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# From Refugee to Citizen: Rhizomes and Roots in the Digital Age

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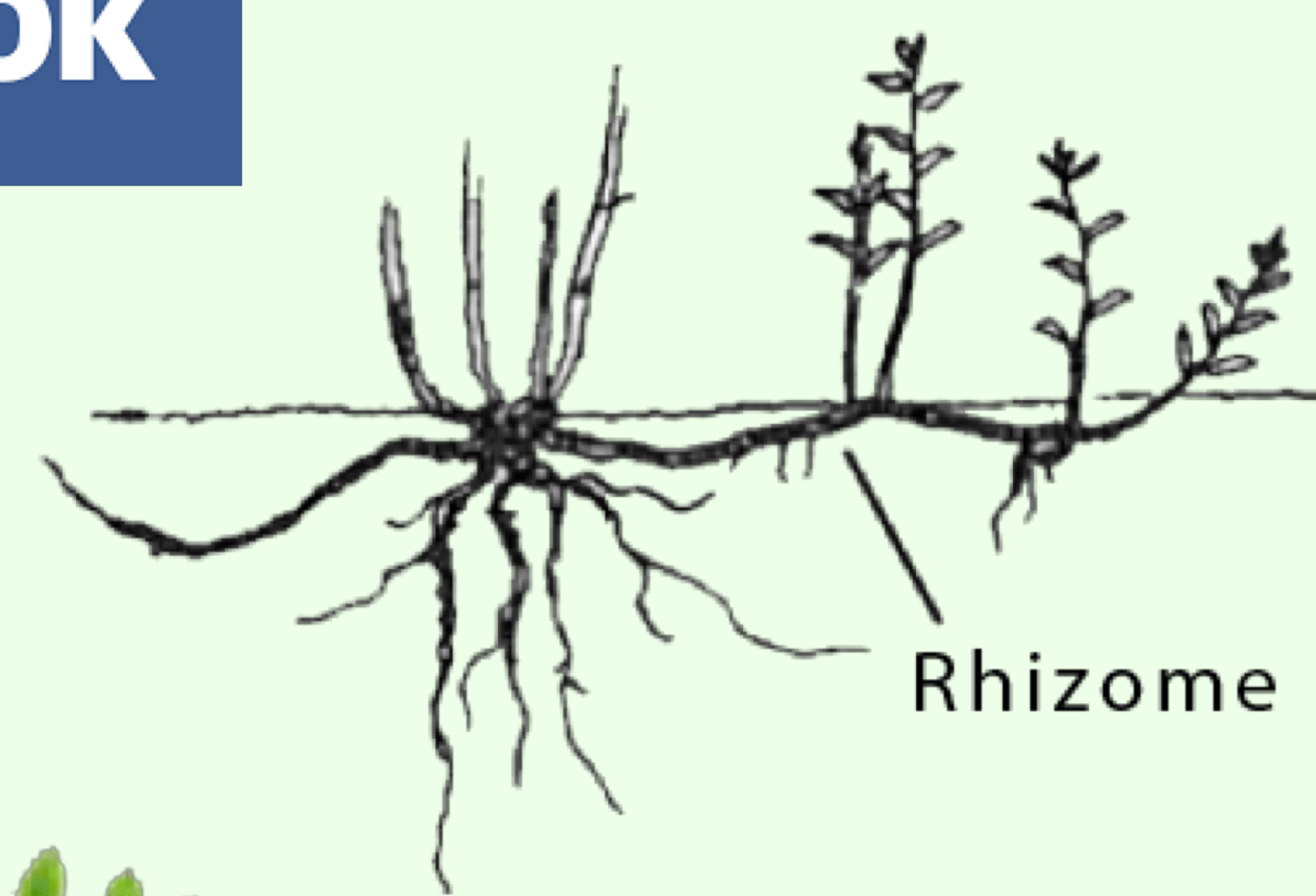
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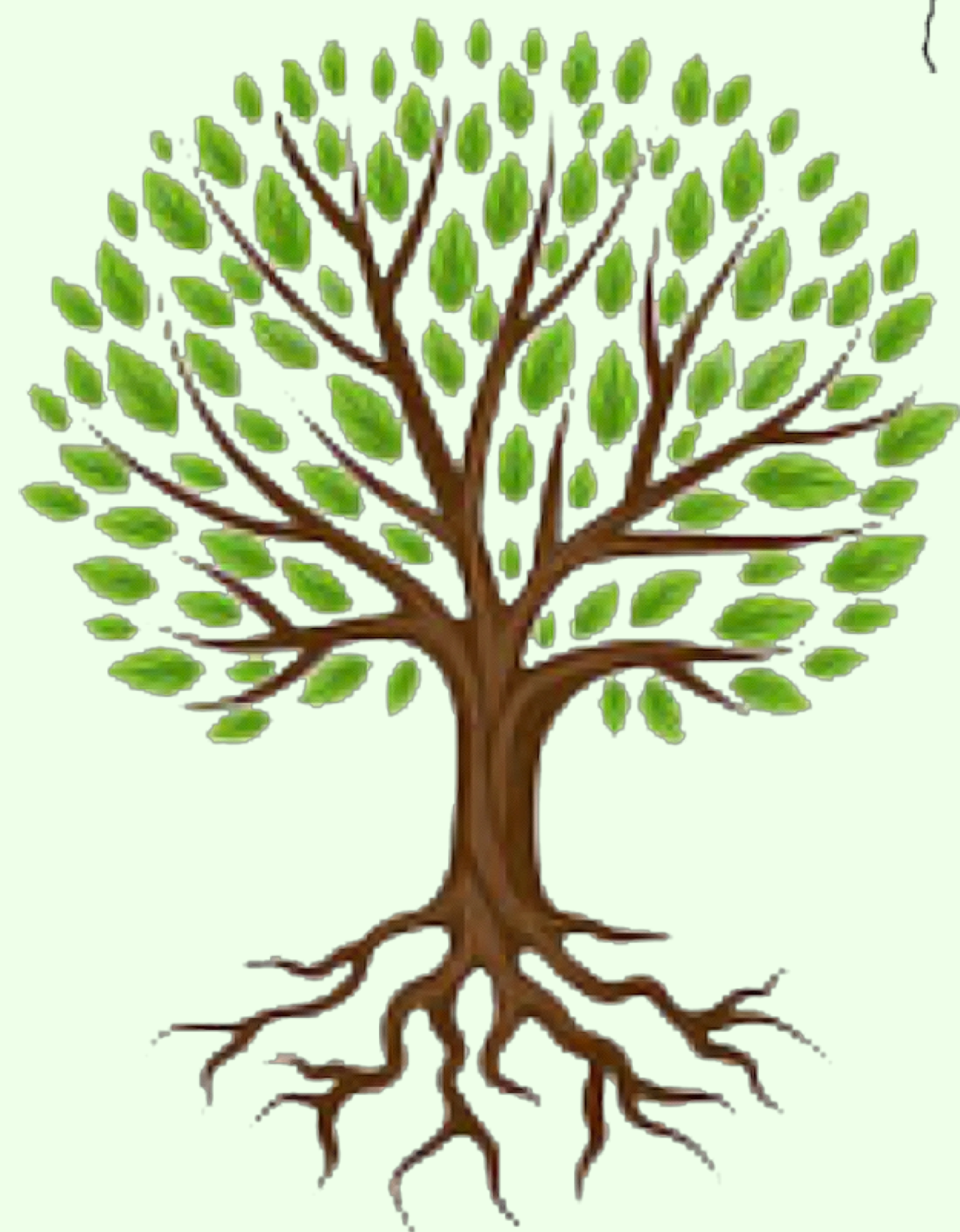
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# From Refugee to Citizen: Rhizomes and Roots in the Digital Age

Julia Nett, Anthropology  
Advisor: Michele Gamburd, PhD



Rhizome



Roots

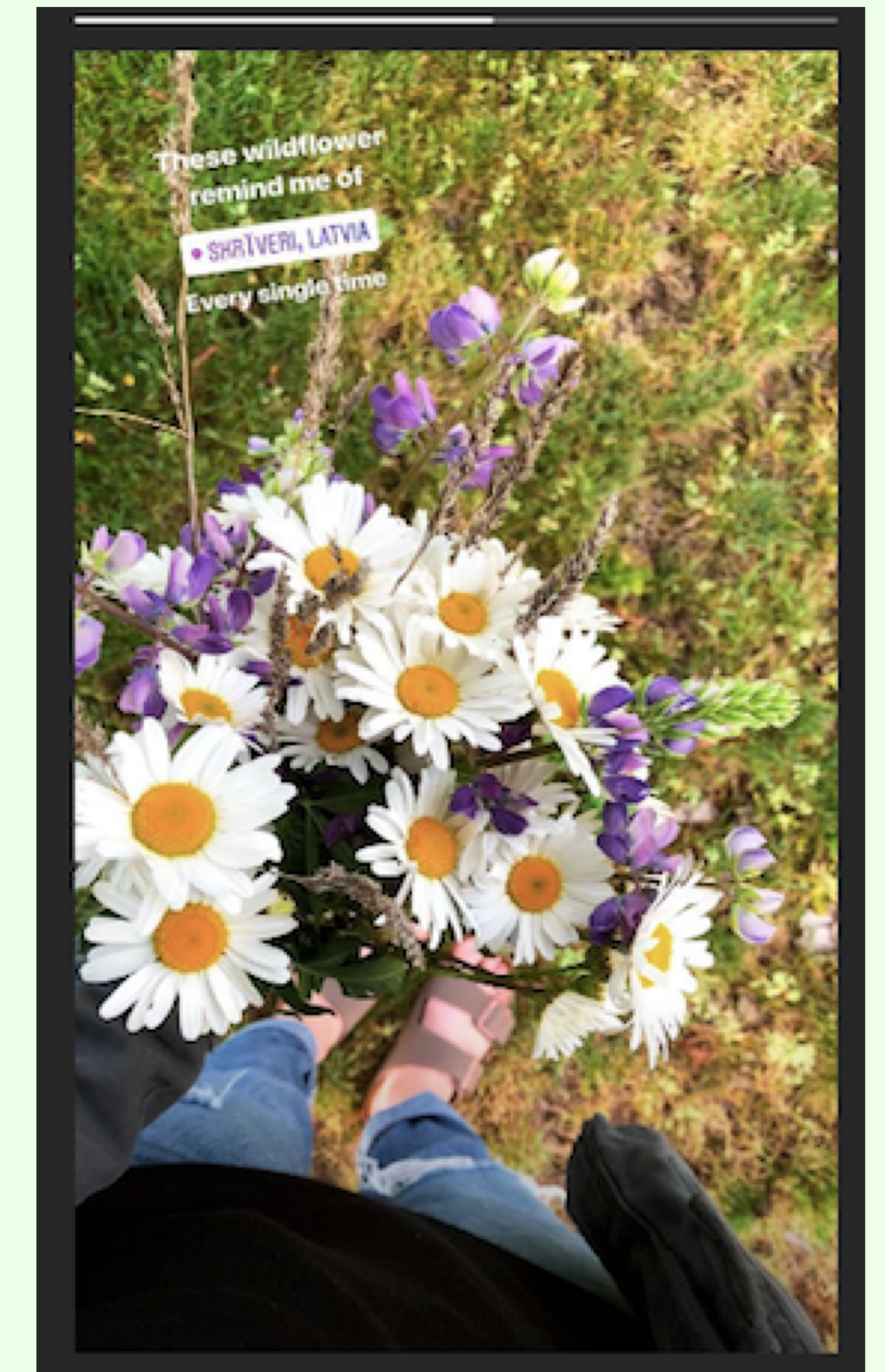


Front page of the Refugee Center Online



## Abstract

This study examines digital media as platforms for current and former refugees to reaffirm and create themselves and to learn to be American. To think of refugees as “**uprooted**” with “roots that threaten to wither” (Malkki 1992, 32) is misguided. This study utilizes Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of the **rhizome** (1987) to rethink current and former refugee experiences post-resettlement in the US. With the rising ubiquity of **digital media and digital technologies**, increasing numbers of refugees resettle with smartphones and other technologies. These technologies provide current and former refugees opportunities to maintain **hybridized self-conceptions** and to feel they are both “here” *and* “there.”



From an informant, Eva’s, Instagram story: “These wildflowers remind me of Latvia every single time.”  
Eva resettled to the United States from Latvia about ten years ago. She repeatedly mentioned her hybridized identity as Latvian-American woman who feels she belongs both “here” *and* “there.”

## Doing Digital Anthropology

- Investigating what happens in “the virtual” to understand “its relationship to the actual” (Boellstorff 2012: 40). This sheds light onto refugee resettlement experiences in general.

### Theorists

- Boellstorff, Tom. 2012. “Rethinking Digital Anthropology.” In *Digital Anthropology*, by Heather Horst and Daniel Miller (eds.), 39-60. London: Bloomsbury.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Malkki, Liisa H. 1992. “National Geographic: The Rooting of Peoples and the Territorialization of National Identity among Scholars and Refugees.” *Cultural Anthropology* 7(1): 24-44.

## The Project

- Exploring post-resettlement identity and belonging through a digital anthropology lens.
- How are citizenship and belonging constructed and experienced in digital resources?
- Facebook/ Social Media and the Refugee Center Online

### Questions

- How do people use the RCO and Facebook/social media to learn about being ‘American’?
- How do resettled refugees use social media to build community and maintain a rhizomatic experience?
- How does the RCO construct American culture for refugee internalization?

## Key Terms

- Rhizomes vs Roots
- Cultural Orientation
- Social Media
- Hybridized Self-Conceptions
- Becoming American

### Research

- Design
  - Compare Facebook and RCO
- Methods
  - Participant Observation
  - Interviews
  - Convenience Sample
    - Mostly *former* refugees.
    - From DRC, Iraq, Afghanistan, Indonesia, Somalia, Kurdistan, Syria, Laos, Myanmar, Latvia.
- Analysis
  - Grounded Theory
  - Discourse Analysis

## Significance

- Myth of being “uprooted” → rhizomatic, **hybridized** identities
  - “Iraq as mother, America as wife”
  - “We have roots here, but we always look in the rearview mirror”
- Social Media
  - Everyday mundane habit - to be both ‘here’ and ‘there’
- Social Media platforms as ‘place’
  - Place to reaffirm self
  - Place to ‘inhabit’
  - “Meta best-friend”
  - Cultural Resource Center
- RCO as Place too
  - “Mini Google”
  - Cultural Resource Center
  - “Transplanting” one’s roots
    - To become American
- Facebook as spontaneous performance of self // RCO one-way shift of identity