

Rhizomania: Five Provocations on a Concept

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“The rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automation, defined solely by a circulation of states” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 23)

Akin to the vertiginous growth potentials of the weed, the concept of the *rhizome* has begun to proliferate throughout the fields of educational philosophy, curriculum theorizing, and arts-based research. Constituting an image that shares fidelity with both complexity and post-structural theorizing, the *rhizome* has been deployed as a foil against transcendence and essentialism, the Western metaphysical tradition of logocentrism, and the structural immutability of the modernist subject. In its deployment within the field of arts-based research, the *rhizome* has been mobilized as a metaphor for the complex subjectivity of the artist, the act of transformational creativity, and as an image of hybridic space peripheral to State control. In each of these configurations, the *rhizome* is deployed as an image of liberation and freedom, dynamically warding against the sedimentation of life into taxonomic orders and moribund habits of representational thought. Insofar as it is conceptualized as a vehicle of liberation or an image of processural renewal, it is not hyperbole to suggest that we are today forging a *romance with the rhizome*.

The aforementioned tactics are undoubtedly significant to the particular problems of contemporary education and in general, one finds it relatively easy to sympathize with the image of the *rhizome* as a conceptual tool for relaunching thought from under the legacy of representation, that is, the predilection to tether difference to an image of what *already is*. Yet, the deployment of *rhizomatics* in much contemporary curriculum and arts-based theorizing concomitantly marks a *co-optation* of the concept that

ostensibly divests it of its most radical political and ethical import. At risk here is not simply the reduction of '*rhizomatics*' into yet another educational cliché, but perhaps more significantly, the domestication of the concept within the *a priori* fantasies of liberation, creativity, and plurality. To fall into either trap is to misapprehend the radical potential of the rhizome for thinking an ontology of difference.

Provocation One: The Rhizome is not, in Itself, Libratory

The libratory conceptualization of the rhizome must be reconnected to a caveat. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write, the kind of smooth or non-hierarchical spaces created by the rhizome are "not in themselves libratory...[n]ever believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us" (p. 500). As it is conceptualized in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), the rhizome is not simply an image of liberation. Rather, Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize the rhizome in a manner that is already populated by potentials for stratification. While heterodox elements might very well be connected 'rhizomatically', as in the case of minoritarian groups assembling in collective protest, this does not mean that they will not reconstitute their enunciation upon some microfascism or tyrannical image of life. In Deleuzeguattarian terms, the rhizome is populated by lines of flight (deterritorialization) as well as lines of 'territorialization' by which flows become halted, ordered, and attributed. As Deleuze and Guattari write, "there exists tree or root structures in rhizomes; conversely, a tree branch or root division may begin to burgeon into a rhizome" (p. 15). Neither the rhizome (the potential for things to deterritorialize and enter into new assemblages) or the root-tree (the stratification of things into orders, taxonomies, or structures) is primary. Against the celebration of deterritorialization observed in some contemporary curricular and arts-based deployments of rhizomatics, Deleuze and Guattari advise caution. Sometimes more stability is what is required, other times, "a little more flow...or escape...is needed to shake up an overly rigid system" (Bonta & Protevi, 2004, p. 83). The general dismissal of this nuance has led to the general misapprehension of the rhizome as the opposite of stratification, leading to the production of a dichotomy that would pit rhizomatics against the image of homogeneity and totality Deleuze and Guattari dub 'arborescence'. In the production of this binary machine, educational research fails to adequately theorize the complex 'knotting' of rhizomatic and arborescent forces, amounting to what Gregoriou dubs an uncritical "cut-and-paste" 'Deleuzianism' (p. 101).

Provocation Two: The Rhizome as a Handmaiden of Neo-liberal Capitalism

Social machines feed off the contradictions they give rise to, on the crisis they provoke, on the anxieties they *engender*, and on the infernal operations they regenerate. Capitalism has learned this, and has ceased doubting itself (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983, p. 151).

Conjoined to the mobilization of the rhizome as an image of complication and plurality persists a more insidious fidelity to the logic of neo-liberalism. That is, the potential of

the rhizome to desediment and send territories into flight bears marked similarity to the deterritorializing powers of neo-liberalism, the machinery of which functions precisely by decoding and capturing social flows. For example, the contemporary commoditization of sex first requires that codes surrounding courtship become decoded, hence removing those social mores and local rituals that would block the circulation of sex as a diffuse and ambient commodity, available anywhere at any time. While the rhizome has been conceptualized as a corollary of difference in much curriculum and arts-based research, difference itself is insufficient for thinking liberation. The neo-liberal capitalist apparatus does not fear *difference*, but rather, fears its cessation. It is in this vein that the mobilization of *rhizomatics* for the multiplication of subjectivity becomes equally problematic, since contemporary neo-liberalism requires the kind of pliable, dynamic, and itinerant subject celebrated by many contemporary curricularists and arts-based researchers. In this vein, such pluralist subjectivities as the *artist-teacher-researcher* are not as much radical as they are perfectly optimized for a socio-economic vehicle that requires such post-structural, self-styling *schizo-identities*. As an operation of “variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots” the rhizome must be politically reconnected to the desires of neo-liberalism in an effort to mobilize *becomings* capable of (temporarily) escaping or *infecting* forces of neo-liberal capture. Toward this, curricularists and arts-based researchers must begin to link the rhizome alongside its Deleuzeguattarian counterpart: the *war-machine*. As Deleuze and Guattari aver, the *war-machine* operates as a subterranean counterforce to the stratifying powers of the State, emerging contemporarily in the figure of the computer hacker, urban guerilla, and terrorist.

Provocation Three: The Rhizome is Neither Model or Metaphor

“A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 25). As Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize it, the rhizome is an asignifying system. *Intermezzo*, it has neither a germinal origin or teleological image toward which its actualization aspires. In this way, the rhizome might be thought as a *body without image*, since if there is any *way* of composing a rhizome, it is via the creation of a conjunction “and...and...and...” (p. 25). In this vein, it becomes possible to speak of a rhizomatic model only once it has become abstracted from processes of conjunction and territorialized as a stable image. Yet, this is not exactly correct, for as Deleuze and Guattari remark on the rhizomatic quality of ants, the attempt to capture rhizomatic movements via the imposition of blockages simply bifurcates the ant-rhizome onto new lines of movement. Simply, the rhizome cannot be captured as a specific object since it inheres a virtual multiplicity of lines that might be operationalized. To speak in terms of a *rhizomatic model* is to no longer understand the connective potential of the rhizome, but rather, to already presume what rhizomatic connections are possible within a particular milieu. As an asignifying system, we do not yet know what will be made of a rhizome: Will it instantiate something radically new, prove deadly, or fail outright? To create a rhizome is an experiment that must be risked rather than an image to be traced. For example, the kinds of connections created by a

heroin user might result in the creation of an exceptional work of conscious altering art, a fatal overdose, or a 'bad trip'. The connection of revolutionary cells in an act of counter-cultural production might produce a sustained enunciation or disband prematurely. *We do not yet know*. In lieu of composing a model for rhizomatic thought, Deleuze and Guattari issue an *art of caution*. When one creates a becoming, it must be composed carefully. "You don't do it with a sledgehammer" Deleuze and Guattari write, "you use a very fine file" (p. 160). *A rhizome can be a dangerous thing*.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the rhizome is thought as a process of material connection in which a machine (such as a bicycle, for example) is connected to another via a process of conjunction. When a human connects with a bicycle in a conventional way, certain potentials of both become operationalized. To connect a bicycle to an art gallery, as Duchamp did, creates a very different kind of rhizome. In this brief example, what a thing *is* can only be known via the material connections into which it enters. In this vein, the Deleuzeguattarian concept of the rhizome cannot be exclusively metaphorical, since to conceptualize it as an effect of language is to steal away its material import. Rather, Deleuze and Guattari describe the rhizome as *metamorphic*. That is, rhizomatic connection augments the powers and potentials of the things connected. A guitar player who connects with a guitar operationalizes particular potentials for expression, while a guitar fed through an stack of amplifiers is operationalized differently than one played acoustically. The composition of the rhizome is intimate to the connections created. This is what it means for the rhizome to eclipse metaphor and become *metamorphic*. In turn, such *metamorphosis* marks the practical materialism of rhizomatics. The rhizome is not an object to be known or a metaphoric representation of something else. It is a practical matter of creation.

Provocation Four: On not Taking it Personally

In Deleuzeguattarian terms, the rhizome becomes a way of thinking a decentered multiplicity without a center of emanation or point of representational reference. In this way, the rhizome becomes a productive way of thinking about the composition of packs, swarms and fuzzy machined collectives. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) aver of their rhizomatic-becoming in *Anti-Oedipus*, "since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd" (p. 3). The *schizo-subjectivity* composed by Deleuze and Guattari renders the contemporary conflation of the rhizome with modes of autobiographical research dubious. That is, insofar as autobiography is preoccupied with the interpretation and representation of the subject, it counteracts the anti-hermeneutic, non-genealogical and asignifying impulses of rhizomatic thought. Further, insofar as autobiography continues to posit a *subject* at the heart of its inquiry, it fails to grapple with the question of *how* the subject is composed in the first place. It is in this way that rhizomatics suggests that the subject is not primary, but rather, is *already* the territorialization of an *a priori chaosmos* (not-yet coded flows). Hence, to deploy the rhizome for thinking the question of subjectivity is not simply to recommence the familiar post-structural conceptualization of *multiple identities*, since this deployment has ostensibly done little to liberate the

subject from the clutches of the new world order. Rather, to create a rhizome is to experiment with a subject that can no longer be accounted for by representational (self-reflective) or identitarian (statistical or categorical) thinking. Further still, if such a thing as a *rhizomatic subjectivity* can be composed, it is one that is necessarily engaged with what might be called the *inhuman*, or rather, those potentials for the subject to enter into unnatural alliance with *what it is not*. As Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize it, the rhizome mingles signs and bodies in heterodox connection. Hence, beyond the presumption of an underlying subject to which *multiple identities* are imagined to correspond, the rhizome creates a way of thinking the subject as an acentered *interbeing* irreducible to a mythical “I” or prior object upon which the subject might reflexively meditate. As Deleuze and Guattari develop, the rhizome is never One (n), but rather, the subtraction and fleeing of a material component (n-1). It is this act of productive fleeing that Deleuze and Guattari connect to an ontology of *becoming*. Hence, rather than a platform for the reiteration of post-structuralism’s *pluralist subject*, rhizoanalysis might better be suited to understanding the ways in which the subject is connected to and capable of affecting institutional, urban, and State organizations. This is to understand the radically inhuman becomings with which the human is already folded.

Provocation Five: The ~~Third Space~~ Under Threat

Daignault (1992) warns that *third space* is itself under constant threat of reterritorialization. “Even the middle attracts new people committed to reducing it to a matter of knowledge, to a new epistemological stake” (p. 199). As Deleuze (1992) develops, contemporary society is one that is no longer organized by operations of inclusion or exclusion. Rather, we live in an age predicated upon the global decoding of borderlines and limits. While certain movements in curriculum theory and arts-based research have done much to conceptualize a liminal *third-space* oriented to overcoming dichotomous thought, it is this *third space* that is contemporarily under the greatest threat. As Daignault suggests, such a threat is figured in the desire to territorialize *third space* as a knowledge-object rather than a matter for practical composition. Yet, curriculum theorists and arts-based research must also attend to the ways in which the kinds of ‘smooth’ or decoded spaces synonymous with the rhizome have become increasingly appropriated by both State and neoliberal powers. While the former has co-opted smooth space as an aspect of its military apparatus, rendering liminal and ‘borderline’ space into a site of satellite surveillance, the latter has found fidelity with the image of the rhizome as a means of controlling the circulation of goods, people, and information within the global marketplace (Conley, 2009). In both cases, we must begin to attend to the creative powers of the rhizome as a weapon of resistance as well as endeavor to better understand how the rhizome is being operationalized in ways that remain deeply oppressive, functioning to mask the reinsertion of old ideals under the banner of progressivism.

To Create is to Resist (?)

Rhizoanalytically, we might begin ask how Korea's Cheonggyecheon was reterritorialized into the city space. That is, how did the cutting of the stream from the striated space of the city work to alter the city rhizome (flows of traffic, flows of pedestrians, flows of leisure, etc.)? The implicit question here pertains not simply to the rhizomatic character of place, but how place works rhizomatically: What is connected? How do such connections produce networks of behavior and pedagogical possibility? How do its flows and exchanges work? It is in this way that we might begin to evoke the ethical question pertaining to the way in which the rhizome is composed - a question that can only be posed along a vector of understanding of what the rhizome *does*. This, in part, is the task of what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as *schizoanalysis*.

Having posed five provocations on the use of the rhizome, it must be restated that the contemporary deployment of the rhizome in both curriculum theory and arts-based research *is not banal*. Rather, it is by operationalizing rhizomatic thinking in these fields that thought and action *might* be productively mutated into new forms of singular (yet impersonal) and collective assemblage. Following Guattari however, we must become weary of those *pseudo-creations* that fall too easily into stratified thought and the appetites of global capitalism. (Guattari, 1995). This all goes to say that for as much as the rhizome constitutes a weapon for revolutionary thought, it can be made poorly. *To create is to resist*, Deleuze and Guattari provoke, for creation runs along a different line than that of representation. However, we must be cautious as to what resists in our creation. Perhaps what is most dangerous today are the appeals to deterritorialization that function to reinsert old hegemonies under the guise of difference, hence maintaining the investment of thought within preestablished circuits of power. It is in such a vein that both curriculum theory and arts-based research might mobilize a mode of rhizoanalysis more adequate to registering the internal and external limits ascribed to pedagogical thinking. Put differently, our task as researchers must begin to address what *creativity* preserves and whether such conservation is sufficient for the production of a life not yet anticipated by the desires of the current socio-political order.

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