

# WRITING THROUGH THINKING EXPLOSIVELY

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Researchers in narrative and identity studies have recognized the correlation between narrative and self. De Fina (2015) argues that narrative is the main vehicle to express identity, while identity can also be shaped through narrative. In this view, narrative and identity are “mutual presuppositions” (Gallagher, 2014, p. 403) that come together and influence each other. Taylor (2009) claims that narrative creates identity. This assumption comes from the fact that identity is shaped through social interaction, and narrative is an inherently social activity that people engage in to affect and be affected. In the context of education, Sears (2011) posits that young students who have moved from context to context have multiple identities. The findings revealed that narrative serves to integrate the multiple aspects of the students’ identities. These scholars use the theories of identities in the postmodern world, which are multiple, shifting, and fragmented aspects of the self, identities that are not fixed and are always changing.

Although referring to the theories of identities as multiplicity, researchers in narrative studies still view that narrative and identity are the unity of different fragments. For example, Ochs and Capps (1996) argue that narrative activity is crucial to recognizing and integrating repressed selves. From this perspective, narratives are a collection of different fragments of lived experiences that create a meaningful set of understanding. Even though narrative is seen as a collection, it is also partial, as not all elements of a self can be covered. Mackenzie and Poltera (2010) argue that self-narratives are used to organize and integrate different experiences to understand the self, action, and world. Both the collection and integration of different fragments of self and experience view the fragments as an inward process that groups and reduces them to the ideation of so-called identity. On the other hand, Braidotti (2014) argues that identity does not exist. Instead, we are always becoming as nomadic subjects that are entangled with the different elements of life we experience. Derrida (1972/1990) also argues that existence is influenced by the different social contexts that shape the “Self,” similar to how word formation in a language is prone to changes due to differences and fabrications. The self becomes in motion and is difficult to call an identity or a reduced self. The self is a plateau that has “bricks” of different elements that are entangled (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Through these discussions, I argue that narrative and self are not inward processes that lead to a grouping process, like coding in qualitative research. Instead, it is an outward process, like an explosion that pervades in messy directions. In writing a narrative about the self or learning about the self through narrative, there are different involvements of negative and positive feelings and emotions that explode in messy directions, influenced by different actants (Bennett, 2010) beyond merely human-based social interaction. Thus, it is important to see that the nuclear core of the reactions is not composed of one ingredient called human. It is more than human. The rhizomatic self (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) cannot be reduced through the term “self-integration,” since after our explosion (i.e., creation and birth) our self is always in pieces that are difficult to collect, as the process is always expanding, like the universe after the Big Bang. Thus, the self comes in multi-form, as a multi-self. The multi-self is multi-directional and multi-dimensional, which is always uprooted and messy (Carlson, 2023).



Emerging from theories of assemblage and immanence through the lens of rhizomatic plateaus (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), distributive agency (Bennett, 2010), and nomadic becoming (Braidotti, 2014), this paper proposes the concept of explosion as an approach to narrative inquiry, focusing specifically on autobiographical inquiry, or *currere* (Pinar, 1994), which involves a mix of lived experiences, history, and possibilities. Explosions are emotional with affect, like Spinoza's *affectus* in Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Explosions affect and are affected.

What I hope this work will do is offer scholars in narrative inquiry and educators an understanding of multi-self not as either a totality or an integration of all different aspects of experiences like "I," but more like "they," which is always plural, inherently different, uncertain, and rhizomatic. Janks (2009) shows how different narratives and practices can demonstrate the hybridity and multiplicity of students as diverse identities instead of sameness and "markedness." They come with their multi-self that cannot be reduced or integrated into a collective story. Consequently, they come with their multi-narrative of multi-self. The multi-self and multi-narrative can implicate multi-modality to articulate their self-being.

In the next sections, I will look back at the history of explosions derived from my lived experiences of an external explosion entangled with internal explosions. Likewise, I will present the assemblage of the explosions through different lived experiences that explode. Then, I will raise the issue of the explosion in writing as a scholar and educator. In the final section, I will conclude and discuss the implications of my educational practices and research in thinking explosively.

## HISTORY OF EXPLOSION

The Big Bang theory has become the most widely accepted explanation for the universe (Silk, 2000), positing that the universe originated from a singular entity that exploded, creating diverse objects. The term "Big Bang" stems from the observation that the universe is expanding, causing objects to move away from each other. The original explosion initiated the expansion, creating a diverse array of objects from a single point of origin. If we consider this single entity to be "God," then we are, in a sense, fragments of that divine entity. For thousands of years, humans have searched for God. I believe we should stop looking for a separate entity and instead look within ourselves, as the explosion that created the universe also created "us."

In addition to creating humanity, the singularity explosion also initiated an influx of knowledge (Silk, 2000). Saldaña (2015) referred to this as an "explosion of knowledge" (p. 95) that sparks a human curiosity to understand our existence. We analyze distant objects in space and, within our limitations, theorize different concepts to find evidence. Scientists like Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking became famous for their work on the theory of relativity, which posits that time and space are relative. While this concept sounds simple, it's quite complex. During my own science studies, I focused on astronomy to answer the questions bursting in my mind. I read multiple pieces of literature to understand how the universe works, yet I understood very little. The word "relative" created a sense of relativity in my own mind, as its meaning depends on how people perceive it. For example, people can have different perceptions if I say that "taste is relative" or "beauty is relative." Similarly, space and time are relative, depending on our context. The time and space on Mars aren't the same as on Earth. I may be in the U.S. having dinner at 6:00 p.m., while my parents in Indonesia might be having breakfast. Time and space are relative, but the fact is that we all perform actions simultaneously, regardless of where we are. For instance,

we all have tried food, whether we like the taste or not. Could this way of thinking be considered an influx of knowledge?

The influx of knowledge and human curiosity moves at a pace similar to the universe's expansion. Since the explosion of Einstein's theory, we have continued to develop our knowledge, albeit within limits. I use the word "limitation" because humanity's ability to travel beyond Earth and the Moon is still very restricted. When Neil Armstrong first landed on the Moon during the Apollo 11 mission in 1969, people expected that traveling to the Moon would become easy in the near future. However, the U.S. decided to stop the mission. Fifty years later, the U.S. resumed its lunar mission after public interest had waned. Conversely, the push to explore Mars seems more appealing to private companies like SpaceX. In this way, the momentum toward the Moon has dimmed as the enthusiasm for Mars exploration expands. One explosion can lead to another.

The explosion of topics and interests is also a part of scholarly life and writing. For example, topics like ChatGPT are currently trending as topics for research papers or as assistants for writers. However, topics like feminism, which was brought to the forefront by Mary Wollstonecraft's (1972) publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, have lasted for a long time. The feminist movement's momentum also spread to the LGBTQ+ community, advocating for gender equality and equity. Judith Butler (2002) challenged the ideas of heteronormative gender, discussing concepts like gender performativity. Similarly, Donna Haraway (2016) expanded this "fire" by raising the topic in the *Cyborg Manifesto*, which intertwines feminist theory, cyborgs, ableism, and affinity. This intellectual explosion is wild and limitless, much like the expansion of the universe after the Big Bang.

The topics discussed here are diverse but not separate; they are entangled. For example, feminism can travel beyond its traditional limits in sociology to the scientific world, where it can be affiliated with masculinity. Feminism has also touched the medical field, where nursing is often associated with women. The universe works similarly. Its objects are diverse and spread out, yet they remain entangled. Earth is entangled with Jupiter through the solar system's gravitational pull. The Milky Way Galaxy also entangles Earth with Proxima Centauri b. Perhaps, through the concept of a "wormhole," Earth is connected to other galaxies or even another universe in the theory of a multiverse. In short, explosions spread and entangle, causing them to grow in intensity. Beyond the physical, an "explosion" can also be something that happens inside a living being. This hidden explosion is an innate part of being a creature. All creatures are created with inner entities. Humans have emotions that motivate their actions, and I believe animals and plants do as well. Animal mothers feel a need to protect their babies. When their babies are threatened, they explode with instinctive action to protect them, even at the cost of their own lives. I once saw a video on Facebook of a mother deer attacking three dogs to protect her fawn, ignoring her own safety. It made me feel a profound sadness and reminded me of how my own mother used to take me to kindergarten and wait for hours until school was over. When I walked too close to the street, she would pull me back and keep me close. As I write this, I feel an internal explosion of emotion through my tears.

An internal explosion can be triggered by external factors. What happens outside an individual can affect them. As humans, we become entangled with others as a nomadic subject (Braidotti, 2014). A nomadic subject moves and encounters different subjects in an unplanned way, with no finality. A self has been fragmented since birth (i.e., the explosion). These fragments meet other external fragments and become entangled. Therefore, a self is not formed in isolation. We become subjects when we are acted upon by and respond to others (Butler, 2001). We cannot exist as a fully independent subject throughout our lives. According to Jane Bennett's

(2010) distributive agency theory, humans, non-humans, and other-than-humans all exist in a space and time where each is connected and has its own role and agency. In this theory, entanglement goes beyond human-centric actions. It's similar to the universe, in which all materials are intertwined. The planets in our solar system need the Sun to shine on them and organize them, preventing them from colliding with each other. Earth needs the Moon to be habitable by keeping Earth on its axis and stabilizing the climate. The explosion of the singularity of the universe created a diverse range of objects, elements, and entities. This is reflected in the reality of humans being diverse in myriad way. We experience emotions of failure, sadness, excitement, anxiety, doubt, and love. Even in ignorance, humans still have feelings toward others that have developed implicitly.

### POP CORN



*Popcorn, taken by Author, 2024*

I cannot fully recall the memories of the times when my parents took me to the theater in Palembang City. I still can see a glimpse of the seats, people, and the movie but fail to retrieve the details. My parents seldom took me to the theatre as they were busy making money to support my uncles, cousin, and siblings. It was an explosion of our family expenses when my grandmother brought my father's two youngest brothers to live with us for their education. They were 8-10 years older than my oldest sister. My grandparents, on my father's side, had nine children. It is such an explosion in human creation and costs. My parents needed to pay my two uncles' tuition and living costs.

Having uncles at home did not help much because they could not do much with household stuff. They could not clean the house or even cook when my parents were not home. I cannot blame them completely as they might also be the products of gender performativity (Butler, 1998) that puts men with privilege in the home. They just knew how to work to get money for the home, which was not their responsibility at the time. A few years earlier, my father's oldest brother came to our home, bringing his oldest daughter, my oldest cousin, for the same purpose. He wanted my parents to help his daughter's education. My father is a person who is nice to anybody and seldom says no to helping people in need, especially family. He is also known as the person who cares about education more than the other siblings, even though he did not finish school because he wanted to be self-employed.



My parents had different businesses. My father used to run a small grocery store. Meanwhile, my mother ran a fish cake store and small grocery store at a home that used to be my oldest sister's. Regardless of their multiple money sources, having many people go to school simultaneously was a burden for them. They never told us how hard it was to work day and night to ensure that everybody was cared for. The focus was on education and food. We did not expect them to pay for our leisure time, such as going to the theatres in my hometown. They would not do it. This condition explains why I had my first popcorn when I went to the theatre with my college mates. It was too expensive for parents with exploding expenses. I decided to make my own popcorn. I went to the grocery store (i.e., not my family's because we did not sell popcorn; We sold corn for poultry only). I was captivated by the explosions that happened continuously during the cooking process. The kernels went from being a small amount to a big amount. I also thought of the same process experienced by rice and other grains when being cooked rather than heated. A scope of rice can produce rice for two, three, or even four plates (depending on the "greediness" or hunger levels). The explosion, in this sense, helps humans' existence. Without the explosion, humans may need more grains to sustain their lives. Having more grains means more farms, labor, open fields, and sustainability issues. Explosion is entanglement.

### TOUCH ME NOT/JEWELWEED (*IMPATIENS CAPENSIS*)

In the back of my home, there was a field with bushes where I used to play with my childhood friends. We used to play soccer, catch grasshoppers (*Omocestus viridulus*), and climb the trees to steal the mangos (*Mangifera indica*) and water apples (*Syzygium aqueum*), which tasted very sweet. The theft made the owner of the land kick us out when they noticed our presence. We used to roam around to explore the field's diverse things. There were green snakes that were not poisonous but very cute for the kids to catch and play with. We also picked up golden berries (*Physalis grisea*) that tasted like passion fruit (*Passiflora edulis*).

Among all the exciting things to do in the field, there was a unique experience with the plant named *celetup* (the local language) or touch me not (American name) or jewelweed (*impatiens capensis*). The unique thing is the seedpods that explode when they are squeezed or pressed. It was fun and satisfying to do it. We were excited when our parents allowed us to play around the field. Our satisfaction with playing with the seedpods helped spread the seeds for the next generation of the plant. We acted like bees taking the nectar of plants and helping them to produce fruits simultaneously. Yet, without our help, the plant could still spread the seeds naturally. Beyond that, we had fun exploding the seedpods, and we invested in the explosions in the future.

Writing this section requires me to recall childhood memories with my friends and other children I have not met for years. The memory-recalling process that I am experiencing now exploded all memories about my childhood, causing me to remember the faces and names and counting them. Now, I am missing them and the old times. I am exploding. Explosion is memory.



## BROKEN GLASS

That Sunday, my husband and I decided to take a one-day road trip to the Grand Canyon. The round trip took an entire day of driving. Around 8 p.m., we were famished, having skipped lunch because we were so busy driving. We stopped at Panda Express and chose our favorite, the orange chicken. We decided to eat at home, as all we wanted was to be in the comfort of our house. When we got home, we were exhausted and starving. We prepared the Panda Express dishes on the table while our dogs looked excitedly on, waiting for us to drop some food. I noticed something was missing from my meal. “I need my sriracha,” I said, leaving the table to get the bottle from the pantry. I accidentally touched and dropped the soy sauce bottle. It was an explosion in the pantry! My husband stopped eating and came to see what had happened. Glass pieces from the bottle were scattered everywhere, having flown in different directions. We tried to clean up the mess, making sure we picked up every single piece. We were sure we had succeeded until a piece of glass pierced my foot. At that moment, we began to feel uncertain about where all the broken glass could have gone.

An explosion creates fragments that move in messy and unpredictable ways. It is impossible to be sure where all the pieces have moved. After the Big Bang, the elements of the universe moved and expanded in chaotic and unknown directions, without a hierarchical root system like that of a plant. This movement is rhizomatic, like the burrows of rats (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). I believe the self contains fragments of an explosion that are difficult to fully and definitively collect. Thus, the self is always partial. The partiality of the self is connected to the partiality of the narrative that the self can express (Ochs & Capps, 1996). We can attempt to gather these fragments, but it is a task that is never complete. Its wholeness is impossible. Explosion is unsureness.



*“Fragments” painting by Author, 2025*

## MIND EXPLOSION

One day, a classmate’s responsive statement to our professor’s explanation stunned me. “Wait a minute. There is an explosion in my brain now,” she said with full energy. Her choice of the word “explosion” matched her paralinguistic expressions. Based on my observation at the moment, I describe the situation in the poetry below.

She turns her head to the professor  
Her eyes widely open  
Her voice tone increases  
Her fingers try to note down things  
She has a lot of questions

Andrea explained the sensation she was feeling when she said “explosion.” She said it felt like a “train running and rushing in all kinds of directions with TONS of possibilities.” She thought of myriad, limitless possibilities for knowledge. It was not only she who exploded with curiosity. I also experienced the explosion when I heard her saying the word explosion. The sensation was explosive. I was curious about what she meant by the explosion. I was stunned by how we frequently mention explosions consciously or unconsciously. I ignored it previously.

When an explosion happens, it creates a distinct sensation that involves emotions and actions. The self is addressed and responds to this sensation (Butler, 2001). The response can be positive or negative, depending on one’s personal history.

In my first year as a PhD student, I was so excited to start a new academic journey. I was about to explode with excitement to step into my first class, which was a quantitative research design course. I met the professor and new friends in my cohort, which consisted of 11 students from different backgrounds. We talked with and learned about each other in the introductory week. The next week, I had my first week of a different class. It was a transdisciplinary class, which made perfect sense as to why students in my program were from such diverse educational backgrounds. My feelings were different this time. I experienced an explosion of information from all the different fields. It was all new to me, and the information seemed to be coming from too many directions. I felt both confused and curious. In one of the weekly readings, I came across articles on STEM, which is not my area. I was curious but struggled to make connections, and I became frustrated. In class, I was anxious about not being able to completely master the material. I told one of the professors that I couldn’t grasp all of the concepts, that it felt too sudden, like an explosion. She responded, “You don’t need to know every single detail. All you need to know are bits and pieces from the different areas.” That made me feel better, but the shock of the explosion remained, as I was in a vulnerable situation, pushed outside my own zone of knowledge. Explosion is vulnerability.

## HEART EXPLOSION

Explosions can also happen in the heart. In the summer of 2023, I lost my dog, Cinder. She was the most sociable pet that I have ever had. My husband adopted her from a shelter. She was only eight months back then. She had some past trauma and used to hide under the piano when we watered our garden or held a broom. When I first began dating my husband, she went with us everywhere. My husband did not want to leave her alone at home. In addition, he wanted to introduce his dog to me. At first, I did not feel comfortable, as I come from a Muslim family that forbids dogs in the home. When I was a kid, I petted my neighbor’s dog. My mother saw and wanted me to swipe my hands on the soil seven times. That rite is common among Muslims. I tried to pet Cinder to start a bond with her. She licked my leg. It was a slimy lick that did nothing to ease my discomfort. Every weekend, I visited my husband’s apartment and started feeling comfortable petting her and being licked by her. In the summer of 2021, before our marriage, we

went on road trips along the East Coast, from Maine to Virginia. Cinder traveled with us in the car. We shared our bed with her even though some hotels had queen-sized beds instead of king-size ones. After our marriage, we decided to add more dogs to our family so Cinder could stay home and play with her siblings. She did not feel comfortable sharing things such as toys, but she finally did it.

Happiness with her ended in the summer of 2023. In the blue sky, the thick trees, the 75F temperature, the green backyard with her toys, and the peaceful neighborhood of Cleveland, we exploded. Since taking her to the animal hospital the morning before, we had been in tears. I believe she felt the explosion in our hearts as dogs are good at reading human emotions. In the hospital, the vet put the first dosage on her leg. She was quiet and numb. That was the function of the shot. The second shot was on her back. In a minute, her eyes started to change in color, her heart stopped working, and her breath stopped. She could not even breathe her last breath as it was so quick. The process was quick, but the pain lingers. I am writing this in pain and exhaustion of explosion, my heart. I dared myself to dig into the trauma of losing her. Her red eyes keep spinning in my mind even when I sleep. Her red eyes symbolize the explosion in her veins, which makes blood spread in the eyes. She might not feel the pain, but we did instead. This explosion can be triggered anytime; we do not know when the flame will dim.



*Rest in Love. Cinder Johnson (01/26/2011-06/13/2023), taken by Author, 2023*

An atom consists of protons and electrons. Removing protons or electrons from the nucleus results in an explosion. An explosion is not always a positive thing; it can also be negative. When I talk about my negative experience of losing Cinder, I focus on the painful aspects, creating an internal explosion of sadness, regret, anger, and depression that dominates my story. This explosion is a result of putting the positive experiences aside. However, if I remember the good things I had with Cinder, the joy, happiness, and fun are what remain, enabling a different kind of explosion.

We exist in a liminal space between positive and negative explosions. Being on the border of these explosions brings tension, violence, and constant flux (Anzaldúa, 2022). Just as protons and electrons constantly interact to form different bonds and compounds, the self is inherently shaped through the interaction of negative and positive stories that ignite these explosions. Explosion is tension.





## CONCLUSION

This paper explored how various, interconnected concepts and ideas come together in an entanglement that resonates with my personal experiences. In this view, entanglement arises from the complexities and interplay between the narratives I have presented. Humans are entangled with other humans, as well as with nonhumans and more than humans.

Therefore, an explosion can never be the result of a single entity or story. Each individual carries multiple narratives. To create an explosion requires an atomic reaction at the core, where both positive and negative elements exist to generate energy. As a result, an explosion occurs through the destabilization of these positive and negative energies. In this paper, I have presented both of these energies to demonstrate the power of narratives and create meaning that moves beyond the simple binary of positive and negative experiences.

## IMPLICATIONS

The concepts explored here have implications for education and research, particularly in how we treat students. Students are far too diverse and dynamic to be reduced to simple categories. Therefore, educators and researchers must listen closely to their narratives without making immediate judgments or interpretations, as described by Pinar's (1994) concept of *currere*. I challenge the traditional practice of viewing narratives as an inward reduction—collecting and grouping lived experiences—and instead advocate for an outward expansion that begins with an inward explosion, leading to unpredictable, multidirectional paths. I introduce the concept of “explosion” not as data or a method, but as a nomadic, rhizomatic, and agentic process of emergence rooted in posthumanist theories of assemblage and immanence.

This approach recognizes that knowledge is not static but continually generates new insights and directions. Instead of falling into the binary of positive and negative experiences, which leads to judging and labeling students, we should blur this binary by seeing both narratives as part of a complex multi-self. Both positive and negative experiences have existed immanently within the self since its creation. Students from marginalized groups, for example, should not be viewed solely through the lens of negative experiences. They also bring diverse narratives of joy, happiness, love, and fun that outsiders may not see, and vice versa. Understanding a student's history, lived experiences, and constant search for meaning leads to authentic and deeply reflective educational work.

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