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# Thesis as Rhizome: A New Vision for the Honors Thesis in the Twenty-First Century

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## CHANGING CONTEXTS AND THE HONORS THESIS

**R**ichly diverse, the collective undergraduate thesis work that students produce across the United States in our honors programs and colleges is cause for celebration of their individual achievements. Generally considered the founder of honors education, Frank Aydelotte centered his honors program model at Swarthmore in the early twentieth century on individual achievement (see Rinn, 2003), which has thus defined honors from the beginning; it is a cardinal honors value, and the thesis is its primary manifestation.

According to Charles Lipson's 2005 guide to thesis writing, a thesis is characterized by formal language (152), infrequent personal referencing (152), and a tight line (146). Reasoned argument structures the thesis, supported by logic and evidence (110). Lipson recommends that students choose a subject that matters to them (11) and emphasizes the process of reaching one's own conclusions (3). However, the form of the thesis is predominately expository; thus thesis writers need to maintain distance in their writing between themselves and their subjects. Furthermore, the thesis as described by Lipson quintessentially embodies the signifiers of traditional academic discourse: objectivity, rationality, the need for evidence, and coherency. The "creative" theses that students produce also fall into conventional forms such as plays, musical compositions, and photographs. At the University of Southern Maine (USM), for example, students producing a creative thesis must also write analytically about their work.

Over recent decades, however, the undergraduate curriculum at large has changed. New work in the social sciences, including forms such as auto-ethnography and performance ethnography, calls for the tracking and inclusion of subjectivity (e.g., Wall; Denzin). Along with these new

ethnographic methods, interdisciplinary studies have increasingly become an accepted feature of the undergraduate curriculum. Less linear than traditional disciplinary writing and scholarship, interdisciplinary work often includes a range of perspectives and different kinds of evidence and methodologies. In order to make the writing cohesive, the author maintains a stronger presence on the page, in the process suggesting a closer relationship between narrative and analysis. Carolyn Haynes, Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies and Director of the Honors and Scholars Program at Miami of Ohio, explains that “. . . interdisciplinary studies fundamentally entail a movement away from an absolutist conception of truth to a conception of truth that is situated, perspectival, and discursive and that informs and is informed by the investigator’s own sense of self-authorship” (xv).

Writing across the undergraduate college curriculum includes numerous genres, and scholars continue to contest the very existence of a universal academic discursive practice (“the paper”). In their attempt to re-imagine first-year composition as an “Introduction to Writing Studies,” Downs and Wardle explain that “more than twenty years of research and theory have repeatedly demonstrated that such a unified academic discourse does not exist and have seriously questioned what students can and do transfer from one context to another” (552; see also Petraglia, Russell). Nevertheless, most undergraduate students produce papers across disciplinary areas that closely resemble one another in form and reflect the thesis characteristics described by Lipson.

In addition to changes in the way we think about academic discourse, literacy itself is changing from “literacy” to “literacies,” and in the face of rapid technological advances, these literacies are multiple, overlapping, and simultaneous. But within the larger context of change, how have these shifts and this proliferation of literacies influenced the traditional thesis? The questions students want to pose, the nature of their interests and concerns, and the kinds and varieties of subjects and methodologies in which students want to engage demonstrate these changes. But has the thesis changed in response, and, if so, to what degree?

Central to this essay, given the shifting landscape, is a search for a new vision for undergraduate thesis work, both in theory and in practice, in process and in product, a vision that invites and incorporates recent changes rather than resisting or ignoring them. The thesis represents the culmination and synthesis of honors education from both faculty and student points of view, and, as Gregory Lanier points out in his essay about honors assessment, the thesis capstone experience can provide the opportunity to assess student learning objectives in aggregate (108). Guidelines, systems, and rubrics are necessary, yet I find myself ever vigilant against reduction to the formulaic in this complex work. Against this backdrop, I attempt in this essay to practice

the self-reflexive analysis we now ask of all students at their thesis defenses at USM. We ask them to reflect on their projects, to articulate new insights, to consider their learning on multiple levels, and finally, because we are an interdisciplinary program, to examine the disciplines and methodologies they have drawn from and why. In this spirit, I set out to push into new areas of thought; to explore the tension between mastering existing bodies of knowledge (expertise) and taking intellectual risks (imagination), between constraint and freedom, the critical and the creative, the past and the future; to argue for the thesis as a site of experimentation rather than reproduction; and ultimately to pose questions about the fundamental purposes of honors education.

## NOMAD THOUGHT: THE RHIZOME

To develop a new vision for the honors thesis, establishing a theoretical framework is critically important, and for that theoretical framework I explore Deleuze and Guattari's work. They describe the tree structure that has "dominated Western reality and all of Western thought" (*Plateaus* 18). But in our cultural era, characterized by upheaval and change, many overlapping social and political forces are at work—and have been at work for some time—to challenge this tree structure. In order to tackle their monumental task of offering alternatives to this structure, Deleuze and Guattari create a detailed cosmology with its own topographical vocabulary, meanings, and imaginings.

"Arborescent thought," the term Deleuze and Guattari use to destabilize Western thought, is structured, like a tree with its root, trunk, and branches, by points and positions that move hierarchically in pre-established channels. This structure is not open-ended, experimental, or creative, nor is it critical of its existing form, content, or method. Although this critique is far from new, Deleuze and Guattari both elaborate on previous imaginings, such as Foucault's "outside thought" (xiii), and break through the boundaries of their own disciplinary histories, practices, and thinking to articulate and embody a new model: "nomad thought." Rather than immersion in and defense of entrenched positions, nomad thought moves freely in open space, negotiates difference, and thrives on connection. Rather than placidly and neutrally claiming to mirror the world, nomad thought "is immersed in the changing state of things" (xii).

Within their model of nomad thought, Deleuze and Guattari anchor their challenge to arborescent thought and its tree structure by constructing and enacting a new operational metaphor: that of the rhizome. In botany a rhizome is an underground rootstalk, tuber, or bulb, horizontally elongated, that under the right conditions will produce stems above and roots below: continuous outcroppings that can split off and become new, dividable plants

in turn. Deleuze and Guattari expand on this botanical definition so that rhizomes, in their terminology, can also be animals that live in burrows, packs, or mounds, such as rats or ants. Like weeds such as crabgrass and like musical forms with their “ruptures and proliferations” (12), for Deleuze and Guattari the rhizome is a network, “an endless pattern in which everything is linked to everything else” (*Kafka* xxvi).

These linkages, however, are not hypothetical nor are they formal, clear-cut pathways between discrete units; rather, they traverse domains of reality and subject matter as “lines of flight” coming and going, arriving and departing in the conjunctive spaces between species, modalities, disciplines, and forms of life. Creating exchanges “between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles” and among “very diverse modes of coding (biological, political, economic, etc.) that bring into play not only different regimes of signs but also states of things of differing status” (*Plateaus* 7), rhizomes operate according to principles of connection, heterogeneity, and multiplicity. To understand the interactions of these diverse modes, Deleuze and Guattari point to, for example, the symbiotic relationship between a wasp and an orchid, parallel formations that imitate one another yet remain distinct, one moving and one stationary, one desiring and one the object of desire but together maintaining and expanding their local reality (10).

## MAPS VERSUS TRACINGS: THE HONORS THESIS AS A SITE OF EXPERIMENTATION

Deleuze and Guattari criticize traditional linguistic forms and psychoanalytic models for producing analyses that are ready-made and preconceived products of our dominant, Western tree structure. They use cartographic metaphors to highlight the differences between arborescent thought with its tree structures and nomad thought with its rhizomatic manifestations. The textual products of our culture—books and also by implication the papers produced in university settings, which include not only the thesis statement so essentialized in academic discourse but also the honors thesis itself—are “tracings” because they tend to review the same material and to use the same approaches. Deleuze and Guattari call instead for the creation of “maps.” Maps have multiple entryways, allow for open-ended connections between fields, and foster applied experimentation. This feature of Deleuzian and Guattarian cosmology resembles that central mapping component of honors pedagogy we are all familiar with, *City as Text*<sup>TM</sup>, described by Bernice Braid as “. . . a living laboratory in forging connections . . . [f]rom social links essential to communal life, to intellectual links fundamental to integrated thought . . .” (5).

An important distinction between tracings and maps is that tracings emphasize “competence” (13)—under an evaluative and comparative gaze, here is what has been done—while maps emphasize “performance” (12)—an evolving process of subjective engagement and enactment. Moreover, lurking within this distinction is insight into desire as a motivating force. Arborescent thought can subsume a rhizome and flatten its cartographic possibilities. Deleuze and Guattari warn us that: “Once a rhizome has been obstructed, arborified, it’s all over, no desire stirs; for it is always by rhizome that desire moves and produces. Whenever desire climbs a tree, internal repercussions trip it up and it falls to its death; the rhizome, on the other hand, acts on desire by external, productive outgrowths” (14). Rhizomes are acentered, non-hierarchical systems that grow, like weeds, in the spaces between cultivated areas and existing trees of thought. Rather than treading and retreading over established ground in expected patterns, like “the paper” that students learn to produce and reproduce throughout their high school and college careers, rhizomes and the maps they configure in their paths freshly project unconscious material, activate underground, subverted desire, and create new statements in their wake. In terms of carrying out and completing the work of an honors thesis, Deleuze and Guattari point to the importance of desire in sustaining and completing such a complex piece of work. And their suggestion resonates with Lipson’s: students should choose thesis topics that matter to them. Without activated desire, achieving a quality piece of work is akin to stage actors performing in deadpan mode, going through the script lines and actions without embodying their characters.

The function of lines in mapping and tracing is another critical point of difference between the two. In mapping, lines demarcate territory, giving it shape and texture (topography); but like a photograph and its negative, these delineations also draw attention to the dimensions of space circulating outside the boundaries. Deleuze and Guattari use the terms “territorialization” and “deterritorialization” to capture these dimensions and to accentuate motion in any direction, lines of flight, comings and goings, from any initiating point. Foregrounding the importance of leaving the marked territory, the cartographic element of deterritorialization represents the frontier. In tracing, however, lines function reiteratively. As traced lines move around a template or a text, they center on structure, the form around which they circulate—not on travel into uncharted territory. Unlike a structure, a rhizome possesses no central unity around which it pivots (8). Rather, a rhizome is all lines, and these lines “operate by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots” to produce “a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight” (21). With implications for honors programs and colleges and the thesis work we are charged to

carry out, this list of modifiers points to perhaps the most significant feature of rhizomatic mapping in Deleuzian and Guattarian cosmology: “that it is entirely oriented toward. . . experimentation in contact with the real” (12).

As listed on the NCHC website, a characteristic of fully developed honors programs and colleges is that they serve as laboratories for faculty to develop prototypes (read: rhizomes) that can be expanded into the larger institutional communities where they are situated. It occurs to me, however, that faculty experience and student experience need to mirror one another. Is there enough space/place in honors curricula for students to create experiments/rhizomes of their own? I pose this question even while I am aware of the abundance of creative and energetic honors study occurring across the United States in all its many forms. A parallel characteristic of fully developed honors students might be that they are able to engage twists and turns of thought, to think critically, experimentally, nomadically, and to climb in and out of rhizomes (messes of thought, messes in our world). But to what degree is the capstone thesis experience a tracing or a map? This concluding experience could become the place/space/laboratory for students to perform experimental thinking and approaches. My questions are an attempt to argue against neither the necessary accumulation of knowledge, ability, and expertise nor their display but rather to argue for the thesis as a site of increased experimentation, a rite of nomadic intellectual passage that integrates learning and transforms students as they are poised to complete their undergraduate education and are ready to graduate.

## **NEW LINES OF FLIGHT COMING IN**

In applying the metaphor of the rhizome to the undergraduate honors thesis, a new and different type of product and process starts to emerge, a type that connects study in the university with the social and political formations outside of it, a type that is more dynamic and uncertain, more organic and less linear—more experimental. Within this site of experimentation, this laboratory, what are some of the rhizomatic thesis approaches and forms that we are starting to see?

### **THESIS PRODUCTS AS ASSEMBLAGES: EMPHASIS ON CONSTRUCTION**

Approached as rhizomes, future thesis products transform into versions of Deleuzian and Guattarian “assemblages” (503–505). Containing a “double-articulation” (504), these assemblages are conclaves that seek to gather together both “what is done” (content) and an extension of that material into a regime of signs, “what is said,” written, and represented (expression) (504). An “a/b” rhythm pervades the rhizomatic; content/expression bend in concert

with process/product, with territory/deterritorialization: “Assemblages act on semiotic flows, material flows and social flows simultaneously” (22–23). The notion of assemblages suggests that rhizomatic theses undergo “construction,” a positive association in that the term signifies skyscrapers, demolition, roadways, equipment, architectural plans, ribbon-cuttings, scaffolding, frameworks, jackhammers, underground systems. Work is under way, and that work is a process where desire circulates, as students fashion themselves into architects, building contractors—cartographers. This emphasis on construction could help students with their expository, analytical writing by suggesting that an argument with its needed evidence is something that the writer must work at, must build (the text as a city).

A thesis as an assemblage under construction spotlights engagement with a process, and this process can be tracked, studied, entered, written, reflected upon in multiply literate formats via technology. Every thesis marks a territory. What are the cartographic elements circulating? What are the lines of flight/thought coming in—and going out? Rhizomatic theses need tools such as ongoing project maps, logs, and diagrams; but more than these, students need us to value these trajectories.

### **RHIZOMATIC FRAGMENTS, CRITICAL/CREATIVE JUXTAPOSITIONS, AND THE AUTHORIAL “I”**

As mentioned above, connection, heterogeneity, and multiplicity are three interlinked rhizomatic principles of operation that bring “into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states” (21). Following these principles, students organize, through their engagement with their areas of interest, subjects and methods of presentation and analysis that are usually kept separate. Rhizomes are “composed not of units but of dimensions, or rather directions in motion” (21). Understanding is not predetermined; rather, as new knowledge is assembled and constructed, and connection/heterogeneity activated and accumulating, understanding emerges, multiplicity erupts, and this understanding in turn produces new statements, insights, lines of flight. But because “the fabric of a rhizome is the conjunction ‘and . . . and . . . and . . .’” (12), these lines of flight need tracking, reflection, and reformulation. Theses as rhizomes point to the necessity of effectively incorporating deterritorializations, excursions into the unknown, into thesis defenses and written presentations. Honors thesis students should not be able to get away with coloring inside the existing territory only. As Charlie Slavin so succinctly reminds us, “taking intellectual risks” (15) is a defining element of honors culture.

During my junior year in high school, I did a thesis on Thomas Hardy, my senior year on Edward Albee. Classic research papers, these theses were



arborescent. I read both primary and secondary texts, took notes, and then consolidated these into a coherent, linear, written presentation. I chose topics that interested me per Lipson's suggestion in his guide to the B. A. thesis. Despite students' commitment to their subject matter and the diversity of thesis topics, the undergraduate honors thesis can often reflect such a standard approach and form. Theses as rhizomes don't have this smoothness and linearity; hybridic and textured, more like collages, they tend to rely on juxtaposition of multiple modes of representation, kinds of evidence, and genres of writing. Below I will present examples from three theses that are in many ways standard but that also contain tendencies, elements that move them somewhat into the rhizomatic. Like palimpsests, these examples contain elements of the old and the new, the traditional and the experimental, the critical and the creative.

Inspired by the work of industrial photographer Lewis Hine, Aaron Wilson—for his 2001 USM honors thesis, "An Internal Perspective on Chemistry"—produced a documentary photography exhibit. Wilson, who went on to complete a Ph. D. in chemistry, did not want to write a scientific paper for his thesis, so instead he produced an exhibit that highlighted the processes and practices of chemistry as well as the physical lab environment in which it is conducted. In some images, the lab is empty, and the bottles, beakers, tubes, and other equipment take on aesthetic dimensions; they appear as beautiful artifacts in a state of repose. These images stand in contrast to those taken in class, which reveal the social side of science disciplines. Other images, taken during a visit to a local middle school, present the magic of chemistry as the younger students sit transfixed by the elemental shifts from liquid to solid and back. The collective effect of these images is that they intervene upon stereotypical, outsider notions about the discipline. The photographs portray chemistry as beautiful, social, and magical.

In her 2004 USM honors thesis, "Methadone Maintenance: Treatment or Tragedy," Linda Jalbert explores the efficacy of methadone treatment from oppositional points of view that she constructs through interviews with two community advocates. Rather than present her material in a traditionally seamless fashion, this thesis opens each chapter with italicized story material. Jalbert herself was an addict, and, with her organizational strategy, she is able to juxtapose, for example, a piece of her withdrawal narrative and an expository presentation of her research on the effects of withdrawal. Creating a jarring effect on the reader and linking narrative and analysis, the particular and the general, these personal inclusions give Jalbert's thesis a sort of double vision, and the visual look of the pages reflects this oscillation as she alternates between italicized and standard typefaces.

Edward Erikson draws on literary criticism, creative writing, discourses of poststructuralism, and new social science ethnographic methods in his 2005

USM honors thesis, “The Author Revisited: A Poetic Ethnography of Ernest Hemingway with a Foucaultian Analysis.” In decoding Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast*, Erikson appropriates poststructuralist theory to destabilize the canonical in literature and to disrupt the tertiary structure of discourse: the trinity of the reader/the writer/the work. An interdisciplinary project, Erikson’s thesis concludes with a chapter of self-analysis in which he turns back toward his own work, speculates on the impossibility of his living/imitating the life of Hemingway ethnographically as a modern male, and introduces new questions about writing and reading.

Unlike my high school thesis work, these examples use creative fragmentation, deploying multiple modes of representation, genres of writing, and reflective elements. In contrast to Lipson’s instruction that thesis writers should rarely use personal references, Jalbert’s and Erikson’s work incorporates personal features. Students learn, usually sometime during their middle school years, that a key feature of academic discourse is the elimination of the first person pronoun. Although this instruction is presented as a necessary function of mechanics, as a feature of the writing surface, it also embeds positional implications: the call for this absence inserts distance between writer and subject. Courses in college writing as well as the sciences, for instance, generally reinforce this discursive feature. However, in interdisciplinary studies and new social science methodological forms emerging from critiques of positivism, increased authorial presence and more overt subjective participation on the page reverse this directive. The first person pronoun holds the disparate elements together and delivers the synthesis, the meaning, the deterritorializations, the lines of flight into new areas of thought. Subjective engagement is also a feature of rhizomatic construction. In their alternative cosmos, Deleuze and Guattari explain that there is no longer the “tripartite division among a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author)” (23).

## **DETERRITORIALIZED EXCURSIONS: LINES OF FLIGHT HEADING OUT**

Our task in honors education, many would agree, is to educate tomorrow’s critical thinkers, those future citizens/leaders who can construct a territorial map, lift off of it in a questioning stance, ride lines of flight, and travel into new possibilities, insights, and solutions. Every public and professional sphere beckons creative, critical thinkers. In a policy research brief, “21st-Century Literacies,” posted on their website, the National Council of Teachers of English discusses the teaching of critical thinking as a necessary component of student mastery of multiple literacies; the overload of information now circulating via technology demands the development of critical

thinking as a counter-weight. And implicit in the NCTE discussion is an enhanced role for higher education and certainly for honors programs and colleges as sites of development for multiply literate, nomadically adept, engaged critical thinkers.

At a recent faculty meeting, the director of our graduate program in occupational therapy at Lewiston/Auburn College explained the program's educational philosophy. Instead of memorizing every diagnosis—a pedagogy of tracing—the program instead uses a select few diagnoses to teach students how to critically analyze and assess their future patients, a pedagogy of mapping. The program's emphasis is on developing critical, nomadic thinkers, who can think on their feet, engage lines of flight, move from the known to the unknown, and use clinical reasoning to diagnosis their patients. Since the graduates of this program pass the national exam at a far higher percentage than the average, the certification board supports this pedagogical approach.

With their construction of nomad thought, Deleuze and Guattari attempt to shake us out of our myopic hyperactivity into dynamic inventiveness. "Thought is not arborescent," they declare (15). Although we live and work generally in arborescent contexts, new knowledge production—the move from known to unknown territory—suggests the nomadic. Admittedly, this disjunction between arborescent contexts and nomadic possibilities can work against the outcomes to which we aspire. Breaking out of the classroom while in it is a difficult project; developing and mentoring rhizomatic work are also challenging. Nevertheless, the capstone thesis should provide opportunities to advance rather than retreat. Rhizomatic approaches suggest exciting possibilities moving forward, and the signal, the permission, the modeling, and the commitment for these approaches can and should come first from honors faculty and administrators.

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THESIS AS RHIZOME

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