# Hypertext as an Expression of the Rhizomatic Self

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## ABSTRACT
Developments in the philosophical and social science literature around narrative and identity are seeing the emergence of an understanding of the Self as rhizomatic. Rhizomatics in narrative form can be conceptualized as hypertext. In this position paper, we aim, from a social work perspective, to lay out some of the strengths of conceptualizing the self through a rhizomatic hypertextual narrative, helping to resolve the agency/structure problems we find in the literature on the dialogical self by accounting for context, accounting for multiplicity, providing a metaphor for distant and proximal memory, and allowing for shared nodes where individual lines of flight cross.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors
A.0 [General] Biographies/autobiographies

## General Terms
Theory

## Keywords
Narrative, rhizomatics, hypertext, identity

## 1. INTRODUCTION
There is a large and ever growing literature on the relationship between narrative and the Self. Writings at one end of the spectrum understand narrative as a valuable way of gaining insight into the nature and workings of an essentialist self that exists prior to, and independently of, narrative. This essentialist self is seen as discrete and separate from others, defined by one continuous identity. We see this model as problematic because it fails to take into account the impact that interactions with others have on the Self and suggests that the self is a-social, a-historical, and a-cultural, existing within but not shaped by the social, historical, and cultural spheres. At the other end of the spectrum is the view that narrative is constitutive and that there is no one self but a multiplicity of Selves each framed by narrative. Authors such as [14] argue that narrative is the way we understand ourselves; without narrative there is no Self to understand. Within the constitutive camp there are a number of differing positions. [8] for example, takes the view that while we each have multiple selves these are identities that we take for ourselves in differing situations. For [2] the multiples selves are functions of multiple

social and cultural forces, that is, multiple identities are imposed upon us. These positions reflect the enduring sociological tension between agency and structure. More recently we have seen the emergence of what can be termed the rhizomatic self (see, for example, [6] and [15]). In this view the self is neither single nor multiple but nomadic, that is it is continuously in flux, on the move, and is to be understood solely in its passing through. As the term suggests, the rhizomatic self is de-centered, non-linear, non-hierarchical and made up of an unlimited number of nodes that can be configured and traversed in endless combinations. In this way the rhizomatic self can incorporate interactions with others and with society, take account of context and be subject to numerous interpretations. In other words, the rhizomatic self reflects the process whereby we get to know another person. By drawing on supporting literature and presenting a personal hypertext narrative, we will argue that hypertext provides the ideal avenue for presenting and understanding the rhizomatic Self and for exploring narrative as a lens on identity.

## 2. RHIZOMATICS: BEYOND THE DIALOGICAL SELF
In thinking about the rhizomatic self we draw on four related concepts from the work of [3]: arborescence, rhizomatics, lines of articulation and lines of flight.

### 2.1 Arborescence
[3] use the term arborescent (that is, tree-like) to refer to post-Enlightenment Western ways of thinking, acting, and knowing. Such structures of thought are linear, hierarchical/vertical, fixed, and deeply rooted. In this light, the modern self is seen as the result of the process stemming from the discovery of the individual in the 11th and 12th centuries [12] and emerging from the Enlightenment possessive individualism of Locke and Hume to a humanistic conceptualization of personhood as individual self-ownership, rooted in that individual's history and personality, consistent and internally and externally coherent, and framed within a socio-legal discourse of rights and citizenship. For [3] the self is constructed within three strata: organism, significance, and subjectification. The first points to the necessity to be organized as a body, the second to being interpreted through hierarchical language, and the third to the requirement to become a clearly identifiable, singular self (see [10] for a discussion of these strata). This is a self that can be considered as a centered, individual subject that can be known, a central 'I' 'as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe; a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background …' ([4], p. 31).

## 2.2 Rhizomatics

In contrast rhizomes are non-linear, horizontal, non-centered, anarchic, and nomadic. Rhizomes are defined by their connections rather than their roots and spread horizontally across time and space. Unlike trees rhizomes do not have a defining form – they can take any shape or direction and nodes can be connected to any other nodes. Transposing this image to how personhood might be conceived we have an image that is one of multiplicity: 'This vision – the narrative self as a postmodern story – is related to the postmodern idea that the self has no stable core but is multiple, multivoiced, discontinuous, and fragmented … From this viewpoint, the self is not something that is inherently given, is fixed, or has one core. On the contrary, the self can be compared with "a buzzing beehive so agile and inconsistent, we can barely keep track of it" (Rosseel 2001)' ([15], p. 637). This self defies subjectification, that is, the requirement for a clearly defined, singular identity (see [10] above). Furthermore, personhood can be seen as a process of becoming through connectedness. It does not rest at or in any particular node of the rhizome but travels the spaces between such nodes. As such personhood can be seen as in a state of permanent becoming as nodes are added to the rhizome and new pathways navigated.

## 2.3 Lines of articulation

This notion of becoming is also central to the work of [3] who argue that rhizomes are the outcome of struggle between 'lines of articulation' and 'lines of flight'. Lines of articulation seek to establish unity, coherence, and stability through the setting of rules, establishing explanations, ordering and categorizing and defining center-periphery relations. In our chosen field, social work, one need only examine standard texts to see how such lines of articulation are presented as the crux of good practice, from assessment and eligibility criteria to care planning and review (see, for example, [13]). The processes of articulation establish the self through framing individuals as conforming to the demands and expectations of ordered classifications such as 'heterosexual parent', 'good employee' and 'effective manager', or, for our purposes here, the 'difficult to engage service user'. In the field of mental health, lines of articulation not only shape each and every diagnostic category but the very demarcations of normal and abnormal on which they are based. In politics, we can see lines of articulation in concepts of good citizenship, respect for the law and what constitutes legitimate protest.

## 2.4 Lines of flight

Lines of flight, on the other hand, seek to make connections across borders, disrupt established lines of articulation, dissemble unity and coherence and thus open up possibilities for becoming 'other' and for multiplicities (becoming variegated others). We can see these lines of flight reflected in developments such as queer theory which contests essentialist and heteronormative categories of identity, asserting that identity is multiplicitous and ever-changing, never reducible to a fixed essence [1]; crip theory which transforms '…the substantive, material uses to which queer/disabled existence has been put by a system of compulsory able-bodiedness…[and] imagining bodies and desires otherwise' ([11] p. 32); or the experimentations of Australian performance artist Stelarc who challenges notions of fixedness in arborescent thinking by breaking down traditional conceptualizations of the unity and stability of the body through performances such as his third, mechanical arm project or the grafting of a third ear onto his arm (see [5]). We see such multiplicities in narratives of transgender where the binary models of fe/male are contested as individuals attempt to define for themselves who they are, defying not only traditional gender categories but also a unified transgender identity (see, for example, [9] and [7]).

Lines of flight, or rhizomatics, focuses on multiplicities, and in terms of the self this means seeing the self as a process of becoming through association with, and relationship to, the world and Others (see [6] for a discussion of rhizomatic parenthood). The self is thus fluid, contingent and dynamic, a process or performative act made real (or unreal) in each and every interaction.

## 3. PRESENTING THE RHIZOMATIC SELF AS HYPERTEXT

Here we present an extremely simplified rhizomatic narrative to illustrate the basic theory presented above. Any 'real life' rhizome would be far more complex in terms of number of nodes and connections between nodes and such nodes would reflect personal, familial, communal, societal and discourse intersections and narratives. The rhizome presented here is designed with modest intentions - to represent tensions between different selves, in this case the military and the social work selves and to allow the reader to come to know a little of the author. It can be read in a number of ways. First, as this paper is not presented here in hypertext each numbered sub-section can be read in the order it appears. This will provide one sense of the author, though one that would not be available in a hypertext version. Second, the reader can start with the first sub-section and then possible pathways are indicated in brackets at the end of the section, giving the number of the subsection or subsections to which one might move. This will give a different reading than the first, and different readings according to which pathways are chosen. Third, one might start in any of the subsections 3.1.1 to 3.1.11 and follow the pathways indicated at the end of the subsection. Depending where one starts one will have a different reading. The rhizome, here presented in non-rhizomatic form, is illustrated in Figure 1, in which nodes represent subsections. One can then trace the possible pathways within the rhizome.
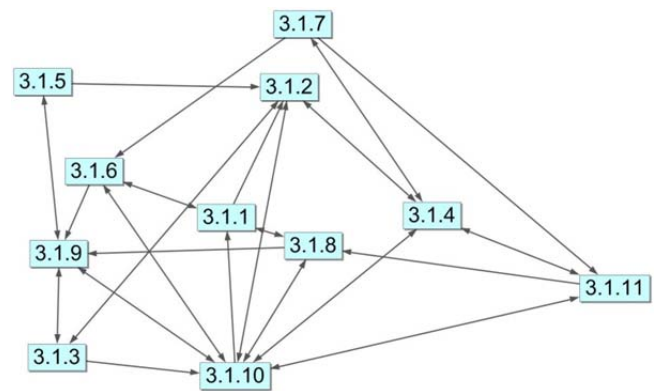
## 3.1 A hypertext narrative of the self



**Figure 1: The rhizome narrative**

*3.1.1.*

My swearing-in ceremony was a fancy affair, a one-off public affairs stunt aimed at garnering support for an increasingly unpopular military. Most new military members attend a quiet reception at their local barracks or armory; I was sworn in with hundreds of other new recruits by the Minister of National Defence, Chief of Defence Staff, and Prime Minister of Canada at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa.

We were served a full-course dinner on white tablecloths. Dignitaries toasted our patriotism and loyalty to our country. Entertainment included a demonstration of rappelling techniques from a squadron of helicopters flying overhead.

Other than commending the bravery of the troops, there was little mention of the Canadian military mission in Afghanistan. (3.1.2, 3.1.6, 3.1.8)

*3.1.2.*
I graduated from Basic Military Qualification (BMQ) training on a Friday afternoon, ranked third in my class of 58 recruits. We were a mix of regular and reserve force army, navy, and air force members.

Women were outnumbered 4:1. Of the five highest-ranked graduates, three were women; my roommate was also awarded the top shot prize for highest shooting accuracy on the range. My female platoon mates and I thrived in the adrenaline- and testosterone-fueled environment and we never let anyone question our capability as soldiers-in-training.

We all had different reasons for joining the military – adventure, travel, rebellion, money. Basic training was a summer-long mind game, instructor vs. recruit. I did well because I refused to take all of the military rah-rah seriously. When I giggled in the ranks, I completed my prescribed push-ups without complaint, but no punishment could stop me from smiling gleefully up at the drill commander as he screamed "Ordinary Seaman Hill, why are you so god damn happy to be here?"

I was seventeen years old, living away from home, making tons of new friends, and being paid a heck of a lot of money to do it. It was like summer camp for physically fit adults, and it was a blast. (3.1.3, 3.1.4, 3.1.10,)

*3.1.3.*
Excerpt from Letter to the Editor

As a member of the Canadian Forces and a full-time student, I was interested to read of the recent "die-in" protesting military recruitment on campus. I wish to contribute to the discussion on "what kind of people" are attracted to recruiting stations, and to the Canadian Forces as a whole.

In almost two years with the Canadian Forces Reserve, I have realized that it is unnecessary and inappropriate to make generalizations about the type of people attracted to a military career. At my current place of employment with Montreal's Naval Reserve unit, I work alongside people from all walks of life. Some live with their parents and attend college. Some work full-time for the military. Some have full-time jobs as professionals in various fields. The vast majority however, are students. There are students of biology, religion and political science. Others are studying architecture, engineering, or philosophy. Many are working on a professional or second degree.

In short, I am in very good company. There are many intelligent, hard-working people from diverse backgrounds working in the Canadian Forces. (3.1.2, 3.1.9, 3.1.10)

*3.1.4.*
My grandfather passed away the day before my ship sailed for a deployment to Bermuda and the Eastern Seaboard.

He had been shipped off to war at 21 years of age, the same age I was when he died.

I sent him letters every summer detailing my adventures with the Navy. When he passed away I was on the other side of the world,

thousands of miles away and unable to attend the funeral. Instead, I sent him one final letter.

When I was little I used to sit on your knee and ask you to tell me the longest story in the world - you would recount stories of your days in the Navy, postings all over the Continent and throughout the Middle East, languages learned and sites seen. I know now that you must have been filtering your stories carefully for my young ears, leaving out the horrors of war and replacing them with the beauty that you managed to see amidst the destruction.

My grandmother told me after his death that he had rarely discussed the war with anyone. (3.1.2, 3.1.7, 3.1.10, 3.1.11)

*3.1.5.*
When I moved here and enrolled in my social work degree, I transferred from the Naval Reserve unit in Montreal to the Naval Reserve unit in Saint John. As a reservist, I continue to work one night per week and over some weekends when I am not under long-term contract. For me, this has always meant that I work part-time for the military during the school year, and dedicate the summer months to full-time employment as a sailor. (3.1.2, 3.1.9)

*3.1.6.*
He was a Corporal in the infantry, a gambler trying to kick the habit before his late summer wedding. His fiancée was not aware of his expensive hobby.

He had been deployed to Afghanistan twice and was expecting a third deployment in the New Year. We worked our way through the Addictions intake sheet quickly, chatting easily about his background. I asked him if he had ever received counseling services in the past; he replied that he had. I asked him if he would be able to elaborate.

He spoke of the deaths of six friends in the same roadside attack. They were in his battalion; he was lucky to be alive. He lost his roommate and suffered from severe nightmares and flashbacks for years after. His grief counselor used exposure therapy, made him watch movies that reminded him of his dead roommate.

I sat in front of him, speechless. He was only a year or two older than me. I felt like a child play-acting at an adult's very important job. (3.1.1, 3.1.9, 3.1.10)

*3.1.7.*
The Bishop tells us: "When the boys come back/They will not be the same; for they'll have fought/In a just cause… /"We're none of us the same!" the boys reply/"For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind/ … /And Bert's gone syphilitic; you'll not find/A chap who's served that hasn't found some change."/… (Siegfried Sassoon 'They') (3.1.4, 3.1.6, 3.1.11)

*3.1.8.*
My supervisor had been working with him for months, and we had tracked his case at our weekly Mental Health meetings. She was distraught at his suicide; they grew up in the same small community and she knew his family.

A memorial service was held at the base; the father called out to his son's former co-workers, begging them to seek help for post-traumatic symptoms so often pushed aside.

The family called for a 'Highway of Heroes' to bring him home, asking only that he be given the same honour as soldiers killed in combat.

Later, talking to a number of reporters, his father repeated the same line over and over:

"He may not have been killed in Afghanistan, but Afghanistan is what killed him." (3.1.1, 3.1.9, 3.1.10)

*3.1.9.*
My decision to undertake a student placement at the local forces base was based on my desire to merge my military role with my social work role. The reality of working for the army element of the military was very different from my own experience in the navy. Real war is ugly, and it does not end when soldiers return home. I was not prepared for the inconceivable pain experienced by many of the soldiers and their families. At times I felt ill-equipped to handle my new role. My supervisors were experienced and truly incredible in their respective roles. They provided me with guidance and always seemed to have the best interest of their clients at heart. I eventually realised that even that could not prevent the inevitable tragedies that occur in this line of work.

At the mental health clinic, the military tagline 'If the soldier isn't deployable, he's not employable' is law. Social work confidentiality rules (harm to self, harm to others) go out the window; the social work officer is first and foremost a military officer, and illicit behaviours such as drug and alcohol misuse may be reported to the client's commanding officer. The responsibility to the client is replaced by the responsibility of keeping the military machine running as smoothly as possible. Over the course of my placement, I realised that I could not function as a military social work officer within this system because I would never be willing to compromise my professional ethics for the sake of the military institution. By the end of my three months at the base, it was clear to me that my social work identity was slowly replacing my military identity. (3.1.3, 3.1.5, 3.1.10)

*3.1.10.*
I stand on the parade square in a packed arena. I am in the front row, dead center. My uniform is pressed, my boots are shined, and my hair is in a tight bun at the nape of my neck. As the drillmaster orders us to stand at ease, the opening strains of Amazing Grace begin to play. The first wreath is laid on the cenotaph, borne by an elderly veteran who walks slowly and carefully with the assistance of a cane. I think of my grandfather, and feel tears well up in my eyes. I will myself to keep it together. There are thousands of people watching, television crews cross back and forth in front of our platoon.

I stare directly ahead, focusing on the shine of the parade commander's boots, the light sprinkling of dandruff lingering on our platoon officer's shoulders, the dull ache of my feet in my flat-bottomed parade boots, anything to keep my mind occupied.

The next wreath is laid by a veteran of our modern era of conflict. He walks toward the cenotaph clutching the hand of a young girl, who I imagine must be his daughter. She wears a sparkly dress and a ribbon in her hair. I think of my former clients, broken and lost upon returning home from the deadly desert. It is not the deployment that breaks them, but the return home to normalcy. They are no longer normal. Tears start to slide slowly down my cheeks. I feel one trickle into my ear.

I clench my fists at my sides, digging my fingernails into my palms. I lock my knees, then unlock them, then lock them again. I bite the inside of my cheek. I try to prevent the inevitable.

The procession of veterans and mourners continues, laying wreath after wreath on the simple stone cenotaph.

As the bugler begins The Last Post, we stand at attention and our platoon officer raises his right hand in a strong salute. Across the parade square, a WW2 veteran comes to attention and struggles to raise his right hand to his brow. He holds his salute for a few seconds, until the intense shaking of his arm forces him to lower it down to his side. After a few moments, he tries again. Up and down, up and down, he tries so hard but his body is not as strong as it was once. The last mournful notes echo in the large arena.

Tears are streaming down my cheeks, my nose is running, my composure completely lost.

A thousand thoughts compete for space in my head. (3.1.1, 3.1.2, 3.1.4, 3.1.6, 3.1.8, 3.1.9, 3.1.11)

*3.1.11*
I think of Siegfried Sassoon's poem At the Cenotaph: I saw the Prince of Darkness and his Staff/Standing bare-headed by the Cenotaph/…. /"Make them forget, O Lord, what this Memorial/Means; their discredited ideas revive/ …/Lift up their hearts in large destructive lust/ … /The Prince of Darkness to the Cenotaph/Bowed. As he walked away I heard him laugh. (3.1.4, 3.1.8, 3.1.10)

## 3.2 The advantages of hypertextual auto/biographies

This way of representing narratives of identity has certain advantages in the writing of auto/biography. First, it allows the reader to engage with the author, at least in part, in a way akin to getting to know someone face to face. In most situations we meet and get to know people part way through their lives. We meet them in certain situations and through conversations and selective self-disclosure we gradually get to understand the person. This getting to know someone is thus an interaction, what we get to know is dependent on the situation, how we interpret what we hear and see, what paths we might seek to follow (what do we ask of them), what paths the other person want to divulge and so on. In a hypertext auto/biography we can meet the person at any point and from there begin to piece together the rhizome taking our clues from the text we are given (but not determined by these) and choosing to follow up on what we think is the most desirable line of encounter.

Second, hypertext allows the author to set conditions on accessing further information, that is, to incorporate narrative agency. For example, there are things I will only tell people once I am of the opinion that they know enough to understand or appreciate the self-disclosure. In a traditional auto/biography the choice would be to include such material or exclude it. In a hypertext auto/biography it can be included but parameters set so that this material can only be access if the reader has accessed pre-requisite material or even followed a specific pathway, unlike in print texts where a reader might skip to any passage without reading what has gone before. So in our rather simplified example, it is only possible to access 3.1.5 from 3.1.9 and we might set other parameters, such as access to 3.1.5 being dependent on arriving at 3.1.9 from 3.1.6. These two advantages act together to emulate the co-construction of an auto/biography between author and reader.

At the same time, and this is the third advantage, the hypertextual approach allows for the construction of identity in agentic terms, in relation to others and in the context of social, cultural, historical, political and discoursal effects. One can construct the hypertext in such a way that the auto/biography can be read in agentic terms by establishing pathways through nodes that

represent episodes that favor individual action and agency. One can also construct pathways in which we get to know the person through the eyes of others, for example, in the film *Vagabond* [16] in which we only get to know Mona, the subject of the film, through the stories of others who encountered her. And we can construct pathways in which agency seems to be minimized, choices emerging from pathways through nodes capturing the social and other forces that frame one's thoughts, actions, decisions and so on.

A fourth advantage is that hypertext allows for multiple, transient interpretations of the author's life. As readers we all bring to the material a set of frames or schema, understandings, expectations that impact on our interpretation. Hypertext allows for these in allowing the reader to have some effect on the story being told through choice of pathway and also by challenging single interpretations through the non-linear organization of the text. Thus in our example above, how we understand 3.1.10, standing at the cenotaph, depends at least in part on whether we have first read 3.1.11, the Sassoon poem. Is the reflection at the cenotaph prompted by the poem or is the poem to take on a personal significance following the reflection? By being able to access 3.1.11 before or after 3.1.10 we are faced with an inherent uncertainty as to how to interpret 3.1.10, and whatever our interpretation, we are left with a deep sense of contingency regarding our interpretation.

A further advantage lies in the unknowability inherent within a hypertext auto/biography. The reader cannot be fully sure that s/he has understood the author, nor that s/he has accessed all there is to be known. With traditional print auto-biographies one knows whether one has read everything – there is nothing hidden, all the available text being present. With hypertext the reader can never be sure s/he has accessed all nodes, thus prompting re-engagement with the text to find new nodes and thus new understandings. And, of course, if the text is online, it is relatively easy to add to the text, creating new nodes and linkages and thus ongoing development of the rhizome.

## 4. A CONCLUDING REFLECTION

When I [CH] first decided to write a hypertext narrative I found it difficult to choose a starting point, a natural opening narrative for my own story. Several weeks later, standing on a parade square struggling to maintain composure, a thousand thoughts competed for space in my head. That became the starting point to truly understanding rhizomatic narrative. There was no need for an opening narrative. The ideas and stories swirling around in my head were unrelated…but related. They could not be expressed in a coherent, single, linear narrative, but they made perfect sense as individual stories or nodes that could then be linked together in multiple ways to provide the reader with an understanding of my social work and military identities. Writing a personal narrative in this way is intuitive and comfortable. A fleeting thought or passing idea can add to the richness and depth of the story by becoming a rhizome node. There is no need to reduce the author's existence only to important events and life-changing experiences; every event, experience and passing thought can become a piece of the identity puzzle, create a new line of flight.

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