricular materials, instruction, employee training, surveys, and personal analysis related to an "individual's sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, national origin, or political affiliation" (House Bill 1134, 2022), effectively prohibiting teachers from discussing a variety of vitally important topics in the classroom. Many Indiana educators anticipate that the Bill will lead to a "mass exodus" of teachers; a teacher interviewed by the *Indy Star* predicted that, as a consequence of the Bill, there will not be " enough people to fill the positions, or some of the folks you're going to bring in aren't going to be qualified" (Herron, 2022; see also Kamenetz, 2022). These conditions are being replicated, in varying degrees, across the country. A recent Florida bill states that "an individual should not be made to feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race" (Farrington, 2022). Similarly, the reprehensible "Don't Say Gay" bill (H.B. 1557) attempts to silence any classroom conversations about sexual identity or orientation while empowering parents to sue schools that are perceived as violating the legislation (Block, 2022).

In essence, such measures prevent social studies educators from teaching the difficult but critical histories that shape our society today. These bills and book banning efforts seek to scrub the existence of racism, patriarchy, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination and oppression from the historical narratives presented in social studies classrooms. In doing so, such measures threaten the autonomy and professionalism of educators, provide young people with a distorted and whitewashed worldview, and limit teachers' ability to connect with and protect their students. These systemic and systematic efforts to bridle teacher independence and innovation are not limited to the content of the curriculum, but extend to the composition and delivery of that curriculum as well.

The Danielson Rubric

New York State offers one example of this development in the implementation of the Danielson rubric for teacher evaluation. This rubric, adapted from Charlotte Danielson's (Danielson Group, n.d.) "Framework for Teaching," is used in New York City public schools "as a formative tool to develop teacher practice as well as a rubric for use when observing and evaluating teacher practice" (WeTeachNYC, 2022). Clayton (2016) found in her analysis of the rubric that "as performance tasks are linked with high-stakes decisions, the measurement desire to increase validity and reliability necessitate the construction of low-inference rubric tools that sacrifice a complex view of teaching in favor of a behavioralist one" (Clayton, 2016, p. 97). Such instruments demand that teachers make efforts to align their pedagogical choices with reductive, prescriptive, and hierarchical rubrics that "overly focus on technique to the neglect of subject matter, context variations, and the social and moral aspects of teaching" (Valli & Rennert-Ariev 2002, p. 202).

The applied simplification and regulation of teacher practice, as found in standardized teacher evaluation tools like the Danielson rubric, combined with the associated psychosocial stress that often accompanies education (Drüge et al., 2021), the emotional and affective toll of teaching difficult histories in social studies (Epstein & Peck, 2018; Garrett, 2011/2017; Sheppard, 2010; Zembylas, 2016), and the current political landscape, which restricts social studies teachers' speech and autonomy (Pollock et al., 2022; Powell, 2021), together produce an unsustainable state for many teachers. Asimeng-Boahene (2003) writes of the burnout experienced by teachers living under authoritarian regimes, but his description of their conditions sounds remarkably similar to those faced by American teachers today: "social studies teachers feel pressure when handling controversial issues in an autocratic political system because they are likely not permitted to engage in a free analysis of major policies and established social habits" (p. 58). Moreover, social studies teachers face expectations to conform to standards shaped by neoliberal policies, to follow prescribed curriculum (Apple, 1999), and to prepare students for the increasingly challenging task of "thinking like historians" (Barton & Avery, 2016; Seixas, 2015; van Hover et al., 2016). In this atmosphere, teacher creativity is disciplined, and surveillance of teacher behavior is persistent and oppressive.

Indeed, in a study of public school educators in Chicago, Lipman (2009) "found that teachers experienced accountability as a system of intense monitoring and punishment [in which] teachers were scrutinized for their adherence to a scripted curriculum and test preparation" (p. 161). This "authoritarian system of state monitoring bred powerlessness" among teachers (p. 161). Such feelings of futility can in turn influence levels of "emotional exhaustion, perception of achievement and academic satisfaction," with a direct link drawn between "stress, burnout, and job satisfaction" (Briones et al., 2010, p. 116). The confluence of these factors, coupled with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the epidemic of school shootings, has produced a breaking point in many teachers contributing to the looming teacher shortage (Loewus, 2021) and has instigated a national conversation about the essential value of social studies education in a democracy (Collins & Bessinger, 2022; Gorbea & Jennings, 2022; Packer, 2022). However, until these conversations bear fruit in the form of policy change, teacher educators, administrators, and other individuals who are in a position to support classroom teachers must take steps to support teacher's efforts to reinvest in the field while also protecting teachers' psycho-emotional well-being and guarding against teacher burnout.

What the recent legislation and policies described above fail to account for is the inherent creativity that accompanies that practice of teaching—while teachers might choreograph their lessons, I argue that it is often the on-the-spot rejection of that planning that yields the most satisfying experience for both educator and learner. To this end, thinking with theory, in particular rhizoanalysis (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), offers a way to reconceptualize how teachers produce, use, modify, and sometimes discard curricular materials. Indeed, in order to support teacher success and retention, rethinking how teachers' approach the production and implementation of curriculum has the possibility of increasing educator investment, satisfaction, and commitment to the profession.

Thinking with Theory

The description above admittedly paints a rather dismal picture of the current state of affairs for social studies teachers. And until (or if) the political terrain shifts in ways that create space for

social studies teachers to freely explore the topics essential to their practice *and* democratic society, many teachers will continue to feel the pressure to regulate their speech and action in the classroom. However, thinking with theory may provide a means to recast some of these conditions in ways that can reanimate teacher joy in these trying times. Joy—feelings of pleasure and happiness—is an important but somewhat neglected concept around which to frame teacher satisfaction. Joy is a powerfully motivational and optimistic emotional state. It is simultaneously grounded in nostalgia and anticipation and may offer a reprieve from the emotional exhaustion generated by factors beyond a teacher's control. Joy in teaching might be found in learning, creating, or enacting. It can also be found in relationships with students and colleagues. Poetter (2006) reminds us that, for teachers, "joy fills the synapses between alienation and community" (p. 272), and he maintains that "joy should be a fundamental value and end in our work as teachers" (p. 286). However, he also acknowledges that "the educational process in our public schools has taken on such a joyless tenor for teachers and students on so many fronts" (p. 273), which he attributes, in part, to "the pressures, demands, and realities of standardized testing and curriculum" (p. 272). Likewise, Briones et al. (2010) argue in their study of teacher self-efficacy and job satisfaction that "in relation to emotional exhaustion and professional achievement, they both displayed the expected relationship with job satisfaction, in other words, a negative relationship between emotional exhaustion and satisfaction, and positive between satisfaction and the perception of professional achievement" (p. 121). The question is: how can social studies teachers feel the joy produced by professional achievement within a system that persistently strips them of their professional autonomy through rigid rubrics, evaluations, and censorship? One answer may be thinking with a theory that embraces uncertainty, complexity, and messiness.

bell hooks (1991) argued that the act of theorizing can liberate thinking, though she acknowledged that theory has often been used as a mechanism of gatekeeping within the academy. In her 1991 article, "Theory as a Liberatory Practice," hooks writes that

> it is evidence that one of the many uses of theory in academic locations is in the production of an intellectual class hierarchy where the only work deemed truly theoretical is work that is highly abstract, jargonistic, difficult to read, and containing obscure references that may not be at all clear or explained. (p. 4)

Indeed, theory can sometimes be used to "divide, exclude, keep at a distance," or even "silence, censor, and devalue" certain voices (p. 4). Conversely, theory can also be used to unlock understanding and give us language to capture particular experiences. hooks (1991) writes that she "came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within" (p. 1). She suggests that theory provides us with the ability to reimagine or explain a set of conditions. It can help to illuminate hidden variables, expose connections or gaps in the relationship between entities, shift horizons of expectation, and destabilize systems that appeared, at first glance, permanently affixed.

It is important to acknowledge here that hooks is writing from a place of intersecting identities that have been historically and violently oppressed and marginalized, and so her use of theory as a way to explain existence within a matrix of oppressive systems should not be decontextualized. However, hooks' perspective on theory is helpful in reckoning with the current context facing social studies teachers in the U.S., many of whom are struggling to endure at the center of a maelstrom produced by neoliberal, conservative, cultural, and emotional demands. Thinking with theory can be one way to take back some agency within this tempest.

The Rhizome and Rhizoanalysis

The notion of the rhizome, as conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), has been deployed in educational research to theorize educator and student learning and thinking. The rhizome has been used in considering preservice and novice teacher learning (Graham & Selmer, 2011; Strom, 2015; Strom & Martin, 2017), educational doctoral research (Cumming, 2014), teacher education (Adams, 2021; Hordvik et al., 2019; Marble, 2012; McKay et al., 2014), professional development (Sherman & Teemant, 2020), and pedagogical strategies and interventions (Adams & Kerr, 2021; Zembylas, 2007), among others. The rhizome is a useful lens through which educational researchers can interpret what goes on in a classroom, while also presenting practicing teachers with a way to remap the landscape of their own approaches to complex topics.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) challenge us to re-envision the way that we perceive ourselves, our history, our interior and exterior lives, our sense of time and space, and our relationships with those organisms and materials around us, both human and non-human. They seek to transform our thinking through introducing us to a paradigm that eschews binaries and dualities and embraces instability, unpredictability, evolution and devolution, symbiosis and fracture, and fragmentation and connectivity. Reading their book, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, can sometimes feel profoundly unsettling. This is the intention and by design. Their writing does not follow a linear progression arranged along unifying themes or predictable patterns. Their prose sometimes meanders and sometimes radiates intensity, at times circling back on itself and then breaking into a new train of thought or veering in an unexpected direction. In this way, they want their readers to experience the rhizome through the book. The book is a rhizome. Pivotal to the theory of the rhizome is the rejection of Western epistemologies that seek to explain phenomena through notions of reason and logic, those that center human experience and exceptionalism and organize concepts into binaries/dualities. Deleuze and Guattari argue that humanist, positivist, and even critical epistemologies inhibit our capacity to perceive relationships and phenomena not readily apparent if only interpreted through our socialized and reductive normative structures. This arborescent model (trunk, branches, and roots that lead to the construction of binaries, dichotomies, and hierarchies) blinds us to new ways of understanding our world and producing knowledge in unpredictable and unanticipated ways. Rhizoanalysis "involves experimenting with how to move between things in ways that nullify beginnings and endings" (Alvermann, 2000, p. 116) to allow for "strangling the roots of the infamous tree" (Alvermann, 2000, p. 117). Masny (2013) describes the rhizome in this way:

> A rhizome has horizontal shoots that take off in unpredictable directions. It has no beginning, no end. It spills out in the middle. For Deleuze, a rhizome functions to disrupt and to create change/becoming. (p. 339)

While rhizoanalysis offers qualitative researchers an innovative approach to data collection and analysis that can yield new insights that productively destabilize interpretation and offer an alternative to rigid, hierarchical, and linear methodologies (Masny 2013), I argue that rhizomatic thinking can also help educators to reorient their practice to resist hegemonic and prescriptive frameworks. In the following section, I will bring the rhizomatic framework into conversation with Berlant's (2011) notion of "cruel optimism" as a way to reconceptualize lesson planning.

Cruel Optimism and the Rhizome

In her book, *Cruel Optimism*, cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2011) engages with Deleuze and Guattari's critique of arborescent and hierarchical epistemologies through interrogating and problematizing the classical concept of the "good life" (Hardt, 2015, p. 215). Cruel optimism describes the attachments that we have to objects that promise a "good life," but that actually prevent us from flourishing in the present. Berlant argues that such attachments lead to the exhausting and ultimately corrosive labor of striving to reproduce a fantasy of what we imagine is the good life. This aspirational and unattainable fantasy produces the ordinary as an object of suffering and reconstructs good life histories as being void of trauma. These shared histories are only amplifications of local or individual history but become "delaminated" from the personal or local, circulating "as evidence of something shared" (Berlant, 2011, p. 12). According to Berlant (2011), the reflexive definition and perception of your lived experience is constantly shaped by your "inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that this time, nearness to this thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (p. 2). Hope and optimism, in this way, appear similar. We set goals for ourselves and work toward those goals in the hope that we incrementally improve our outcomes. This kind of optimism, however, is an attachment to an outcome that has been forged by the neoliberal illusion of the good life, which is constituted from social, economic, political, cultural systems that intensify and magnify the experiences of a few and, in doing so, create an unattainable standard for the many.

According to Berlant (2011), we process the historical present through intuition, or "the contact zone between the affects and their historical contexts of activity, a zone of inference that, as it encounters the social, will always shift according to the construction of evidence and explanation" (p. 79). If affect is the unsorted, unassigned data we experience through the sensorium, then intuition is a tool that transforms affect into emotion. Trauma serves a similar function—giving shape and imposing meaning onto the amorphous affect circulating within our bodies. In examining the role of trauma and intuition, Berlant presents the ways in which "genres" of understanding and process can lead us to develop our objects of cruel optimism. She writes that "the traumatic happening intensifies the nervous system of worlds and focuses persons on the sense that what's going on in front of them is history in the making" (p. 79). Trauma "shatters the biostory that was a foundation for what gets taken for granted about life's historical self-continuity" (p. 80). If trauma and intuition both shuttle our affects into normative habits of the mind, then can they also perhaps disrupt those pathways and reassign our affects to new attachments. There is opportunity to acknowledge our visceral response and reassign, or recode, its pathway and, ultimately, destination.

A rhizomatic framework offers us a way to shatter familiar refrains or genres in order to generate new understandings and liberate us from narratives that bind us to oppressive systems. In short, the concept of the rhizome can help us to overcome our attachment to objects of cruel optimism. A key feature of the rhizome is the principle of cartography, the opposite of which is tracing. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), "the map has to do with performance, whereas the tracing always involves alleged 'competence'" (p. 13). A tracing "has organized, stabilized, neutralized the multiplicities," "and when it thinks it is reproducing something else it is in fact only reproducing itself" (p. 13). In other words, the cartography of the rhizome allows for unlimited points of juncture and disjuncture. While a tracing reinforces normative structures, a mapping opens new horizons. In terms of teaching social studies, the concept of mapping invites us to think about how difficult histories can serve to "nuance, and/or complicate long standing

metanarratives" about our nation (Salinas, 2022 p. x). According to Salinas (2022), "intentional interruption through the teaching of difficult histories requires an understanding of the flawed dominant narrative and its intent to dehumanize" (p. x). Interruption is destabilizing; it reveals multiplicities and yields fertile unpredictability. Social studies teachers who seek to trouble dominant narratives that have "gone awry" (Salinas, 2022 p. x) may find that the required interruptions are incompatible with the tools being used to evaluate teacher practice—namely, rigid rubrics and lesson plans.

Lesson Plans as Objects of "Cruel Optimism

Lesson plans can be objects of cruel optimism. A lesson plan is part of a lesson segment, is part of a unit, is part of a semester, is part of a course, is part of a way of thinking about ourselves, our world, our place in the world. A lesson plan is a narration of a linear movement through time—one activity moves to the next and to the next. Lesson plans drive us through a series of incremental goals that construct scaffolding that enables the learner to access the next goal and then the next, climbing up through the hierarchy of skills and content until critical analysis or complex understanding has been achieved. A lesson plan, separated from a segment or unit, presents the best version of what could be. These descriptions represent attachments to the neoliberal concept of the good life. Our lessons allow our students to race to the top, to conquer standardized tests, to accumulate points, master skills, accomplish goals, and attain dreams. If we execute the objectives of a lesson plan like conductors of an academic symphony, we will not only enable our students to be the best versions of themselves, but will also be deemed "good teachers." If an administrator walks into such a classroom, certainly the educator observed will earn a "highly effective" on the Danielson rubric!

If, though, a lesson plan is indeed an object of cruel optimism, there is something about it that prevents us from flourishing in the present. If the lesson plan we have constructed veers off course, is interrupted or disrupted, falls flat or fails to inspire (or at least engage), the teacher may experience feelings of anxiety or disappointment. Any seasoned educator knows that this latter scenario is far more common than the former. If an administrator enters the classroom during one such episode, the teacher may drop to the wearisome designation of "effective"—or even the dreaded "unsatisfactory." This is not a suggestion that lesson plans serve no practical purpose and should be stricken from teacher practice. However, the lesson plan cast as a blueprint that demands fidelity of implementation (O'Donnell, 2008), which seeks to produce empirical evidence that assigns value to both students and teachers based on neoliberal standards of achievement, used as an implement of surveillance, and containing the specter of punishment in the form of negative teacher evaluation might contribute to the production of educators who feel disaffected and disassociated from the profession.

The Rhizome as a Way Out

In conceiving the topic for this article, I floated my conceptualization to a few teachers in my professional circle, and our conversations crystallized my own thinking around the way that the concept of the rhizome can be liberatory for teachers caught up in and disciplined by systems of regulation. Before delving into my discussions with Christie and Amelia, it is important to note

that this is not a qualitative study, though the moments explored here occurred during data collection for a larger qualitative project. My purpose in writing this article is not to make prescriptive assertions. Rather, in thinking through the concepts presented here, I excavated my own fourteen-year career teaching social studies in New York City, and brought these musings to my peers to see if their experiences aligned with my own.

Christie is a teacher at a mid-sized school in New York City. She teaches three mainstream U.S. History classes and two Advanced Placement Government classes. The school serves a racially, economically, and academically diverse population, and Christie has taught there for sixteen years. Amelia has taught social studies for seventeen years at a large and academically high-achieving high school, also in New York City. She currently teaches Global Studies. Despite the difference in setting and student body, both teachers expressed similar experiences when discussing their curricular construction and instruction process. During each conversation, I briefly described the rhizome and how I interpreted its application to the process of lesson planning and subsequent instruction. Both teachers became animated during my description, nodding heads and uttering affirmations while I spoke.

In my talk with Christie, she provided a detailed narration of a lesson in which she deviated from the plan she had painstakingly constructed prior to the class. Christie's supervisor requires teachers to produce lesson plans that follow a fairly prescribed and rigid format: content and skill objectives, aligned state and Common Core standards, a detailed list of timed activities, formative and summative assessments or checks for understanding, differentiations and accommodations for students with different abilities, and required materials. When I asked whether elements of Christie's lesson plans were pre-populated, she confirmed that certain components, such as standards and differentiation, were typically copied from lesson to lesson rather than generated anew. When I asked if she was mindful of the Danielson rubric when planning a lesson, she said it was always in the back of her mind. Each term, her assistant principal, who conducted observations and teacher evaluations, would identify a particular part of the rubric as a term focus and would look for evidence of pedagogical strategies that satisfied Danielson's expectations. For instance, if the AP's focus was Domain 3c of the Danielson Framework, she would look to see if:

> Virtually all students are engaged in challenging content through well-designed learning tasks and activities that require complex thinking by students. The teacher provides suitable scaffolding and challenges students to explain their thinking. There is evidence of some student initiation of inquiry and student contributions to the exploration of important content; students may serve as resources for one another. The lesson has a clearly defined structure, and the pacing of the lesson provides students the time needed not only to intellectually engage with and reflect upon their learning but also to consolidate their understanding.

As a teacher educator and educational researcher, certainly nothing in the passage above strikes me as bad practice. Moreover, the elements of this component reflect some strong pedagogical practices that I encourage my own students—pre-service teachers in a social studies methods course—to employ. Thus, it is not necessarily the content of the rubric that is problematic. Rather, it is its application as an institutional tool of evaluation that produces lesson plans as objects of cruel optimism.

The lesson plan for the day that Christie narrated for me was detailed to the point of being exhaustive. Every minute of the period was accounted for, with additional layers of contingency in case an element of the carefully choreographed lesson veered off course. When asked about the anticipatory nature of her plan, Christie related that much of the plan's construction was to satisfy the rubric used by her administration for purposes of teacher evaluation. Indeed, veers regularly occurred, and those moments both contained and produced joy and excitement for Christie and her students. In Christie's own words:

> *I was teaching about third parties and how it's so difficult for them to become relevant in general elections. We got into the 2016 election, and the kids wanted to see the Libertarian Party platform. They started researching the platform, looking into different topics and discussing their opinions. One student said, "This isn't even possible! It's like a utopian society!" They thought many elements of the platform were absolutely ridiculous (like eliminating income tax, etc.).*
>
> *This actually happened again yesterday! I was teaching about primaries and asked them whether they agreed with the idea of closed primaries. It turned into 15 minutes of heated debate (I allotted for a 2 min turn and talk). A few kids thought it was helpful to keep only party members involved in the decision-making process, and most thought it wasn't fair and excluded a huge portion of the electorate.*
>
> *If any admin had come in my room, I would have been hit on the Danielson rubric for timing … . I think it's the point about planning/pedagogy … for not finishing the lesson in time … which both times I did not.*

Thinking through this moment, I was reminded of hooks (1994) *Teaching to Transgress*, in which she writes,

> To enter classroom settings … with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement, was to transgress. Not only did it require movement beyond accepted boundaries, but excitement could not be generated without a full recognition of the fact that there could never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching practices. Agendas had to be flexible, had to allow for spontaneous shifts in direction. (p. 7)

Putting Christie's expressions of joy and excitement into conversation with the feelings of cruel optimism induced by her lesson plan illuminate how a rhizomatic framework might offer a way to diffuse teacher anxiety and encourage teacher flourishing.

Christie's on-the-spot veer from her original plan illustrates several elements of the rhizome, but in particular the notions of "asignifying rupture" and "line of flight" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 10, 11). Christie's students ruptured her lesson. They "broke" from the plan, "shattered at a given spot," and "started up again" on a new line (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9). Her objectives in the first example—a lesson about third parties—transformed into something unanticipated but also related, also existing in the rhizome. Her students then took a "line of flight" in relating the Libertarian party platform to that of a utopia—using the new metaphor to interrogate the realistic possibility of the ideological underpinnings of Libertarianism. As the plan was fractured, the broken pieces began to take on new meaning—what is a utopia? To what extent does a political platform align to the lived experiences of students in a classroom? How do we reconcile the tension between political promises and outcomes? Both students and teacher were

invested in the process of "becoming" through the "circulation of intensities" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 10) that flowed through the classroom. The uncertainty and destabilization of the veer produced new meaning that brought teacher and student together, blurring hierarchies through the process of collaborative discovery.

In my next conversation, Amelia discussed her process of lesson planning during remote learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Like so many teachers, the abrupt shift to online instruction forced Amelia to reimagine her approach to teaching social studies, both because virtual instruction requires different pedagogical strategies and because her students were grappling with the associated stresses of learning from home during a pandemic. Additionally, without the expectation of preparing students for a high-stakes assessment, Amelia expressed that she felt unbound from many of the structures that previously shaped her lesson planning process. Considering the unprecedented circumstances facing both teacher and student, she made the decision to discard the curriculum she had taught for years and start anew. Embracing this novel flexibility, she described the experience of lesson planning during the pandemic as arranging "a translucent multidimensional floating puzzle." For instance, Amelia related that she rejected the progress-oriented and chronological structure she had used to frame her freshmen Global Studies class for many years. Instead, she selected a few concepts she felt were often uncritically accepted in the official curriculum found in standards and textbooks and built new lessons around interrogating these ideas. A new unit on the notion of "civilization" spanned space and time, investigated common assumptions that underpinned the word itself, and drew upon diverse and underexplored examples from world history. Importantly, Amelia shared that the day-to-day, minute-to-minute plans that made up her unit often shifted direction in response to student interest and thinking. She countered the precarity of the pandemic with curriculum development that flowed dynamically, lessons shooting off in unpredictable directions and reattaching to comfortable narratives in disruptive and compelling ways.

Amelia's description of her lesson planning process and products intimates a reconfiguration of thinking that eschews linear or hierarchical structure, instead conceptualizing her lessons rhizomatically. Her "translucent multidimensional floating puzzle" is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's description of rhizoanalysis: "you start by delimiting a first line consisting of circles of convergence around successive singularities; then you see whether inside that line new circles of convergence establish themselves, with new points located outside the limits and in other directions" (p. 11). The crisis precipitated by COVID-19 created conditions that allowed Amelia to engage in more satisfying and generative lesson planning because of the elimination of structures that mediated and surveilled her thinking.

A third example of the potential of applying a rhizomatic framework to the enactment of a lesson plan comes from recent research by Fitzpatrick and von Hover (2022). Though their inquiry sought to answer very different questions than are the focus of this article, reading their work revealed compelling evidence of the benefits of eschewing a rigid plan in favor of a rhizomatic approach. In a study aimed at exploring how interrogation of secondary sources can help teachers discuss difficult knowledge and histories, Fitzpatrick and von Hover analyzed the pedagogical and content choices of a veteran social studies teacher, Lance Weisand. In his reflections, Weisand expressed a desire to challenge mythologized historical interpretations that reify master narratives and allow teachers to avoid contentious topics related to "race, gender, ethnicity, religion, class, immigration, sex" (Weisand et al., 2022, p. 180). Of note in their analysis of Weisand's style, Fitzpatrick and von Hover underscore his pedagogical fluidity and dynamism. Rather than scripting his student's encounters with difficult knowledge, Weisand allowed his

lessons to flow rhizomatically, embracing the ruptures and lines of flight that emerged during discussions. They observed that Weisand saw an "unplanned moment to discuss with students the complexities of history" (p. 184). Instead of adhering to a lesson plan that showed clear alignment to a set of standards or a rubric, Weisand responded to the students in his classroom—their affects and emotions drove his on-the-spot choices more than a lesson plan that promised realization of content and skill objectives.

The examples of Christie, Ameila, and Lance Weisand bring to mind Poetter's (2006) contention that joy in teaching emerges out of authentic connections between teachers and students. Poetter calls us to "make the subject matter come alive in the lives of students as a starting place for thinking about and planning for and delivering curriculum and teaching and for connecting us as human beings" (p. 285). Instead of acting as an object of cruel optimism, these teachers' rhizomatic lesson plans continuously reinvest both them and their students in the process of (co)creating, rather than accepting, knowledge. They embrace the joyful and generative unpredictability produced by multiple bodies and minds sharing space in a classroom.

Concluding Thoughts: Teaching as a Project

The proliferation of highly scripted "teacher proof" lesson plans (Fogo et al., 2019) and the explosion of educational resources offered, for a price, by "teacherpreneurs" on sites like Teachers Pay Teachers (Harris et al., 2021) underscores the significance placed on the materiality of instruction—the paper or document that the lesson exists upon—rather than the minds and bodies of the teacher and students enacting the lesson in space and time. Without wholly discarding the object of the lesson plan—indeed, a plan of some sort is certainly necessary, especially for novice teachers—reimagining the purpose and attached significance of the lesson plan could reinvest teachers in the *project of teaching*. The theory of the rhizome may offer teachers, teacher educators, and those who evaluate teacher practice an opportunity to liberate thinking about lesson planning in order to transform the plan from an object of cruel optimism into a productive and emancipatory practice.

Maxine Greene (1987) argued that the longevity of teachers who are fully invested and engaged in the profession is reliant on a shift away from educators functioning as "'good daughters' … middle managers, transmission belts, or complaint members of a 'team'" (p. 181). Greene explains:

> I should think that a teacher in touch with his or her own interrogations, confrontations with deficiencies, and lived reality would project situations in which students would be empowered to make sense of their own lived situations–to "name," as it were, their worlds. To be enabled to name one's world is to be offered a range of languages or symbol systems or even disciplines to use as perspectives through which to see … . To be told to take part in a tightening of requirements and a raising of standards across the board, no matter what the cost in failure and drop-out, should convey a feeling of personal frustration, if not despair. It is when people become aware in this subjective fashion of lacks, especially those that are covered up with affable, correct, or reassuring talk, that they are moved to repair, to surpass, to choose a flight and a leap ahead, a refusal and a realization. (p. 186)

Greene encourages us to embrace teaching as a project that is ongoing, fluid, constantly evolving, and in a continuous state of disassemblage and reassemblage. Teaching as a project imbues the teacher with agency and autonomy, which has been shown to increase "teacher job satisfaction, professionalism, and empowerment" (Girard et al. 2020, p. 232). Prioritizing teacher autonomy also creates a classroom experience that is more responsive and inclusive of student diversity and mindful of "dismantling past oppressive structures" (Dunn et al. 2021, p. 218). Reorganizing our conceptualization of the lesson plan to allow for the possibility of rhizomatic thinking and action can empower social studies educators and their supervisors to embrace those moments when an asignifying rupture or a line of flight produces unexpected and fruitful outcomes. Such on-the-spot transformations should not cause anxiety—they should not prevent a teacher from flourishing in the present because of the fear of not attaining a goal or standard. A lesson plan should be a map, not a tracing. Those of us who teach, supervise, and support teachers must remember that a lesson plan as a map works best when it "fosters connections between fields, the removal of blockages," and "provides multiple entryways" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p. 2) to engage and invest both student and teacher.

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